



San Francisco Museums for All: Case Study and Impact Report

Unique Program Used Over 130,000 Times in 2022 by
Low-Income San Franciscans for Free Admissions to
22 Museums and Cultural Institutions

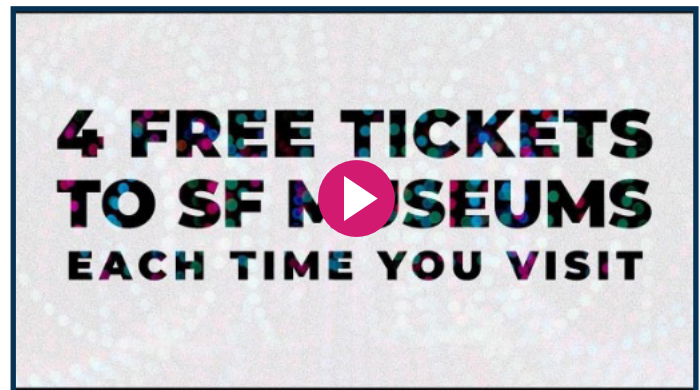
EXECUTIVE SUMMARY



San Francisco is home to some of the world's greatest cultural institutions—from the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art to the de Young to the California Academy of Sciences. Many families in San Francisco, however, cannot afford the entrance fees to visit these and other institutions. For example, for a family of four, total entrance fees for museums across the city can range from \$20 to more than \$165.

To ensure all city residents, regardless of their incomes, have access to San Francisco's renowned museums and cultural institutions, the City and County of San Francisco launched the San Francisco Museums for All program in 2019. The program provides low-income residents free or \$3 admissions to 22 museums across the City.¹ The program is a collaborative partnership between the Office of Mayor London N. Breed, [The San Francisco Financial Justice Project](#) in the Treasurer's Office, [the Human Services Agency](#), [the San Francisco Arts Commission](#), [the San Francisco Parks and Recreation](#), and museums and cultural institutions throughout the city.

The program enables individuals and families that currently receive means-tested public benefits, such as Medi-Cal and CalFresh, to receive up to four free or \$3 tickets to any participating museum when they present their benefits card and proof of San Francisco residency. More than 250,000 people—nearly one in three San Franciscans—receive one of these public benefits.



This one-minute [SF Museums for All informational video](#) was created in collaboration with [BAYCAT](#) and was viewed over 23,000 times.

¹ The California Academy of Sciences SF Museums for All tickets are \$3. The other participating museums and cultural institutions provide free admissions through the SF Museums for All program.

SF Museums for All was piloted during the summer of 2019 and became year-round and permanent in June 2021. SF Museums for All builds off and expands on the national [Museums for All](#) program.

In early 2023, we conducted a survey and requested admissions data from the participating San Francisco museums to understand the impact of this popular program.

Museum admissions data showed that the SF Museums for All program was used over 130,000 times in 2022 by residents with low incomes to obtain free or \$3 admissions access to museums and cultural institutions. The broad use of the program underscores that there is high demand from people of all socioeconomic backgrounds to participate in San Francisco’s cultural life and institutions.

The participating museums also reported that the program improved the racial and economic diversity of their visitors. Two-thirds of museum respondents said they were “very satisfied” with the program, with the remaining one-third stating they were “satisfied.” Additionally, half of museum respondents said that they made programming improvements at their institution because of their participation in SF Museums for All. For example, museums reported improving language access, translating messaging and visitor maps, and creating programmatic offerings to engage more diverse audiences.

In this issue brief, we describe how we collectively launched and implemented the San Francisco Museums for All program. We also discuss the impact of the program, our messaging and marketing strategies, and what we have learned along the way. We hope this issue brief can inform other cities that would like to start a similar program.



“All San Franciscans, regardless of their income, deserve the opportunity to experience the joy, inspiration, and community that our incredible arts and cultural institutions have to offer.”

– SAN FRANCISCO MAYOR LONDON N. BREED



1 SAN FRANCISCO MUSEUMS FOR ALL

How did SF Museums for All get started?

In early 2019, the Planning team at the San Francisco Human Services Agency (HSA) was exploring ways to promote social inclusion of the people they serve—over 250,000 low-income San Franciscans who participate in public benefits programs such as Medi-Cal, CalFresh, and CalWORKs. HSA wanted to find ways to improve the ability, opportunity, and dignity of their clients to fully participate in the civic fabric of San Francisco.

At the same time, the San Francisco Financial Justice Project in the Treasurer’s Office began to hear from residents who could not afford the entrance fees to the City’s museums. The Financial Justice Project assesses and reforms fines and fees that have a disproportionate impact on people with low incomes. Previously, The Financial Justice Project team had worked with the San Francisco Superior Court and the San Francisco Municipal Transit Authority to create discounts for low-income San Franciscans with benefits cards who could not afford to pay their citations.

In response, the Human Services Agency and The Financial Justice Project initiated a collaboration to develop a program to provide free admission to museums and cultural institutions for people with low incomes.

The Office of Mayor London N. Breed quickly stepped up to help lead the program and the initial outreach

to museums. Mayor Breed grew up in public housing in San Francisco and understood firsthand that people with low incomes want to go to museums and cultural attractions, but they often cannot afford the admissions prices. The San Francisco Arts Commission also joined the collaborative effort.



“No one should be excluded from our world class museums because of the size of their wallet. A truly inclusive city is one where all residents have the opportunity to experience the wonder and excitement of our museums and cultural institutions.”

– TREASURER JOSÉ CISNEROS

How does SF Museums for All build on the national Museums for All program?

The collaborating city departments were inspired by the [national Museums for All](#) initiative launched by the Institute of Museum and Library Services in 2014. Museums that participate in the national program agree to provide free or reduced admission to anyone receiving food assistance through the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (“SNAP” benefits, also known as CalFresh in California).



“Everyone should be able to experience San Francisco’s rich history, art, cultural, and science institutions. We are proud of our museum and government partners for their continued commitment to equity and inclusion. Through San Francisco’s Museums for All program, all community members, regardless of income, can have equitable access to enjoy our world-class museums.”

– TRENT RHORER, Executive Director of the San Francisco Human Services Agency

An evaluation of the national Museums for All program found that participating museums do not experience negative impacts on admissions, revenue, or membership sales. In fact, the national evaluation found that many museums experience higher museum admissions, higher development revenue, and an increase in their membership sales. Museums also report having positive shifts in their community connections and museum recognition.

The collaborating San Francisco departments decided to build on the national Museums for All program by:

- **Expanding eligibility to also allow the participation of San Franciscans who receive Medi-Cal (California’s Medicaid Healthcare program).** This expansion more than doubled the number of eligible residents, since Medi-Cal has twice as many enrollments as the CalFresh program. As of [March 2023](#), there were about 104,000 CalFresh beneficiaries while there were

around 220,000 Medi-Cal beneficiaries in San Francisco.

- **Expanding the number of participating museums and cultural institutions.** We wanted to get as many museums and cultural institutions to participate as possible. Approximately four San Francisco museums were already participating in the national program at the time. As of 2023, we were able to expand the number of participating San Francisco museums to 22.
- **Conducting a citywide marketing campaign to promote SF Museums for All.**

When did SF Museums for All launch and what museums and cultural institutions participated?

The Office of Mayor Breed reached out to museums and cultural institutions across the city to participate. As of May 2023, 22 museums and cultural institutions participate in the program. The program launched in June of 2019 as a summertime pilot program. During the first summer, the SF Museums for All program was used over 25,000 times by San Franciscans with low incomes. The participating cultural institutions included:

- Asian Art Museum
- Cable Car Museum
- California Academy of Sciences
- Cartoon Art Museum
- Children’s Creativity Museum
- Chinese Culture Center of San Francisco
- Chinese Historical Society of America
- Conservatory of Flowers
- The Contemporary Jewish Museum
- de Young Museum
- Exploratorium
- GLBT Historical Society Museum

- Legion of Honor Museum
- Museum of Craft and Design
- Museum of the African Diaspora
- Museum of the Eye
- Randall Museum
- San Francisco Botanical Garden
- San Francisco Museum of Modern Art (SFMOMA)
- San Francisco Recreation and Park Departments' Japanese Tea Garden
- San Francisco Railway Museum
- Yerba Buena Center for the Arts

How do San Franciscans with benefits cards gain free admission to cultural institutions through SF Museums for All?

Our goal was to create a process that was straightforward for public benefits recipients to access and easy for museums to implement. We also wanted to minimize any stigma associated with receiving public benefits. We were inspired by research that suggests that [eliminating administrative burdens](#) and reducing stigma can [improve take-up rates](#) of public benefits programs.

To get free or \$3 tickets to participating cultural institutions, San Franciscans show their EBT card (CalFresh Electronic Benefits Transfer card) or Medi-Cal card and proof of San Francisco residency to museum ticket offices. San Franciscans show proof of residency by showing any state-issued identification (e.g., driver's license or passport), piece of mail, any San Francisco student ID card, or utility bill.

The San Francisco Financial Justice Project had previously partnered with the Human Services Agency and the San Francisco Superior Court and

the San Francisco Municipal Transit Agency to create discounts for citations that low-income residents could access by showing their benefit cards. For example, San Franciscans who get their vehicles towed or booted have access to [towing and booting discounts](#) by showing their Medi-Cal or CalFresh EBT card.



Through the SF Museums for All program, eligible individuals can get up to four same day or advanced tickets to visit participating museums. There are no limits on how many times people can visit museums.

How is SF Museums for All marketed?

We wanted to do everything we could to ensure San Franciscans with benefits cards learned about SF Museums for All and the opportunity to visit museums for free.

Crankstart provided a \$100,000 grant to conduct an awareness campaign after the success of the 2019 summertime pilot. We partnered with D&A Communications to better understand the needs and preferences of our target audience, people receiving public benefits, and what messages would most resonate with them. Using this market

research, we developed digital ads that embodied these messages and launched them through multiple channels.

Listening sessions: To understand the needs and preferences of our target audience, we conducted listening sessions with local residents who receive public benefits. We learned that:

- **Accessibility and inclusivity** for museums and cultural institutions require more than free/ discounted admission.
- **Museum staff should deeply understand the program**, especially if they're interacting with patrons.
- **Partnerships with community organizations, schools, and advocates** can help get the word out.
- We needed to create a **central, user-friendly SF Museums for All website**.
- **Program communications should be consistent and multichannel** to reach our target audience.

Messaging: From our listening sessions, we realized that we need to keep our messaging simple, relatable and engaging. We determined that our messaging should:

- Highlight that **SF Museums for All is an opportunity for cultural enrichment**.
- Ensure that **affordability and accessibility of the program is front and center**.
- Avoid overly **complex or elevated language**.

Based on this, key messages we decided to use to promote SF Museums for All in our ads included:

- **"FREE or \$3 admission** for SF residents."
- **"A cool experience you can afford** – all year long."
- **"Discover the City's most exciting** art and outdoor attractions."
- **"Be inspired, discover and play** – for free."
- **"Spread the word** – bring 3 family or friends for free to your next museum visit."

Outreach methods: We then used various outreach and marketing strategies to reach our target audience, including:

- **Press** – Press releases and press conferences with Mayor Breed to promote media coverage to get the word out about the program.
- **Postcards** – English, Spanish, and Chinese SF Museums for All postcards were sent to over 100,000 households that receive public benefits.
- **Social Media** – A paid social media campaign was developed and implemented to target tens of thousands of San Franciscans living in low-income communities. The ads were in multiple languages.
- **Bus Card Advertisements** – Over 1,000 bus card advertisements in English, Spanish, and Chinese advertised the SF Museums for All program on SF MUNI buses. SFMTA provided this advertising space for free.
- **Text Messages** – The Human Services Agency sent text messages to benefits recipients, timed at the start of summer and winter breaks, to encourage parents and families to check out the program.
- **Video** – The Financial Justice Project worked with BAYCAT to create a one minute video highlighting the SF Museums for All program. The video has over 23,000 views.
- **Organic and Social Media Influencer Content** – Several San Francisco departments participated in widespread social media content sharing, as did Bay Area social media influencers.
- **Community Presentations and Field Trips** – The Financial Justice Project regularly presents on the SF Museums for All program to community organizations and partnered with the San Francisco community organization, [Mo' MAGIC](#), to conduct a field trip and bus tour of participating museums with children and families.
- **Museum Promotions** – Museums promoted the program on their websites and at admissions counters, as well as on social media and at community events.



2 PROGRAM IMPACT

What was the impact of this program? How many San Franciscans with low incomes used SF Museums for All to gain free admissions to participating cultural institutions?

To evaluate the impact of the SF Museums for All program and targeted outreach strategies, we surveyed participating museums on their experience implementing the program. We also asked the participating museums and cultural institutions to provide admissions data.

Fourteen museums and cultural institutions provided monthly admissions data for the calendar year 2022 and responded to the survey. Although not all museum participants provided data, the largest museums did, giving us confidence in the main takeaways from the available data.



Overall, museums reported a high level of satisfaction with SF Museums for All. Two-thirds of museum respondents said they were “very satisfied” with the program. The remaining one-third of respondents stated they are “satisfied” with the program.

Admissions data and museum survey data confirm that the SF Museums for All program is highly successful in increasing museum attendance for low-income residents and expanding public awareness of museums.

Below are the major takeaways from the admissions data:

- SF Museums for All was used **136,498 times** in 2022 by low-income residents for admissions to participating museums and cultural institutions.²
- SF Museums for All tickets make up the highest percentage of tickets sold at **the Children’s**

Creativity Museum (22 percent) and the **California Academy of Sciences** (8 percent), compared to full price ticket purchases at those museums.

- **Highest admissions numbers were during the summer months and during December**, in line with typical student academic breaks and SF Museums for All campaigns.

The table below shows 2022 admissions data. The table details each museum’s total SF Museums for All (SFMFA) tickets, total

² Fourteen museums and cultural institutions provided admissions data for January 1, 2022 through January 16, 2022 (to account for visitors during Martin Luther King Jr. Day).

admissions numbers, SFMFA tickets as a percent of each museum’s total admissions and each museum’s

SFMFA tickets as a percentage of the total 136,498 SFMFA admissions across the City.

Museums	SFMFA Admissions	Total Admissions	SFMFA Percent of Total	Museum Percent of all SFMFA Admissions
California Academy of Sciences	75,767	999,929	8%	56%
Exploratorium	20,434	452,561	5%	15%
Gardens of Golden Gate Park (3 museums)	19,343	1,217,290	2%	14%
Children’s Creativity Museum	6,328	28,558	22%	5%
San Francisco Museum of Modern Art (SFMOMA)	5,569	563,936	1%	4%
de Young Museum	4,458	797,444	1%	3%
Legion of Honor	1,856	360,820	1%	1%
Asian Art Museum	1,578	113,279	1%	1%
Museum of Craft and Design	367	11,137	3%	0%
Museum of the African Diaspora	355	14,970	2%	0%
Cartoon Art Museum	302	10,233	3%	0%
GLBT Historical Society	141	8,755	2%	0%
TOTAL	136,498	4,578,912	3%	

Did SF Museums for All improve the racial and ethnic diversity of visitors to SF museums and cultural institutions?

The participating museums and cultural institutions do not collect ethnic and racial admissions data. However, based on Medi-Cal and CalFresh recipients demographics, and museums’ anecdotal observations, **the SF Museums for All program expanded access to racial, ethnic, and economically diverse communities.**

In San Francisco, [public benefits recipients are disproportionately people of color](#) and primarily reside in the Outer Mission/Excelsior, the Tenderloin, Bayview-Hunters Point, Visitacion Valley, and the Mission District neighborhoods of San Francisco.

In the survey, museum staff stated that SF Museums for All helped them achieve their goal to diversify their visitors. Below are a few comments from museum and cultural institution staff who responded to the survey:

- “We have seen an increase in visitors of all ages and races able to visit due to SF Museums for All. People who otherwise are unable to access museums due to pricing, are now able to come.”
- “The SF Museums for All program has made our museum more inclusive. Some people who come in and see the [high] admission prices decide not to come in.”
- “SF Museums for All has allowed us to retain racial diversity through tumultuous times.”
- “It has allowed us the ability to have one less barrier for those interested in attending.”

About half of the participating museums who responded to the survey said they had made improvements to make their museum's programming more accessible and inclusive because of their participation in SF Museums for All. Some of their comments included:

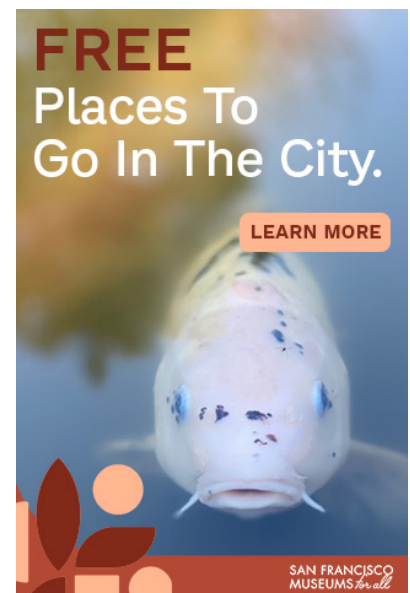
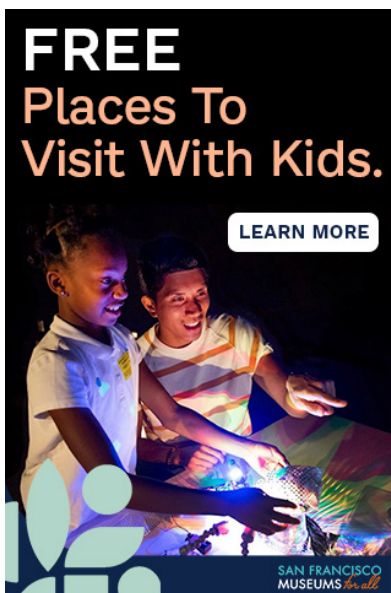
- "We have made changes in an effort to attract more diverse audiences, including translating messaging and visitor maps, amplifying more diverse voices on social media channels, and creating programmatic offerings seeking to engage more diverse audiences."
- "Streamlined our online and in-person ticketing processes and trained staff on welcoming SF Museums for All visitors."
- "Increased digital signage in the museum and the language online to promote access to the museum. As visitor experience, we are educating others about the program and educating ourselves on more ways to ensure more people visit."
- "Increased language access and increased outreach in partnership with local partners."



"We recognize the importance of SF Museums for All and its vital role in ensuring equitable access

to museums and cultural institutions throughout San Francisco. We applaud the program for offering free and reduced-cost admission to eligible residents of San Francisco. The MAGIC Programs highlight the program as a resource to families to enjoy while on summer break and also year-round."

– BRITTANY FORD, Executive Director of San Francisco BMAGIC and Mo' MAGIC Programs of the San Francisco Public Defenders Office





3 RECOMMENDATIONS FOR OTHER CITIES

What are our recommendations for other cities that want to create a similar program to improve access to museums for people with low incomes?

1. Reach out to the National Museums for All program. The national [Museums for All](#) program has partnerships with over 1,000 museums across the United States. Participating Museums for All institutions provide free or reduced admissions to people receiving food assistance through the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, otherwise known as SNAP. To gain free or reduced admissions through this program, people can show their Electronic Benefits Transfer cards, commonly referred to as “EBT” cards, and a photo ID. Museums that are not currently listed as participating museums in the national Museums for All program can register to be a part of the program and gain access to toolkits where museums can use approved marketing materials to promote the program on their websites and inside museums.

2. Have your mayor reach out to museums to garner support and participation. In the City of San Francisco, Mayor London N. Breed promoted the SF Museums for All program and played a key role in expanding awareness of the program through press releases, media, and by working with museums to garner support and participation.

3. Start out with a summertime pilot of your program. The SF Museums for All program originally launched as a 2019 summer pilot program to test how museums and participants responded to the program. Starting with a pilot program can help museums implement the program more effectively in the long run if the



“With more than 1,130 museums serving 6.7 million—and counting—visitors, The Museums for All initiative serves as a paragon and model for excellence in nationwide access programs, fostering inclusivity and promoting cultural enrichment for all. This remarkable initiative recognizes and demonstrates the transformative power of museums and cultural organizations in the lives of individuals and the betterment of communities.”

– ARTHUR AFFLECK, Executive Director of the Association of Children’s Museum, the administering organization for the National Museums for All initiative

pilot program is a success and implementation hurdles are addressed during a piloting phase.

4. Get the word out in multiple ways! When implementing the program, be sure to employ a

coordinated, multichannel campaign strategy to ensure that the program is reaching residents wherever they are, whether that is at home, online, on the bus, on social media, or community spaces.



4 WHAT'S NEXT FOR THE SAN FRANCISCO MUSEUMS FOR ALL PROGRAM?

1. Continue to get the word out to diverse audiences. The various SF Museums for All outreach and marketing campaigns were critical to get the word out about the program to eligible populations. Residents learned about the program through multiple channels, increasing the likelihood that they would remember and seek SF Museums for All admissions to museums.

2. Expand to other cultural institutions and museums. While San Francisco's largest and most popular museums are already participating in the SF Museums for All program, the success of the

program highlights the demand for museum visits and is an opportunity for all of San Francisco's museums to participate in and increase their admissions numbers.

3. Expand to the performing arts. Given the success and demand for cultural and art museums in San Francisco, there is an opportunity to expand the SF Museums for All program to other performing arts institutions, such as theaters, symphonies, ballets, operas, and more. We repeatedly hear this request from community group staff and San Franciscans with public benefits cards.



5 CONCLUSION

San Francisco Museums for All is a highly successful and important program that removes economic barriers and increases museum accessibility for low-income San Franciscans. The SF Museums for All program can also help reduce economic and

racial disparities among residents since museum visits are linked to cognitive and educational development. This program ensures all San Franciscans can enjoy our world class cultural treasures, and that no one is denied entry because of the size of their wallet.

Authors:

Cecilia Perez,

Program Manager, Financial Justice Project, San Francisco Office of the Treasurer & Tax Collector

Anne Stuhldreher,

Director, Financial Justice Project, San Francisco Office of the Treasurer & Tax Collector

