

# THE VOICE

A Trusted Voice From The Community's Perspective



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# THE VOICE

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# More Than A Newspaper — We're Where You Are

If you're only reading The Community Voice in print, you're only seeing part of the story.

While we remain proud of our bi-weekly print edition, The Community Voice is a multi-platform newsroom delivering news to you all week long — online, through social media and directly to your inbox.

Each week, we publish four, **FREE**, targeted newsletters designed to keep you informed and connected. **Monday Voice Wichita** and **Monday Voice KC** feature top stories curated specifically for each community, along with local event calendars so you never miss what's happening. On Wednesdays, **Health Wednesday** highlights stories focused on the health and well-being of our community. And on Fridays, our **Friday Top Five** delivers the five biggest stories of the week in a quick, easy read.

These short newsletters help you stay up to date before you even visit our website — and they're delivered straight to your inbox.

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You can also connect with us on social media. On average, **The Community Voice** Facebook page shares three to four posts daily that foster active engagement. Kansas City readers can follow our new **The Voice KC** Facebook page, created to grow a

stronger news presence across the Kansas City metro area. We're also expanding our presence on Instagram (**community\_voice** and **tcv\_kc**) and adding more video content across platforms beginning in March.

The Community Voice isn't just something you pick up. It's something you can connect with — anytime, anywhere. Sign up for our newsletters here: Follow us on Facebook here **TCV-KC** and **The Community Voice**



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# At 26, Jesse Jackson Was Already Changing The Nation



**JESSE JACKSON**  
1941-2026

Before he became a presidential candidate, global diplomat and founder of Rainbow/PUSH, Rev. Jesse Jackson, born in 1941, was raised in the Jim Crow and attended North Carolina A&T University – an HBCU – where he became active in civil rights organizing. In 1964, Jackson moved to Chicago to study at Chicago Theological Seminary on a Rockefeller Foundation grant. While still a student, he traveled to Selma, Alabama, in 1965 to join the voting rights movement led by Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC).

It was there that Jackson asked for a role in organizing the Chicago Freedom Movement – bringing the civil rights struggle to the North. He was hired by the SCLC and soon left seminary to work full time in the movement.

**Operation Breadbasket:  
Economic Power As Protest**

Under Dr. King's leadership, Jackson became head of Operation Breadbasket in Chicago – an initiative focused on economic justice. Instead of only marching, the program targeted corporations that refused to hire Black workers. Through boycotts and negotiations, Breadbasket secured thousands of jobs and millions of dollars in new

income for Black families in Chicago within its first 15 months.

**From Protégé To Independent Leader**

In January 1967, Dr. King called Operation Breadbasket SCLC's "most spectacularly successful program" in Chicago. Of Jackson's leadership, Dr. King said, "We knew he was going to do a good job, but he's done better than a good job."

That same year, Jackson was promoted to national leadership of Operation Breadbasket, with King telling an audience in Chicago on Jan. 6, 1968, that no one would be "more effective in the role," the institute said.

But Jackson also clashed with Dr. King, who criticized Jackson for following his own agenda instead of supporting the group, the institute said. They reconciled after King called Jackson and asked him to join him in Memphis, where Jackson was talking with King from below the balcony of the Lorraine Motel when King was assassinated on April 4, 1968.

At just 26, Jackson was already at the center of national organizing. Dr. King was 39 at the time of his assassination. The Civil Rights Movement was, in many ways, powered by young leaders who believed change could not wait – and who acted on that belief.

**Operation PUSH and a Presidential Run**

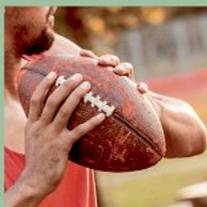
After leaving the Southern Christian Leadership Conference in 1971, Jesse Jackson founded Operation PUSH in Chicago's Bronzeville neighborhood – transforming it into a powerful vehicle for economic and political leverage.

Throughout the 1970s, Operation PUSH expanded through direct-action campaigns, a weekly radio broadcast and high-profile awards events that drew corporate leaders and elected officials. PUSH pressured major corporations to hire more Black executives and managers, often backing its demands with prayer vigils and targeted boycotts.

In 1982, Jackson demonstrated his growing political clout by leading a boycott of ChicagoFest in protest of Mayor Jane Byrne's appointments to the Chicago Housing Authority board. Supporter Stevie Wonder withdrew as a headliner, amplifying the pressure.

The following year, Jackson mobilized voters behind Harold Washington's historic mayoral bid. "Dr. King did not march in vain. This is our day," Jackson declared. Washington's victory, he later said, convinced him to run for president in 1984.

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# Black Legislative Day Highlights Supreme Court Vote, Civic Action

By Voice News Service

More than 250 Black leaders and community members from across Kansas gathered at the State Capitol Monday for Black Legislative Day, an annual event centered on civic engagement and issues impacting Black Kansans.

Sponsored by the Kansas African American Affairs Commission and The Community Voice, the event gave attendees the opportunity to learn about key legislative priorities, connect directly with lawmakers and better understand how state policies affect their communities.

"It's an opportunity to bring us all together and to have a collective conversation and build awareness of what is happening with the legislative and the legislators and how that impacts us



Gov. Laura Kelly (center front) poses with attendees during Kansas Black Legislative Day in Topeka, where more than 200 community leaders gathered to discuss key legislative issues and civic engagement across the state. BRIAN PETERS PHOTOGRAPHY

and how we can best be responsive to it," said Angeline F. Johnson, chair of the Kansas African American Affairs Commission.

Participants also heard

from Laura Kelly, who emphasized the importance of continued engagement, strong leadership and protecting progress for communities across the state.

Among the issues

discussed was the August constitutional amendment that would change how justices are selected to the Kansas Supreme Court. Several speakers noted that many Kansans are

unfamiliar with the court's current merit-based selection process and unaware of the upcoming vote. The proposed amendment would shift the system from a non-partisan selection model to a

partisan election process, a change advocates described as significant and worthy of close attention.

Throughout the day, organizers encouraged attendees to speak directly with their representatives about bills and issues that concern them and to take advantage of being in Topeka to engage lawmakers face-to-face. Participants were also reminded they can contact legislators year-round through the Statehouse switchboard at 1-800-432-3924.

Black Legislative Day is held annually to encourage civic participation and elevate the voices of Black communities across Kansas.



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# What Is TrumpRx?

## Who it Helps — and What it Doesn't Cover

President Donald Trump this week unveiled TrumpRx, a new government-hosted website the administration says will help Americans access discounted prescription drugs.

"You're going to save a fortune," Trump said at the launch event. "And this is also so good for overall health care."

But TrumpRx is not an online pharmacy — and it's not insurance. Here's what it does and who might actually benefit.

### What Is TrumpRx?

TrumpRx is a federal website that directs consumers to pharmaceutical companies' direct-to-consumer platforms or provides coupons that can be used at participating pharmacies.

Users cannot purchase medications

directly from the government site. Instead, the platform acts as a referral tool, sending patients to drugmakers' websites where they can pay cash prices or access discount offers.

The White House says the program was made possible through agreements with companies including AstraZeneca, Eli Lilly, EMD Serono, Novo Nordisk and Pfizer.

### How Does It Work?

Patients can search for a medication on the TrumpRx website. If it's listed, the site provides pricing and instructions on how to obtain the discounted rate.

The discounts apply only to people paying without insurance. The site advises consumers to check their insurance co-pay first, noting prices "may be even lower" with coverage.

That matters because roughly 84% of Americans already have prescription drug coverage through employer plans, Medicare, Medicaid or private insurance.

### What Drugs Are Included?

TrumpRx launched with just over 40 medications, primarily high-cost brand-name drugs used to treat obesity, diabetes, fertility issues, asthma and heart disease.

Among them are Ozempic, Wegovy and Zepbound for weight loss and diabetes, along with fertility drugs such as Cetrotide and Gonal-F. Administration officials say more medications will be added in the coming months.

### How Big Are The Discounts?

The administration highlights

savings ranging from about 50% to more than 90% on certain drugs. Cetrotide, for example, is listed with savings of up to 93%.

Still, the site excludes generic medications, which are often significantly cheaper than brand-name drugs. And coupon-based services like GoodRx already offer similar pharmacy discounts.

Analysts say people paying cash for weight-loss medications — which many insurers do not cover — may see the greatest benefit.

### Political Context And Delays

TrumpRx comes as the administration seeks to address concerns about rising costs for housing, groceries and health care.

Trump has said he pushed pharmaceutical companies to match lower

prices charged in other developed nations. "We're tired of subsidizing the world," he said.

The website's launch followed multiple delays, with earlier promised release dates pushed back without public explanation.

Separately, the administration has negotiated lower prices for certain drugs for Medicare enrollees through a direct negotiation program created under a 2022 law.

### The Bottom Line

TrumpRx may provide savings for uninsured or underinsured Americans paying cash for certain brand-name medications.

But for most people with prescription coverage, insurance may still offer the lowest price — making comparison shopping essential.

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## MISSOURI GENERAL ASSEMBLY BRIEFS

### Missouri Lawmakers Move To Rein In 'Corner Store Slots'

The Missouri House narrowly approved legislation Wednesday to regulate so-called "gray market" slot machines that have spread to gas stations, bars and fraternal halls across the state. The bill passed by a single vote and now moves to the Senate, where its future remains uncertain.

Sponsored by Republican

Rep. Bill Hardwick of Dixon, the proposal would create a state-run video lottery system overseen by the Missouri Lottery. Licensed machines would be required to return at least 80% of wagers as prizes. About one-third of profits would go to public education, with an additional 3% tax directed to local governments. Lawmakers also added a \$250 annual fee per machine to support disability services and doubled the per-patron

admission fee casinos pay from \$2 to \$4.

Companies operating unregulated machines would have one year to remove them. Supporters say the bill brings oversight, revenue and clarity to an industry operating in a legal gray area, while giving local governments authority to ban the machines.

Opponents argue it rewards companies that skirted the law and expands gambling into everyday retail spaces. Recent court rulings have declared some of the machines illegal, raising questions about whether regulation — or removal — is the better path forward.

### Missouri House Passes Bill Banning Intoxicating Hemp Products

The Missouri House approved legislation Thursday banning intoxicating hemp products, including THC seltzers and hemp-derived edibles sold in gas stations and smoke shops. The bill passed 109-34 and now heads to the Missouri Senate.



Sponsored by Dave Hinman, a Republican from O'Fallon, the measure would prohibit hemp products containing more than 0.4 milligrams of THC per container beginning in November. Even if Congress later allows such products nationwide, Missouri would limit sales to the state's licensed marijuana dispensaries. If federal officials delay enforcement, Missouri would still move forward with its ban,

except for certain intoxicating beverages.

Hinman said the bill aligns Missouri law with recent federal action, giving state and local law enforcement clear authority to act. "No gaps, no loopholes," he said during debate.

Opponents, including Rep. Matthew Overcast, argued the bill effectively redefines hemp products as marijuana, restricting sales

to dispensaries supplied by Missouri-grown cannabis. Overcast said that could shield the marijuana industry from competition and override voter-approved constitutional language.

State officials estimate tens of thousands of retailers could be affected. Lawmakers have debated hemp regulations for four consecutive years, with previous efforts ending in stalemate.

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## KANSAS LEGISLATURE BRIEFS

### Kansas House Advances Bell-To-Bell Cellphone Ban

A bill banning cellphones during the school day in both Kansas public and accredited private schools has cleared the House after hours of bipartisan debate.

The measure would require a "bell-to-bell" ban on cellphones and other electronic communication devices — including smartwatches and earbuds — during the school day, including passing periods and lunch, unless students are permitted to leave campus. Schools would be required to adopt policies ensuring devices are turned off and stored away, along with disciplinary measures for violations.

Originally, House Substitute for Senate Bill 281 mandated

the ban only for public schools and suggested it for private schools. However, Rep. Jill Ward, R-Wichita, successfully amended the bill to require the ban in both public and nonpublic schools, arguing that mental health concerns linked to device use affect all students equally.

The amendment passed 68-55. The House approved the bill 76-45, sending it back to the Senate for final consideration.

Supporters from both parties said the policy would improve student focus, strengthen relationships and address growing concerns about teen mental health. Opponents raised concerns about parental choice, emergency communication and state overreach into private education.

### Debate Flared as Kansas Honors Charlie Kirk

The Kansas Legislature has designated Oct. 14 as Charlie Kirk Free Speech Day, approving a resolution that has drawn both praise and sharp criticism across party lines.

Republican supporters say the day honors the First Amendment and pushes back against what they see as a culture that too often distorts political speech. Rep. Blake Carpenter, R-Derby, said lawmakers are living in a "moment where context isn't just ignored, it's discarded." He argued the resolution wasn't about endorsing every statement Kirk ever made, but about defending "intellectual honesty" and a public square where ideas can be debated fully and fairly.

Democrats, while condemning the violence that led to Kirk's death, questioned whether he should be elevated by state government. Rep. Brooklynne Mosley, D-Lawrence, said no one deserves to die by an assassin's bullet — but added that not everyone should be formally honored. "I pity my colleagues who are so desperate for heroes that they have to settle for a man who espoused sexist and racist views," Mosley said.

The debate reflects a broader divide in Kansas politics: whether recognizing Kirk strengthens free speech protections — or deepens disagreement about how that freedom should be exercised.

# IMPORTANT VOTER ALERT

Unless You **Vote No** On Tuesday, March 3<sup>rd</sup> Your Taxes WILL Increase

KWCH 12 NEWS

**"It's too big, too vague  
and too rushed!"**

January 1, 2026

The Wichita Eagle

**Group behind Wichita sales tax election  
mails wrong info to thousands of voters**

January 31, 2026

Wichita Forward uses  
misleading calculator  
to promote sales tax  
hike as a tax cut

February 5, 2026

The Wichita Eagle

**"a race toward chaos... a  
rush job from the get-go..."**

January 15, 2026

The Wichita Eagle

**"the ballot language...*doesn't*  
say specifically where the  
money should go."**

January 26, 2026

## Wichita Deserves Better Than An \$850 Million Tax Hike!

### YOUR FAMILY Shouldn't Pay More

Wichita citizens shouldn't be asked to pay higher taxes on daily necessities to fund an \$850 million plan with no guarantees or binding safeguards. You shouldn't pay more to fund a wish-list of big ticket projects wanted by city insiders. **ENOUGH IS ENOUGH!**

- ✗ No more backroom deals
- ✗ No more no-bid contracts
- ✗ No more bailouts for failed city council led projects

**STOP THE SALES TAX**  
**VOTE NO!**  
on or before Tuesday, March 3<sup>rd</sup>

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Early Voting Begins February 17<sup>th</sup>  
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# Wichita Sales Tax Vote: The Case For And Against

Wichita voters will decide March 8 whether to approve a proposed 1-cent citywide sales tax expected to generate about \$850 million over seven years for public safety and housing initiatives, revitalization of Century II and the convention center, property-tax relief and a new performing arts center. The measure would include citizen oversight and

annual audits. Early voting begins Thurs., Feb. 26.

As part of our continued coverage, Margaret Shabazz and former City Councilmember Brandon Johnson present opposing perspectives on the proposal — outlining the arguments for and against the sales tax before voters cast their ballots. If you're not up to date, you can learn more about the measure and its background at <https://bit.ly/46mBGaw>.

## Vote No: Margaret Shabazz

I want to be clear at the start: I am not anti-growth, and I am not anti-sales tax.

I believe Wichita does need to grow, and I believe a sales tax can be part of that growth.

But tonight, my opposition comes down to one word: trust.

And right now, trust is missing.

I want to spell that out — literally — because every letter matters.



### T — Transparency

This sales tax proposal did not come with transparency.

It was introduced suddenly, just one week before the deadline to call a special election.

There was no broad, meaningful public process before it was advanced.

When people are already struggling, transparency isn't optional — it's foundational.

### R — Representation

This tax requires everyone to pay, but it does not benefit everyone equally.

Whole neighborhoods — particularly historically disinvested areas — do not see themselves reflected in the priorities attached to this tax.

If we are going to ask every household to contribute, then every demographic, every district, every lived experience must have a seat at the table before decisions are made, not after.

### U — Use of Funds

We are told this tax will fund many things — public safety, arts, downtown projects, housing.

But some of these items, like fire services, are core services and should already be planned and funded through the Capital Improvement Plan, not pulled out and repackaged to justify a new tax.

That raises legitimate questions about budgeting discipline and long-term planning.

### S — Safeguards

Wichita has a history of weak oversight and shifting costs.

We are being asked to trust that this time will be different — but we are not being shown strong, enforceable safeguards that prevent mission creep, cost overruns, or reallocation away from promised uses.

Trust is built with guardrails, not assurances.

### T — Timing

Finally, timing matters.

We are being asked to approve this tax in a special March election, at a cost of roughly \$170,000, when it could be placed on the August ballot at no additional cost.

At a time when the city says money is tight, spending extra taxpayer dollars just to rush a vote sends the wrong message.

If we're struggling, we should slow down — not speed past the people.

### In closing

This isn't about saying "no" forever.

It's about saying not like this.

Before we raise taxes:

- We need trust
- We need representation
- We need clear benefits for every area
- We need strong oversight
- And we need a real public process

For example, we've already identified food deserts across our city.

Why aren't we talking about city-owned grocery stores, or investments that directly lower household costs in underserved areas?

If the city had started by asking communities what they need — and then built a proposal around that — this conversation would look very different.

I want Wichita to grow.

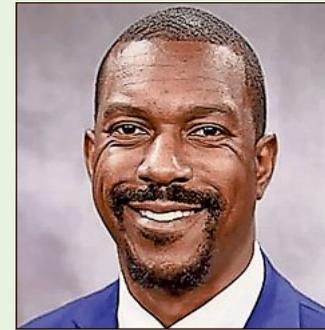
I want smart revenue.

But growth without trust doesn't last.

**Until trust is rebuilt, my answer is no.**

## Vote Yes: Brandon Johnson

*Before outlining his support for the sales tax, Johnson spent several minutes discussing the implications of voting no. He said voting no would mean continuing to fund projects the way Wichita traditionally has — relying on growth, property taxes and shifting council priorities — where services and investments often depend on whether four council members agree on neighborhood needs. He argued that approach has at times left low-income neighborhoods vulnerable to cuts or delays.*



before you for a different funding stream that would dedicate funding to address those needs.

The council will be legally bound to only fund the items defined in those buckets. And additionally, there's a citizen oversight board that will

look at the items purchased, the revenue coming in, have regular meetings — that's all open to the public.

And another positive of this sales tax is not only will you save \$20 million in interest because you can cash finance versus debt finance, it also allows council to redirect some funding that would have paid for those items right now in the CIP and allow them more flexibility to address more neighborhood needs.

Things like mow tall grass and weeds, sidewalk repair, road repair, extended library hours, improvements in service delivery like sweeping our streets more often, and more opportunities for affordable housing.

But we have to hold the council's feet to the fire.

Now again, is this perfect? It's not. Will this be a burden on some more than others? It will. Those are true. But we have to choose our hard, and all of these decisions are hard.

The reality is that those who need better service delivery, those who need investment in their neighborhood, those that many of us are concerned about now — those folks are going to be impacted by both options.

Voting yes provides the flexibility to the City Council — this one and future ones — to help them more than having them just wait and hope that things will happen.

Or you can vote no, do things the way we've always done it, hope they can handle those deficits, and then pray that the services and programs that help lower-income communities in the core of Wichita don't get impacted too much.

Voting yes provides the council an additional option and a dedicated funding source to address the issues identified in the sales tax proposal.

Yes, a sales tax is regressive. But as I said earlier, it's happening now anyway in lower-income communities. So we have to choose our hard.

But the positive of that sales tax is that nearly a quarter of it, or more, would be paid by other people who visit and spend money here.

This isn't too big. You keep hearing that. But our challenges are big. You have to have a big solution for big challenges.

It's not too vague. You see the buckets. You see what we addressed. You saw the ballot language. These buckets are defined.

We cannot say we have not been talking about these challenges with homelessness for years. We can't say public safety hasn't been discussed.

And many of you know I'm not supportive of the property tax piece of the sales tax. But electeds have continued to hear about property tax issues for years.

All of these items — all of these buckets — performing arts and conventions have been studied, have been talked about. We know we need improved performing arts facilities.

What is new — and what people kind of think is rushed — is the opportunity

# WICHITA FORWARD

This is about keeping Wichita families stable — helping seniors stay in their homes, renters avoid sudden increases, and working families manage rising costs. It's about preventing costs from escalating for everyone, especially those least able to absorb them.

## **Accountability starts with a *yes vote on March 3rd.***

This proposal provides:

- \$150 million in property tax relief
- More accountability
- A 15-person citizen oversight committee
- Guardrails created by the City

Wichita Forward supports the grocery rebate for qualifying households, while continuing the exemption for SNAP and WIC. We support House Bill 2456 which allows Wichita to exempt groceries from the local sales tax altogether.

### WHY THIS MATTERS NOW



Federal funding for housing stability and support services expires in September 2026, with no future funding currently identified.



With “No” important projects will be delayed, there will be higher future interest costs on needs, property taxes may rise, or services may be cut.



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#### LEARN MORE

Scan for more details or visit [www.wichitaforward.org](http://www.wichitaforward.org) for FAQs and updates.

# 2026 Black Educators Hall of Fame Ceremony Set for Feb. 28

By Voice News Service

The Black Educators Hall of Fame will induct eight new members during its 2026 ceremony on Saturday, Feb. 28, at the Carl Brewer Center in Wichita. A reception begins at 4 p.m., followed by the program at 5 p.m.

This year's inductees are Lorenza O. Breckenridge Sr., Dr. Jesse Williams, Dr. Kevin Harrison, James E. Anderson Sr., John R. Carter, Pearlie McCoy, Latonya Kennedy and Gayle Jackson.

The Hall of Fame is a project of Art That Touches Your Heart Foundation, founded by former Wichita art teacher Janice Thacker. The initiative was created to recognize Black educators across Kansas whose work has had a lasting impact on students and communities.

Last year marked the organization's 10th anniversary. Since its founding, the Hall of Fame has honored 50 teachers from across the state.

This year's ceremony also marks a new chapter for the Hall of Fame. The exhibit has found a permanent home inside Wichita's Carl Brewer Center, which opened in December. The installation includes portraits and biographies highlighting the contributions



A family views portraits of past inductees displayed at the permanent home of the Black Educators Hall of Fame inside the Carl Brewer Center in Wichita.

of inductees and will feature rotating displays.

Organizers say locating the Hall of Fame at the Brewer Center strengthens its visibility and ensures the legacy of Black educators in Kansas remains accessible to the community.

The ceremony is part of Black History Month observances and is open to the public.

## Free Expungement Clinic Set for April 10 in Wichita

Community members seeking to clear past arrests or misdemeanor and felony convictions from their records can receive free assistance at an upcoming expungement clinic hosted by Goodwill Industries of Kansas.

Goodwill Industries of Kansas, in partnership with Kansas Legal Services and Koch, will hold the clinic Friday, April 10, 2026, from 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. at 3351 N. Webb Rd. in Wichita.

The clinic offers pre-qualification checks to determine whether individuals are eligible for expungement. Kansas Legal Services professionals will review each case at no cost. Even though the clinic isn't until April, it's important to check your availability early by calling 316-267-3975 or emailing [kls\\_expunge@klsinc.org](mailto:kls_expunge@klsinc.org).

org to complete the free eligibility screening.

Those who qualify will then be scheduled for the clinic and appointments will be made on a first-come, first-served basis, and space is limited.

"Clearing a record helps remove barriers to employment, stable housing and education," said Lauren Soliday, Vice President of Operations at Goodwill Industries of Kansas.

Interested individuals must call 316-267-3975 or email [kls\\_expunge@klsinc.org](mailto:kls_expunge@klsinc.org) before April 6 to complete the free eligibility screening. Those who qualify will then be scheduled for the clinic.

For residents outside the Wichita metro area, a list of additional expungement clinics across Kansas is available at [kansaslegalservices.org/clinics2025](http://kansaslegalservices.org/clinics2025).

## Care doesn't have to wait for open enrollment



**PACE is available year-round!**

**Call 316-830-5921 (TTY: 800-766-3777) to speak with a person from our local center today.**

**For more information about PACE services and benefits, visit [AscensionLiving.org/HOPE](http://AscensionLiving.org/HOPE)**

 Ascension Living

**HOPE**

*Participants must be at least 55 years old and live in Sedgwick County. All PACE participants agree to receive all services other than emergency services from HOPE staff and its network of providers, and may be fully and personally liable for the costs of unauthorized or out-of-network services.*



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# HOPE CDC Expands Affordable Housing Strategy In Wichita

By **Bonita Gooch**  
Voice Editor-in-Chief

When Rev. Dr. Kevass Harding built HOPE Community Development Corporation's first home on North Ash in 2022, it followed the model he envisioned when he formed the nonprofit in 2017: build new houses, prepare buyers financially, and help families step into homeownership.

The house was a traditional "stick build," constructed on-site using wood framing. It was sold through the City of Wichita's Home 80 program. Buyers completed credit counseling and financial literacy classes before construction began.

It was a model that worked — but it was slow.

Today, HOPE's strategy has expanded.

With the creation of Wichita Affordable Housing LLC in 2024 — a social impact fund launched by former Koch Inc. Chief Financial Officer Steve Feilmeier — Harding now has access to lower-cost capital that allows him to move more quickly.

The result is a broader portfolio that includes:

- Stick-built homes constructed on Evergy-donated lots
- Former City of Wichita houses purchased for rehabilitation
- Newly placed manufactured homes on permanent foundations

And a noticeable shift toward rental housing — particularly quality units that meet Housing Choice Voucher (Section 8) standards.

## The Financing Shift That Changed The Pace

Scaling homeownership through traditional bank construction loans proved difficult.

"Coming to them with your financials, asking for a million dollars to do a couple of houses, like, 'Oh, my God, no,'" Harding said. "So, I got a lot of no's."



Modular homes on North Estelle in Wichita, Kansas. The collaboration between Wichita Affordable Housing LLC, Hope Community Development Corporation and Prime Craftsman Homes are providing modular homes for those in need in Wichita. (PHOTO BY SELENA FAVELA)

Feilmeier's fund changed that equation.

Wichita Affordable Housing LLC raised roughly \$10 million from local banks and high-net-worth families. The fund lends to nonprofits like HOPE at approximately 5% interest. Investors receive modest returns, and Feilmeier's family office covers administrative costs, allowing rates to remain below typical construction loans.

Local banks have participated in part because federal regulators evaluate their lending activity in low- to moderate-income neighborhoods under Community Reinvestment Act standards.

"Without him, I'd probably be at some other bank trying to get 8%, 7%, you know," Harding said. "But yet he gives it at 5%."

Access to capital meant HOPE could move beyond building one home at a time.

"I went from one door to 15 doors in three years because of Steve's help and his team," Harding said.

## The City Housing Opportunity

The shift also coincided with the City of Wichita's decision to sell off portions of its single-family public housing stock.

Many of those houses had already been vacated years earlier and were sitting in various states of disrepair. HOPE bid on and secured a batch of those properties, adding them to its portfolio for rehabilitation.

Those homes may ultimately be sold to qualified buyers or retained as rentals depending on neighborhood need and tenant readiness.

The acquisition expanded HOPE's footprint beyond new construction.

## Why Rentals Became Part Of The Strategy

Originally, HOPE focused primarily on ownership.

But mortgage qualification has become more difficult for moderate-income families amid higher interest rates and tighter credit conditions. At the same time, Wichita faces a shortage of affordable, quality rental



Kevass Harding, Executive Director of Hope Community Development Corporation, explains how the modular homes are set on a permanent foundation and are safer during storms than a mobile home. (PHOTO BY SELENA FAVELA)

housing, including those that meet Housing Choice Vouchers, commonly known as Section 8.

City officials have acknowledged that while thousands of vouchers are administered locally, many recipients struggle to find safe, well-maintained homes that meet inspection standards. Some are living in sub-standard properties simply because options are limited.

Harding says that gap is part of what HOPE is trying to address.

Rather than waiting for ownership-ready buyers, HOPE began adding newer, code-compliant rental units to the market — with ownership pathways available when tenants are financially prepared.

## Manufactured Housing As A Scaling Tool

A major part of that shift is HOPE's use of manufactured housing.

These homes are built entirely in factories under a federal

building code administered by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD), which regulates fire safety, structural integrity and energy efficiency.

The homes are transported in sections to the lots and installed on permanent foundations, then connected to utilities like any traditional house.

Factory construction reduces delays and helps control costs, allowing HOPE to add inventory more quickly while keeping rents within HUD voucher payment limits rather than open-market pricing. Manufactured housing carries lingering stigma in some communities, often tied to older mobile home parks or declining post-war developments. The introduction of manufactured housing has not been without criticism. Some traditionalists have raised concerns about long-term property values and

See **HOUSING** Page 15 →

# Damon Mitchell Appointed to Wyandotte County District Court

By Voice News Service

OUR HISTORY BEGINS HERE.

DEL

BLACK OWNED BUSINESS

Choices Medical Clinic, Inc.

www.choicesmedicalclinic.org

Governor Laura Kelly today appointed Damon Mitchell of Kansas City, KS to a judgeship position in the 29th Judicial District. The position was created through the retirement of Judge Constance M. Alvey.

“As a former defense attorney and current prosecutor, Damon Mitchell brings a unique and robust perspective to the bench,” Governor Laura Kelly said. “His empathy, commitment to justice, and deep roots in the community will benefit Wyandotte County.”

Mitchell, a lifelong resident of Wyandotte County, works as the Chief Deputy District Attorney at the



(L-R) Damon Mitchell, recently appointed to the 29th Judicial District Court, joins Judge Candice Alcaraz, Jackson County Prosecutor Melesa Johnson and Wyandotte County District Attorney Mark Dupree at the swearing-in of KCK Mayor Christal Watson.

Wyandotte County District Attorney’s Office, where he advises the District Attorney on legal matters, assigns cases to attorneys in the office, and trains attorneys.

“I am humbled and honored to serve as the next District Court Judge of

Wyandotte County,” said Damon Mitchell. “I thank Governor Kelly for giving me the opportunity to serve as Judge in my hometown. I look forward to helping Wyandotte County move forward, together, with justice for all.”

“We are incredibly proud of Damon,” said Wyandotte County District Attorney Mark A. Dupree, Sr. “From the moment he walked into the office restructuring his role and that of the assistant district attorneys in his charge, he has been nothing short of exemplary. He will bring the experience, work ethic and empathy required of his new position. Wyandotte County is well-served with Judge Damon Mitchell.”

District court judges in the 29th Judicial District are elected and serve four-year terms. When a vacancy occurs in the middle of a judge’s term, the governor appoints a new judge to fill the position and finish out the term. Elections for this position will be held in 2026.

## Susan Wilson Launches Campaign for Jackson County Legislature

By Bonita Gooch  
Editor-in-Chief

Susan B. Wilson has launched an early campaign for Jackson County Legislature’s 3rd District at-large seat, entering what could become a closely watched 2026 race.

The seat is currently held by Legislator Megan L. Smith, who was elected in 2022 under her previous name, Meghan Marshall. Smith has not publicly announced whether she will seek re-election. In December, she shared that she is expecting a child, due in April 2026.

The Jackson County Legislature is a nine-member body — six district representatives and three at-large members — responsible for approving budgets, property tax policy, public safety funding and other county operations.

Wilson, a clinical psychologist and retired University of Missouri–Kansas City vice chancellor, says she is running to restore stability and accountability following the county’s property tax assessment controversy.

On her campaign website, Wilson calls for data-driven assessments, a simplified appeals process and permanent safeguards to prevent future spikes in property taxes. She also pledges



Susan Wilson

to improve communication between the County Executive and Legislature, saying recent dysfunction has delayed budgets and weakened public trust.

Wilson currently serves as a Jackson County COMBAT commissioner, helping oversee anti-drug tax revenue dedicated to violence prevention and victim services. She supports continued funding for SAVE KC, a region-

al initiative aimed at reducing violent crime through coordinated community efforts.

Her background also includes leadership as board president of Essential Families, a non-profit focused on economic mobility and digital access, as well as board service with Prime Health, the Healthcare Foundation of Greater Kansas City and the Missouri Mid-Continent Library. She served 15 years as a team psychologist for the Kansas City Chiefs and the NFL.

Smith was elected as part of a slate backed by Freedom Inc., a Kansas City political organization whose endorsed candidates initially held enough seats to shape legislative outcomes if unified. However, divisions emerged, and Smith later voted independently on several key issues, shifting the chamber’s internal dynamics.

Candidate filing for the August 4, 2026 primary opens Feb. 24 and closes March 31.

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# American Jazz Museum Set For \$3.5 Million Renovation In 2026

By Bonita Gooch  
Voice Editor-in-Chief

A \$3.5 million restoration project will bring significant changes to the American Jazz Museum in 2026 — including expanded performance space, new food service and a larger retail footprint designed to enhance the visitor experience at 18th & Vine.

The Kansas City Council recently approved \$3.2 million in public funding for the redevelopment. The museum will contribute an additional \$300,000, bringing the total investment to \$3.5 million. Work is expected to begin and conclude within 2026.

The renovation reorganizes four major components of the museum's 29-year-old footprint.

The most noticeable change will be the relocation of the Blue Room, the museum's live jazz venue. Currently housed in a smaller space, the Blue Room will move into the area that now serves as the changing gallery. The larger



The American Jazz Museum at 18th & Vine is set for a \$3.5 million restoration project that will expand performance space and add new dining and retail features

footprint will allow the venue to accommodate approximately 180 to 200 guests, along with upgraded acoustics, sound and lighting.

The current Blue Room space will be converted into a café, introducing

dedicated food service inside the museum. Leaders say the addition is designed to create a more immersive, destination-style experience, encouraging visitors to stay longer before or after performances



Amber "Flutienastiness" Underwood hits soaring high notes during a performance at the Blue Room, which will be relocated and expanded as part of the American Jazz Museum's \$3.5 million renovation project in 2026.

and exhibits.

Retail space will also expand. The gift shop will grow to offer more merchandise connected to Kansas City's jazz heritage, artists and exhibitions, while serving as an additional revenue source for the institution.

Exhibit areas will be reorganized to improve flow and storytelling.

The museum will continue to maintain permanent galleries highlighting jazz masters, while refreshing its approach to rotating exhibitions.

Stephenie Smith, chair of the museum's board, said the restoration is about more than physical upgrades.

"The American Jazz Museum has a powerful story to tell about the history, impact and future of jazz, and this effort will help us tell it in the way it deserves to be told," Smith said.

She emphasized Kansas City's responsibility in preserving the genre's legacy.

"Jazz was here before anything else that Kansas City is known for," Smith said. "Many have said it was born in New Orleans, but it was raised here in Kansas City. It's our responsibility to shepherd that."

The project builds on years of strategic planning and community input, positioning the museum to strengthen its role as both a cultural anchor in the Historic Jazz District and a gathering place for residents and visitors from around the world.

# Negro Leagues Baseball Museum Provides Expansion Update On Anniversary

By Bonita Gooch  
Voice Editor-in-Chief

Marking the anniversary of the Negro National League's founding in Kansas City, the Negro Leagues Baseball Museum updated the community on its \$35 million expansion announced in 2023.

The update featured new renderings of the planned 30,000-square-foot facility, confirmation of the connected 132-room Pennant hotel, and progress on supporting infrastructure already underway in the 18th & Vine district.

Kansas City's historic 18th & Vine Jazz District is in the middle of a transformation that leaders say is about more than construction — it's about reclaiming cultural identity.

At the center is the **Negro Leagues Baseball Museum**, which plans to complete a \$35 million, 30,000-square-foot expansion by late 2028.

The new two-story museum facility will be built southwest of 18th Street and The Paseo, just north of the historic Paseo YMCA. The expanded museum will feature enhanced exhibits, immersive and tech-enabled displays, expanded galleries and improved visitor amenities.

The new building will connect directly to two major components: the restored Paseo YMCA — which will become the Buck O'Neil Education and Research Center — and a new 132-room boutique hotel called The Pennant.

"When you're talking about the development here, it's not



This rendering shows the expanded Negro Leagues Baseball Museum along The Paseo, connected to the historic YMCA, with The Pennant hotel visible behind it.

just digging a hole and doing a deal," Grayson Capital CEO Michael Collins said at a recent media event. "It is bringing back the most authentic cultural identity of Kansas City."

Grayson Capital is developing the hotel, which will be a Marriott Tribute Portfolio property. Estimated at \$53 million, The Pennant will be physically attached to the museum. Grayson Capital CEO is Michael Collins and the new hotel is being described as the first majority Black-owned hotel in Kansas City since the historic Street Hotel.

In addition to the hotel, Grayson Capital is developing

approximately 150 to 155 mixed-income apartments as part of the campus. The residential units will be constructed around and above the 470-space city-owned parking garage at 1819 Lydia Ave. The project also includes ground-floor retail space designed to add street-level activity and support small businesses in the district. The parking structure is designed to support the museum, hotel, housing and district visitors. Additional public participation includes streetscape work and utility improvements. However, the city does not own the museum or the hotel. Unlike the Jazz Museum, which is owned by the City, the museum operates as an independent nonprofit.

The organization launched its \$35 million capital campaign in 2023. Fundraising is ongoing.

The museum and the **American Jazz Museum** have shared space at 1616 E. 18th St. since 1997. That arrangement will end once the baseball museum relocates.

The Jazz Museum also announced the launch of its own renovation and expansion this month. Phase one plans include relocating and enlarging the Blue Room jazz club from 120 seats to as many as 200, expanding its café and Swing Shop retail area, reorganizing exhibits and making back-of-house improvements.

The Kansas City Council recently awarded \$3.2 million toward that effort — \$2 million from sports complex funds and \$1.2 million in Third District public improvement funds — with the Jazz Museum contributing \$300,000.

# Riverfest 2026 Mixes Classic R&B, Gospel and Friday Night Hip-Hop

Nine-day festival brings pop legends, gospel standouts, and hip-hop energy to downtown Wichita.

By **Bonita Gooch**  
Editor, In Chief

Organizers of **Wichita Riverfest 2026** have unveiled this year's concert lineup, delivering a cross-generational mix of Motown nostalgia, contemporary gospel, country, Latin music and hip-hop to downtown Wichita. Riverfest runs **May 29 through June 6, 2026**, with nightly concerts at the Crossland Construction Kennedy Plaza Concert Stage included with a festival button.

## The Jacksons

Kicking off the festival on **Friday, May 29**, The Jacksons bring decades of music history to the Riverfest stage. Formerly known as The Jackson 5, the group became one of the biggest pop-soul acts of the 1970s with hits like "ABC," "I Want You Back" and "I'll Be There."

Founding members Jackie



Jonathan McReynolds

and Marlon Jackson continue to tour, honoring the family's iconic legacy and giving longtime fans a chance to relive the Motown era.

## Jonathan McReynolds and Brent Jones

Gospelfest takes center stage on **Monday, June 1**, featuring Grammy-winning contemporary gospel artist Jonathan McReynolds and high-energy choir director Brent Jones. McReynolds is known for reflective worship favorites like "Make Room" and "Cycles," while Jones brings an upbeat, choir-driven sound with



Sage the Gemini

praise anthems that energize audiences.

## Sage the Gemini and Gym Class Heroes

Hip-hop and rap-rock fans will turn out on **Friday, June 5**, when West Coast rapper Sage the Gemini hits the stage alongside Gym Class Heroes. Sage rose to prominence in the early 2010s with bass-heavy hits like "Gas Pedal," "Red Nose" and "Now and Later," bringing club-ready energy to festival crowds. Gym Class Heroes, known for crossover favorites such as "Cupid's Chokehold" and "Stere



The Jacksons

Hearts," built a national following by blending hip-hop, pop and alternative rock.

Additional headliners throughout the week include Latin music stars El Fantasma, Los Reyes Locos and Mariachi Mexico En La Piel; country artist Jake Owen; Cajun favorite Keith Frank; Sons of Legion; the USAF Heartland of America Band; Mudbugs; and Hank

Azaria & the EZ Street Band: A Springsteen Celebration. Riverfest will also host a family movie night featuring "Back to the Future."

## Button Information

Early-bird Riverfest buttons cost **\$15 from April 3 through April 24**. Prices increase to **\$20 from May 1 through June 6**. Buttons for **children ages 6 to 12** cost

**\$10**, and children **5 and under are admitted free**.

Festival buttons provide access to concerts as well as Riverfest's food vendors, fireworks, family activities and community events throughout the nine-day celebration.

With a lineup that spans generations and genres, Riverfest 2026 promises something for nearly every musical taste in Wichita.

## ARTS & CULTURE BRIEFS

### New African American Artists Exhibit at Bruce Watkins

The African American Artists Collective KC is presenting a powerful new exhibition, **"Our Voices Our Truth ... In Peace,"** now on display at the Bruce R. Watkins Cultural Heritage Center, 3700 Martin Luther King Jr. Blvd., Kansas City, Missouri.

The exhibit, featuring the work of 25 national and local artists, serves as a special showcase for Black History Month and Women's History Month. It runs through **April 10, 2026**, and is open to the public **free of charge** Tuesdays through Saturdays from 10 a.m. to 6 p.m.

The exhibit highlights works from acclaimed artists including Charles Bibbs, Stasi Bobo-Ligon, Michael Brantley, Kwasi Asare, Dean Mitchell, Larry "Poncho"

Brown, NedRa Bonds, Michael V. Toombs, Sonie' Joi Thompson-Ruffin, Jason Piggie, Glenn North and Quraysh Ali Lasana, among others.

Through oil, acrylic and watercolor paintings — as well as pieces created with paper, fabric and metal — and through poetry and written word, the artists explore themes of history, identity, belonging and peace. Each voice contributes to a collective narrative rooted in cultural expression and community reflection.

For more information or to RSVP for the Opening Reception, call 816-513-0700.

### Still Time To Catch Five Guys Named Moe

If you're looking for a high-energy night of music, laughter and

classic rhythm and blues, there's still time to catch Black Repertory Theater Kansas City's production of *Five Guys Named Moe* at The Black Box in Kansas City.

An exuberant tribute to rhythm and blues pioneer and alto saxophonist Louis Jordan, *Five Guys Named Moe* has become an international sensation for its infectious

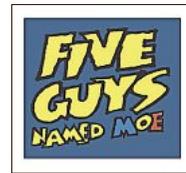
score and feel-good storytelling. Packed with Jordan's iconic jump-blues hits, the musical delivers toe-tapping numbers and larger-than-life performances that celebrate a golden era of American music.

The story centers on Nomax, a down-on-his-luck romantic who's broke, heartbroken and alone at

5 a.m., listening to the radio after his beloved Lorraine leaves him. But just when things seem darkest, the music takes over. Out of the radio step five sharply dressed, wise-cracking characters — all named Moe — who bring Jordan's music to life. Through song, humor and plenty of swagger, the Moes push Nomax to get himself together, fight for love and tell Lorraine how he really feels.

Set entirely to Jordan's swinging rhythm and blues and jazz score, the production blends nostalgia with high-octane choreography, playful audience energy and powerhouse vocals.

The show runs at **The Black Box**, 1060 Union Ave., Kansas City, Mo. 64101. Performances are at 7 p.m. except on Feb. 22 and 28 and March 1. Other remaining dates are: Feb. 20, 21, & 27. Tickets can be purchased online at [BRTKC.org](http://BRTKC.org).



### KC Melting Pot Theatre Hosts High School Monologue Competition

KC Melting Pot Theatre is inviting area high school students to step into the spotlight at its Next Narrative® Monologue Competition Kansas City Regional Finals. The event gives students in grades 9-12 the chance to perform a commissioned monologue before a panel of judges for scholarship prizes and the opportunity to win an all-expense-paid trip to New York City to compete nationally.

The competition will be held Saturday, March 28 at 5 p.m. at KC Melting Pot Theatre, 3051 Penn Valley Drive, Kansas City, MO. Registration closes Feb. 28, 2026, so students are encouraged to apply soon.

Parents, educators and community members are invited to attend. For full details, registration requirements and deadlines, visit [KCMPT.org](http://KCMPT.org)'s website.



**Harlan Garrett, 70**

November 11, 1955 - February 17, 2026  
Service will be held at 11 am on Sat., March 7 Greater New Testament Baptist Church 1833 N. Hydraulic.

**Charles Hollingsworth, 74**

June 15, 1951 - February 13, 2026  
Service was held on Feb. 28 at Jackson Mortuary Chapel.

**Grace Daniels, 56**

April 10, 1969 - February 10, 2026  
Service will be held at 11 am on Fri., March 6 at Jackson

Mortuary Chapel, 1125 E. 13th St.

**Betty McLeroy, 73**

March 23, 1952 - February 8, 2026  
Service was held Saturday, February 14 at Greater Mizpah Baptist Church

**Donald R. Parker, Sr., 67**

June 11, 1957 - February 8, 2026  
Service will be held at 11 am on Wed., Feb.25 at New Jerusalem Baptist Church, 1625 N Madison.

**Mary "May" Christa Davis, 99**

December 25, 1925 - February 5, 2026  
Service was held Feb. 21 at Holy Temple COGIC.

**Korte' L. Dawson, Sr., 48**

March 19, 1977 - February 5, 2026  
Service will be held at 11 am on Sat., Feb 28 at Greater New Testament Baptist Church, 1833 N. Hydraulic.

**Gwendallyn Ausbie, 69**

September 20, 1956 - February 4, 2026  
Service was held on Feb. 14 at Greater Mizpah Baptist Church.

**Bryant Moose, 67**

December 11, 1958 - January 31, 2026  
Service was held on Feb.14 at Kingdom Hall of Jehovah's Witnesses.

**REQUESTING BID PROPOSALS**

McCownGordon Construction is requesting bid proposals for the **Airside Innovations - Apex Aero at the Kansas City Airport - Wheeler Field.**

Proposals are due by: **2:00pm, March 13, 2026.**  
For Plans, Specifications, and Bid Packages, contact Chris Kelly at ckelly@mccowngordon.com.

The following scopes of work are being solicited for bids: Pre-Engineered Metal Buildings. All other scopes of work will be bid at a later date.

MBE and WBE preliminary goals are pending board approval.



**HOUSING, from Page 11 ↓**

neighborhood character compared to conventional stick-built homes. Housing experts note, however, that neighborhood outcomes are shaped more by long-term maintenance, ownership practices and economic investment than by whether a home was built on site or in a factory.

**Training And Community Stabilization**

Harding says housing is only part of the work. Whether a tenant is renting or preparing to buy, HOPE requires participation in financial literacy and budgeting programs. The goal is to strengthen credit, build savings habits and prepare residents for long-term stability. Harding has often described his work as community development, not simply real estate.

"You don't just build the church. You build the community around it," he has said in prior interviews.

Homeownership remains the long-term vision. But rental housing has become an important entry point — a way to stabilize families first, then create ownership opportunities when they are ready.

**Looking Ahead**

HOPE now operates under a mixed model:

- Build new homes
- Rehabilitate city properties
- Add manufactured units
- Provide quality rentals
- Create ownership pathways over time

Feilmeier has said he is interested in working with additional developers who are willing to engage in affordable housing at scale.

For HOPE, the evolution reflects a broader understanding: stabilizing neighborhoods may begin with ownership — but in today's housing market, strengthening the rental side of the equation is a critical need.

**MBE / WBE INVITATION TO BID**

JE Dunn Construction Company is bidding **Grandview 2024 – Pkg. 5 – Conn West Elementary, Belvidere Elementary, High Grove Early Childhood Center Kitchen and Art**

Rooms and request your bid proposal for applicable material and/or labor.

- 01.74.02 – Final Cleaning
- 02.41.00 – Selective Demolition
- 03.00.00 – Building Concrete
- 04.20.00 – Masonry
- 07.84.00 – Firestopping
- 08.10.00 – Doors, Frames, & Hardware
- 09.50.00 – Acoustical Ceilings, Drywall, & Framing
- 09.65.00 – Resilient Flooring & Base
- 09.67.00 – Resinous Flooring
- 09.90.00 – Painting
- 11.40.00 – Food Service Equipment
- 12.30.01 – Carpentry, Casework, & Specialties
- 22.00.00 – Plumbing
- 26.00.00 – Electrical & Fire Alarm



Bids will be received by JE Dunn via BuildingConnected.com until **February 27 th , 2026 at 10:00 AM.**

JE Dunn invites subcontractors to call if any assistance is required or questions arise concerning work segmentation, work and contract requirements, or the form of proposal requested.

Questions should be directed to Maxwell Heinen, Project Manager, by phone at (816) 859-3862, or by email at max.heinen@jedunn.com.

EOE, Minority/Female/Disability/Veteran/Sexual Orientation/Gender Identity

**PORGY AND BESS, from Page 16 ↓**

performed in several major works within this growing repertoire, including operas by **Terence Blanchard**, whose work has reshaped contemporary American opera.

Blanchard — widely known outside opera for his collaborations with filmmaker Spike Lee — made history as the first Black composer to have an opera staged at the Metropolitan Opera in New York. His operas blend classical structure with jazz, blues and modern storytelling, creating work that speaks directly to Black experience in America today.

**A Production Rooted in Community**

Lyric Opera's *Porgy and Bess* brings together an all-star principal cast from around the country, including baritone Eric Greene as Porgy and soprano Michelle Bradley as Bess. At the same time, the production features a substantial local chorus made up of young Black opera singers from the Kansas City area.

He describes the production as visually stunning, with sets that shift dramatically — particularly during the storm scene — bringing

**If You Go**

The Gershwin's *Porgy and Bess*  
Presented by Lyric Opera of Kansas City

**Dates:**

7:30 p.m., Sat., Feb. 28

7:30 p.m., Fri., March 6

2 p.m., Sun., March 8

**Location:**

Kauffman Center for the Performing Arts  
1601 Broadway Blvd., Kansas City, MO

**Tickets:**

Available through the Lyric Opera of Kansas City box office at kcopera.org or by calling the Kauffman Center ticket office.

Catfish Row vividly to life.

The costumes are designed by **Paul Tazewell**, who made history as the first African American man to win an Academy Award for costume design for *Wicked*.

For a singer who left Liberty to build a career on some of the world's biggest stages, returning home for *Porgy and Bess* is more than another role. It's a full-circle moment.

# National Black Cast Headlines Lyric's "Porgy And Bess"

By Bonita Gooch  
Voice Editor-in-Chief

When Lyric Opera of Kansas City announced it would stage *Porgy and Bess* for the first time in its history, baritone David Morgans didn't hesitate.

A Liberty, Missouri native now based in New York, Morgans said he "jumped" at the opportunity — not only to perform in one of the most significant American operas ever written, but to do it at home. The production has allowed him to spend time with his mother while returning to the region that shaped both his life and his voice.

Morgans plays Mingo, a key figure in the Catfish Row community and a prominent presence within the opera's choral world. While *Porgy and Bess* centers on the love story between Porgy and Bess, it is also very much an ensemble piece — one that relies on the collective voice of the community to tell a fuller story of survival, faith and resilience.

## From High School Stage to New York

Morgans' path to opera began in high school. Cast in school plays and musicals, he quickly realized that singing the words came far more naturally than memorizing spoken scripts.

After college, he moved straight to New York, where his career began to take shape. Living in Washington Heights was also a cultural shift.

## Making Opera Feel Accessible

Opera can feel intimidating for



Featuring beloved songs like "Summertime," *Porgy and Bess* blends operatic tradition with jazz and blues influences. KARLI CADEL

many audiences, especially those who didn't grow up exposed to it. Morgans, 33, understands that hesitation — and challenges it.

This production of *Porgy and Bess* is sung in English, with projected supertitles to follow along. And unlike concerts or Broadway shows, opera singers perform without microphones, relying solely on trained voices to carry over a full orchestra.

That raw, unamplified sound is part of what Morgans loves about the art form. Opera, he says, is

about emotion in its purest form — a human voice telling a story with no electronic filter.

And for first-time audiences, the music itself will feel familiar. Songs like "Summertime," "It Ain't Necessarily So," and "I Got Plenty O' Nuttin'" have lived far beyond the opera house, woven into American music for generations.

Originally written as a full-scale opera by George Gershwin in 1935, *Porgy and Bess* later grew in popularity through shorter Broadway-style adaptations, leading many

Americans to think of it as a musical. Today, it is widely recognized as one of the most important American operas ever composed — blending classical form with jazz, blues and spiritual influences.

## A Changing Opera Landscape — With Work Still to Do

Morgans has been fortunate to build a career during a moment when more Black stories are finding space on opera stages. He has

See **PORGY AND BESS** Page 15 →

## Meet the Artists of Porgy and Bess

Monday, March 2, 2026,  
6:00–7:30 pm  
Black Archives of  
Mid-America  
1722 E 17th Terrace, Kansas  
City, MO 64108

Learn more about their careers, their unique experiences bringing this iconic opera to life, and the stories behind their performances. A Q&A session will follow.

Dr. Roger Williams, Dedicated Lyric Opera patron and ambassador Dr. Roger Williams moderates this conversation, with: Michael Ellis Ingram, conductor; Michelle Bradley, Bess; Eric Greene, Porgy.

RSVP @ <https://donate2.app/WaMvIb>



Liberty, Mo., native David Morgans joins a national principal cast as Mingo in Lyric Opera's production of *Porgy and Bess*.

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