

Kansas Children's Discovery Center



Annual
Report
2025



The year ended at the Discovery Center with jubilant celebration. On November 7, supporters cut the ribbon on a \$11.6 million expansion project that more than doubled the size of the museum.

The Building Discovery expansion was the largest expansion in the museum's history and a major development in Topeka's tourism and education sectors. Thousands of families visited the new galleries in the final months of the year, leading to an all-time attendance record.

But as the organization grows, commitment to museum access remains strong. More than one-third of museum visitors received free or reduced admission in 2025. We have much to celebrate, but our work to create joyful play experiences for every child continues.



Growth and Joy

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Advocates for Children

Profoundly committed to museum access, the Discovery Center works zealously to identify and remove barriers to high-quality play experiences.

Learn more on pages 3-6

Educational Laboratory

The museum is designed with the whole child in mind. We value children as our world's most important citizens. Our child-led play facilitates early learning.

Learn more on page 7

Play Activators

We are committed to working outside our walls, fostering a culture of play that places children at the center of the community and honors the way in which they learn and grow.

Learn more on page 8

Sustainable Nonprofit

The Discovery Center uses a decision-making model that emphasizes the long-term sustainability of the organization while ensuring the mission of the museum is at the forefront of all work.

Learn more on pages 9-14



Profoundly committed to museum access, the Discovery Center works zealously to identify and remove barriers to play.



Advocates for Children

The Discovery Center is committed to ensuring every child has rich and diverse museum experiences.

In 2025, more than one-third of Discovery Center admissions were free or donor-subsidized, nearly 50,000 total admissions.

These admissions included record-setting numbers of *Museums for All* visitors from families receiving food stamps or WIC, families with subsidized memberships, military families, and field trip visitors from schools with a high percentage of children receiving free or reduced-cost lunches.

Access Highlight: Unprecedented Growth in Museums for All

7,295 admissions ↑ 70% from 2024
Museums for All ensures any Kansas family with EBT or WIC benefits can visit at a reduced cost. Admissions grew from 4,275 in 2024 to 7,295 in 2025, an increase of more than 70% in just one year. This growth reflects both rising need and the museum's commitment to ensuring every child has access to high-quality, play-based learning experiences, opportunities made possible through donor support.



Discovery Baby

180 served

Gives first-time parents community connections and the tools they need to begin a lifetime of learning.

Sensory-Friendly Sundays

934 admissions

Provides children with autism and their families with a safe place to play at no cost.

Play Free

24 sessions held

1,042 served

↑ *51% from 2024*

Helps children impacted by incarceration. *More on pages 5-6*

Discovery Kindergarten

5 camp sessions

156 attended

A free community-wide initiative to help ensure every child is ready to begin school.

Social Service Memberships

4,305 admissions

Partnerships with local social service organizations to strengthen families.

Medical Warriors

74 served

Honors medically fragile children, or those battling life-limiting illnesses, who need free, private play time.

Free Night

3,911 admissions

Free admission nights held monthly to unite the entire community in playful learning.

The estimated value of all subsidized admissions totaled \$426,841 in 2025, made possible by committed donors and partners.

“You reminded my children that they are worthy of joy, and you reminded their father that his role and presence matter deeply. That is powerful beyond words.”



Play Free Breaks Barriers



In the United States today, millions of children are growing up with an incarcerated parent. Their time with that parent is likely to involve a long drive, toys left behind in the car, a security line, and the sound of doors closing. Visits are shaped by rules and separation, and by the fragile hope of being able to talk, to play, to be held, and to be seen as more than a visitor. The long-term impact of parental incarceration on children is profound—but play is powerful.

For seven years, the Discovery Center has worked to create and expand Play Free, a program with the potential to fundamentally change how children are treated in the corrections system.



Play Free starts with Museum Visits

Play Free started in 2018 with a simple but powerful idea: make visitation child-centered by bringing mothers incarcerated at nearby Topeka Correctional Facility to the museum with their children.

The response was immediate. Mothers and children found palpable joy in shared play, meals, and bonding. Custodial caregivers wrote letters of support. Corrections staff praised the positive impact of the program. State leaders took notice, came to see the program, and asked for more.

In response, the museum has worked in collaboration with Kansas Department of Corrections for seven years to grow Play Free from a museum-based pilot into a statewide, model serving more than 3,000 parents and children across Kansas.

Mobile Museum

Starting in 2024, the Discovery Center's Mobile Museum began traveling to the communities where prisons are located, bringing hands-on play and learning experiences directly to families, and allowing the program to expand to fathers and juvenile parents.

Visiting Rooms

This year began a project to create permanent, museum-quality children's visitation environments within correctional facilities for parents unable to leave.

National Expansion

Play Free has inspired corrections departments and cultural institutions across the nation, and a national model is launching in 2026.

By centering children and families, Play Free is creating lasting change across Kansas and beyond.

Educational Laboratory

At the
Museum

The museum acts as an incubator and innovator, designed with the whole child in mind. We value children as our world's most important citizens. Our child-led play experiences facilitate critical learning and social skill development. New play experiences created in 2025 included:



Lullaby Project Spring 2025

An innovative collaboration with Carnegie Hall that invites parents to write custom lullabies for babies.



Thomas & Friends Spring 2025

The famous tank engine and friends welcomed fans with an engineering adventure on the Island of Sodor.



Prairie Art Summer 2025

Two art installations dedicated, including *The Prairie Holds the Key* basket by Lisa LaRue-Baker.



Very Eric Carle Fall 2025

A Very Hungry, Quiet, Lonely, Clumsy, Busy Exhibit featuring Eric Carle's classic books.

In Our Community

Play Activators



The museum is much more than a building. We are committed to fostering a culture of play that places children at the center of the community and honors the way in which they learn and grow.

We provide ongoing education and opportunities for play experiences to come to life outside our walls. From school gyms, to local parks, to community festivals—we take play on the road.

Mobile Museum

The Mobile Museum delivers STEAM-based educational play in parks, schools, and neighborhoods.

Launched in 2018, the museum has served more than 20,400 people at 158 events, 28 of which took place in 2025.

The museum has pulled into Hays, Dodge City, Nicodemus, Kansas City, and everywhere in between, bringing communities together with the power of play.



Grown Up Play Days

Promotes the power of play for all ages with facilitated, play-based team-building for former children.

Discovery Classroom

Engaging engineering experiences delivered in local schools by museum educators.

Investing in Children

Building Discovery Transforms the Museum



Hundreds of generous donors made this transformational year possible.

The \$11.6 million Building Discovery expansion doubled the museum's size, growing from 15,000 to over 30,000 square feet to better serve a growing number of children and families.

Attendance surged in the last two months of the year as families flocked to new exhibits.



Building Discovery introduced:

- The World's Tallest Climbable Sunflower
- Three immersive gallery spaces
- Learning lab classrooms and a maker space
- A café and exhibit workshop
- Flexible spaces designed to welcome more families than ever before



The project also helped reimagine beloved parts of the original museum, including:

- Top City Build and Kansas Water
- The Nest, an infant, lactation, and special care room
- The Cocoon, a sensory-friendly space
- A remodeled family restroom with a universal changing table, supporting caregivers of older children and adults



Guided by Children's Voices

From early planning sessions in which children sculpted their ideas in clay to cutting the ribbon, children's voices guided every step of the process. One highlight of their participation is the art installation *Sunflowers*. Every first grader at Shawnee Heights Elementary School contributed a unique sunflower design, and each original drawing was reproduced on wood, transforming 54 one-of-a-kind student works into a sweeping installation

"A Love Letter to Kansas"

Every part of the Building Discovery expansion is designed to give children pride in their state. The towering sunflower climber stands at the center, but beautiful Kansas stories fill the new exhibits. The Hall of Bright Ideas celebrates Kansas inventors and innovators. Top City Build, Topeka on Track, and Kansas Water exhibits use play to teach Topeka history and geography, letting children build from their imaginations in the capital city.



Sustainability

At the
Museum

The Discovery Center has grown and thrived by operating sustainably, while ensuring the needs of children are at the forefront of our work. The museum welcomed a total of 129,987 visitors, nearly 50,000 of which visited with free or reduced admission.

The museum also experienced a notable increase of out-of-town visitors, with 51,209 individuals traveling from outside Shawnee County.

How is the Discovery Center Funded?

- Admissions
- Memberships
- Field Trips
- Discovery Shop and Discovery Café Revenue
- Facility Rentals
- Donations
- Paid Partnerships
- Sponsorships
- 15% of Gage Park Improvement Authority (GPIA) Sales Tax Revenue



**312 volunteers
contributed 4,144
hours in 2025**



In Our Community

Economic Impact



Community Anchor

The Discovery Center had 129,987 visitors in 2025 for innovative learning and play experiences. The museum generates an estimated \$5.8 million in annual economic impact to the Greater Topeka region.



Tourist Attraction

Nearly 40% of museum visitors live outside Shawnee County, making the museum a major tourist attraction and economic driver. The museum generates more than 50,000 out-of-town visits annually.



Quality of Place

We love Topeka. Establishing quality of place and community pride for the next generation of Topekans is an intentional part of our work, and drives our outreach, exhibit design, and programming.



Cradle to Career

We are engaging the next generation of dreamers and leaders in science, technology, engineering, art, and math through quality STEAM play.

Key Revenue Numbers

129,987 total visitors

★ *new all-time attendance record*

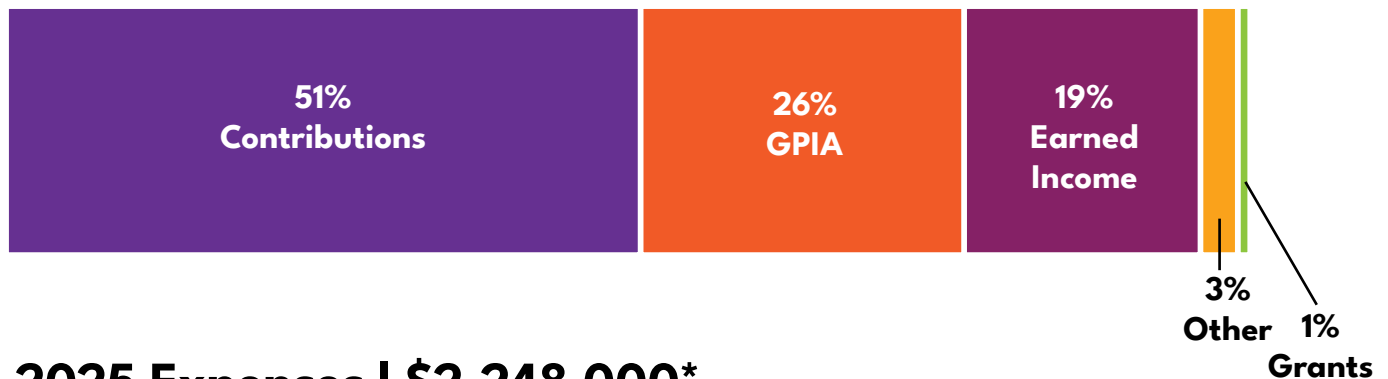
2,407 member families

6,291 field trip students

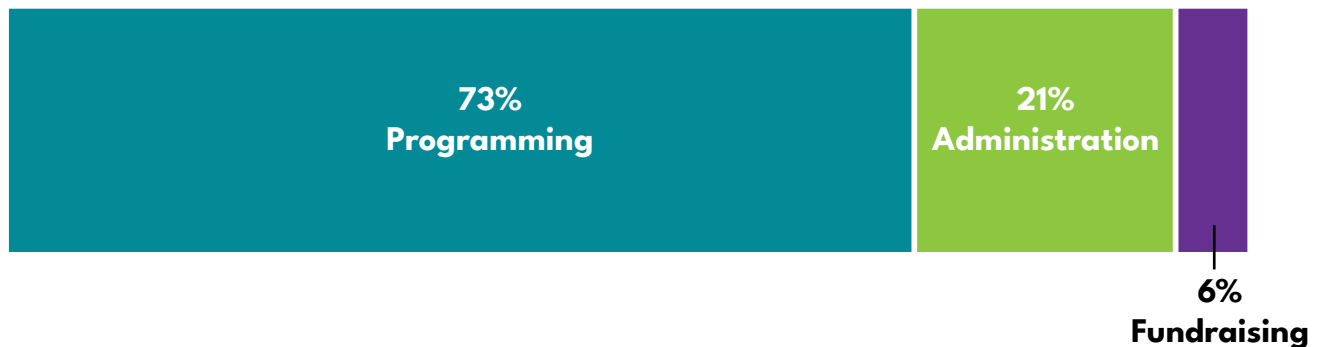
\$286,027 raised at Evening of
Discovery Gala

\$1,414,500 Gage Park Improvement
Authority (GPIA) distributions

2025 Income | \$5,873,000*



2025 Expenses | \$2,248,000*



* *unaudited financials, income reflects Building Discovery pledges to be paid through 2030*



What's Next?

With your support in 2026, we will carry the momentum of Building Discovery by expanding access, launching Play Free nationally, hosting three traveling exhibitions, installing two new outdoor learning environments, and continuing to ensure every child experiences the **power of play**.



**Because every
child deserves
joyful play.**

Please give today at
www.kansasdiscovery.org/give



**Kansas
Children's
Discovery
Center**



4400 SW 10th Avenue
Topeka, Kansas 66604
(785) 783-8300

www.kansasdiscovery.org