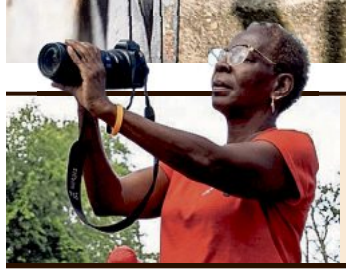
THE VOICE

A Trusted Voice From The Community's Perspective



THE INDIAN SPRINGS BET

ERIK MURRAY SEEKS A DEAL TO REBUILD THE SITE PAGE 6-7



Bonita Gooch's 30th Anniversary
Three decades later, The Voice publisher still puts our stories first.
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Medicare, ACA Deadlines Near: Review Before Renewing

By Bonita Gooch
Editor-in-Chief



Keeping the same health insurance may feel like the easiest choice, especially if you're healthy. But with insurance costs straining household budgets, letting coverage renew without reviewing it could mean higher bills or unexpected changes in benefits.

Two enrollment deadlines are approaching for 2027 coverage: **Dec. 7 for Medicare and Dec. 15 for Affordable Care Act Marketplace coverage beginning Jan. 1.**

Medicare: Check What's Changing

Through Dec. 7, Medicare beneficiaries can change Medicare Advantage plans, switch between Advantage and Original Medicare, or join or change a Part D prescription drug plan. Changes take effect Jan. 1. Returning to Original Medicare does not automatically guarantee eligibility to buy supplemental Medigap insurance.

Existing Medicare Advantage and drug coverage generally renews automatically if the plan remains available and eligibility requirements are met. However, renewal does not guarantee the same costs or **benefits. The benefits offered among a lot of plans are changing this year, so make sure you check your existing plan for changes. There may be some you don't find acceptable.**

Review the plan's **Annual Notice of Change,** sent each fall. Check premiums, deductibles, copayments, covered medications and pharmacy costs. Confirm that preferred doctors and hospitals remain in network, and examine dental, vision and hearing benefits. Even people taking no medications should consider what they would owe after an unexpected illness.

ACA: Two Dates To Remember

For Kansas and Missouri residents using HealthCare.gov, **Dec. 15 is the deadline to enroll in or change plans for Jan. 1 coverage.** Those enrolling Dec. 16 through **Jan. 15** generally receive coverage beginning **Feb. 1,** provided they pay their first premium. After Jan. 15, enrollment generally requires a qualifying special enrollment opportunity.

Marketplace coverage generally renews automatically, but consumers may be placed in a different plan if their current option disappears. Review renewal letters and update expected income and household information to receive the correct financial assistance. Compare total expenses—not just monthly premiums—including deductibles, prescriptions and provider networks. HealthCare.gov

Free Help Is Available

Medicare beneficiaries can compare options at Medicare.gov/plan-compare or call **1-800-MEDICARE**. Free, independent counseling is available through **Kansas SHICK, 800-860-5260**, and **Missouri SHIP, 800-390-3330**. medicare.gov

For ACA coverage, visit HealthCare.gov or call **800-318-2596.** Find local enrollment assistance at LocalHelp.HealthCare.gov; select an assister for help from a trained navigator or certified application counselor.

For appointments, bring current insurance information, medications and preferred providers. You may decide to keep your coverage—but make that decision after checking what you'll receive and what you'll pay.



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When Full-Time Work Isn't Enough to Pay the Bills

ALICE data show how many households in Kansas and the Kansas City area fall short on essentials, and what it costs to build a cushion.

By Bonita Gooch
Editor-in-Chief

Two full-time paychecks can put a family well above the poverty line in Kansas and Missouri and still leave them short on rent, groceries and child care.

In one Kansas City-area example from United Way, a cashier and a nursing assistant raising two children earn a combined $4,987 a month. Their basic expenses, including child care, total $5,889. That leaves a **$902 gap every month.** Their combined annual pay is nearly $60,000, well above the 2024 federal poverty guideline of $31,200 for a family of four.

That gap is what United Way's **ALICE** measure captures. ALICE stands for **Asset Limited, Income Constrained, Employed.** It describes households that earn above the poverty line and still can't afford the basics where they live.

In the seven-county Kansas City area, **nearly one in four households** fell into that category in 2024. In Missouri, ALICE workers include personal care aides, cooks, servers, janitors and retail sales workers. They care for patients, prepare meals and keep businesses running while struggling to cover their own bills.



AI-GENERATED PHOTO ILLUSTRATION

What the Poverty Line Misses

ALICE researchers build budgets using local costs for housing, child care, food, transportation, health care and technology, along with taxes and miscellaneous expenses.

In 2024, **38% of Sedgwick County households, 36% of Kansas households** and **35% of households in United Way's seven-county Kansas City region** were either in poverty or classified as ALICE.

Within the Kansas City area, the share varied widely by county.

- **26% in Johnson County**
- **40% in Jackson County** and
- **46% in Wyandotte County**

Getting By and Building a Cushion

A single adult working 40 hours a week year-round at Missouri's 2024 minimum wage of $12.30 earned **$25,584 before taxes.** That was above the $15,060 federal poverty guideline but $1,440 short of the state's ALICE Survival Budget and that was before taxes.

Stability Budget

The report estimated that same adult needed **$47,544** for a Stability Budget, which includes room to absorb an emergency or save toward a longer-term goal.

For two adults with two children in child care, Missouri's annual budget rose from **$72,228** for essentials to **$119,436** with room to build reserves.

In Sedgwick County, the same family needed **$76,512** to get by and **$128,124** for greater financial stability.

For families already struggling to cover the basics, even a small raise can leave them worse off. If the raise pushes their income over the limit for child care or food assistance, they can lose more in benefits than they gain in pay. That's known as a **benefits cliff**. Policymakers can soften that cliff by phasing out assistance as earnings rise, giving families time to take on more of those costs.

In a November opinion piece, United Way of Greater Kansas City CEO Patrick Sallee and co-author Ebony Reed urged employers to examine wages and benefits. They also called on government and philanthropy to use ALICE data to guide funding toward the needs the data reveal.

"It's time for our measure of hardship to catch up with reality," they wrote.

What It Takes to Get By and Build a Cushion

Household, 2024	Federal Poverty Guideline	ALICE Survival Budget	ALICE Stability Budget
One adult, Missouri statewide	$15,060	$27,024	$47,544
Family of four, Missouri statewide	$31,200	$72,228	$119,436
Family of four, Sedgwick County	$31,200	$76,512	$128,124

* Family budgets assume two adults and two children in child care. The Stability Budget includes savings for emergencies and longer-term goals.

Sources: [2026 Missouri ALICE Report](https://unitedwaygkc.org/wp-content/uploads/2026/11/state-of-alice-report-missouri-2026.pdf?utm_source=chatgpt.com) and [United Way of the Plains](https://unitedwayplains.org/download/158/program-info/27479/2026-alice-in-sedgwick-county-handout?utm_source=chatgpt.com).

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Thrive Awards Honor Five Kansas City Community Builders

By Voice News Service

LISC Greater Kansas City held their annual Thrive Awards recognition late last month at the Zhou B Art Center in Kansas City, Mo. The annual awards program recognizes people and organizations that strengthen neighborhoods and expand economic opportunity across the Kansas City metro.

Qiana Thomason — Jim White Community Development Legacy Award. The Health Forward Foundation president and CEO has expanded the foundation's work to address how housing, economic opportunity and residents' influence over public decisions shape their health. She also led the move of its headquarters east of Troost, closer to communities the foundation serves. In her award video, Thomason said residents have the knowledge to solve problems in their communities and need resources and partners who trust them.

Kelly Anderson — Affordable Housing Champion. Anderson began by getting to know people sleeping outdoors in Excelsior Springs, Mo. She is now working to develop Eden Village of Excelsior Springs, which would provide affordable homes and connect residents experiencing homelessness and living with disabilities to services.

Tracey Lewis — Economic Development Champion. During four years as president and CEO of the Economic Development Corporation of Kansas City, Lewis helped connect neighborhood projects with financing. His work included helping put together a city investment agreement for the Overlook District along Brush Creek.



Pictured are Alana Henry, executive director of the Ivanhoe Neighborhood Council, named Outstanding Partner of the Year, and Dina Newman, director of the UMKC Center for Neighborhoods, named Financial Empowerment Champion. Tracey Lewis, former president and CEO of the Economic Development Corporation of Kansas City, was named Economic Development Champion at the 2026 Thrive Awards and Qiana Thomason recipient of the Jim White Community Development Legacy Award.

UMKC Center for Neighborhoods — Financial Empowerment Champion. For a decade, the center has helped volunteer leaders across Kansas City, Mo., build stronger neighborhood associations, plan projects and compete for funding. Its free, 12-week leadership course drew 193 participants from 79 organizations in its first five years. The center also helps residents use neighborhood data and tap UMKC's urban planning expertise. In Blue Hills, that support helped residents secure solar lighting for a park they created on a once-neglected block.

Ivanhoe Neighborhood Council — Outstanding Partner of the Year. The resident-led council pairs housing work with services for families, from youth activities and senior programs to food assistance. It also works with Legal Aid of Western Missouri to help return vacant houses to use as affordable homes.

Why LISC Honors This Work

LISC Greater Kansas City is the local office of the Local Initiatives Support Corporation, a national nonprofit that has worked in the region since 1981. LISC partners with residents, nonprofits and developers, providing grants, loans and technical assistance to build and preserve affordable housing, support small businesses and bring investment to neighborhoods that have historically received too little of it.

LISC launched the Thrive Awards in 2017 to recognize the people and organizations doing that work across the metro. The celebration also brings grassroots organizers, bankers, developers and civic leaders together so they can learn what others are doing and find partners for future projects.







For 30 Years, Bonita Gooch Has Put Our Stories First

By Lauren Cheeseborough

From a Wichita monthly to a regional newsroom, Gooch has built The Voice around a question readers ask: What does this mean to me and my community.?

This summer, a Kansas City reader sent Bonita Gooch a handwritten letter thanking her for an article she wrote explaining what a "yes" and what a "no" vote on the proposed Kansas constitutional amendment would do. The airwaves had been full of confusing and misleading ads and her story laid out both sides of the issue in a manner that was b

After reading her story, he told her, he understood what was going on.

These are the kinds of notes and comments Gooch loves receiving and hearing. The letter was confirmation that she was delivering on a commitment she made when she took over the paper 30 years ago.

"I've always felt our community deserved a quality publication with informative, well-written articles that speak to our issues, concerns and interests," Gooch said. "And I refused to give them less."

She believed it so much that for more than 20 years, the paper has led with and followed its tagline and motto, committing it to being "a trusted Voice from the community's perspective."

"Our stories are focused on news and issues of importance to our targeted African American and underserved communities, and they're written in a way that explains how the news impacts them.

"For our readers," said Gooch, "we want to answer the question, 'What does this mean to me?'"



Building the Paper She Wanted

Gooch put out her first issue as publisher of The Community Voice in November 1996, having taken over a year and a half after Billy and Yvette McCray launched the Wichita monthly. She brought a journalism degree, experience in the field and a firm idea of what the paper should deliver that was obvious from the beginning.

Early on, that wasn't an easy task. When she started, the technology we take for granted didn't exist, making the process slow and onerous. Getting a photo meant getting film developed and hoping you had the perfect shot. Getting files between locations meant driving them there, not transmitting them across the internet. Email and social media were in their infancy.

For decades, Bonita covered the stories of Wichita's Black community. She was there with a pad, pencil and camera in hand. And when people saw her, they knew to look for the related story in the pages of THE VOICE.

As technology expanded, so did THE VOICE. She recognized the need to grow the paper's audience, and she had been asked for years to expand the paper into new markets. In 2017, she began distribution of the paper across the I-70 corridor in Salina, Junction City, Manhattan and Topeka. She expanded into Kansas City, Kansas, in 2018 and crossed the state line into Kansas City, Missouri, a year later.

In 2023, Gooch was inducted into the Kansas Newspaper Hall of Fame.

The Pandemic Changed the Pace

Of all the changes Gooch says she's experienced in the industry, those of 2020 marked a defining moment. As Americans sheltered at home, they turned to the internet for news and information. A newsroom accustomed to putting out a paper every other week quickly switched to 24/7 mode.

"We switched to an always-on mode to make sure we were a reliable and timely source of information for our reader," said Gooch.

It's a pace that hasn't slowed down since, with the paper delivering news and information seven days a week via its state-of-the-industry website, four weekly newsletters and daily social media posts. Articles aren't just delivered every two weeks. The organization regularly publishes 15-plus online stories per week in addition to its print publication.In 2023, Gooch was inducted into the Kansas Newspaper Hall of Fame.

The Small Team Behind The Voice

"We do a lot with a little," Gooch says often.

The Voice runs with a small team of part-time employees and Gooch, who typically puts in 12 to 16 hours a day.

"This paper is what it is because of Bonita's commitment to the product and the community we serve," said longtime Voice employee Elaine Guillory. "If you appreciate anything you've read or seen in THE VOICE, thank Bonita. We're members of the team, but she's the engine that keeps it going."



Bonita Gooch and members of The Community Voice staff pose with a copy of the newspaper around 2000. Gooch put out her first issue as publisher in November 1996.

(L-R) Bonita Gooch, Chester Thomas, LaTricia Harper, Loui Nossaman, Dorothy Crouch, DeeDee Alexander, Chris

HELP KEEP OUR VOICE STRONG

THE VOICE

"Even when we went online, I refused to put our publication behind a paywall," Gooch said about keeping The Voice free.

Thirty years after her first issue, readers can still pick up a free copy of The Community Voice. They can also open a newsletter, share a video or follow a story from another city as it develops. For Gooch, keeping that access free is part of making sure the communities The Voice covers can stay informed and connected.

Even though it's free to take, it's not free to make.

Our costs continue to rises The biggest hit came after The Voice had already set its $40,000 year-end fundraising goal. A 30% increase in its printing bill will add about $10,000 to the budget, making it more important than ever to meet or exceed the goal.

Help Keep Our Voice Strong

Help The Community Voice meet or exceed its $40,000 goal by Dec. 31. Your gift helps keep the news free in print and online by paying for printing, website hosting and the work that goes into reporting, newsletters and video.

Give $50. That's less than $1 a week over a year.

Give $100 if you can. You'll help keep The Voice free for a reader who can't afford to give. Consider setting up recurring monthly or yearly giving. You can do all of these online here

Erik Murray Wants His Hometown to Bet on Indian Springs

The local developer's $1.15 billion plan would bring more than 2,000 homes, a grocery store and a hotel to the former mall site. After years of failed deals, Wyandotte County officials are weighing what it will cost the public.

By Bonita Gooch
Voice Editor-in-Chief



A rendering of Center Street shows outdoor dining, storefronts and apartments at Midtown Station, the neighborhood Erik Murray proposes for the former Indian Springs Mall site in Kansas City, Kansas. The Unified Government and Murray's development team have until April 30, 2027, to reach a development agreement.

Erik Murray grew up shopping at Indian Springs Mall. Now the Wyandotte County developer wants to build apartments there that teachers like his niece can afford. She teaches in Kansas City, Kansas, and moved back into her father's basement, Murray said, because she couldn't cover rent while pursuing her master's degree on a teacher's salary.

For Murray, that's part of what makes the **two years** he's **spent negotiating with the Unified Government over Midtown Station** so frustrating. He sees an opportunity to build housing and bring everyday services to a part of Kansas City, Kansas, that has waited years for major investment. However he feels he's had to clear hurdles that developers of large projects in western Wyandotte County rarely face.

On Nov. 12, **Mayor Christal Watson cast the deciding vote** to keep his project alive, but only gave Murray and his Eastside Innovation LLC until April 30, 2027, to reach a development agreement with the Unified Government.

Murray says delay in reaching a development agreement has a lot to do with turnover in multiple key staff positions at city hall, and some to do with a government that has a history of being more open to outside developers that those who are homegrown.

No matter what's behind the delays, a read of the room at the Nov. 12 commission reading, seems to indicate the commissioners are ready to get this deal finalized or move on.

A Site With a Long Memory

Indian Springs, the premier mall in Wyandotte County when it was built in 1971, was located near 47th Street and State Avenue. iLike many enclosed malls, Indian Springs lost the department stores that drew shoppers and helped sustain its smaller stores. Its last major anchor left in 2001.

The Unified Government acquired the property in 2007 for about $8.4 million and tore it down in 2016/ Since then, they've suffered a series of failed development projects.

A proposed business park failed to win enough support the following year. Then came Scavuzzo's $140 million **KC Foodie Park.** That project had a development agreement and preliminary site work before a UG committee moved to end the deal in 2022.

That history of setbacks could help explain in part why City Hall is approaching this award with caution.

The Midtown Station Project

The roughly 90-acre plan calls for 2,117 homes, including 1,915 rentals and 202 for-sale homes. Of the rentals, 697 would be reserved for households earning roughly 30% to 80% of the area median income. The earlier plan called for 828 income-restricted homes.

The $378 million first phase, projected to open in 2031, would include 609 apartments, 305 of them income-restricted, along with a grocery store, pharmacy, daycare and clinic space. A 167-room hotel with 10,000 square feet of meeting space would give Kansas City, Kansas, another venue for gatherings following the closure of the Jack Reardon Convention Center.

The next four phases would add 1,508 homes, including the development's 202 for-sale homes. The full plan calls for about 223,000 square feet of commercial space, including space in the first phase. The development would also include an innovation hub modeled on Kansas City, Missouri's Keystone Innovation District, where entrepreneurs, universities and companies could work together to develop new businesses.

The final phase is projected to open in 2037.

Murray points across the river to Second + Delaware, a 276-unit apartment development his partner Jonathan Arnold helped build in Kansas City, Missouri's River Market. The complex, a model for Midtown Station's apartments, features spacious, light-filled homes and rooftop gardens and was designed to use 80% to 90% less energy than standard buildings.Murray said the commissioners who voted to continue negotiating with him had toured Second + Delaware at his invitation. He said the visit helped them understand the quality of the apartments his team plans to build at Midtown Station.

The development will pair energy-efficient buildings with an on-site solar array and batteries that could store electricity for later use. He says the goal is for residents to have no electric bill. A proposed agreement with the Board of Public Utilities for battery storage capacity is still pending.

Innovate Project Financing

Why do Murray and his company, **Eastside Innovation Kansas LLC**, still lack a signed development agreement with the Unified Government two years after they were chosen to develop the project?

Relations between the two parties have been strained from the beginning. Murray said problems with the UG's online system kept his team out of the bid process. After his team sued, the Unified Government reopened the process and later selected Eastside Innovation's Midtown Station proposal as the project they wanted to move forward with.

Murray describes the project as "ambitious and innovative," qualities he believes have led city leaders to question its viability. At the Nov. 12 commission meeting, the commissioners had lots of questions, most of them focusing on the project's $1.145 billion funding package.

Murray has built a diverse and creative package for funding the project, but with so many parts, commissioners seemed concerned about what would happen if one of those sources fell through.

Midtown Station's financing plan includes a lot of independent

"You are asking for a TIF for every phase, and essentially, that's a tax break. And while I do recognize there is some revenue, how do we explain this to our community?"

CHRISTAL WATSON
Mayor/CEO of the Unified Government

elements, including loans, federal and state tax incentives, private investment and what has turned out to be an important part of the package – tax increment financing subsidies from the city.

Many of the programs capital packages are designed specifically to help make projects like these financially viable, but does the project depend too heavily on these programs?

Two sources would cover just over half of the project's estimated cost. The plan calls for $444 million in HUD-insured mortgage financing for rental housing and $138 million in federal low-income housing tax credits to help finance income-restricted apartments.

HUD mortgage insurance helps developers secure loans from private lenders by protecting lenders against losses if the developer defaults.

Tax credit programs put projects like this on a more positive foot by lowering loans and personal debt with investments.

Midtown Station will use **energy investment tax credits** to help pay for solar panels and battery storage. Funds from **New Markets Tax Credits**, designed to draw investment into qualifying low-income communities, can help finance facilities like the grocery store, child care center or health clinic proposed in the project.



From left, Erik Murray, president of Eastside Innovation LLC, JaEvon Marshall, partner and vice president of asset management, and Tamara Arredondo, community engagement and operations lead. The team is behind the Midtown Station proposal for the former Indian Springs Mall site.

Midtown Station will also take advantage of the site's recent designation as a federal **Opportunity Zone.** The developer aims to raise $238 million in equity from investors hoping to take advantage of the opportunity zone's favorable tax incentives.

A few other sources of funding for the project include $45.8 million in private equity – commitments from Murray and his partners, $2.75 million in upfront money from the project;s proposed hotel brand or operator, and $16.2 million in projected proceeds from the sale of residential lots in the project.



An aerial rendering shows the proposed 90-acre Midtown Station development near I-635 and State Avenue in Kansas City, Kansas. The five-phase plan calls for 2,117 homes, including 697 income-restricted rentals, along with a grocery store, a 167-room hotel and an innovation district. Rendering by Arnold Development Group.

The City's Give Back

Despite the rest of the project's creative funding package, the commissioner's major concern with the project is Murray's rather large request for use of Tax Increment Financing or TIFs for the project.

With the TIFs, local taxing bodies would continue to receive the property tax revenue the site generated before redevelopment – which isn't much. As the property's taxable value rises, a share of the additional tax revenue, known as the increment, would go toward reimbursing the developer for eligible project costs. The rest would be available to local taxing bodies.

Murray's proposal calls for returning **100% of residential property-tax increment in Phase 1 to the project. 95% or residential property-tax increment in phases 2-5 and 90% of property-tax increment on all commercial development in every phase.**

Under the proposed pay-as-you-go arrangement, the Unified Government would put up no money upfront., but the UG would generate very little in property tax from the project.

With property taxes already high in Wyandotte County, Mayor Christal Watson questioned how to justify the incentives to residents.

"You are asking for a TIF for every phase, and essentially, that's a tax break," Watson said at the Nov. 12 commission meeting. "And while I do recognize there is some revenue, how do we explain this to our community?"

Murray says he recognizes the mayor is between "a rock and a hard place," with many Wyandotte County residents feeling overtaxed. In November, voters rejected two sales tax proposals.

However, Watson has also called for more development east of I-635, pointing to northeast Kansas City, Kansas, and downtown and east-side residents have long been frustrated by seeing development and incentives go west.

Official Viability Call

Directed to by the UG, Murray's team paid for a project feasibility study conducted by PGAV Planners, a consultant selected by the UG. PGAV's analysis showed how much the terms matter.

PGAV found that Midtown Station could be financially viable under Eastside Innovation's proposed TIF loan, but that the project had very little margin. However they said the project could not be viable under the UG proposed terms, which would direct just 75% of eligible new tax revenue back to the project.

Murray, says he's asking for less than the Chiefs for a project that's designed to help not a professional football team, but the city's residents, particularly those to the east, who've been asking for their fair share for decades. Murray wants officials to weigh the value of a grocery store, child care and housing for working families with the same seriousness.

By April 30, both sides will have to decide what they're willing to commit to make it a place people can call home.

VA Disability Claims Help Is Free. When Can Someone Charge?

Kansas and Missouri lawmakers have weighed restrictions on paid claims consultants. A federal ruling could also mean money back for veterans who paid one company.

Veterans in Kansas and Missouri can get free help filing for disability benefits from the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs. VA-accredited veterans service officers can help veterans figure out which benefits they may qualify for, gather records and prepare the paperwork. Yet court records show one private company billed a veteran more than $21,000 for help with his first claim.

Veterans may turn to paid consultants because they're overwhelmed by the paperwork or want someone to take more of it off their hands. A consultant may help organize medical records, coordinate appointments and put together a claim packet. Some companies charge only if the veteran receives new or increased benefits, which can make the offer appealing because there's no upfront bill. The fee can still be substantial.

For example, Veterans Guardian, who were recently sued in court, generally charged five times the increase in a veteran's monthly benefit.

Paying for help may save a veteran time preparing the claim, but it gives the claim no priority at the VA. Accredited veterans service officers can also help gather evidence and prepare the paperwork for free.



Veterans in Kansas and Missouri can get free help filing VA disability claims through accredited veterans service officers, who can help gather records and prepare the paperwork. However, if you used Veterans Guardian to help you file a claim, you might be able to get a refund. *TEEPHONE0124*

When Federal Law Allows Fees

Federal law generally requires VA accreditation to act as a veteran's claims agent or attorney. For disability claims, even accredited attorneys and claims agents generally cannot charge for work they do before the VA issues its first decision.

Once the VA issues that decision, whether it approves or denies the claim, a veteran can hire a VA-accredited attorney or claims agent to seek a review. A veteran might pay for help gathering new evidence or challenging a denial or a disability rating they believe is too low. Free accredited help is also available at that stage.

Federal rules require those fees to be reasonable. If the VA pays the attorney or agent directly out of a veteran's back pay under a qualifying agreement, the fee is capped at **20% of the past-due benefits awarded.** Other fee arrangements can include a flat fee or hourly rate. Fees above **33⅓% of past-due benefits** are presumed unreasonable.

Kansas lawmakers could revisit competing proposals in January to regulate paid veterans claims consultants or bar them from charging for claims help. Missouri lawmakers considered similar proposals in 2026, including a cap on consulting fees and a measure to bar fees that federal law prohibits, but neither became law.

Veterans Guardian Billed One Veteran More Than $21,000

In May, a federal judge in North Carolina ruled that **Veterans Guardian VA Claim Consulting** violated federal law by preparing and presenting disability claims on veterans' behalf without VA accreditation and charging for the work.

The company generally charged five times the increase in a veteran's monthly disability benefit. One plaintiff, **Eric Beard**, received **$4,272.80 a month** after filing his first disability claim. Veterans Guardian multiplied that monthly award by five, rounded down to the nearest $10 and billed him **$21,360.** Court records show he paid **$19,224**

Could Local Veterans Get Money Back?

On Nov. 10, the judge ruled that eligible class members are entitled to **three times what they paid Veterans Guardian, plus interest on the original amount.** The Veterans of Foreign Wars said total damages **could exceed $1 billion.** The court has yet to set the final amount and scheduled a Dec. 1 status conference. Veterans Guardian disputes the finding that it acted as an unaccredited claims agent and says it plans to appeal.

Kansas and Missouri veterans who paid Veterans Guardian may be covered by the case. Eligibility depends on the contract, the timing of the payment and whether the veteran opted out of the lawsuit.

As of Nov. 20, the court-approved website lists no payment claim form or filing deadline. Veterans can check the eligibility rules, contact the lawyers representing the class and follow the case at VeteransGuardianClassAction.com. www.veteransguardianclassaction.com

Where to Get Free Claims Help

- Kansas Office of Veterans Services https://www.kovs.ks.gov/veteran-services/field-office-locations?utm_source=chatgpt.com
- Missouri Veterans Commission https://mvc.dps.mo.gov/service/?utm_source=chatgpt.com
- VA Accredited Representative Finder https://www.va.gov/get-help-from-accredited-representative/find-rep/



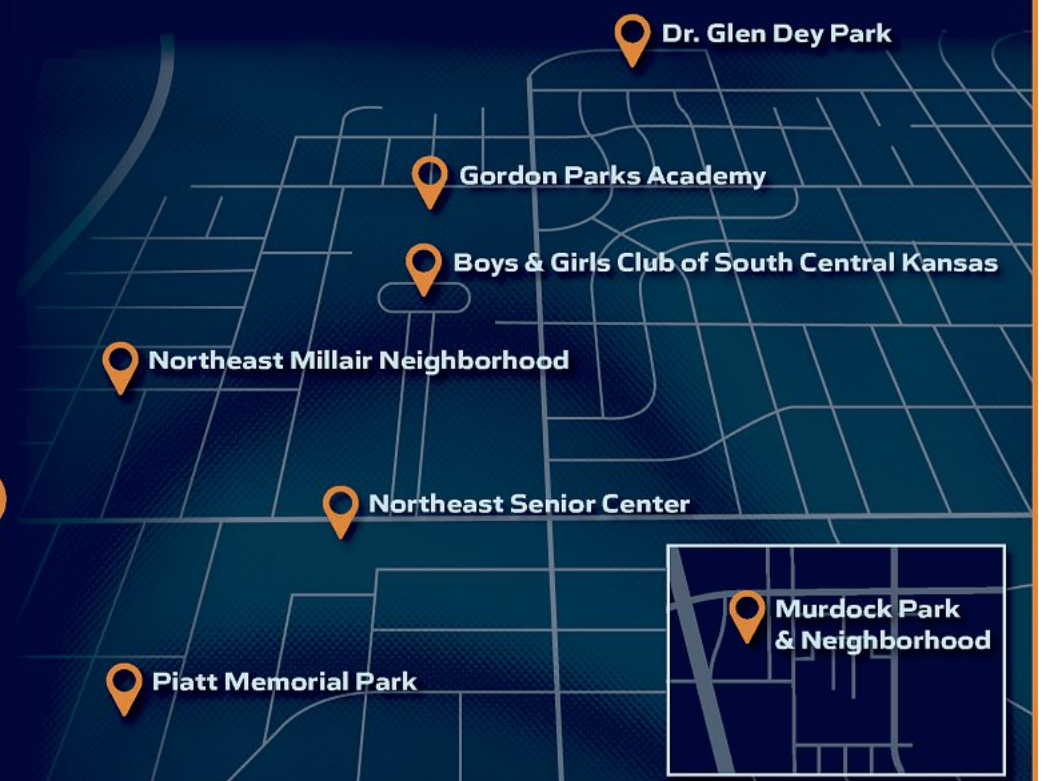
I Feel Fine. Why Should I Get Tested for TCE Exposure?

Contaminated groundwater has been identified near ***29th & Grove*** in Wichita. Exposure to TCE has been linked to serious health problems that may take years to develop.

FREE Health Testing Ends December 31, 2026!

Clearway Testing offers free health testing to help identify potential health concerns. There is no cost to you, and no insurance is needed. Testing and care will remain available in 2027 and beyond, but fees may apply.†

Don't Wait. Get tested for FREE while you still can!



Know These Locations?

If you've lived, worked, or spent time in this area, you may have been exposed without knowing it.

Clearway TESTING

ClearwayTesting.org

†Free health testing through Clearway Testing partners is funded through December 31, 2026. Testing and care will remain available after this date, but fees may apply.

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

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.

Program of All-Inclusive Care for the Elderly (PACE®) benefits and services highlights

- No bills, co-pays or deductibles for covered services
- Door-to-door transportation with a familiar face
- Social work/care management and home health included
- Medication and medical equipment/supplies fully covered and delivered to your home
- Day center and activities
- A personalized plan to help you with your symptoms and to help you reach your goals

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Wichita Wants to Know:
What's Happening at I-135 and Kellogg?

Two aging bridges are undergoing major work at a busy Wichita interchange. KDOT explains what's changing, how traffic is affected and when construction is expected to end.

By Ty Davis
The Community Voice

If you've driven through the I-135 and Kellogg interchange recently, you've probably noticed construction barriers, closed ramps and heavy equipment along one of Wichita's major highway connections.

For motorists who depend on the interchange to get to work, school and other destinations, the construction raises three questions: What's being built? Why is the work necessary? And when will drivers be able to travel through the interchange without construction disruptions?

The Kansas Department of Transportation (KDOT) is replacing one bridge and rehabilitating another where I-135 meets U.S. 54, commonly known as Kellogg.

J.B. Wilson, KDOT's Wichita Metro Public Information Officer, spoke with The Community Voice about the project and what drivers can expect when the work is finished.

Two Bridges, Two Different Approaches

The construction involves two ramps connecting I-135 and Kellogg, each requiring a different approach because of the condition of its existing structure.

The bridge carrying southbound I-135 traffic to eastbound Kellogg has reached the end of its service life and is being replaced entirely.

Crews are building the new bridge parallel to the existing structure, allowing the original ramp to remain available while the replacement is constructed.

"We're going to essentially migrate traffic to the new ramp, and then we're going to demolish the old one," Wilson said.

The northbound I-135 ramp to westbound Kellogg requires a different type of work. Its supporting structure remains serviceable, but the concrete deck motorists drive across has reached the end of its useful life.

Crews are replacing that surface through a process called redecking, which removes and rebuilds the roadway portion of the bridge while retaining the supporting structure.

Wilson explained that KDOT handles maintenance and rehabilitation differently from projects intended to modernize or expand highways. Rehabilitation restores aging infrastructure, while expansion projects may add lanes, redesign ramps or increase roadway capacity.

"We're not enhancing that connectivity; we're rehabilitating it," Wilson said.

The replacement bridge will serve the same traffic movement as the existing bridge, and the redecked structure will keep its original configuration.

Will the Improvements Reduce Traffic Backups?

Motorists traveling through the interchange often encounter congestion where vehicles enter and exit Kellogg, particularly during busy commuting periods.

One trouble spot is the southbound I-135 connection to eastbound Kellogg. Drivers also encounter merging traffic where vehicles entering eastbound Kellogg from northbound and southbound I-135 come together.

Wilson said the current construction is not designed to expand the interchange or substantially change how traffic moves through it.

When asked whether the replacement bridge would be wider or include additional lanes, Wilson explained that it would follow essentially the same design as the existing structure.



As part of the rebuild at 135 and Kellogg, the southbound 135 to west bound Kellogg is closed. The bridge is being redecked, which removes and rebuilds the roadway portion of the bridge while retaining the supporting structure.

That means the project is not expected to eliminate recurring traffic backups through additional lanes or redesigned merging areas.

Instead, drivers will gain renewed bridge structures that allow the existing highway connections to remain in service.

During construction, however, motorists must navigate temporary restrictions.

The northbound I-135 ramp to westbound Kellogg has been closed during rehabilitation. KDOT's published detour directs drivers to continue north to the

See BRIDGES Page 11 →

What Wichita Wants to Know.
You Ask. We Find Out.

Curious about a new business, a neighborhood landmark, road construction or a piece of Wichita history? The Community Voice is finding answers to your questions about our community. Submit your question at www.communityvoiceks.com/wichita-what-do-you-want-to-know/Your question could inspire our next story



Contractors are building a new bridge to carry southbound I-135 traffic to eastbound Kellogg. The new bridge is being built parallel to the existing bridge allowing the original ramp to remain available while the replacement is constructed.

What's Next for Wichita's Aging Canal Route?

Residents have through Dec..3 to tell KDOT what they'd like to see along I-135 and beneath it.

Wichita's Canal Route opened in 1979 and now carries more than 90,000 vehicles a day. With many of its bridges expected to reach the end of their service lives in the next 10 to 15 years, the Kansas Department of Transportation has launched a study and is asking Wichita residents to help shape the route's future.

The study covers 5.5 miles of I-135 from Harry Street to K-96, as well as Kellogg from Washington to Hillside. KDOT will look at how people use the corridor, how changes could affect nearby neighborhoods and which improvements should come first. The findings will help guide future development and identify potential funding sources.

At two open houses Nov. 18, KDOT asked residents what they'd like to see change. J.B. Wilson, the agency's Wichita metro public information officer, said KDOT wants to hear from more people who drive the route as well as those who walk or bike beneath it or live nearby. Residents can still submit comments on the study page through Dec. 3.

KDOT will use those comments and its engineering data to develop suggestions back to the community with open houses in spring 2027. The agency expects to finish the proposed plan for improvements by the fall. From there, the project will move into environmental review required under the National Environmental Policy Act, followed by permitting, engineering design and eventually construction. KDOT will determine the timing and funding for each step.

Marilyn Fox Retires After 45 Years Behind the Chair

The Wichita stylist's family invites former clients, friends and neighbors to a Nov. 28 benefit and card shower.

By Voice News Service

"If you can't grow it, we can sew it!"

That line from a Power 93.9 radio ad was how some Wichitans got to know Marilyn Fox. Others knew her from the years they spent in her salon chair at Foxy's Fantastic Hair Design, where a hair appointment often came with a little encouragement.

Fox closed her salon at 1903 E. 21st St. North in September, ending a 45-year run. Diagnosed with colon cancer in June 2024, she decided to retire and focus on her health. Her family



Marilyn Fox

is inviting former clients, friends, relatives and neighbors to stop by a Nov. 28 benefit celebrating her career and helping with the cost of her ongoing care.

Fox trained at Professional Beauty College and worked at Hancock Beauty Salon before opening Foxy's in 1981 with her then-husband, Jimmy Fox. They worked side by side for more than a decade, offering Carefree Curls, Wave Nouveau styles, hair weaves and barber cuts. Even their four children helped answer the phone.

Fox became a master stylist through the National Beauty Culture League and trained with Willie Lee Morrow, an innovator behind the California Curl. She also took her work beyond the salon, producing Wichita hair and fashion shows that put her own clients on the runway.

"Customers became friends, and friends became family," her daughter, Dr. Nicole Fox, wrote in a tribute.

More than 15 years after opening Foxy's, Marilyn returned to school to become a licensed practical nurse. She cut back her salon hours to work in nursing, and her clients kept coming. She also served for more than a decade as president of the Philo Affiliate of Sigma Gamma Rho Sorority Inc.

Benefit and Card Shower

Foxy's Legacy Benefit runs from **1 to 4 p.m. Saturday, Nov. 28,** at **O'Brien's Irish Pub, 5205 E. Kellogg** in Wichita. Admission is free and everyone is welcome. The event will feature food, a silent auction, 50/50 raffles and door prizes. Proceeds will support Fox's cancer treatment and ongoing care.

The family also welcomes cards with favorite salon memories or words of encouragement. Mail them to **Marilyn Fox, Foxy's Fantastic Hair Design, 5630 Denise, Wichita, KS 67220.**

Jackson MORTUARY

A Legacy of Service... Built upon more than 90 years of knowledge and community trust

Curtis Edwards, 75

Aug 6, 1951 — Nov 13, 2026

Service will be held at 11 a.m. on Tue., Dec. 1, 2026 at New Beginning 7th Day Adventist, 209 W. 21st St.

Stephanie A. Manuel, 71

Jul 11, 1959 — Nov 11, 2026

Service was held Nov. 21, 2026 at New Hope Missionary Baptist Church

Paula Bufford, 71

Oct. 18, 1955 – Nov. 10, 2026

Memorial Service to be announced at a later date

Brenda "Tutti" Jackson, 72

Nov 26, 1953 — Nov 8, 2026

Service was held Nov. 20, 2026 at Greater St. Mary's Missionary Baptist Church.

Ernell Buncome, 93

Dec. 20, 1932 - Nov 2, 2026.

Service was held on November 21, 2026 in Charleston, SC

JB Jacques, Jr., 68

Feb 17, 1958 - Nov 1, 2026

Service was held on November 19, 2026 at St. Mark United Methodist Church

BRIDGES, from Page **10** ↓

Second Street exit, return southbound on I-135 and then connect to westbound U.S. 54.

Construction has also required closures of inside lanes along I-135 between Lincoln Street and Douglas Avenue during portions of the project.

These restrictions give workers room to remove concrete, position equipment and complete bridge construction while traffic continues moving through nearby highway connections.

Wilson explained that traffic-control plans must be coordinated with contractors and engineers, particularly when construction requires specialized operations such as concrete placement.

Because those activities depend on construction schedules, some closures and detours are announced only after the necessary plans are finalized.

Drivers can check current traffic restrictions and alternate routes through KanDrive, the state's traveler information service, at kandrive.gov.

When Will Construction Be Completed?

Wilson said KDOT anticipates completing the I-135 and Kellogg interchange project by December 2027.

He explained that the completion date is an estimate because weather conditions, contractor schedules and other construction-related factors can affect when work is finished.

The department must coordinate those activities while keeping surrounding highway connections available to motorists whenever possible.

For Wichita drivers, the finished project will mean a newly constructed bridge carrying southbound I-135 traffic onto eastbound Kellogg and a rehabilitated bridge connecting northbound I-135 to westbound Kellogg.

The interchange will retain essentially the same layout, with renewed infrastructure intended to keep those connections available for years to come.







KAUFFMAN FOUNDATION · 60TH ANNIVERSARY

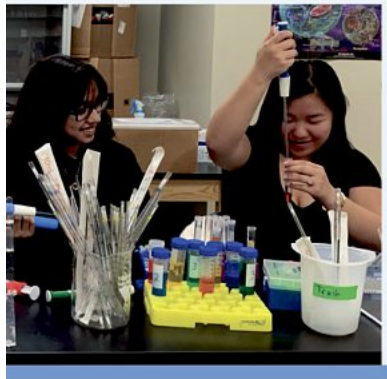
Opportunity starts here and keeps moving forward.

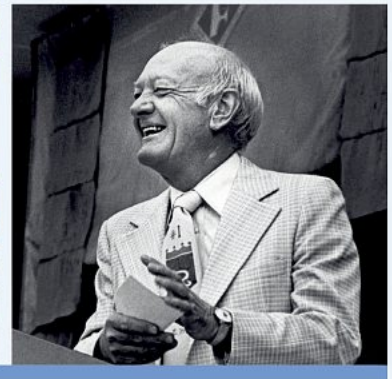


For 60 years, the Ewing Marion Kauffman Foundation has helped Kansas Citians turn possibility into progress by opening doors to economic opportunity and empowering people to shape their own futures.









EWING MARION KAUFFMAN FOUNDATION

LOOKING AHEAD: THE 2035 VISION

Over the next decade, the Kauffman Foundation is focusing its work on equitable economic mobility, guided by community insight and informed by six decades of learning and partnerships.

Our Focus:

- College access and completion — equitable opportunities for all
- Workforce and career development — at every stage
- Entrepreneurship — supporting and sustaining business ownership

Powering possibility across decades.

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Explore Our Legacy
kauffman.org/legacy