

LINC Commission Meeting

Nov. 20, 2023



Seeing a bigger world

LINC collaborated with Trailwoods Elementary School and the Kansas City Public Schools to build an educational experience around a trip to the Kansas City Zoo & Aquarium



Local Investment Commission (LINC) Vision

Our Shared Vision

A caring community that builds on its strengths to provide meaningful opportunities for children, families and individuals to achieve self-sufficiency, attain their highest potential, and contribute to the public good.

Our Mission

To provide leadership and influence to engage the Kansas City Community in creating the best service delivery system to support and strengthen children, families and individuals, holding that system accountable, and changing public attitudes towards the system.

Our Guiding Principles

1. **COMPREHENSIVENESS:** Provide ready access to a full array of effective services.
2. **PREVENTION:** Emphasize “front-end” services that enhance development and prevent problems, rather than “back-end” crisis intervention.
3. **OUTCOMES:** Measure system performance by improved outcomes for children and families, not simply by the number and kind of services delivered.
4. **INTENSITY:** Offering services to the needed degree and in the appropriate time.
5. **PARTICIPANT INVOLVEMENT:** Use the needs, concerns, and opinions of individuals who use the service delivery system to drive improvements in the operation of the system.
6. **NEIGHBORHOODS:** Decentralize services to the places where people live, wherever appropriate, and utilize services to strengthen neighborhood capacity.
7. **FLEXIBILITY AND RESPONSIVENESS:** Create a delivery system, including programs and reimbursement mechanisms, that are sufficiently flexible and adaptable to respond to the full spectrum of child, family and individual needs.
8. **COLLABORATION:** Connect public, private and community resources to create an integrated service delivery system.
9. **STRONG FAMILIES:** Work to strengthen families, especially the capacity of parents to support and nurture the development of their children.
10. **RESPECT AND DIGNITY:** Treat families, and the staff who work with them, in a respectful and dignified manner.
11. **INTERDEPENDENCE/MUTUAL RESPONSIBILITY:** Balance the need for individuals to be accountable and responsible with the obligation of community to enhance the welfare of all citizens.
12. **CULTURAL COMPETENCY:** Demonstrate the belief that diversity in the historical, cultural, religious and spiritual values of different groups is a source of great strength.
13. **CREATIVITY:** Encourage and allow participants and staff to think and act innovatively, to take risks, and to learn from their experiences and mistakes.
14. **COMPASSION:** Display an unconditional regard and a caring, non-judgmental attitude toward, participants that recognizes their strengths and empowers them to meet their own needs.
15. **HONESTY:** Encourage and allow honesty among all people in the system.



Monday, Nov. 20, 2023 | 4 – 5:30 pm
Kauffman Foundation Conference Center

Agenda

- I. Welcome and Announcements**
- II. October minutes**
 - a. Approval (motion)**
- III. Superintendent Reports**
- IV. Audit presentation**
 - a. Approval (motion)**
- V. Report on Retirement Committee**
- VI. Collaboration with KCPS and KC Zoo & Aquarium**
- VII. LINC training with Kansas City Young Audiences**
- VIII. Lights On Afterschool**
- IX. LINC leadership**
- X. Other Reports**
- XI. Adjournment**



THE LOCAL INVESTMENT COMMISSION – OCTOBER 16, 2023

The Local Investment Commission met at the Kauffman Foundation, 4801 Rockhill Rd., Kansas City, Mo. Cochair **David Disney** presided. Commissioners attending were:

Bert Berkley
Kiki Curls
Aaron Deacon
Shawn Foster
SuEllen Fried
Rob Givens

Anita Gorman
Matt Haase
Tom Lewin
Marge Randle
David Ross
Marj Williams

Disney welcomed everyone to the meeting.

A motion to approve the minutes of the Sept. 25, 2023, LINC Commission meeting was passed unanimously.

Superintendents Reports

- **Rick Chambers** (Director of Communications and Development, Center School District) reported the district is seeking ways to provide more mental health support in schools.
- **Steve Morgan** (Assistant Superintendent, Fort Osage School District) reported on upcoming student theater performances and on the high school softball team's successful season. Construction on the new fieldhouse at the high school should be completed by Nov. 22. The district is giving residents opportunities to try out driving a school bus on a closed course as part of an effort to hire transportation staff. The district's real-world learning initiative has resulted in 83% of seniors graduating with a market value asset such as college credit, credentials, and internships.
- **Casey Klappmeyer** (Deputy Superintendent, Hickman Mills School District) thanked LINC for providing out-of-school-time support for Ingels Elementary's first year of year-round school; LINC is featured at this week's football game. T&L Welding Academy received a community service award for its support of the district's real-world learning initiative. Students from the C.O.R.E. (Create, Observe, Research, Engage) Microschool housed at Burke Academy and Ruskin High School business classes won the CEC-MCC Business Challenge hosted by Metropolitan Community College Longview Campus earlier this month.
- **Christy Harrison** (Assistant Superintendent, Kansas City Public Schools) reported KCPS is implementing Blueprint 2030; it has started project-based learning and expanded music and foreign languages in elementary schools, and is offering Beyond Four Walls field trips at all schools. Armed guards in elementary schools is the topic of the next district community meeting. Sports are back at Paseo High School this fall.
- **Terry Ward** (School Board, North Kansas City School District) reported on district enrollment, the early college program for high school students at MCC-Maple Woods, and \$18 million in scholarships earned by last year's graduates, including those with significant challenges. The district is starting its ten-year facilities plan to refresh schools in their neighborhoods; the effort follows significant updates over the past 10 years, including extensive renovations at North Kansas City High School. The new school superintendent, Rochel Daniels, begins on Jan. 1.

Caring Communities Administrator **Sean Akridge** introduced a discussion of the Score 1 for Health vision clinic, beginning with a video. **Anissa Brantley** of Kansas City University reported on KCU's Score 1 for Health preventive health initiative (part of KCU's clinical education curriculum) to provide free health assessments for students in Kansas City and Joplin, Mo. Score 1 for Health partnered with One Sight Foundation to hold a week-long clinic serving 800 children, include those at four Hickman Mills elementary schools. **Danyca Singleton** of Hickman Mills School District reported the partnership with Score 1 for Health and LINC has provided 296 students in the district with glasses since the 2016 school year. The hope is to increase the number of students receiving assistance every year.

Director of Finance **Jeff Hill** introduced a discussion of the Justice in the Schools joint project between Legal Aid of Western Missouri, Center School District, Hickman Mills School District, and LINC to provide free, high-quality legal services to families and district employees. **Garrett Christensen** of Legal Aid reported on the effort to provide school-based legal clinics for families needing help with evictions, landlord issues, subsidized housing, family issues, and domestic violence. The goal of the project is to keep families in their homes, and kids in their schools. **Jaden Powell** of Legal Aid reported that the city's housing shortage is causing rents to rise; therefore some clients need rental assistance more than legal assistance. Discussion followed.

Hill introduced a video and reported on LINC's efforts to connect renters with utility and rental assistance. From the beginning of the Covid pandemic to January of this year, LINC connected 2,000 households to \$2.9 million in assistance. Since then LINC has received \$250,000 in aid money from the City of Kansas City, and is working on getting more.

Director of Youth Services **Bryan Shepard** reported that over the last two years, the State of Missouri has made an unprecedented increase in funding of foster youth initiatives. He gave an overview of LINC youth programs including the Division of Youth Services mentoring program, Missouri Star School online learning, the Chafee Older Foster Youth program to provide independent living skills and academic support, and the LINCWorks Futures program which provides incentives for attaining a diploma and maintaining employment. Youth Advocates **Phyllis Padgett, Steve McClellan, Michael Coram, and Rodney Copridge** reported on their experiences working with youth, as did **Linda Davidson** and **Amy Holliday** of Star School.

LINC reporter **Joe Robertson** reported on the recent community partner event held by KC Digital Drive. **Aaron Deacon**, KC Digital Drive managing director, reported on its partnerships with LINC and other organizations on various digital inclusion initiatives including affordable connectivity, criminal record expungement, and work with telehealth. He reported that the federal government is providing funding to expand broadband connectivity, and states are putting together teams to create plans to invest those dollars.

Robertson reported that, for the first time since before the pandemic, Missouri Medicaid recipients are being required to reapply for benefits and many who haven't done so have been dropped. LINC site coordinators are doing outreach to families as part of a Health Forward Foundation grant.

Akridge reported that LINC Caring Communities sites will be participating the annual Lights On Afterschool! celebrations this month. Families, commissioners, and superintendents are welcome to attend.

The meeting was adjourned.



'We are family!'

Lights On Afterschool celebrates with LINC's communities

Nov.8, 2023

By Joe Robertson, LINC Writer

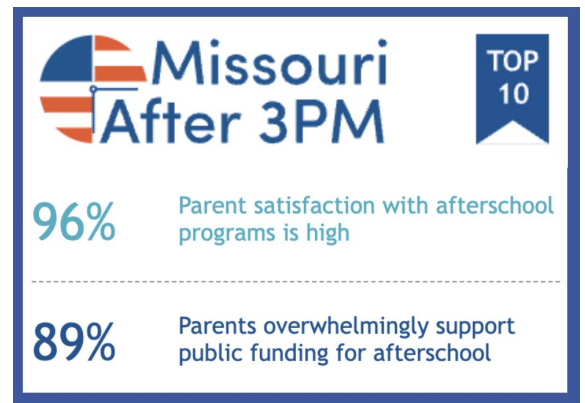
For all the statistical and historical reasons that measure the value of quality after-school programs, the music at Meadowmere Elementary School's celebration in Grandview captured the heart of it all.

The kids dancing to the beat wouldn't know Sister Sledge and the R&B vocal group behind the song, but joined the happy chorus:

"We are family . . .!"

In the school cafeteria, the LINC team at Meadowmere, with the help of many community partners and families, had prepared an array of meals celebrating the school's ethnic diversity.

LINC Caring Communities Coordinator Adrian Wilson was speaking to his Meadowmere families, but could have been speaking for all of LINC and the more than 45 after-school Caring Communities when he said:



Data from Missouri After 3 p.m. report



“Thank you, thank you so much for allowing your students to be in our program.”

The annual Lights On celebrations all across LINC’s sites in between Oct. 19 and Nov. 2 highlighted Kansas City’s commemoration as part of the Afterschool Alliance’s nationwide recognition of the value of after-school programs.

In the Alliance’s collection of statewide studies, [Missouri rates in the Top Ten](#) in satisfaction surveys that overall show a nation that sees the importance of strong programming for children and families outside of the regular school day.

By overwhelming numbers, the studies show, Missouri parents agree that after-school programs:

- help children become more excited about learning and interested in school
- help parents build connections to their child's school day education
- provide children valuable homework assistance
- provide children opportunities for reading or writing
- allow kids to build positive relationships with caring adults
- provide kids opportunities to learn life skills, like the ability to communicate and work in teams
- provide a safe environment for their children
- provide children with a knowledgeable and caring after-school staff
- provide kids opportunities to be physically active
- give working parents peace of mind
- help working parents keep their jobs

At Gladstone Elementary School in Kansas City, the Lights On event was a chance to showcase what LINC offers and how the school and the community all work together, Gladstone Principal Dana Carter said.



LINC, the school staff and partners collaborated to provide a giant meal, games, face-painting, prizes and music, Carter said.

“We have a lot of fun activities for the families, so families can see how the kids are enjoying LINC and the all the offerings that we have,” she said. “We have a lot of community members coming out to support the families such as the library, and we have some health resources . . .”

The music sounding from the gym was coming from a band that included many former Gladstone students who had come back for the annual celebration, and that, Carter said, was her favorite part.

For more videos and photos of the 2023 Lights On Afterschool celebrations, go to kclinc.org/lightson.





Seeing a bigger world: Aquarium visit inspires KCPS, LINC students

Nov. 10, 2023

By Joe Robertson, LINC Writer

The shark's eyes and all its teeth swept past 11-year-old Isaac, trailing its fins in the shimmering blue-green water, close enough to touch if not for the aquarium glass between them.

Here was an indelible image he could now fix onto the work he and his classmates had done days earlier in his fifth-grade classroom.

LINC and the principal and teachers at Trailwoods Elementary in the Kansas City Public Schools had collaborated to take the fifth-grade class to the Kansas City Zoo & Aquarium Nov. 6 to bring that classwork to life.

"There's stuff we can do to harm the oceans, and stuff we can do to help the oceans," Isaac said outside the aquarium.

He was thinking back, remembering the work that math and science teacher Jordan Traub had them do on the earth's hydrosphere and biosphere. From their reading and class time they'd broken up into groups and put their ideas down under headings of "Help," "Harm," and "Uses."

Now, to have wandered through the new aquarium's immersive experience, with the sharks, and sea turtles, eels, manta rays and brilliantly colored exotic fish around them, even above them, the lessons became real.

“It helps me more to know about the ocean,” he said, “and how I can help . . . and what else we can all do to help.”

At times, the crowd of children seemed awe-struck, with their eyes searching about. And other times they squealed aloud, laughing together and looking at each other’s reactions.

It was a beautiful sight, said Trailwoods Principal Leah Starr.

“I’ve seen a lot of kids have this experience for the first time,” she said. “I love hearing them laugh and point and scream out of excitement.”

LINC’s Caring Communities, in its before- and after-school programming and community programs in the Kansas City Public Schools and several other area districts, is constantly looking for ways to strengthen education and enrich children’s lives.

“We’re always looking for ways to connect kids with educational opportunities that are hands-on and more experiential,” said Melanie Scott, the LINC Caring Communities Coordinator at Trailwoods.



“Being able to come to this zoo (and aquarium) and help support them is a great way to connect the learning to real life,” she said.

“It was cool,” said 11-year-old Karla. “It was something new.” The sharks “were scary,” she said. The jellyfish “were weird, shaped weird, different colors, different shapes . . .”

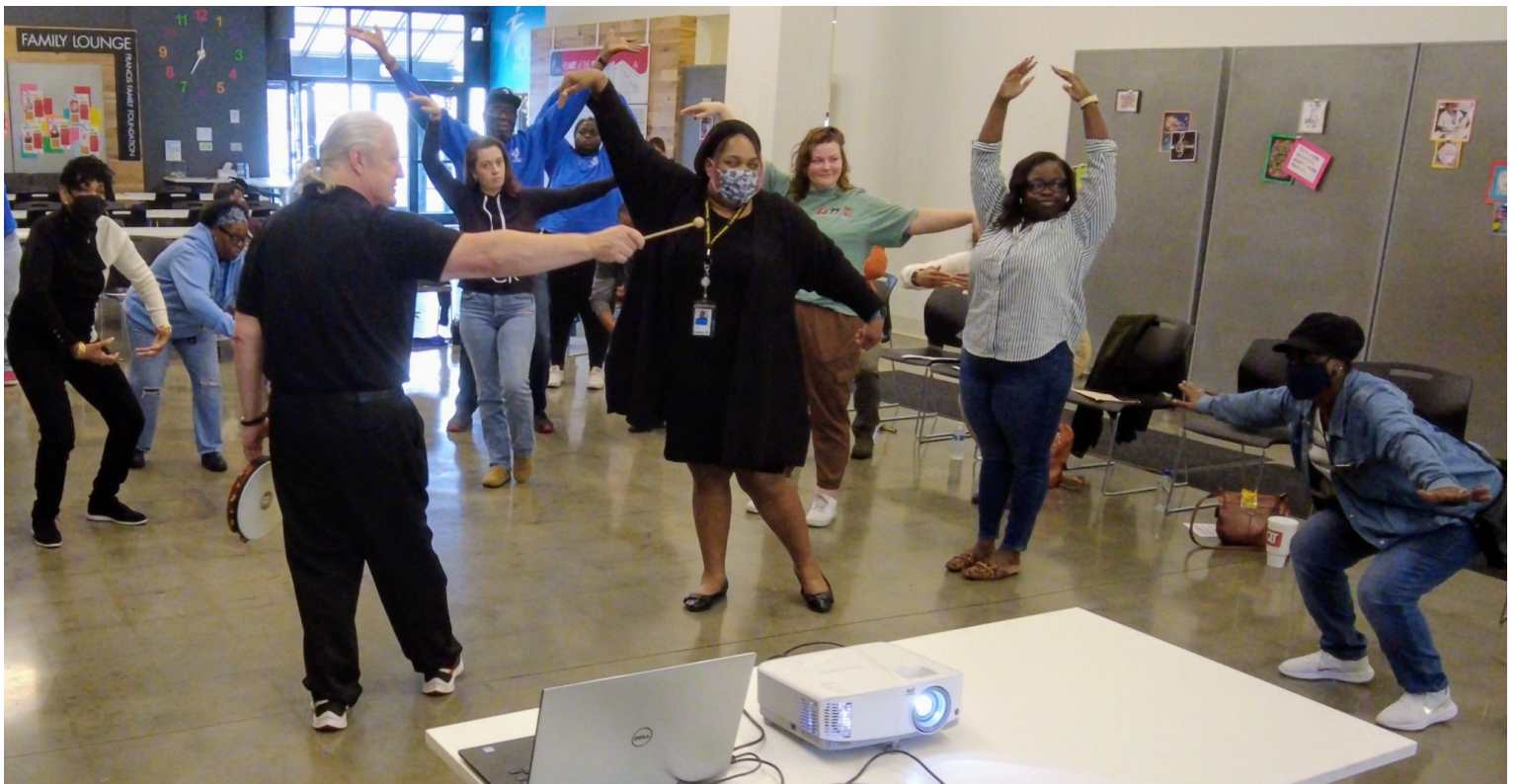
The places inside where the walkways became almost surrounded around and above by the fish-filled water made it seem like the students were in the ocean itself.

And the lessons are going to continue, their teacher, Jordan Traub, said.

They’d spent time ahead of the field trip talking about the hydrosphere and the biosphere, their importance and how they interact, especially with the impact of humans, he said.

“To actually come here and see these things contextualizes it and lets them see the beauty around them and why we need to make sure that we are protecting . . . and being mindful of our role as caretakers of the planet,” he said.

“It’s going to be exciting time for the kids to share what piqued their curiosity and what got their interest going. Hopefully they’re able to take something away and realize they are part of a much bigger world.”



'How we would've liked to learn': KCYA helps LINC integrate the arts

Nov. 3, 2023

By Joe Robertson, LINC Writer

Before the teachers' teacher ever put the lesson's scientific words on the screen, the class of adults had become expressive dancers.

To the beat of a tambourine, LINC's Caring Communities staffers were stepping, freezing and reaching for artistic poses.

"We're not thinking about the curricular area yet," Master Teaching Artist Harlan Brownlee told the LINC team. "We're just thinking about the art form."

Today, the classroom site was dancing space inside Kansas City Young

Audiences at 3732 Main Street. But in the days ahead, the LINC staff aim to create scenes like this with the children in LINC's Caring Communities after-school programs across the Kansas City area.



Once his adult class had channeled their child-like enthusiasm for daring dance, Brownlee turned on the pictures of clouds and their names: Cirrus. Stratus. Cumulus.

This is how after-school learning can tap children’s innate energy, Brownlee said.

Over the next several minutes, the LINC team were using their bodies to imitate the varying shapes of the clouds. Soon they were in small groups, choreographing a dance story, recreating the onset of a meteorological warm front.

“We were creative,” said LINC Caring Communities Coordinator Marlisa Collins. “We were active.” She could see that the lesson on weather had become “interesting” and “entertaining.”

Beyond memorization and understanding, the highest way to demonstrate learning is in creating, Brownlee said. The arts help children reach this highest level.

“I absolutely love the work because I’ve seen what a difference it makes with children,” he said. “It can energize them. It can engage them and it is another way for them to really learn an idea and to use their imaginations to be creative.”

LINC has been partnering with Kansas City Young Audiences for many years to enrich the Caring Communities experience. KCYA artists regularly lead programs in LINC’s classrooms, but LINC also works with KCYA’s teachers to help LINC’s staff incorporate the arts and all their benefits into their own lesson planning.

“Bringing arts into the program,” Collins said, “helps those (children) who like to draw, who like to move, who like to dance, who like to sing, who like to act, who like to play.”

Collins was out there on the dance floor, ballet-like, shaping herself into moving clouds, enjoying it the same as her colleagues all around her.

She felt the energy, she said.

“It brought us into our childhood,” she said, “like how we would have liked to learn.”

For LINC and KCYA to bring the energy of the arts into the after-school time is a great benefit to children, schools and families, Brownlee said.

“The LINC partnership with KCYA is really important because it provides that after-school space for students through the course of their day,” he said. “To be able to have an opportunity to experience arts at the end of the day I think is a powerful way for them to learn.”



KCPS board resolves to pursue bond issue election in 2025



The time has come, the Kansas City Public School board has resolved.

It has been more than half a century since the school district has passed a tax issue. But now the district will be planning to put a bond issue election before the voters in April, 2025.

The decision, the district announced in a statement after Wednesday night's resolution, "has marked a historic moment in our journey to enhance the quality of education in Kansas City."

In its statement, the district pointed to the challenge ahead of more than \$400 million in deferred maintenance in its schools — a burden that has "significantly impacted the quality of education and the overall learning experience for our students."

"It is clear," the statement continued, "that we need to make essential investments in our school facilities to meet the educational needs of today's students."

The board made the resolution with confidence that the community is dedicated "to providing the best possible education for our children."

With a successful bond election, the district would aim "not only to address the backlog of deferred maintenance, but also create modern, safe, and comfortable learning environments for students, complete with access to the latest technology."

The district said there will be numerous opportunities in the months ahead for the community to provide feedback and join in the campaign in support of the district.

"We value the input of our dedicated families, staff, and all community members," the statement read. "KCPS is fully committed to involving the entire Kansas City community in shaping the future of our schools."

Kansas City Public Schools won't arm officers in elementary schools after community feedback



Nov. 10, 2023

By Maria Benevento, The Kansas City Beacon

Applause broke out at a Kansas City Public Schools advisory committee meeting on Wednesday when an employee announced the district was moving away from a proposal to add armed officers to elementary schools.

In the end, district administrators heard too much opposition to putting more guns on school grounds — even in the holsters of people in uniform.

Shana Long, the district's chief legal officer and a member of its Moving Forward Together safety committee, said the decision showed the district listens to parents.

"We want to make sure that you all believe and trust us when we say we're listening to you," she said. "This isn't just us coming to you with a predetermined solution and then just telling you about it."

Long also said that the district had considered hiring its own officers to carry firearms — not contracting a private security firm.

The decision comes as the district tries to show it's involving the community, particularly parents, in decisions that affect schools.

District officials were already reeling when their proposal to close 10 schools caught the public off guard last fall and provoked angry opposition even though they had sought feedback in advance.

After scaling back the school closures — it only closed two — KCPS launched its Moving Forward Together effort to improve engagement.

When administrators, motivated by mass school shootings like the one in Uvalde, Texas, started to talk about adding armed officers to elementary schools, they brought the idea to the Moving Forward Together safety committee. After that, they took it to a broader group of parents.

Ashley Johnson, a parent, community organizer and District Advisory Committee vice chair, said the risk of mass shootings doesn't top the list of concerns for many parents. Rather, she said they're more concerned about meeting students' basic needs for stable housing and food security.

"The feedback that we got ... was really robust," she said. "If we have issues involving gun violence, it's not at a mass shooting level."

She hopes the decision means the district can now focus on solutions to real problems.

Pros and cons

Decisions about school safety should factor in data rather than emotions, personal worldviews or wishful thinking, Vaughn Baker, president of security company Strategos International, said during a presentation at a KCPS discussion session.

But some parents who spoke at the recorded meeting or submitted comments to an online platform questioned whether, in presenting statistics about the timing of deaths during mass shootings, Baker had made a data-based case that armed officers would help keep students safe.

Parents came prepared with statistics from scholarly articles that cast doubts on whether armed guards would help during a mass shooting and expressed concerns that their daily presence might hurt students.

A smaller number disagreed, saying they thought armed officers would make schools safer and that students would understand they were protectors.

Melvin Livingston, an associate professor at Emory University's Rollins School of Public Health, said in an interview that schools are in a tough spot because they have to weigh potential harms — such as evidence that police officers assigned to schools increase expulsions and criminal referrals — against uncertain benefits.

"If there's an effect either way, it's not strong enough that it shows up in the data," he said. That means the range of plausible estimates, he said, "goes anywhere from 'yeah, this could help' to 'this could hurt.'"

Benjamin Brown, a professor of criminal justice at the University of Texas Rio Grande Valley, said research on arming officers in elementary schools is particularly scarce because it's not as common as stationing officers in high schools or middle schools.

KCPS already has a security force, with sworn officers hired directly by the district and licensed through the Kansas City Police Department. Some of those officers are unarmed and based in specific school buildings while others are armed patrol officers. Separately, several armed KCPD officers are assigned to the school district.

All KCPS middle schools and high schools already have armed officers, said Derald Davis, deputy superintendent, and he knows of other local districts that have added them to elementary schools: North Kansas City and Fort Osage.

Johnson, the DAC vice chair, said she appreciated that the district consulted with the community before following those districts.

"It all came with actually listening to the parents, listening to the community members and stakeholders, that this is not what we want," she said.

After years of free bus fare, Kansas City is studying whether to charge for rides again



Nov. 10, 2023

By Celisa Calacal, KCUR

Anthony Cunningham doesn't own a car, and hasn't the whole time he's lived in Kansas City.

"I am transit-dependent and I use our bus system a heck of a lot to get around," he said.

Cunningham, a 26-year-old organizer with the Kansas City chapter of the climate action group Sunrise Movement, recently moved to the Union Hill neighborhood. He said money partially drove his decision to live without a car in a car-centric city.

"Being a young person who's had to pay off almost \$30,000 in student loans, it was certainly part of the calculus of wanting to live car-free," Cunningham said.

It helps, too, that riding the bus has been free for Cunningham and thousands of other regular bus riders for the past three years. But free rides have come at a cost to the Kansas City Area Transportation Authority and the city.

Now, three years after eliminating fares — which made Kansas City the first major U.S. city to make public transit free — the KCATA is studying the possibility of reintroducing bus fares.

The study involves a financial analysis looking into how fare elimination has impacted the agency's revenues, and then estimating potential revenue the agency would receive if fares are reinstated. The agency will make its final recommendation on whether to reintroduce fares in December.

Richard Jarrold, vice president of regional planning and development at the KCATA, said the board is

studying multiple options.

“Could we still provide zero fare for those really that need it? What would those systems look like?” he said. “So there are a lot of things to take a look at.”

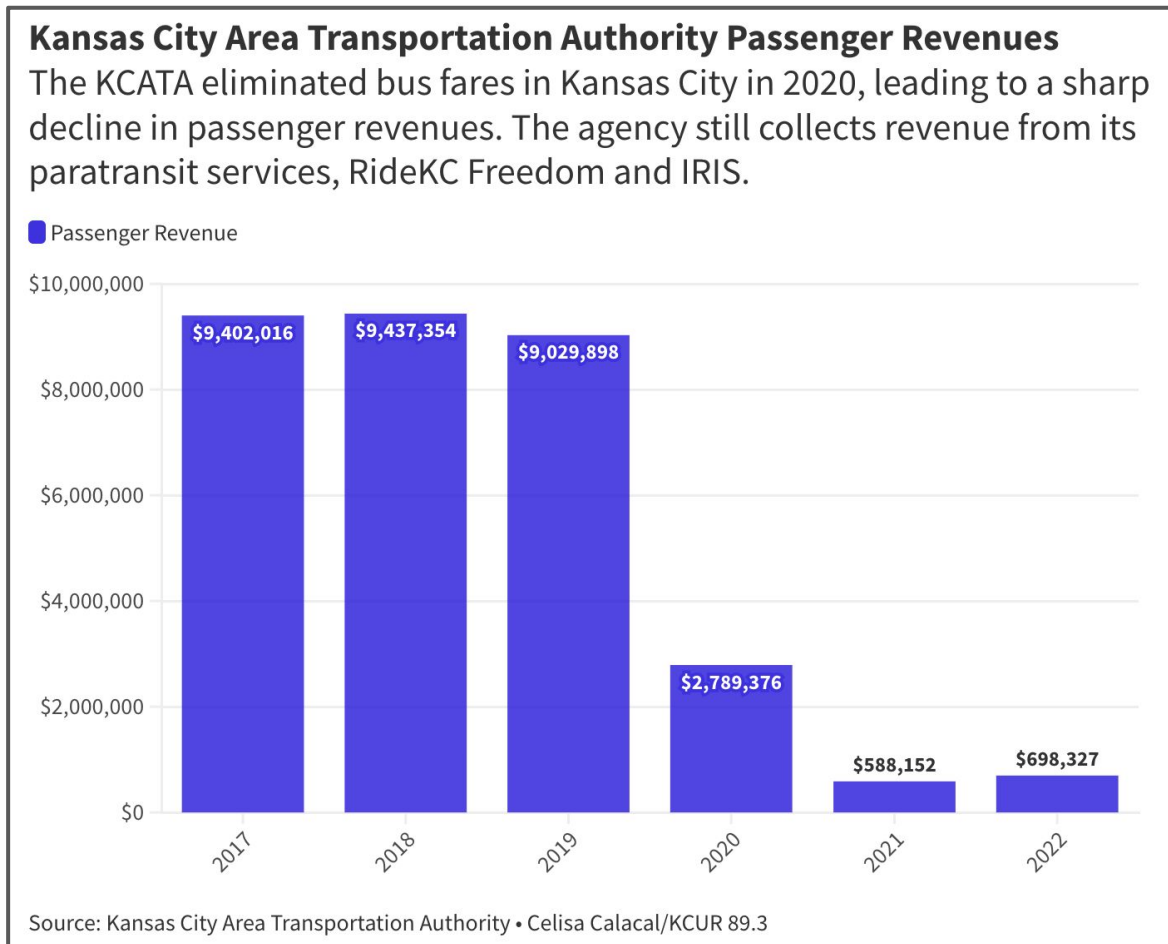
Cunningham hopes the buses continue to be free.

“Not only does it help a lot of poor and working-class Kansas Citians, it also helps with reliability,” he said. “Because if there's 10 people trying to get on the bus and each of them doesn't have to pay, it helps make sure that that bus can get out of that stop quicker.”

Impact of fares on KCATA

Before 2020, bus fares were \$1.50. Veterans and students could ride for free. The fares made up between 7% and 12% of the agency’s total revenue.

Between 2011 and 2014, passenger fares brought in about \$12 million annually, reflecting high ridership numbers.



In 2019, the last year before Kansas City eliminated bus fares, the agency collected \$9 million in passenger revenue — about 7% of the KCATA’s total revenues that year.

Last year, the KCATA collected \$698,327 through passenger revenue — a drastic 92% decrease. Though the KCATA doesn’t charge bus fare in routes that serve Kansas City, it still charges for its microtransit programs, RideKC Freedom and its newest venture, IRIS.

When the Kansas City Council voted to eliminate fares in 2019, the city also agreed to cover a portion of

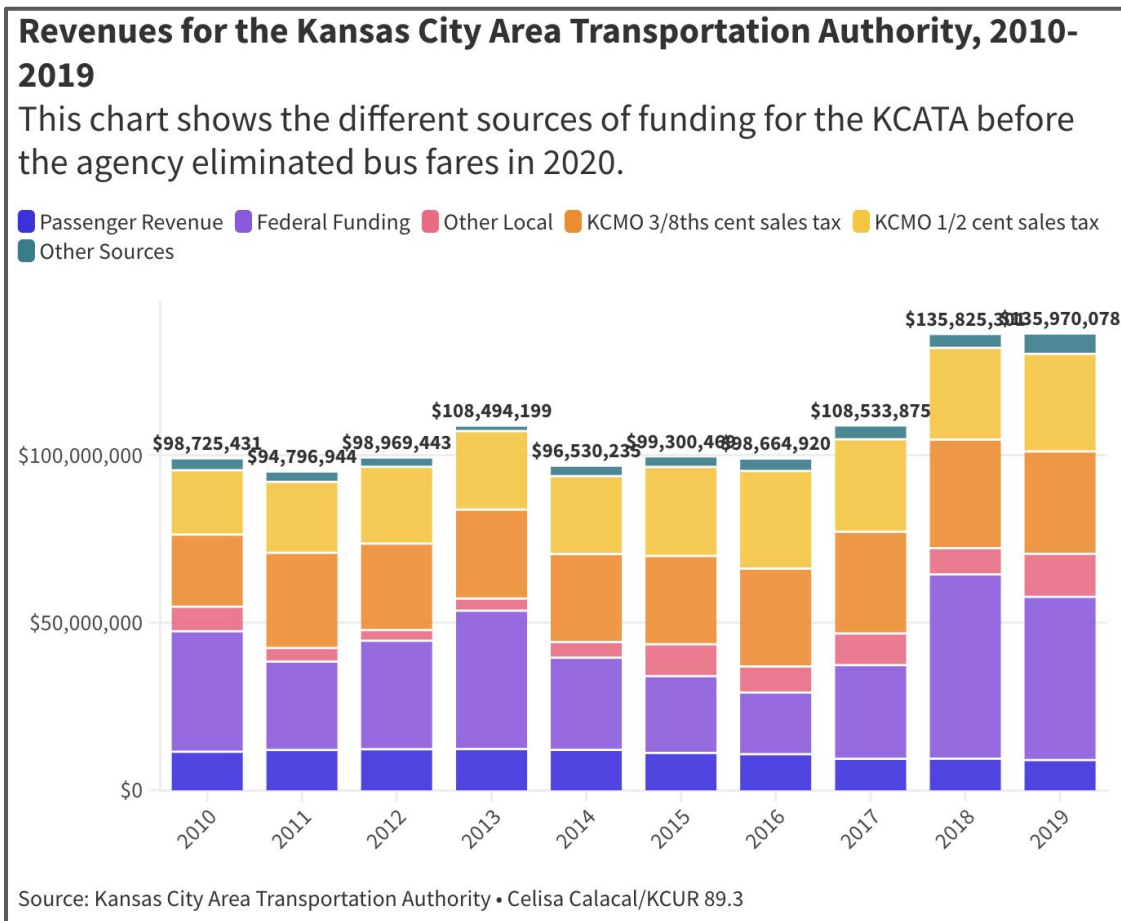
the money that would have come from passenger fares. In 2021, the first full year of fare-free buses, Kansas City allocated \$3.2 million to the agency. Last year, the city provided \$4.8 million. That money came from Kansas City’s half-cent sales tax to support public transit.

Cunningham talks to bus riders as part of the Sunrise Movement’s Better Buses campaign, and said zero fare is a popular policy.

He questioned how fare, if it’s reintroduced, would be collected. When agency staff presented to the KCATA Board of Commissioners last month, they highlighted ease of use and affordability as goals in studying fare collection.

Nicholas Miller, president of the local Amalgamated Transit Union, said bus operators would prefer bus fares come back. He said the zero-fare program was implemented without a structure.

“Frank White (III, KCATA’s director) and his team are doing a great job of making sure that they start putting more structure in place by increasing the security and putting stricter guidelines as far as people just arbitrarily riding around,” he said.



Other funding sources

Kansas City’s three-eighths cent sales tax is the largest local source of KCATA funding — and voters resoundingly renewed it for another decade earlier this week.

Last year, money collected from the 3/8ths cent sales tax made up 29.5% of the KCATA’s operating revenue of \$100.9 million.

Public transit advocates were concerned that if the sales tax renewal hadn’t passed, the agency would

have drastically cut service and labor.

The half-cent sales tax makes up about 26% of the agency's total revenues.

The agency also receives money from the federal government. In 2022, COVID relief funds made up about 16.6% of the agency's revenue.

But that money won't last forever, which pushed the KCATA board to look at other funding sources in addition to charging fares again.

"It is certainly important for other communities in the region to help contribute towards the funding", Jarrold said. "We think the private sector has a role to play as well, of beneficiaries of the transit services and even new services."

At the same time revenue from passenger fare has dropped, the agency's expenses have grown. In the 2023 budget, the agency's operating expenses were \$117 million, an increase from \$100 million last year.

Jarrold attributes the rise in expenses to inflation and the agency's decision to raise pay for bus operators.

Riders return as pandemic eases

The agency has seen its ridership numbers bounce back this year after seeing decreases due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

So far this year, nearly 9 million people have ridden on KCATA. Last year, there were 10 million total riders. The KCATA saw its best year in ridership in 2012, when the agency saw nearly 15 million riders. In September 2023, the most recent month of data available from the KCATA, there were 1,066,966 bus riders — slightly more than the number of bus riders in September 2019.

"We are above a million rides per month," Jarrold said. "We are pre-COVID ridership levels and we believe zero fare had a role to play in that positive impact on ridership."

Volunteers needed for local tax preparation assistance program

Can you help?

The Kansas City Metro Tax Coalition and MU Extension are seeking volunteers for the upcoming tax season (January – April 2024).

The Volunteer Income Tax Assistance (VITA) and Tax Counseling for the Elderly (TCE) programs prepare free tax returns for people who qualify.

Volunteers will receive training and certification before they begin working with taxpayers.

You say you don't want to do taxes? Don't worry, there are many ways to serve. You can also earn continuing education credits.

Send questions to kcvita@missouri.edu or register online at: extension.missouri.edu/counties/urban-west-region/tax-prep.



MISSOURI **I**NDPENDENT

‘Broken system’: Call center backlogs impede Missouri families seeking food assistance



Treasure Dowell and three of her five children. (Submitted photo)

Nov. 2, 2023

By Clara Bates, Missouri Independent

Treasure Dowell has called Missouri’s social services department three times a day for nearly a month and has yet to speak to a human being.

Sometimes she is automatically disconnected hours before the call center closes because it has reached capacity for the day. Other times she waits hours, her phone on speaker atop the kitchen counter, playing the hold music and occasional queue updates, while she watches her kids, only for the line to disconnect.

When she hears that the queue numbers in the hundreds, she usually hangs up and tries again later.

At stake is the \$1,339 in monthly food benefits she relies on to help feed her five children — three of whom are special needs and have restricted diets.

“I’m scared I’m not going to be able to afford food,” she said.

An in-person or phone interview is required to enroll or be re-certified in the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, formerly known as food stamps — a federal program administered by the states which provides grocery benefits to low-income people.

Dowell has struggled to find child care that would allow her to drive to the nearest resource center, which is more than 20 minutes away and she is hesitant about bringing her kids — four of whom are under the

age of five.

Without getting through the call center for an interview, Dowell couldn't be re-certified when her case came up for renewal in September and she lost the benefits she would've received in October. She submitted a new application but didn't get through for an interview in October either.

"It's very upsetting," she said. "The point is for help to be available."

"I understand waiting a little bit but people who work normal jobs can't wait on hold for four or five, six hours."

Missouri's troubled call center became the subject of a federal lawsuit in February 2022. The lawsuit, which is ongoing, alleges that barriers to obtaining a SNAP interview, primarily because of the state's "dysfunctional" call center, violate federal law and deprive eligible Missourians of benefits.

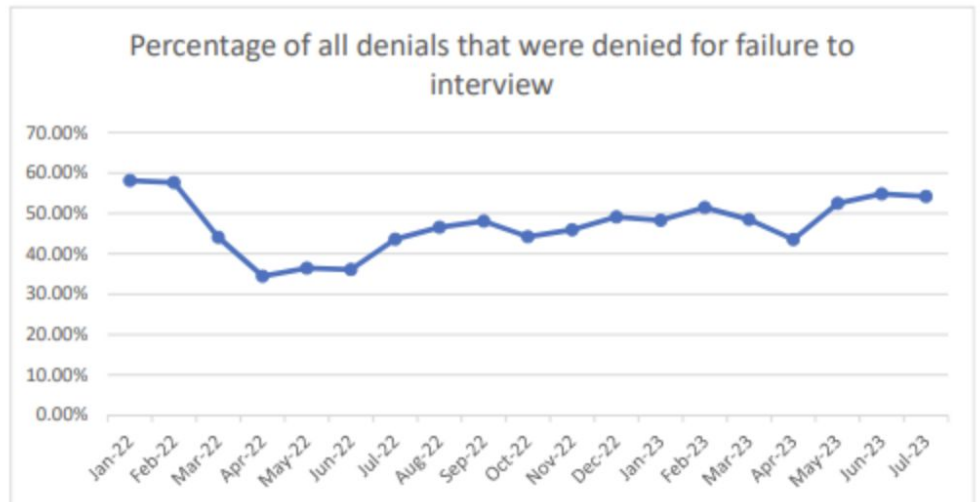
Those barriers — including the system automatically hanging up on people before they get through and long wait times which lead people to abandon the calls — have persisted, data obtained in discovery and published in court filings shows.

One of the attorneys representing the plaintiffs suing the state, Katherine Holley, senior attorney at Legal Services of Eastern Missouri, said 20 months into the litigation the state still has "extreme access problems."

"[The Department of Social Services] has been on notice for quite a while that these problems are going on," Holley said. "And it's a shame because that means people who are doing everything that they can to get SNAP are not getting them."

'At the mercy of a broken system'

In the federal lawsuit, plaintiffs argue the state is denying benefits to eligible low-income Missourians, along with failing to provide reasonable accommodations to those with disabilities to apply. The lawsuit asks the court to order the social services agency to make procedural changes that would bring the state into compliance with federal law.



📷 Around half of all SNAP denials are because the person failed to complete an interview (screenshot courtesy of legal filing).

Plaintiffs describe subsisting on little food while using up prepaid phone minutes waiting on hold for an interview, and, due to disability, struggling to understand the application forms but being unable to get through the call center for help.

Those plaintiffs eventually received benefits after the litigation was filed, but they argue they'll be at the "mercy of [Department of Social Services'] broken, unlawful system" once their yearly renewals come up.

Callers to the state's SNAP interview phone line waited an average of 51 minutes before being connected

to a representative, according to the most recent data, from July.

And that's evidence of improvement, the state has argued: The agency has made "significant strides to make interviews more widely available and reduce wait times," an attorney for the Department of Social Services wrote in an October filing. The average wait time has ranged from around 30 minutes to three hours since January 2022.

U.S. District Court Judge M. Douglas Harpool last year called a wait time of 56 minutes "still unacceptably long and particularly burdensome for financially struggling Missouri citizens in need of SNAP benefits."

The wait time provides only part of the story: Many, like Dowell, don't make it through to a representative at all.

Some callers to the state's SNAP interview line are immediately rejected because the center stops accepting calls when it calculates that, with the wait times and queue, additional calls cannot be answered during the remaining business hours.

Dowell said she has experienced that automatic rejection, usually when she calls sometime after noon, around 3 or 4 p.m. — an automated message plays a list of suggestions, including to visit a resource center or the state's website, then disconnects. (The call center officially closes at 6 p.m.)

Fifteen percent of all calls in July were automatically disconnected for that reason, or 64,053 calls, according to data obtained in discovery and laid out in a September filing.

Those who do make it through to join the queue often do not have the time to wait.

Nearly one-third (32%) of those in the queue in July abandoned their calls before being connected to someone, and they waited an average of 21 minutes.

Dowell said she has "sat on hold until they closed" before, waiting over two hours just to be disconnected.

Without interviews, SNAP applications and renewals are automatically denied after 30 days — even if applicants have tried and been unable to get through.

Around half of all SNAP denials in the state are due to failure to complete an interview, according to data obtained in litigation.

The state has previously said wait times are lower when applicants answer the state's call made from an automated system for an interview. But the state usually only makes one such call.

And according to the federal lawsuit, those calls are "inconsistent," and applicants often miss them because they do not know when to expect them, at which point they must go to an in-person office or use the call center.

Missouri was one of only 4 states with a significant rise in infant deaths



By Sarah Fentem, St. Louis Public Radio

Infant mortality in Missouri went up 16% between 2021 and 2022, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Missouri was one of only four states that showed a significant rise. Infant mortality in Missouri went up 16% between 2021 and 2022, according to federal data released this month.

Missouri babies died before their first birthday at a rate of 6.8 per 1,000 live births, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

The numbers were painful to see for Melinda Monroe, CEO of Nurses for Newborns, a nonprofit that provides screening services and care for infants and families.

“We have seen infant mortality rates trending down, overall,” Monroe said. “And this was the first time in over 20 years that we have seen an uptick as a nation, and a significant uptick in Missouri’s rate.”

The state saw 61 more infant deaths in 2022 than in 2021, despite fewer overall births that year. The data lacked state-specific information beyond the raw numbers and infant mortality rate.

Monroe said that the state will need to examine Missouri-specific data on why the babies died once it becomes available:

“But when we’re talking about a baby dying, one more is too many,” she said “It’s not OK. And so that’s where we have to pay attention to the most granular data we can get our hands on.”

Public health experts say infant mortality is one of the major measures of a population’s overall health and ability to access health care.



Training Day

A full house of LINC front-line staffers gathered Oct 27 at Kansas City's Hartman Elementary School for a full day of Caring Communities training with LINC's resident experts and with experts from our community partners, including the Kansas City Police Department.

