



COMMUNITY FOCUS

2026



A REPORT FOR THE
Springfield Ozarks Region



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The 2026 Community Focus Report was written from May to September 2026 and intended to reflect on the two years prior to this publication. For more information, updated data, and to request additional printed copies of this report, visit our website at cfophi.org.

Acknowledgments

The Community Focus Report is a community-authored publication, assembled after a months-long production process that gathers input from diverse stakeholders across the region. Without these individuals contributing their voices, there would be no report. Steering Committee members are **highlighted in bold**.

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A Look at the Numbers

- Number of Referrals Received (08/2024-08/2025)
574 or 71.75 per month average
- Number of Petitions Filed (08/2024-08/2025)
504 or 63 per month average
- Number of Children Removed (08/2024-08/2025)
456 or 57 per month average



Introduction

The 2024 Community Focus Report reflected on two decades of honest assessments of the Springfield community, preparing the community for a transition from a biennial reflection to a continuously operating project. In the past two years, we have shifted to Community Focus, identifying that the report would become one facet of the expansion; data and action would round out the new, three-pronged approach. This framework emerged after a year spent learning about community indicator projects around the nation.

We know that the Springfield Ozarks are made up of doers who lead with common sense. Community Focus has become a continuous cycle of data to action to reporting. Data informs action; we report on that action and measure whether it works; and what we learn improves the next round of work. The wheel of community building keeps rolling.

These past two years have been an immersive experience in the flow of local action. Community Partnership of the Ozarks (CPO) acts as our primary partner to connect the action piece. This expanded capacity has enabled the addition of two new topics: Food and Faith. These chapters arose from their counterparts in CPO's Community Collaboratives. Another feature of the 2026 Report is a special section on the long-time Red Flag of locally higher rates of child abuse and neglect, again authored in partnership with a Collaborative. These additions deepen our community's understanding of the current of action that supports our region's most vulnerable.

Community Focus staff have attended monthly meetings for CPO's eight Collaboratives, soaking up the breadth and depth of individual, organizational, and sectoral efforts. CPO led intensive strategic planning for Collaboratives to sharpen the impact of the group and align efforts across the organization. When 2026 report production began, Community Focus provided Collaboratives with data reflecting what points arose again and again through the years' meetings. As the project gains its footing, our goal is to expand that service to each of the chapter committees.

Our data strategy has been refined with John Schupbach as Data and Research Analyst. Schupbach's experience in both psychology and statistics at the academic level are bringing texture to the numbers we use to describe the Springfield region.

Leveraging the strength we have built in these two areas, we look forward to report and publication processes that reflect expanded capacity, incorporate more public perspective, and dive into topics under- or unexplored, all while maintaining the strength of community authorship.

This year's committee meetings had both old and new faces, reflecting the 2024 theme of Community Connections, which noted the retirement of several top leaders and prompted readers to "forge new networks and relationships to ensure continued collaboration." The steering committee had rich conversations about what we choose to talk about and why it matters, what and who



Traci Nash

Facilitator and Program Coordinator

are missing from our table, all while continuing to do the work of gathering information the community relies on to direct its next steps. What has not changed is the sense of pride and hope that permeates the room. We are immensely fortunate as a community to have a large group of contributors who utilize their resources for local progress. As is seen throughout the 2026 report, the struggles facing the Springfield region are not abating, but at the same time, the collaborative effort and determination to lift one another up has yet to waver.

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2026 Community Themes

The 2026 production cycle exemplifies the dichotomy that appears throughout every facet of community reporting: our community has changed and yet stayed the same; topics are both Blue Ribbons and Red Flags; and collaboration and competition breathe the same air. After a summer of steering committee meetings, the group convened once more to name the themes that interweave most, if not all, chapters of the Community Focus Report. This rich discussion coalesced around the three levels of system analysis: micro, mezzo, and macro; the themes below appear in that order.

Children and Families are impacted significantly by the pressures outlined across chapters. One in five children in our region experiences food insecurity. More than 11,000 children receive SNAP benefits, which

volunteerism, advocacy, and participation in local groups like neighborhood associations, local boards, or community watch programs. These are more than just good deeds; they are actions that build social capital. Yet too often the same small group of folks fills every board, commission, and volunteer roster. Widening that circle to make room for new and representative voices requires both hospitality and courage, so we broaden both our perspective and our network. Not long ago, a good neighbor was someone you could borrow an egg from; today, a good neighbor is too often someone who does not bother you. As feelings of isolation continue to be reported across every demographic, civic participation is a pathway to greater connectivity. It will take all of us chipping in our small pieces to succeed in lifting up our community.

within 24 hours to address the impending emergency. The outcome was an urgent call for the community to support a few large, experienced organizations to maximize impact and streamline response. The Alliance for Healthcare Education convenes multiple institutions to address workforce needs in the healthcare field, benefitting our local healthcare system, our workforce, and our students. The Springfield region has recently tested its collaborative strength, as competing ideologies make it difficult to find peaceful, workable agreements to complex local matters.

Changes at the state and federal levels make it more important than ever for our region to resolve perceived incompatibilities and work together to address community needs. Sector after sector report the imperiled future of

Community at a Glance

Population 436,866

Demographics

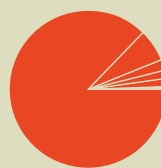
Disabilities

	Total	Avg. Age
With a disability	65,787 (15.1%)	54.5
Without a disability	371,079 (84.9%)	35.7

Retirement

	Total	Avg. Age
Receiving retirement income	49,328 (11.3%)	66.9
Not receiving retirement income	387,538 (88.7%)	35

Race

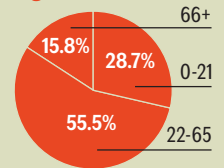


87.5%	White
2.22%	Black or African American
0.23%	American Indian
0.05%	Alaska Native
1.57%	American Indian or Alaska Native
0.12%	Asian
1.78%	Native Hawaiian and Other Pacific Islander
6.57%	Some Other Race

Households

With children under 6 years only	41,525 (9.8%)
With children 6 to 17 years only	107,332 (25.3%)
With children under 6 years <u>and</u> 6 to 17 years	52,186 (12.3%)
No children	222,716 (52.6%)

Age



	Total	Avg. Annual Income
With children under 6 years only	41,525 (9.8%)	\$94,311
With children 6 to 17 years only	107,332 (25.3%)	\$125,102
With children under 6 years <u>and</u> 6 to 17 years	52,186 (12.3%)	\$109,297
No children	222,716 (52.6%)	\$92,819

Source: 2024 American Community Survey, PUMS tabulation. Tables may not sum to estimated population due to survey weighting and estimation processes.

haven't kept pace with rising costs. The childcare subsidy waitlist is holding at more than 1,000, while adults choose between the workforce or family care. Housing instability is a leading factor in child welfare referrals and also a barrier to reunification for families resolving their cases. Early education reports that children are entering their care with greater developmental needs, and the education chapter outlines a key struggle for students – and therefore, educators – as social and economic in nature. We continue to find that those who are the most vulnerable among us need the most assistance to thrive, and our community is getting creative in its effort to find long-term, sustainable solutions.

Civic engagement is paramount to supporting progress on identified Red Flags. This builds on our duty to make our voices heard at the ballot box. Beyond that essential function, civic engagement contributes our individual resources to the pool of community needs. The range of civic activities include

Collaboration continues to be recognized as a hallmark feature of sustainable growth in the Springfield Ozarks. It appears in every chapter because at the most basic level, this is just how we work. Collaboration began as a historical necessity for growth and has become so grafted into our nature that it is essentially Ozarkian. Public safety agencies have begun meeting together as the Crisis Communication Council, streamlining practices and procedures to stay ready for unexpected, large-scale incidents. Major parks projects are being funded jointly by foundations, grants, and public budgets to create accessible play infrastructure that bolsters our community's physical and mental health, while utilizing public space and employing public workers. Our community's appetite for partnership transcends individual agendas in service of larger goals, especially when outcomes are tied to stated community needs. When SNAP funding was suspended in late 2025, more than 100 agencies and leaders gathered

support programs due to tumultuous, unreliable funding from state and federal sources, while others highlight the predicament of responding to sudden restructuring or complete elimination of once-stable programs and initiatives. State transit funding fell by more than \$7 million over three years, while federal housing awards face delays as affordability requirements on existing units expire. Concerns have ranged from frustration to grief as programs built on years of hard-won expertise are cut or restricted into uselessness with little warning, and with no clear replacement from local government or philanthropy. As the region adapts to new upheavals from previously stable sources, its habit of working together may prove to be the resource that matters most.

The themes of the 2026 Community Focus Report remind us that our community has changed and stayed the same all at once. The pressures are new, but the response is familiar: we lean on one another, and we get to work.



Participation and grassroots energy grow while public funding shrinks



Blue Ribbons

- Strong participation
- Cultural assets and networks
- Grassroots arts activity



Red Flags

- Communication and coordination
- Sustainable, reliable, and diversified funding
- Arts education

Springfield's arts and culture sector boasts strong participation, historic institutions, and growing grassroots energy. Even with continued challenges with funding and space, a new energy is emerging, bolstered by This Place We Make, the region's 10-year cultural vision. The plan will support a more connected and sustainable creative ecosystem.



We have **strong participation** based on attendance at a broad range of performances, concerts, exhibits, festivals, events, and more. It is also expressed in the prevalence of residents' hobbyist or amateur arts expression – playing a musical instrument, singing in a choir, preserving

cultural traditions, and many more. Arts demand is projected to increase steadily in the coming decades, as Springfield's population grows. By 2060, assuming current participation patterns persist, demand will grow for arts activities across-the-board, ranging from 36% to 50% (source: Springfield Art Museum Market Analysis, 2024, Keen Independent Research). Additionally, the



The Historic Gillioz Theatre will celebrate its centennial in 2026, continuing its work as hub for live entertainment in the Ozarks.

Source: Springfield Regional Arts Council

appeal of offerings in Springfield-Greene County continues to solidify the region's status as a cultural hub. Seventy percent of the Gillioz Theatre's audience comes from outside of Greene County, with many other organizations showing similar data.

Springfield possesses remarkable **cultural assets and networks** including

historic theaters, museums, emerging arts districts, vibrant music scenes, and passionate creative entrepreneurs. Arts and culture define communities. They shape how residents experience their city, how visitors perceive a place, and how young people decide where to build their futures. This variety in assets is further enhanced with the longevity of established institutions. The

Gillioz Theatre is celebrating its centennial in 2026, followed by the Springfield Art Museum in 2028. The Springfield Little Theatre and Springfield Symphony Orchestra are both 92 years, old followed by several organizations nearing the 50-year mark. Not to rest on our laurels, the region is also home to new organizations like High Tide Theatre, Queen City Shakespeare Company, Mosaic Arts Collective, and Queen City Chorale.

Grassroots arts activity is happening throughout the city. The Commercial Street corridor has evolved into an authentic arts enclave where individual artists and merchants create a thriving cultural ecosystem. Woodland Heights neighborhood has become a hub of DIY arts activity, hosting everything from Porch Pickin' music performances and Silent Nights movie nights. Springfield's music scene is vibrant and diverse. There is a growing community of individual artists, and public art continues to expand through



Legislative Impact

Public arts funding faces mounting pressure at every level of government. Our region is not immune to these pressures. In March 2026, Springfield City Council voted to restore \$100,000 to the Springfield Regional Arts Council for one year after an abrupt cut the previous year. This funding source remains vulnerable to broader budget pressures, with future public support for the arts in question.

The state picture is more severe. In 2026, Missouri Arts Council funding was cut from \$10.1 million to approximately \$6.2 million. This 40% reduction translates to cuts in grant funding for local arts organizations, layered on top of a 20% cut absorbed in the previous fiscal year.

With the state's budget at challenging crossroads, further cuts are expected.

Federal arts funding has faced its most direct threat in decades. The federal government's 2026 budget proposal called for the wholesale elimination of the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) and the National Endowment for the Humanities. The Corporation for Public Broadcasting was shuttered after 58 years of service after funding was eliminated. NEA grants already awarded to theaters and arts organizations nationwide were rescinded. While some stop-gap measures have been put in place by Congress and

courts, the long-term outlook remains uncertain, with continued proposals to reduce or eliminate federal cultural agencies.

Together, these three levels of government reveal a consistent pattern: even as public demand for the arts remains strong, public funding is increasingly treated as negotiable rather than essential. This places greater weight on local philanthropy, advocacy, and community investment to sustain the region's cultural infrastructure.

Regional Perspective

This Place We Make, A Creative Roadmap for the Ozarks, is a ten-year vision for strengthening the regional arts and culture community. The process included extensive community engagement, reflecting input from more than 1,000 residents who shared a common belief: arts and culture are essential to the region's future.

Guided by the vision that "Southwest Missouri's creative energy draws people in and inspires them to stay," the plan establishes three goals:

- Broaden engagement in arts and culture by improving access, marketing, public art, arts education, festivals, and regional collaboration.
- Cultivate the creative sector through increased investment in artists and organizations, professional development, affordable creative spaces, and stronger cultural networks.
- Build sustainable infrastructure by diversifying funding, strengthening the creative economy, supporting

cultural districts, and improving transportation and accessibility.

The plan recognizes that arts and culture are not separate from community development; it's integral to community well-being. Municipalities, educational institutions, businesses, nonprofits, philanthropy, artists, and residents all have a stake in this endeavor. Our investments in creativity alongside basic necessities now will build an environment rich in pride, opportunity, and success. This place is what we make of it – together.

organizations like Sculpture Walk Springfield and Overlay. Opportunities to connect and participate in arts and culture in the region are significant, improving accessibility and lowering barriers to entry for engagement.

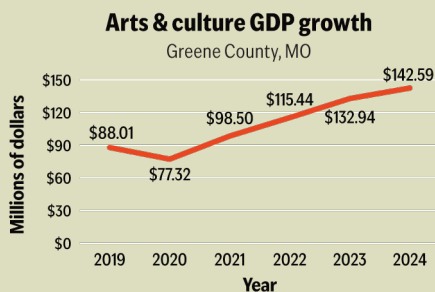
In the surveys used to inform the region's cultural roadmap, **communication and coordination** were among the most frequently discussed challenges. At the most basic level, residents and even active cultural participants struggle to find information about

in 2026, funding for arts and culture is too often a political football rather than a shared community priority. A recent DataArts report from Southern Methodist University found that increased municipal arts funding is directly linked to stronger financial performance and higher attendance across a city's arts sector; a relatively small local investment can have an outsized impact. Sixty-six percent of cultural plan survey participants "strongly favor" increased public funding of the arts, and fifty-nine percent named "providing dedicated arts funding"

survey participants identified arts and cultural venues/facilities, and 76% identified artistic spaces (studios, retail, live-work) among the region's most needed improvements. Affordable studio and rehearsal space is a priority, especially as graduating students lose access to campus infrastructure. Artists of Commercial Street expressed a "strong desire for creating studio spaces for artists to work and collaborate," while musicians identified the need for "rehearsal/gig space with a PA system." The Springfield Art Museum's renovation is a strong start but sustained public and private investment, plus grantmaking to help organizations plan capital projects is needed to build the infrastructure the sector requires. Strategic investment in arts and culture also attracts and retains talent, supports local businesses, strengthens tourism, and builds the sense of place that helps communities thrive.

Accessibility to arts education is limited across the region, particularly outside traditional school settings. Ninety-one percent of cultural plan survey respondents believe arts learning opportunities are essential to their community, yet the region lacks consistent, affordable creative learning experiences. This isn't only a challenge for children; adults want and need opportunities to create and learn, too. Closing these gaps would also open new career opportunities for local teaching artists, expanding the region's creative workforce while ensuring access to creative learning for all. Addressing classroom space and communication barriers will be essential to making expanded arts education viable and sustainable.

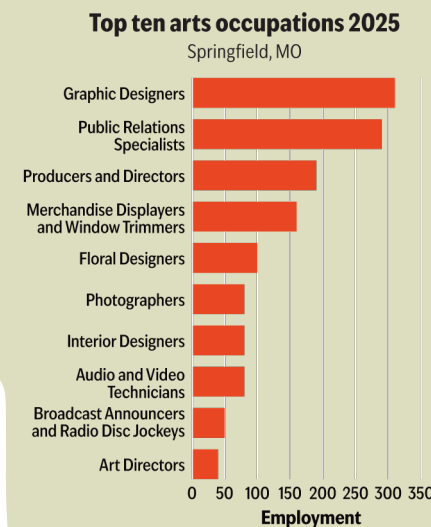
Key Metrics



Source: US Bureau of Economic Analysis

arts events and opportunities. At the same time, arts and culture organizations struggle to find an efficient and affordable path to access new audiences. People engage across many different communication channels, making marketing to potential attendees more complex. The sector needs to connect with residents where they prefer to get information, link existing channels on tight budgets, and develop concise, compelling stories to share. Further centralizing calendars and coordinating schedules would create a more holistic approach across the arts and culture community.

Sustainable, reliable, and diversified funding will always be a challenge. Even



Source: US Bureau of Labor Statistics

a long-term priority. Funding mechanisms must reach large institutions and individual artists alike, supporting neighborhood groups, public art, operating costs, capital projects, and underrepresented communities.

That need for investment extends directly to physical space. Seventy-nine percent of



Early investment positions region to grow; housing, child care shape what's next



Blue Ribbons

- Investing ahead of growth
- Resilient retention and expansion
- Investing in the capacity of people



Red Flags

- Persistent barriers to workforce participation
- Job quality and economic mobility
- Development predictability and community alignment

Business and economic development is often defined by the competitive nature of attracting new investment and job growth to a community, while retaining and expanding the industry base already there. A community's edge usually hinges on maintaining low overhead costs for businesses, including infrastructure and workforce costs for retention, attraction, and training. As CNBC ranks Missouri 38th nationally for business and 49th in workforce, our community is a positive outlier with regional employment, population and GDP growth outpacing the rest of the state.



Investing Ahead of Growth: Economic development success begins years before a project is announced, when communities make the investments



Legislative Impact

Recent state and local policy actions have strengthened the tools available to support economic growth, redevelopment and housing in the Ozarks.

At the state level, the Missouri General Assembly advanced legislation in 2026 aimed at modernizing economic development and redevelopment tools. HB 3231 creates Missouri Innovation Zones, providing a new place-based tool for eligible downtowns, commercial cores, and Main Street districts to support job creation, business retention, housing activation, infrastructure, and private investment. It also updates the Missouri

necessary to support future employers, workers, and residents. Across the Ozarks, leaders have consistently built infrastructure, sites, and community assets that position the region for future growth.

Partnership Industrial Center and Partnership Industrial Center West demonstrate the value of that approach. Early investments in roads, utilities, and development tools created ready locations with thousands of manufacturing jobs. Similar investments in areas such



Genie Recon ribbon cutting – celebrating their expansion and commitment to create 243 new jobs and invest \$11.5 million over the next five years.

Source: Springfield-Area Chamber of Commerce

as Commercial Street and Grant Avenue Parkway have helped transform underutilized properties into new housing, small business locations, and community assets.

Improvements to Interstate 44 and Highway MM will strengthen freight movement, while the Chadwick Flyer trail connection expands quality-of-life amenities for workforce attraction. Major projects at Springfield Public Schools (SPS), Missouri State University (MSU), Ozarks Tech, and the University of Missouri School of Medicine are expanding educational and workforce capacity.

Downtown Economic Stimulus Act (MODESA), providing greater flexibility for redevelopment and other major community investments.

Lawmakers also approved SB 973, which strengthens Missouri's land bank framework by modifying governance and other provisions affecting how land banks operate. More effective land banks can help communities address vacant and underutilized properties, encourage neighborhood reinvestment, and create opportunities for new housing and redevelopment.

These projects reflect a shared theme: growth requires capacity. Past investments helped create the growth the region is experiencing today.

Resilient Retention and Expansion: The Ozarks' economic strength is rooted in businesses that have chosen to build, stay, and grow here. Many of our biggest economic gains resulted from established employers reinvesting locally. These include legacy employers such as Kraft Heinz and Paul Mueller; locally grown businesses like Andy's Frozen Custard, Keep Supply, Erlen Group, and The Good Company; and nationally recognized brands such as O'Reilly Auto Parts, Bass Pro Shops, and Jack Henry & Associates. Recent expansions involving Genie Reconditioning and CNH Reman through partnerships with SRC are building on existing strengths.

These rooted companies are part of the region's business infrastructure, developing local suppliers, strengthening industry clusters, and attracting complementary businesses. With national recognition in sectors like food manufacturing, each successful expansion makes future investment more likely. This pattern is reinforced by the Partners for Economic Development, including the Springfield Area Chamber of Commerce, Springfield Business Development Corporation, City of Springfield, City Utilities, Greene County, the Downtown Springfield Association, MSU's efactory, and others. Together, they help employers address workforce, financing, and development needs that retain employees while making strategic public investments.

Investing in Capacity of People: The Ozarks region has made significant investments to prepare people for work, help careers advance, and give entrepreneurs tools to build locally, strengthening the talent

Springfield's implementation of the Forward SGF comprehensive plan included the first comprehensive overhaul of the city's Land Development Code since 1995. The updated code modernizes zoning and subdivision regulations, creating additional opportunities for diverse housing types and redevelopment.

The long-term impact of these actions will depend on how they translate into new investment, housing, jobs, and redevelopment while maintaining public confidence in growth.

Regional Perspective

The Ozarks region increasingly functions as one interconnected economy. Springfield serves as the region's largest center for employment, education, health care, and services, while surrounding communities provide growing residential options, industrial capacity, infrastructure, and additional opportunities for

investment. Workers, businesses and investment routinely cross municipal boundaries, making economic success in one community beneficial to the region. The region's strengths and challenges are shared, although they may look different from community to community. Workforce availability, housing, transportation, development capacity, and quality of

life do not stop at city limits. Moving from a Springfield-centered perspective to a regional one means recognizing those connections and coordinating investments, development opportunities, workforce strategies, and legislative priorities accordingly. Competing as a region gives individual communities greater scale while allowing each to contribute its own assets to the Ozarks' broader economic strength.

pipeline while creating more opportunities for residents to earn higher wages.

That foundation begins with preparing students for a range of opportunities, including skilled trades, health care, advanced manufacturing, and technology. Higher education institutions, including MSU, Drury University, Ozarks Tech, and the University of Missouri School of Medicine, are expanding programs aligned with employer demand for health care, engineering, manufacturing, and technology. MSU's efactory helps entrepreneurs access mentorship, capital, and business development resources, helping local startups become future employers.

Together, these investments create upward mobility for residents and a deeper workforce for businesses.

Persistent Barriers to Workforce Participation

The region faces a complex workforce challenge. Employers work to attract, develop, and retain talent, as many residents face barriers to entering or remaining in the workforce.

Child care and housing are among the most immediate barriers to workforce participation. Rising costs are compounded

by limited availability. For families with young children, the cost and scarcity of care can delay a return to work or make employment financially impractical. For employers recruiting from outside the region, limited housing options across a range of price points can prevent a successful relocation even when the job is attractive.

Transportation and skills alignment create additional barriers and tend to affect lower-wage workers. Employees may live too far from available jobs, lack reliable transportation, or hold work schedules that align poorly with existing transit options. Others need additional training, credentials, or experience to qualify for more stable, higher-paying positions. As a result, available workers and jobs can remain disconnected within the same regional economy.

Retaining college graduates is challenging. Research indicates that employment opportunities alone do not determine whether graduates stay; professional networks, community connections, quality of life, housing options, and career growth also matter. Without strong personal and economic ties, the region risks losing talent it has invested in educating.

Job Quality and Economic Mobility: The Ozarks region's wage challenge is complex. The issue is not simply that wages are too low. The regional economy plays a factor in overall wages with its large concentration of service-sector jobs, while the number of higher-paying positions in industries like advanced manufacturing, professional services, finance, technology, and management remains comparatively limited. Expanding the availability of career pathways in high earning

sectors will enhance economic mobility.

Strong job growth does not always translate into financial stability. Positions may provide entry into the workforce but offer limited advancement. Educational attainment, skills alignment, and clear career pathways shape whether workers can move into higher-wage opportunities. At the same time, rising costs for necessities are eroding household budgets, leaving some families feeling little financial gain even as wages increase.

Development Predictability and Community Alignment:

The Ozarks has many assets for continued growth: available utilities, strong transportation infrastructure, experienced developers, demand, and communities prepared to invest. Increasingly, the challenge is not whether development is possible but whether the process is predictable enough for projects to move forward.

New housing, commercial, industrial, and redevelopment projects require significant pre-construction investment. Developers must evaluate land, engineering, financing, zoning, infrastructure, and market demand, committing substantial resources before receiving approval. When zoning and land-use expectations are unclear or when projects face uncertainty through referendum or petition challenge, there is a real cost. Projects may take longer, become more expensive, or lead developers to pursue communities with a more predictable approval process.

Advancing major community initiatives means understanding how investments contribute to the region's future. Without broad alignment around community priorities, major investments become more difficult to advance. That alignment requires clear communication and open dialogue about the benefits, costs, and tradeoffs associated with growth.

Predictability does not mean every project should be approved. It means expectations should be clear, technical standards should be consistently applied, and decisions should be made through a process that gives residents and investors confidence. Building trust through clear expectations, meaningful engagement, and responsible growth will be essential for the Ozarks to act on shared priorities and sustain its economic momentum.

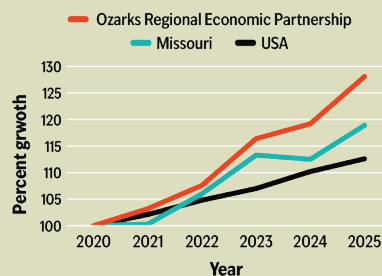
Key Metrics

Growth in average annual highest employed industries



Source: JobsEQ

GDP growth of top 5 industries



Source: JobsEQ



Community builds child care capacity as state subsidy waitlist grows



Blue Ribbons

- Child Care Works
- Local momentum building around quality initiatives
- The Darr Family Foundation HUB at The O'Reilly Center for Hope opens its doors



Red Flags

- The childcare subsidy crisis
- Early childhood remains a precarious field for workers and providers
- External factors

Early childhood in the Ozarks is shaped by determined people working in one of the most underfunded and undervalued fields in our community. This chapter reflects their work and the gaps that remain in providing high-quality care for all the families in the region who need it.



Child Care Works

is Missouri's public-private child care cost-sharing program, designed to bring families, employers, philanthropy, and the public sector together to address the cost of child care. The program launched statewide in December 2025, and in 2026, the Springfield community moved from exploring what

Child Care Works could look like locally to actively implementing the program.

Child Care Works allows community partners to share responsibility for access to stable, quality, and affordable child care. For families, this can reduce stress and support stability. For employers, it helps strengthen the workforce by reducing one of the barriers that can prevent parents from participating in the workforce.

Implementation of Child Care Works



Big Rig Night

Source: Community Partnership of the Ozarks

represents an important step toward building a more sustainable child care system—one in which families, businesses, community organizations, philanthropy, and government work together to ensure children have access to affordable quality care and parents have the support they need to work and thrive.

The early care community in the Springfield area stands out among state peers in its

efforts to support child care programs to improve quality



Legislative Impact

The 2026 legislative session demonstrated the importance of continued advocacy for Missouri's most vulnerable populations, particularly children and families who rely on access to affordable, quality child care. One of the most significant outcomes of the 2026 legislative process was the restoration of approximately \$51 million in child care funding. The House had proposed reducing this funding; however, the Conference Committee ultimately restored the full amount. The funding supports child care rate enhancements – payments for providers pursuing accreditation and quality improvement and serving low-income children and children with disabilities.

Restoring this funding was a positive outcome, but it did not prevent the statewide child care subsidy waitlist that went into effect on March 1, 2026. The continued presence of the waitlist demonstrates that, while state investment in child care remains critical, current funding levels are not sufficient to meet the demand for affordable child care assistance across Missouri.

Another positive outcome of the 2026 legislative session was the continued support for Child Care Works. Governor Mike Kehoe identified Child Care Works as

for children in their care through pathways such as accreditation, Program Support Network, and the Quality Assurance Rating (QAR) program, administered through the Missouri Department of Elementary and Secondary Education's Office of Childhood. QAR is voluntary and has no expense for providers, with a universal point of entry for providers to grow their program's quality.

Local programs are pursuing QAR in the absence of state incentives that were discontinued, demonstrating that quality is a community value rather than simply a compliance requirement. Springfield compares favorably to communities such as Columbia and Joplin, where participation and program phases suggest that we are making meaningful progress in supporting child care quality.

Another benefit of QAR is utilization of the CLASS assessment to observe, measure, and document interaction quality between caregivers and children. Missouri currently does not utilize a statewide assessment tool to determine the overall quality of child care programs, but CLASS provides an important starting point for understanding and strengthening the quality of caregiver-child interactions. Increased use can help programs identify areas of strength, recognize opportunities for professional growth, and establish a more consistent approach to measuring quality.

The **Darr Family Foundation HUB at the O'Reilly Center for Hope** is a family-centered, community-based hub designed to make it easier for families with children to access the resources, relationships, and support they need to thrive.

an economic development and workforce priority for Missouri, recognizing that access to stable, affordable, quality child care is directly connected to Missouri's workforce, employers, and overall economic stability.

Together, these developments demonstrate an important shift in how Missouri is approaching child care: as both an early childhood issue and a critical component of the state's economic and workforce infrastructure.

Regional Perspective

The Springfield region increasingly recognizes early care and education as essential community infrastructure rather than simply a service for individual families. Across the region, stakeholders are beginning to share responsibility for creating a stronger early care system.

At the same time, the region's early care system remains vulnerable. Families continue to face significant barriers to accessing affordable child care, providers struggle

with low wages and workforce turnover, and children are entering care with increasingly complex behavioral, developmental, and social-emotional needs. The statewide child care subsidy waitlist has further exposed the gap between the need for care and the resources available to families. These challenges demonstrate that community investment alone cannot resolve the structural challenges facing early care.

Springfield is demonstrating leadership by investing in quality, developing public-private approaches to child care

financing, connecting families to resources, and building stronger partnerships across systems. However, expanding this progress will require continued advocacy, public investment, employer engagement, philanthropy, and a stronger early childhood workforce. The region has begun moving from recognizing child care as a family issue to understanding it as a community, workforce, economic, and child development issue.

By bringing family centered services, parent education, child care connections, housing resources, health and wellness supports, and other community partners together under one roof, the HUB creates a coordinated “front door” for families rather than requiring them to navigate multiple systems. The HUB will also lend its space to a 36-seat child care program, in partnership with Kids Inn Child Care Center. This helps build our child care capacity in Greene County and will offer on-site child care when programming is being offered to parents on-site.

work schedules, or pursue education and training when affordable child care is unavailable. For providers, the lack of subsidy funding can contribute to vacant child care slots and financial instability, while employers may experience increased challenges related to recruitment, retention, and employee absenteeism.

This situation further demonstrates the importance of community-based strategies such as Child Care Works, which can help bridge the gap for families while broader state-level child care funding and subsidy systems are addressed.

care professionals can often earn comparable or higher wages in other industries without the responsibilities and stress associated with caring for young children. As experienced staff leave, providers are left with fewer qualified employees to maintain required staff-to-child ratios. When programs cannot meet those ratios, classrooms may be forced to reduce enrollment, close temporarily, or turn families away. The community cannot build a sustainable early care system without investing in those who provide the care.

While the workforce is becoming less stable, **early childhood providers report that children are entering care with increasingly complex behavioral**, trauma-related, developmental, and social-emotional needs. This creates a significant mismatch between the needs of children and the capacity of the workforce available to support them.

Existing staff-to-child ratios can make it difficult for providers to respond adequately when children require additional behavioral or developmental support. The impact is felt by both children and adults: staff experience increased stress when they do not have the resources, training, or additional personnel necessary to respond effectively, while children may struggle to receive the individualized support they need.

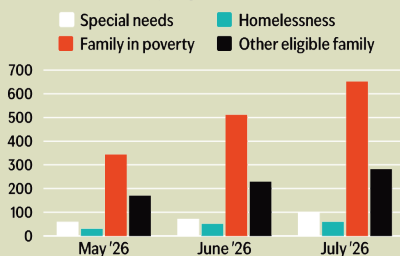
Children with disabilities face additional barriers. Smaller group settings and programs able to provide lower staff-to-child ratios can be difficult for families to find. When those options are unavailable or do not align with parents' work schedules, families may have to choose between maintaining employment and accessing services that support their child's development.

When children enter kindergarten without consistent access to early learning, developmental screening, health care, or appropriate behavioral and social-emotional supports, schools inherit challenges. The result is a system in which early childhood providers, families, health professionals, child welfare, and schools are all affected by gaps occurring upstream.

Key Metrics

Children on subsidy waitlist by priority category

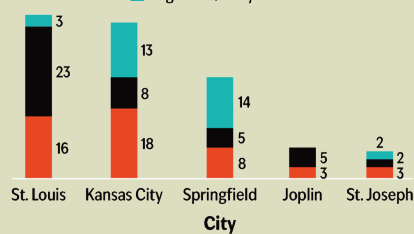
Springfield, MO



Source: MO Department of Education

Top Missouri cities with quality-recognized programs

Beginning Quality Level Middle Quality Level Highest Quality Level



Source: MO Department of Education

Beginning March 1, 2026, **Missouri's Office of Child Care implemented a statewide waitlist for child care subsidy applications**, creating a significant barrier for families who rely on financial assistance to access child care. As of July 2026, more than 1,000 children in the Springfield area were on the waitlist. Statewide, since the implementation of the waitlist, no families have moved from the waitlist, leaving families without the financial assistance needed to access or maintain child care.

The waitlist has significant implications for families, child care providers, and employers. Families may be unable to accept employment, maintain stable

The early childhood workforce is leaving, and the system cannot afford to lose them. **Workforce instability is one of the most significant threats** to the availability and quality of early care in our region. Low wages, limited benefits, demanding working conditions, and increasing classroom needs make it difficult for providers to recruit and retain qualified staff. Child Care Aware of Missouri reports 26%–40% staff turnover in the child care industry, demonstrating the magnitude of the workforce challenge statewide.

The economics of early childhood work create a difficult cycle for providers. Child

Child Life: A Closer Look at Child Welfare in Greene County

Beginning in 2004, the Community Focus Report has identified elevated child abuse and neglect rates as a Red Flag. The factors that influence child welfare referrals are complex, systemic issues, and the response that is set in motion when referrals are made requires a complex system to identify, investigate, intervene when needed, and provide treatment and healing. In this closer look, we will examine the celebrations and challenges identified by the network of agencies and organizations who work with those children and families through CPO's Child Abuse & Neglect (CAN) Collaborative. The group meets monthly, drawing members from across the field: Children's Division, Greene County Juvenile Office, the Prosecuting Attorney's Office, the Child Advocacy Center, CASA, Centerstone, Springfield Public Schools, nonprofit organizations, faith communities, and city and county officials.

Through strategic planning processes, the collaborative named strengths that primarily revolve around partnerships, advocacy, and celebrating positive outcomes.

Children's Division and law enforcement co-investigate cases rather than working in parallel. A multidisciplinary team of investigators, deputy juvenile officers, prosecutors, forensic interviewers, medical and mental health providers, and family advocates works the same case together, often using the Child Advocacy Center for forensic interviews and medical exams. This spares repeated retellings, produces better evidence for better-informed responses, and lays the foundation for healing to begin. This level of collaboration is a uniquely local strength.

Reunification Day, held with CASA at Dickerson Park Zoo, exists to honor the parents and caregivers who did the hard work to bring their families back together. More than half of children placed in foster care are successfully reunited with their families.

Centerstone's youth crisis center moved to 24/7 operation in August 2026, filling a long-standing gap for teenagers who need stabilization but not hospitalization. CASA's Clubhouse model has been successful enough locally that it is being replicated in other parts of the state. The Child Advocacy



2024 Go Blue Event

Source: Community Partnership of the Ozarks

Center breaks ground on a new facility in October, with a target opening of June 2027.

The CAN Collaborative sorts its concerns into two groups: what brings children into the system and what wears down the people who respond.

Economic strain leading to household volatility remains a common backdrop, often surfacing as inadequate supervision or unsafe living conditions. Service providers report a high percentage of cases involving substance abuse. Affordable housing shortages increase instability and delay reunification even after parents complete their plans. Online exploitation and sextortion are evolving faster than prevention efforts, as well as a youth population with behavioral needs too serious for parents to manage but not severe enough to qualify for hospitalization, with private treatment out of financial reach.

Limited resources are at the center of responder challenges. Community-based organizations report a need for stable funding streams to prevent delays in service. Capacity constraints lead to longer wait times for service access, which increases stress and

burnout for providers. Turnover compounds each of these: experienced staff leave, cases transfer, families start over with someone new, and the next worker inherits a heavier load.

The factors that bring children into care are largely beyond any one person's control. What the CAN Collaborative can control is the response, and it has chosen a response built on communication, shared work, and a simple ordering principle: children first. That choice is what sets Greene County apart.

How to get involved

- **Learn How To Keep Kids Safe:** ChildAdvocacyCenter.org lists upcoming trainings
- **Become a CASA volunteer:** new training cycles begin quarterly
- **Apply to provide foster care:** Call 800-554-2222 to meet with Children's Division
- **Attend Go Blue** each April during Child Abuse Prevention Month

Mapping Services in Greene County

A single hotline call can set different processes in motion at once, run by different organizations, on different clocks. The map below follows one report through the child welfare system as it works in Greene County.

Multidisciplinary Team

Children's Division (CD) · Law Enforcement (LE) · Forensic Interviewer · Medical Personnel · Family Advocate · Juvenile Office · Prosecuting Attorney's Office · Mental Health

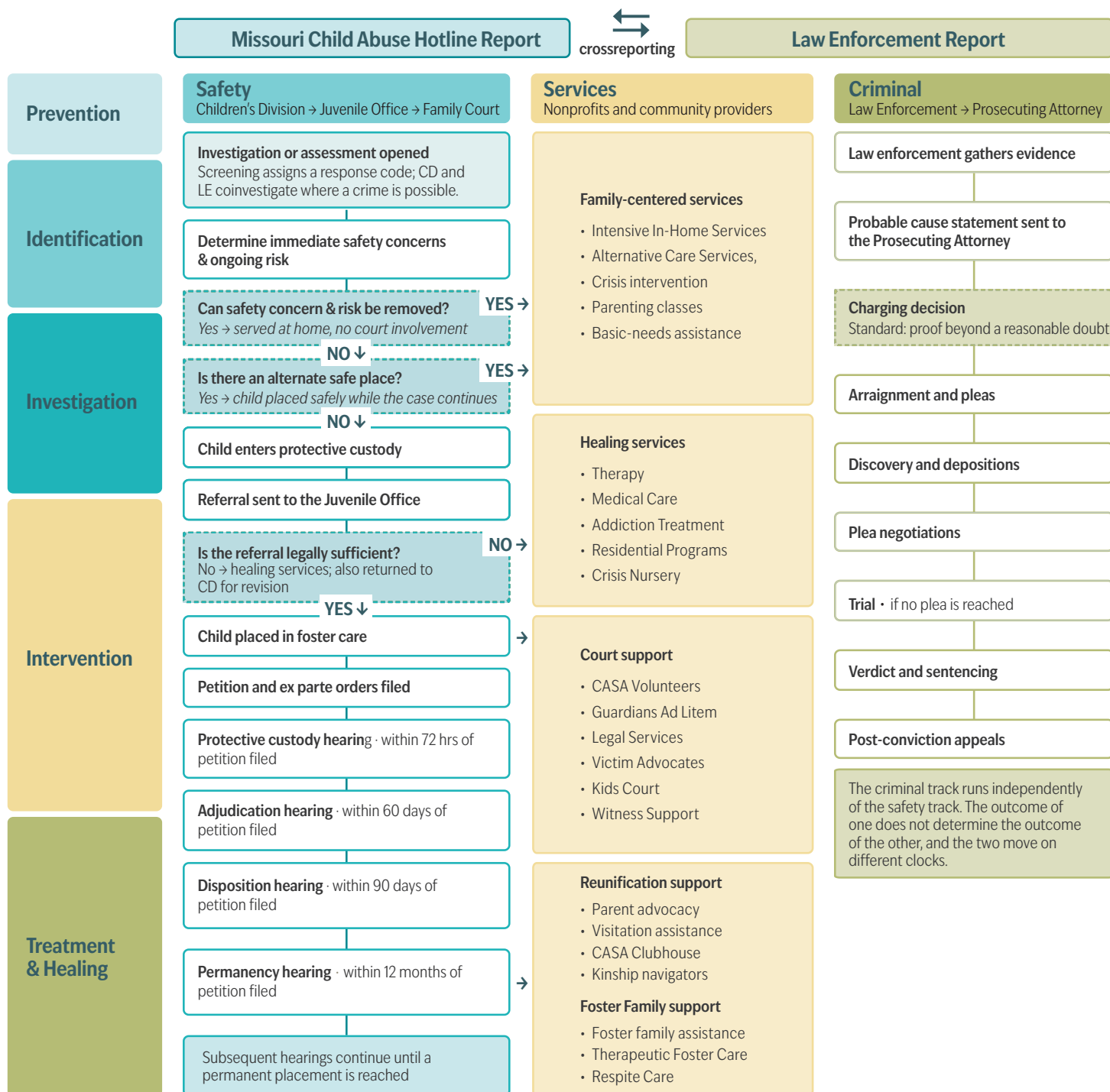
Key Terms

Child Abuse – any physical injury, sexual abuse, or emotional abuse inflicted on a child by someone responsible for their care – not by accident.

Child Neglect – the failure by a parent or caregiver to provide a child with the basic necessities they need to be safe and healthy – things like food, shelter, medical care, and education.

Assessment Vs. Investigation

If a reported concern includes the potential of a crime, LE coinvestigates with CD. If no criminal concerns, CD conducts an assessment and/or referral based on reported concerns. Reports are screened and a response code – Investigation, Assessment, Referral, or Documented Call – is assigned based on the nature of the concerns reported.





Neighborhood engagement grows while boards, trust in process lag



Blue Ribbons

- Civic dialogue maturing, even amid disagreement
- Public participation moving community projects from vision to reality
- Neighborhood engagement



Red Flags

- Declining civic engagement
- Civic participation narrow and unrepresentative
- Growth outpacing public trust in process

While civic engagement on boards declines and trust in government continues to erode, Springfield is finding success in a strengthened community identity and increasing neighborhood involvement. Hope remains that sentiments will improve, thanks to Ozarkian tenacity among all residents and increased efforts among many groups.



Civic Dialogue Maturing, Even Amid Disagreement

While disagreement remains an inevitable part of civic life, Springfield's greatest civic strength may not be consensus, but a growing willingness to stay at the table, remain curious, and work toward shared goals. Shared experiences

are strengthening community identity. Events like the Route 66 Centennial and the historic April 2026 hailstorm don't eliminate differences but create common ground from which communities can tackle more difficult conversations.

Cross-sector collaboration continues to expand. Healthy civic dialogue requires more than respectful conversations—it requires places for those conversations to happen and relationships strong enough to sustain them. Springfield has intentionally invested



Neighborhood Advisory Council chair Nancy Williams speaks to NAC members at the July 2026 meeting.
Source: Citizen Participation Committee

in organizations and civic infrastructure that bring people together across sectors and perspectives, including the Informed Voter Coalition. As the area grows beyond 500,000 residents, the ability to engage constructively across differences becomes increasingly important. Through leadership, volunteerism, philanthropy, public forums, and shared community experiences, Springfield continues to build trust and strengthen the relationships that make collaborative problem-solving possible.

Public Participation Moving Community Projects From Vision to Reality

Springfield has benefitted from momentum surrounding aspirational projects. Grant Avenue Parkway, Crosslines' Safe to Sleep, Jordan Creek daylighting project, and the Art Museum capital project are proof that Spring Forward $\frac{3}{4}$ -cent sales tax and ARPA-funded civic input processes produce visible results. Other projects influenced by public input in various stages of implementation are the Lake Springfield Plan, Sunshine Street Corridor Study, and College Street Revitalization. Tenacity is a trait that continues to show up amongst residents, who keep working to improve the community through incremental improvements across sectors.

Regionally, the downtown in Ozark and the Finley River district have undergone improvements after decades of planning, and the community of Republic has benefitted from investments that brought the Republic Aquatic Park.

Neighborhood Engagement: Neighborhood-level engagement is strong and growing in impact, structure, and spirit with support from designated staff within the City's Planning & Development neighborhood team and Community Partnership of the Ozarks (CPO). The Neighborhood Advisory Council (NAC) comprises 25 registered neighborhoods representing 63% of Springfield's population, and the list continues to grow. Attendees at bi-monthly meetings relay information on city activities, voice shared concerns, and share best practices.

CPO's annual Leadership Summit provides training on organizing and participating locally, and their Neighborhood Organization



Legislative Impact

Springfield and Greene County voters recently united against the local hotel/motel tax to fund a new convention center and against the statewide initiative to eliminate income taxes. The community's general tone seems to be no new taxes and no change, a recent shift from residents' historic support for infrastructure investment.

State and federal budget cuts to safety-net programs are another concern. As funding for housing, food assistance, behavioral health, and other essential services declines, local governments and community organizations are expected to fill the gaps despite limited resources, affecting the overall health, safety,

and economic stability of the Springfield area and increasing pressure on local governments and nonprofit organizations that serve low-income and vulnerable residents.

The actions of state and local legislators do not match the voices of residents. Community conversations and town hall meetings could help realign lawmakers with their constituents. Springfield has overcome similar challenges before and must remember the importance of unity.

Continued collaboration among the City of Springfield, Greene County, nonprofits, and community partners has been critical

to address community needs. Discussions on economic development, infrastructure, housing, transportation, and public safety directly affect organizations' ability to serve effectively.

Local governments play an important role convening community partners to address emerging challenges, particularly amid ongoing uncertainty about state and federal funding. It will be essential to strengthen these partnerships and maintain open communication to ensure Springfield remains resilient and able to meet residents' needs.

Regional Perspective

Our communities are increasingly interconnected. One may live in Springfield, work in Republic, take kids to school in Springfield, receive healthcare in Ozark, and seek assistance wherever available. These patterns make poverty, workforce participation, education, and family stability regional issues rather than purely local ones.

Volunteer Awards (NOVA) recognize standout residents and neighborhood-driven projects each year, including SGF Kickball, a grassroots program building community through play, which won the Neighborhoods USA 2025 Best Neighborhood Program award.

University of Missouri Extension's Engaged Neighbor Project encourages residents to get involved in their communities; Springfield was named one of Missouri's 2025 Most Neighborly Cities, topping the state's participation index. Acts of neighborliness increased during events such as the windstorms of April and June 2025 and the hailstorm of April 2026. Residents are working to designate how to spend \$5 million in Neighborhood Works+ projects through the City, while a competition introduced

Housing costs are pushing many working families farther from employment centers where transportation, childcare, healthcare, and social services are less accessible. Housing shortages affect whether employers can recruit and retain workers. Transportation barriers determine access to jobs, healthcare, and childcare. Food insecurity and limited childcare affect attendance, productivity, and educational outcomes across the region. Smaller communities often lack the social

services, transportation networks, and philanthropic capacity available in Springfield, making regional partnerships critical.

Community Foundation of the Ozarks, Community Partnership of the Ozarks, Care to Learn, Crosslines Community Outreach, and United Way Ozarks Region show how regional systems can expand capacity while preserving local ownership and agency. Our greatest strength is collaboration; the challenge is extending that collaboration to regional problem-solving. The communities that thrive will be those that build the strongest networks.

neighbors and a profound sense of exhaustion among the small group of residents who carry the workload. With civic responsibility concentrated into so few hands, active volunteers are experiencing burnout. To reverse this decline, the community must transition from a passive model of residency to an active model of citizenship, demonstrating the mutual benefits of civic contribution and showing residents the tangible value and community connection they receive back when they choose to invest their time and energy in public service.

Civic Participation Narrow and Unrepresentative: Civic participation remains limited and does not fully reflect our racial, cultural, economic, and generational diversity. The same small group of volunteers often serve on multiple boards, committees, and

voices will make a difference. Others may face barriers including limited time, transportation, childcare, language, or a lack of personal connection to civic organizations. Expanding participation will require clear information, direct invitations, mentoring, accessible opportunities, and willingness to include new voices in meaningful decisions. Our future strength depends on cultivating a broader pipeline of engaged residents embracing civic engagement as something they can and should be a part of. Organizations working towards these shortages include Drew Lewis Foundation RISE, SAAB, and Leadership Springfield Academy Class.

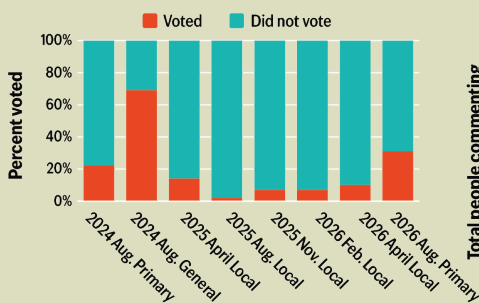
Growth Outpacing Public Trust In Process: Increasing polarization and declining trust in government and public institutions are not unique to our area and present an opportunity for greater dialogue and understanding. Alongside growth, tension rises between the pace and scale of development and the public's confidence in the process, reflected through increased use of lawsuits and initiative petitions to challenge planning decisions that once met little opposition. Some of this friction reflects genuine disagreements over the scale and pace of growth, while others come from a desire to preserve the history and character of longstanding neighborhoods. Both perspectives are valid and deserve to be heard on their own terms, rather than dismissed as simple resistance to change. If left unaddressed, the gap between the process and public confidence is likely to grow rather than diminish.

Regardless of the cause, government leaders must respond with patience and understanding, making every effort to be transparent before, during, and after key decisions. This includes clearly explaining the criteria used, providing meaningful opportunities for public input throughout the process, and following up on how that input shaped the outcome. Restoring trust will require consistent effort over time, built on a foundation of good faith from all parties.

Key Metrics

Voter turnout of all registered voters

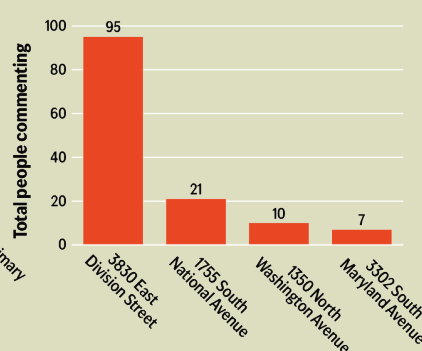
Greene County, MO



Source: Greene County Elections Office

Total public comments by development project

March 2025 - March 2026

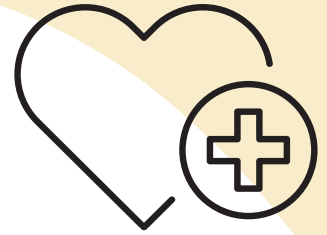


Source: Springfield Planning & Zoning Commission Minutes

in 2024 by Hatch Foundation – Neat Neighborhoods – has upped investment in resident-driven neighborhood improvements.

 Civic engagement in Springfield is experiencing a **severe, systemic decline**. Traditional pillars of community involvement—voter turnout in local elections, participation in public boards and commissions, candidacy for local office, and active membership in community organizations, PTAs, and churches—have all sharply deteriorated, aligning with unresolved warnings from prior community reports. The core issue is twofold: a shrinking capacity to connect with unfamiliar

community initiatives. Their experience and commitment are valuable, but relying on the same people can limit the perspectives included in local decisions, raising questions about whether Springfield's civic engagement is keeping pace with the community's growth and changing population. As longtime leaders step away, Springfield will need to support new people to take their place. The issue may not be that residents are uninterested; many may not know how to get involved, why their participation matters, or whether their



Partnerships connect farmers and families as funding cuts strain access



Blue Ribbons

- Mental health awareness & access
- Declining overdose deaths & increased naloxone saturation
- Overdose fatality review board



Red Flags

- Substance use
- Suicide mortality
- Heart health

According to the 2025 County Health Rankings, Greene County fares about average for health outcomes – which are indicators that reflect the length and quality of people's lives – and slightly above average for health factors. Health factors include community conditions that impact where people live, work, and play.



Mental Health Awareness & Access:

The Springfield community has seen significant improvements in mental health in the last decade in infrastructure, awareness and community support. The ratio of mental health care providers to patients in Greene County is better than the ratio across Southwest Missouri, a major strength because our residents experience poor mental health outcomes, including anxiety and depression, at a greater rate than neighbors across the

region and state. As a major hub for mental health care, Springfield's concentration of services can lead to gaps in access for surrounding rural populations and an overwhelming demand for local providers.

This past year, Mercy Caregivers began screening for Health-Related Social Needs (HRSN). By proactively integrating this information into care, Mercy can



A day of celebration: Centerstone's Youth Resiliency Campus ribbon cutting.
Source: Provided by Springfield-Greene County Health Department

reduce disparities in health outcomes, lower hospital readmissions, and enhance overall patient well-being.

Efforts to develop upstream care and support practices, along with stigma reduction efforts, have also made a positive impact locally. The Springfield-Greene County Health Department rebranded and built a new website for Mental Health 417, focusing on the power of relationships, storytelling, and sharing lived experiences to reduce stigma and improve mental health outcomes. In addition to serving as a resource connector, this

website features the MH417 Stories Project, a collection of anonymous stories from people in our community to inspire hope, instill resilience, and display humanity.

In 2026, Centerstone opened the Youth Resiliency Campus which houses a youth behavioral crisis center, an intensive outpatient treatment center, and a youth residential treatment center for individuals

ages 13-17. With a goal of stabilizing patients and providing reintegration resources for patients and their families, the Campus operates around the clock every day of the year. Their footprint covers a seven-county region of Southwest Missouri. Partially funded by Greene County, the Missouri Department of Mental Health, and the Missouri state budget, this Campus serves as a statewide model for supporting mental health

awareness and access for young people.

Declining Overdose Deaths and Increased Naloxone Saturation:

Overall drug overdose mortality in Greene County continues to decrease. For drug overdoses involving all substances, death rates have decreased by more than 44% from a peak of 47.9 deaths per 100,000 population in 2021. This represents approximately 62 fewer lives lost each year to drug overdose in our county.

Contributing to this decrease is the amount of naloxone (a drug that reverses opioid overdose) available in the Springfield area. In 2025, more than 40,000 units of naloxone were made available in Greene County,



Legislative Impact

It is impossible to adequately describe the landscape of legislation impacting health and healthcare in our community. Of note, a constriction of federal resources continues to impact local efforts challenging our ability to keep our neighbors healthy.

However, there are bright spots. The implementation of the 988 Suicide & Crisis Lifeline represents a systems-wide success with roots at the federal level. Recognition of the prevalence of mental health challenges resulted in strategically applied resources successfully implemented at the local level.

Recent reporting suggests that, since 988's launch, youth suicide is on the decline.

Rapid change in health-related matters is occurring at the federal level, and policy is struggling to keep up. Missouri continues to inadequately fund its public health infrastructure. Resource allocation is disparate, and the lack of state-federal alignment makes it difficult to imagine another 988-level success.

This underlines the importance of local partnerships. Greene County residents benefit from a focused local effort to improve mental health access, prevent suicide, and respond appropriately to the challenges surrounding substance use in our community. Allocations from the City of Springfield Recreational Marijuana Tax, renewed recently, are used to directly support these efforts.

Regional Perspective

Community health champions across the Springfield region and the greater Ozarks have long recognized the importance of working together to assess health needs, strengths, and challenges.

Since 2016, hospital systems, local public health agencies (LPHAs), and other health care partners in the region have worked together to release comprehensive Community Health Needs Assessments (CHNAs)

every three years. This group, known as the Ozarks Health Commission (OHC), released community-level reports in 2016, 2019 and 2022. The 2025 assessment was compiled into community-level and regional snapshots, continuing the regional scope introduced in 2022.

The reports aim to be a valuable resource for health care partners, civic organizations and people who live, work, and seek health care in distinct communities. Health care partners

and LPHAs develop these assessments into Community Health Improvement Plans (CHIPs). Organizations use CHIPs to target areas of health need and disparity in communities and create actionable plans to make them better over time.

Launched in 2026, the Alliance for Health Care Education, a partnership of CoxHealth, Missouri State University, Ozarks Technical Community College, and Springfield Public Schools, creating a seamless secondary and post-secondary educational experience. This intentional coordination of resources will offer huge benefits to local students and the community they may eventually serve.

the third largest saturation in Missouri behind St. Louis City and St. Louis County. While much work remains, the reduction of mortality combined with increased prevention efforts suggests we are helping to combat these tragic outcomes.

Overdose Fatality Review Board: To directly address the impacts of drug use and overdose deaths in our community, the Overdose Fatality Review (OFR) was launched in 2024. The OFR is a team of multidisciplinary individuals who meet regularly to review the circumstances surrounding local fatal overdoses. Through this work, the

the respiratory depression seen in opioid overdoses) are reminders that the response to this issue should continue to be collaborative, quick, and nimble.

At Jordan Valley's Springfield Benton Clinic, patients seeking substance use treatment can now access walk-in care from 7 a.m. to 7 p.m. Monday through Friday, allowing teams to meet individuals where they are and connect them with life-saving care. CoxHealth expanded telehealth options for addiction treatment, allowing the organization to serve a greater number of patients virtually, particularly in outlying areas. Walk-ins are also available at the newly rebranded Center for Recovery at Cox North.

plans of completing suicide. Middle-aged adults in our area are more likely to die by suicide, while younger adults are more likely to experience suicidal ideation, indicating an opportunity for early intervention.

Underlying issues can be addressed through better mental health support, awareness campaigns, and community resources. More comprehensive efforts are necessary to combat these devastating outcomes and improve the overall mental health and wellbeing of residents.

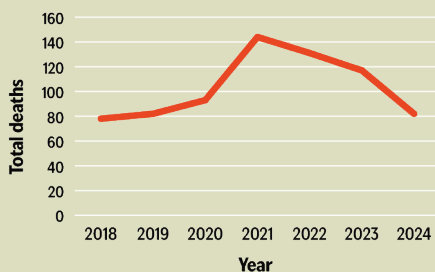
Heart Health: Poor heart health is the leading cause of death for those living in Greene County. Factors that can lead to poor heart health include age, race, family history, being overweight, and lifestyle factors like tobacco use or a lack of exercise. Addressing lifestyle factors early can improve outcomes and promote better overall health.

Evidence shows patients with heart failure symptoms such as shortness of breath, fatigue, or swelling due to fluid overload have better patient experiences with treatment in the outpatient setting. To reduce readmissions and provide safe, quality care when needed, where needed, Mercy has implemented outpatient Fluid Management Programs across the Mercy footprint.

Recognizing the need to help older adults in our community stay safe, healthy, and connected, Jordan Valley Senior Care (JVSC) was launched in fiscal year 2025. Also supported by CoxHealth, the program is the first Program of All-Inclusive Care for the Elderly (PACE) provider in Southwest Missouri, focusing on a continuum of tailored, accessible health and support services for individuals 55+ who are certified as needing nursing-home level care. JVSC exceeded its ambitious goal of enrolling 60 participants in its first year and aims to double enrollment in fiscal year 2026.

Key Metrics

Overdose deaths



Source: Springfield-Greene County Health Department

Suicide deaths by gender



Source: Springfield-Greene County Health Department

OFR identifies missed opportunities for intervention and develops recommendations to decrease the number of lives lost in the Springfield community due to drug poisoning. The group is made up of members from local community organizations representing behavioral health, healthcare, justice, public safety, and public health sectors.

Substance Use: While strides have been made in preventing death from drug overdoses in our community, there is still considerable work to be done. New substances identified in local drug supplies, like nitazenes (synthetic opioids) and xylazine (an animal tranquilizer that compounds

Suicide Mortality: Though many mental health-related measures are trending in the right direction, the death rate from suicide presents a significant concern for our community. Peaking in 2022, the mortality rate from suicide has stabilized slightly but represents a more than one-third increase in the last two decades. In the last five years, the Springfield community has lost more than 300 individuals to suicide. Suicide mortality is higher among males in our community.

In addition, diagnoses of suicidal ideation are higher in Greene County when compared to the rest of the region and the state. Ideation includes having thoughts or



New routes into teaching take hold while barriers follow students to class



Blue Ribbons

- Educator pipeline is growing
- Institutional partnerships expand career and technical training
- Community commitment to student success



Red Flags

- Social & economic barriers to learning
- Ongoing and emerging disruptions facing teaching and learning
- Greater volatility

Education in the Springfield region reaches beyond any single district. Universities, community colleges, K-12 schools and nonprofits are building shared pathways into teaching, health care and the skilled trades. Those partnerships are growing stronger as social, economic, and enrollment pressures test the system.

Although teacher shortages have been identified as a red flag since 2021, there are some encouraging signs of progress. Recent Department of Elementary and Secondary Education data show increased enrollment in teacher education programs and improved teacher retention. In the Springfield area, local universities and school districts are working together to create **accessible pathways into teaching** for high school students and non-traditional learners.



Legislative Impact

Missouri funds a \$1,000 scholarship for students during their student teaching semester. Most student teachers reduce work hours to complete placement, so the award arrives at a point of real financial pressure. Because the scholarship is appropriated annually rather than established as durable funding, its continuation depends on a new advocacy effort each session. Missouri State University is surveying recipients to document program impact.

The Future Educators partnership between Missouri State University and Springfield Public Schools welcomed its fifth cohort this August. Following a record number of applications in the spring, 30 students are beginning the program this fall, including 13 recent high school graduates. MSU's College of Education Pathways for Paraprofessionals program provides undergraduate and



Alliance for Healthcare Education 2025 Groundbreaking
Source: Kevin White

graduate pathways to teacher certification through a registered apprenticeship model while addressing the shortage of special education teachers across the state. SPS joined the program in fall 2025 with 20 students; their cohort has grown to over 30.

Drury University is also addressing the special education shortage through its DU-SPED track, which provides paraprofessionals a pathway to certification through a Master's in Special Education. These programs reflect the strong partnerships among area school districts, universities, and educators, who invest their time in mentoring future teachers, demonstrating a community commitment to strengthening the K-12 teacher workforce.

The state legislature approved 60-credit block transfer for five programs of study, allowing students to carry a full block of credit between Missouri colleges and universities. The change strengthens the transfer relationship between Ozarks Tech and Missouri State, reducing the credit loss students absorb when they move between institutions. Changes to visa and enrollment policy

Career and technical education continues to grow

in response to workforce demand. Through collaboration with businesses, civic leaders and community partners, Ozarks Tech has become a driver of economic development across southwest Missouri. Investments in advanced manufacturing, technology and health care have expanded the college's capacity to prepare students for high-demand careers. Today, Ozarks Tech is a leading producer of technical education graduates and graduates more health science professionals than any other community college in Missouri.

That commitment continues through the Alliance for Healthcare Education, a first-of-its-kind collaboration among Ozarks Tech, CoxHealth, Missouri State University and Springfield Public Schools, creating clear, affordable pathways into high-demand health care fields. Students can begin exploring careers in middle school, earn college credit while in high school and continue through certificate, associate, bachelor's and graduate programs. Today, about 650 students learn on the Alliance campus, helping develop the talent to meet the region's health care workforce needs.

The region has a growing ecosystem of youth programs to support the whole student.

The Boys & Girls Club of Springfield opened the Risdal Family Teen Center in August 2025 as a community hub that supports youth to "become responsible, caring citizens, build leadership skills, and become more civically minded." Empower:abilities, an organization committed to empowering people with disabilities to live independently, expanded year-round youth programs focused on experiential learning to advance life-skills like budgeting and employment preparation. This aligns nicely with the Business Associated

carry consequences for the region's colleges and universities. Institutions report effects on enrollment, on the classroom experience available to all students, and on local businesses that serve international families. International students often relocate with their children, so changes at the postsecondary level reach K-12 enrollment as well.

Regional Perspective

For this report, the Springfield region includes Battlefield, Fremont Hills, Nixa, Ozark, Republic, Springfield, Strafford, and Willard.

Training capacity is moving toward the students and employers who need it. Ozarks Tech relocated its agriculture program from the Springfield campus to Richwood Valley in 2019. Enrollment grew

quickly in the three years following the move, nearly doubling in size from about 100 students to over 200 in that time. The campus has since added a line worker program with a cohort of 24. Both fields are among the region's highest-demand.

At Springfield-Branson National Airport, the Roy Blunt aviation training center

prepares aircraft technicians, and FlySPS has graduated two cohorts of high school students through Ozarks Tech's flight program.

Placing programs where students live – and possibly even work – changes who can reach them. A student in Ozark or Nixa can now train for a career without commuting to Springfield, and employers across southwest Missouri draw from a larger pool.

Student Education (BASE) Project at SPS, which provides community-based vocational and academic programs for high school students with an educational disability. Drew Lewis Foundation, which hosts a BASE site, launched RISE Teens in 2025 given the success of their Reaching Independence through Support and Education (RISE) program for adults, advancing social and emotional learning including self-management, social awareness, self-awareness, decision-making, and relationship building. The community's commitment to youth includes efforts like the annual SPS Back to School Bash, which partners with nonprofits like Care to Learn to prepare students to thrive. The July 2026 event drew nearly 5,000 people.

provide emergent health, hunger, and hygiene resources to students, and saw about a 47% increase in students served from 2024-2026.

Centerstone is seeing an increase in mental health services referrals across our region, beyond Springfield to Republic and Nixa as well. While support programs are in place, the burden of addressing these barriers often falls heavily on schools. Teachers, counselors, and administrators are trusted connections to community resources. However, the challenges families face, including employment, health concerns, and transportation – and the lack of available resources – make it harder for schools to meet these needs while also focusing on learning and success.

Over the last several years there have been

The second disruptor is Artificial Intelligence (AI). Meaningful teaching and learning requires sustained effort to advance critical thinking, creative capacity, and general knowledge. While AI offers opportunities for teaching and learning, there are risks, particularly when used to take shortcuts. Teachers and students are navigating the terrain and looking to understand the benefits and drawbacks. At Missouri State University, a faculty learning community found three critical elements when integrating AI into teaching and learning: transparency, intentionality, and ethical use. The path to ethical use with discernment will take time and effort across the entire ecosystem of education.

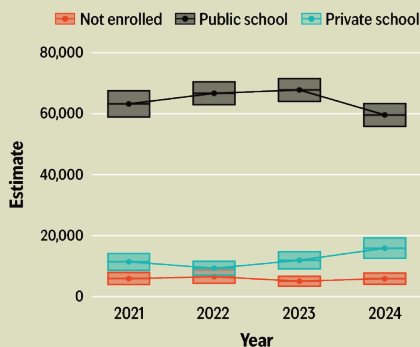
Demographic shifts, changing enrollment patterns, postsecondary trends, uncertain state funding, and growing concerns about families' ability to pay for education are creating **greater volatility across the community**. These pressures extend beyond individual institutions: higher education, K-12 schools, nonprofits, employers, and community organizations are interconnected parts of the same ecosystem and increasingly compete for students, employees, funding, and public support. Educator and staff recruitment and retention illustrate these challenges. Missouri's relatively low pay, unpaid or underfunded student-teaching practicums, and reliance on annual legislative wins rather than durable investment can weaken the education pipeline. Staff retention remains a perennial concern as fewer qualified people enter the field. When education is perceived as overworked and underpaid, recruitment becomes even more difficult.

Community organizations face similar pressures. Nonprofits and youth-serving organizations must sustain services while navigating uncertain funding, staffing challenges, and growing demand. Higher education and community partners can strengthen these pipelines together through preparation, internships, professional development, mentoring, and workforce partnerships.

Key Metrics

School enrollment type - students aged 5-19

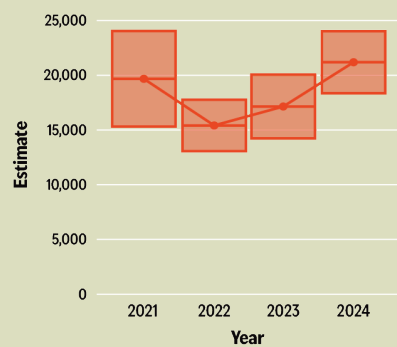
Greene, Christian & Webster Counties



Source: American Community Survey, Custom Tabulation

People with an education degree

Greene, Christian & Webster Counties



Source: American Community Survey, Custom Tabulation

Social and economic factors such as poverty, hunger, and mental health are barriers to student attendance, academic progress, and overall success. These barriers can start at home but are felt in the classroom and across the school, contributing to an adverse environment for both learning and teaching.

The number of students facing barriers to success grows each year, but these issues extend beyond the school system. Care to Learn partners with school districts to

two significant **disruptors to teaching and learning**. The COVID-19 pandemic dramatically impacted teaching and learning and still carries residual impacts. Educators report chronic absenteeism, over-reliance on technology, and a disparate profile of readiness. Annual Performance Reports show that Ozark and Nixa have fully recovered to 2019 levels while others continue to lag. Nixa High School ranks 9th in Missouri on the most recent U.S. News & World Report's annual performance ranking.

Interfaith partners serve side by side and look for ways to widen the circle



Faith Community Highlights

- Support for front-line workers & food security
- The festival of faiths & grassroots partnerships
- Crisis response & low-barrier aid

Opportunities for Growth

- Expanding community involvement and required resources
- Navigating polarization and building leadership resources
- Broadening participation and overcoming misunderstandings

Moving beyond siloed operations, Springfield's diverse faith traditions provide an essential community foundation. This overview traces our 25-year regional journey, highlights our shared service impact, and explores growth opportunities.

The Interfaith Alliance of the Ozarks has a rich history spanning over 25 years. It was originally prompted into existence in February 2001 following the hate-motivated vandalism of a local cemetery, where swastikas were spray-painted on headstones. Local leaders—including Rabbi Rita Sherwin, Reverend Ken Chumbley, and the head of the Council of Churches—gathered to clean up the site and establish a foundational presence of mutual support. Originally set up to build trust, provide mutual aid during crises, and foster understanding, the Alliance grew to include members from over 20 diverse faith groups, meeting monthly to undertake projects like cleaning Cherry Street.

Among the early Alliance activities that deserve to be remembered are its courageous acts of solidarity and community education. When the local Islamic Center faced vandalism, the Alliance organized a rally of support. Before local synagogues had security, Alliance members stepped up to provide physical security during Shabbat services following threats. They also marched in the MLK Parade carrying interfaith signs and hosted public Q&A panel discussions to bridge cultural divides.

Parallel to this grassroots work, the Have Faith Initiative was sparked by the COVID-19 pandemic. Prompted by an initial Zoom call of roughly 30 faith-based organizations whose members felt a strong, urgent desire to assist with virus control and crisis recovery, the City of Springfield and "Philanthropy Row"—the Community Foundation of the Ozarks, Community Partnership of the Ozarks,

brought distinct assets to the table: the Interfaith Alliance brought decades of deep, grassroots inter-tradition relationships, theological trust, and a proven history of standing together against hate. Meanwhile, the Have Faith Initiative brought robust civic partnerships, large-scale event organization, and an expansive network of leadership across a wide array of faith groups and city

agencies. Together, they formed a powerful, unified collaborative dedicated to serving Springfield's most vulnerable populations and fostering lifelong community connections.

The highlights of the Interfaith Collaborative reveal a unifying message: cooperation over competition. At the heart of this spirit is the realization that serving and loving our neighbors is a universal thread woven through all faith

traditions, uniting diverse groups in purpose. Faith organizations across the Springfield area are consistently putting help, service, and unconditional welcome ahead of doctrinal identity. By building on common ground and embracing differences, these communities work hand-in-hand with local nonprofits. Driven by a commitment to maximum impact, the Interfaith Collaborative centers its work on key strategic focus areas of Strengthening Community Connection, Major Events as Catalysts, Social & Relational Development, and Leadership Resources. Within each of these areas, the Interfaith Collaborative has found highlights and opportunities.

Support for Front-Line Workers & Food Security:

The Interfaith Collaborative members rapidly mobilize resources to support the practical needs of front-line community care workers, strengthening community connection. A primary example is providing 90 appreciation bags for the Children's Division during Employee Appreciation Month, offering direct encouragement to staff in demanding roles. Furthermore, faith groups act as the vital backbone for local agencies; even when individual organizations cannot host a food pantry on-site, they routinely bring in 40,000-pound truckloads



Interfaith Collaborative volunteers assembled 90 bags filled with treats, heartfelt cards, and gift cards to celebrate the dedicated staff at Missouri Department of Social Services' Children's Division during Employee Appreciation Week. *Source: the Interfaith Collaborative*

and United Way of the Ozarks—stepped in to help lead it. Co-chaired by Reverends Jenn Simmons and Bob Roberts with Deanna Carpenter serving as Community Organizer, the group held virtual meetings weekly for two years. What began as a vital lifeline during a terrifying time blossomed into massive service efforts, distributing over 110,000 masks and cards for healthcare heroes, sewing sleep sacks, and delivering 20,000 food bags for the unsheltered.

Following the height of the pandemic, the Have Faith Initiative transitioned to quarterly leadership luncheons connecting congregational leaders with city and county officials, including Mayor Ken McClure. This success—alongside signature public events like the Ozarks Festival of Faiths, Faith & Blue police collaborations, and Election Night prayers—paved the way for a natural evolution.

The decision to officially merge the Interfaith Alliance and the Have Faith Initiative into a unified Interfaith Collaborative took place in 2025, born from their overlapping visions and complementary strengths. Each group

Regional Perspective

When expanding our view from Springfield proper to the broader Ozarks Transportation Organization's regional service map—including Battlefield, Fremont Hills, Nixa, Ozark, Republic, Springfield, Strafford, and Willard—the steering committee recognizes that while local municipalities possess distinct identities, the foundational strengths and challenges of faith-based service mirror one another closely.

Across these neighboring towns and cities, housing insecurity, leader burnout,

and the need for disaster response do not stop at municipal boundaries. Moving from a Springfield-centered reflection to a true regional perspective means realizing that rural and suburban faith communities face the same systemic pressures with often fewer institutional resources. By intentionally connecting suburban and rural congregations into the Interfaith Collaborative network, we can pool volunteer power, share

crisis-response strategies, and establish regional communication channels. Working together across the Ozarks footprint allows us to shore up shared strengths, neutralize isolation, and ensure that our collective capacity to serve vulnerable populations reaches every corner of the Ozarks region.

of food to stock local pantries like Crosslines and Least of These.

The Festival of Faiths & Grassroots

Partnerships: Interfaith Collaborative members build deep, cross-cultural relationships through shared major events. The Festival of Faiths encapsulates this dual focus, providing a visible platform for shared values featuring an Interfaith Choir and Prayers for Peace. This relational development extends into grassroots service, with participating congregations uniting to host Back to School bashes, support NAACP events, and assist families through community-focused programs at the Drew Lewis Foundation. Meanwhile, local community gardens maintained by member groups donate over 4,000 pounds of fresh produce annually to Ozarks Food Harvest.

Crisis Response & Low-Barrier Aid: Disaster response and low-barrier aid reliably bring different faiths together fast. Following severe storms in West Central Springfield in April 2026, faith organizations partnered with Convoy of Hope and Harvest on Wheels to distribute over 15,000 pounds of groceries and serve as lunch sites for utility crews and displaced neighbors.

Critically, the Interfaith Collaborative serves as a vital cross-sector bridge for Springfield's housing crisis, most notably through the Crisis Cold Weather Shelter network—where religious and spiritual communities partner with local community action partnerships to contribute vital volunteer hours, operating the Safe Parking program and daily sack lunch efforts while asking not "Whose project is this?" but "How can we help together?"

Beyond this specific shelter network, faith communities serve the wider safety net, providing essential physical spaces, volunteer power, and financial support. Many of the region's non-profits are either directly established or actively operated by faith-based organizations, while religious and spiritual communities supply the

volunteer and donor support that assists the broader non-profit ecosystem.

This grassroots engagement of physical space, volunteer hours, and donor support is a consistent and significant part of how the local outreach and social service network currently operates.

While the Springfield-area faith community demonstrates remarkable collaborative strength, organizations across all traditions face shared, systemic challenges. These hurdles present collective opportunities to adapt, pool resources, and deepen community impact across the city.

Expanding Community Involvement and Required Resources

The mission of the Interfaith Collaborative is to cultivate a thriving, inclusive community where every individual is free to live out their faith and values. Fulfilling this mission successfully requires a significant increase in faith community involvement, which inherently demands dedicated operational resources, funding, and structural backing. Expanding this community engagement directly addresses opportunities for growth: as more individuals and diverse groups participate, underlying misunderstandings are naturally neutralized, which actively reduces political and cultural polarization. Faith-based organizations currently serve as frontline workers across much of the region's outreach and non-profit infrastructure. When this contribution isn't visible to the public, it becomes harder for the community to fully understand faith's role in regional care.

Navigating Polarization and Building Leadership Resources

Addressing political and community polarization is an urgent concern identified by the Interfaith Collaborative. Polarization frequently spills into faith spaces, causing rifts. Compounding this issue is severe leader burnout, leaving faith leaders stretched thin trying to guide groups through divisive times with limited

operational backup. The Interfaith Collaborative has a critical opportunity to establish supportive networks where leaders share the operational load. When major faith leaders model how to work well with others despite differences, they set a powerful example, teaching everyday members how to interact with neighbors and co-workers with kindness and listening, allowing polarization to diminish organically.

Broadening Participation and Overcoming Misunderstandings

The landscape of attendance is shifting post-COVID, with uneven participation trends and shrinking volunteer bases. Underlying misunderstandings about other traditions often create barriers, causing people to view others as outsiders. Furthermore, while smaller groups seek collaboration, larger congregations with robust ministries may hesitate out of a desire to protect distinct institutional brands. This opens the door for profound social and relational development. The Interfaith Collaborative's goal is not a theological melting pot, but a dynamic coalition where working together lifts and honors each distinct faith. Meaningful progress means pooling resources to support existing experts—such as schools, neighborhood associations, and non-profits—moving away from isolated institutional visibility toward community-need-driven service that benefits the entire city.



Interfaith Choir for Festival of Faiths, Prayers for Peace, and Faith & Blue events

Source: the Interfaith Collaborative



Partnerships connect farmers and families as funding cuts strain access



Blue Ribbons

- Strong, diverse partner network
- Increased connection between farmers and consumers
- Statewide and regional alignment



Red Flags

- Persistent areas of low access and food insecurity
- Funding cuts threatening local food organizations
- Civic and community infrastructure and participation

Food connects every sector of our community, influencing health, education, agriculture, business, and quality of life. Its complexity and impact make it both a shared opportunity and challenge. This chapter highlights progress toward a more local, equitable, and nourishing food system while identifying areas where continued improvement is needed.



In 2025, the Community Partnership of the Ozarks' Food Collaborative adopted a strategic plan that identified collaboration and partnerships as a central focus area.



Legislative Impact

Food insecurity remains a significant challenge nationally and across southwest Missouri, with recent federal, state, and local policy changes likely to influence food access. The 2025 federal budget reconciliation law, the One Big Beautiful Bill Act, reduced nutrition program spending, particularly SNAP, through stricter eligibility requirements, expanded work mandates, and increased state cost-sharing. Tracking food insecurity may also become more difficult. After nearly 30 years as the primary national measure of food insecurity and hunger trends, the USDA's Household Food Security Survey was discontinued in 2025, along with related reports, citing cost, redundancy, and methodological concerns. Missouri has advanced initiatives linking nutrition, healthcare, and agriculture. In

This priority reflects three key strengths, or Blue Ribbons: a strong and diverse partner network, statewide and regional alignment, and increased connections between farmers and consumers.

One of the region's greatest assets is the **growing collaboration among organizations working across food**, nutrition, healthcare, agriculture, education, philanthropy, emergency food assistance, faith, and community development. These



Kevin Prather speaks to attendees of the inaugural Local Table Tour hosted by the Food Collaborative, at the Springfield Community Gardens Midtown Garden. Source: Harrison Palmer

partnerships have helped break down traditional silos, creating a more connected and coordinated food system. Through collaboration, organizations are increasing awareness of available resources, reducing duplication of efforts, strengthening relationships, and expanding opportunities for residents to access nutritious food and nutrition education.

September 2025, Governor Kehoe signed Executive Order 25-30, establishing the Healthy SNAP initiative and directing the Missouri Department of Social Services to seek federal approval for SNAP changes that encourage nutritious, minimally processed food purchases while supporting Missouri agriculture. In 2026, Missouri passed the Food as Medicine Act, directing the state to pursue a federal waiver allowing healthcare providers to prescribe medically tailored meals, groceries, produce vouchers, and nutrition counseling for Medicaid participants. It also emphasizes partnerships with local farmers and community organizations. Missouri also adopted the Dietitian Licensure Compact, expected to improve access to nutrition services in rural communities.

The Food Collaborative's inaugural Local Table Tour in 2026 highlighted this strong partner network by showcasing nearly 50 partners, including Springfield Public Schools' Ag Academy, Springfield Community Gardens, and many other local farms and food growers. The event increased awareness of organizations strengthening the food system while demonstrating the **growing connection between farmers and consumers**. Across Southwest Missouri, consumers are increasingly purchasing food through farmers markets, local food retailers, community-supported agriculture programs, and food access initiatives. There is expansion across area farmers markets, with Joplin, Neosho, Webb City, and Springfield markets reporting higher yields of fresh food. Additionally, Ozarks Farm Stop has expanded year-round access to locally produced food while supporting more than 100 farms and food businesses, helping keep food dollars in the local economy.

An additional strength includes **statewide and regional alignment** through participation in the Missouri Regional Food Access Partnership. This collaboration has united stakeholders from healthcare, agriculture, economic development, education, philanthropy, emergency food systems, and government to develop shared strategies, including a Missouri Food System Charter and Healthy Food Financing Initiative framework. These efforts have increased coordination, strengthened partnerships, and created a

However, \$2 million in cuts to Double Up Food Bucks undermines this progress. Because several initiatives depend on federal approval or future state action, their implementation remains uncertain.

Locally, the Springfield City Council adopted a March 2025 resolution identifying food deserts as a priority community issue. The resolution calls for coordinated efforts to improve healthy food access through partnerships, incentives, grants, grocery development, farmers markets, community gardens, and urban agriculture. These developments reflect recognition that food security is shaped by economic conditions and local food system infrastructure.

Regional Perspective

Food systems do not stop at city boundaries. Every community in the region depends on a healthy, resilient food system, with farms, food businesses, workers, consumers, and supply chains interconnected across Springfield and surrounding communities. Farms, fertile soils, and the capacity to produce nutrient-dense food are regional assets that support both community health and economic opportunity. Strengthening connections between rural and urban communities can improve food access, support local producers, and build regional resilience.

Ozarks Farm Stop is a year-round, community-based

food hub in downtown Springfield that combines a farmers market and grocery store model. It increases access to locally produced food while providing regional farmers and food producers with shared retail space to sell directly to consumers and retain more of their revenue.

In 2025, Springfield Community Gardens received a USDA Regional Food System Partnerships (RFSP) award for Fresh Links, a nearly \$1 million initiative to strengthen Missouri's regional food system. The project connects food hubs and partners in Springfield, Kansas City, and St. Louis to link urban and rural producers, expand market access for small farmers, and address food insecurity through coordinated distribution.

Activities include farmer and food producer training, cross-regional partnerships, and evaluation by Missouri State University's Center for Ozarks Poverty Research.

Food connects us all, and there is still much work to be done to ensure everyone has access to nourishing food. This chapter highlights the strengths and challenges of our regional food system through the perspective of individuals closely engaged in this work. While it provides an important snapshot, it does not fully capture the complexity of our regional food system; many additional voices, perspectives, and issues could have been explored. Building a stronger regional food system will require continued collaboration, civic participation and investment in infrastructure, and a shared vision for a stronger regional food system across sectors.

common vision for advancing food access, affordability, sustainability, and equity across Missouri. Strong support for initiatives such as Missouri's Food as Medicine Act and Springfield's 2025 Food Desert Resolution further demonstrates growing recognition of food access as a public health, economic, and community development priority.

Despite these strengths, significant challenges remain. Three major Red

Rising food prices, food waste, supply chain disruptions, labor shortages, climate-related weather events, and increasing production costs pose challenges across the food system, affecting both consumers and producers. At the same time, SNAP participation among children, adults, and individuals with disabilities has declined since 2025, reflecting changes in eligibility rather than a reduction in the need for food assistance. Continued increases in food prices may also erode the purchasing power of SNAP

have decreased resources

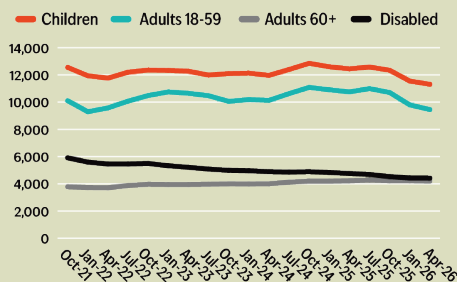
available for community food programs, affecting services such as mobile markets, produce distribution, and nutrition initiatives. Uncertainty surrounding SNAP and other food policy changes has increased pressure on emergency food providers and community organizations such as Ozarks Food Harvest and Crosslines. Many farms, farmers markets, nonprofits, and food-based businesses lack staffing or rely heavily on volunteers, and have precarious financial resources limiting their ability to meet growing community needs.

The third challenge is strengthening our **civic and community infrastructure and participation** to address food system challenges over time. Southwest Missouri has many organizations and community partners working to improve food access. The concern is not a lack of awareness or organizational effort, but whether these efforts are connected and supported by the infrastructure and community capacity needed to sustain progress. Strong food systems depend on trusted relationships, local leadership, opportunities for residents to participate, and coordination among organizations. This includes making space for people with lived experience to help identify priorities and shape solutions. The Food Collaborative can help strengthen these connections by bringing partners together, supporting leadership development, and creating opportunities for shared learning and decision-making. Investing in these relationships, infrastructure, and in our communities' capacity to work together can strengthen food security efforts and help build a more connected and resilient regional food system.

Key Metrics

Persons with SNAP benefits

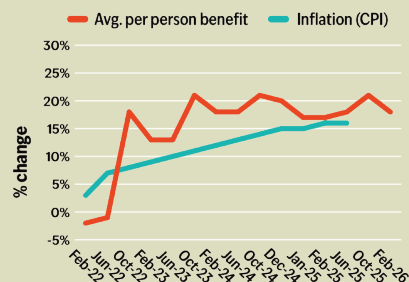
Springfield, MO



Source: Missouri Department of Social Services

Change in SNAP benefits and inflation

Springfield, MO



Source: Missouri Department of Social Services

Flags were identified: persistent areas of low access and food insecurity, funding instability among member organizations, and the need for stronger civic and community infrastructure and participation.

Food insecurity continues to affect many residents throughout southwest Missouri. Regional estimates indicate that one in five children and one in six adults experience food insecurity. Springfield's Food Desert Resolution identified approximately 37,000 food-insecure residents living in low-access neighborhoods. Food insecurity is not only a matter of having insufficient food but also of limited access to affordable, nutritious food.

benefits, further limiting the amount of food households can afford. Furthermore, small farms and food businesses often struggle to remain financially viable despite growing demand for local food. Strengthening local and regional food systems can help address these challenges by increasing the availability of fresh, nutritious foods close to where people live. Continued support for programs that connect local farms with consumers, schools, healthcare systems, and other institutions can improve food access, support economies, and build community resilience.

Funding instability represents a second major concern. Recent federal **funding reductions**

Local programs expand ownership while accessible, affordable housing falls short



Blue Ribbons

- Heightened attention on housing quality
- Dynamic programs to support home ownership
- Collaboration



Red Flags

- Lack of accessible housing
- Lack of affordable housing
- Intersectionality of housing and poverty

Safe, decent, and affordable housing continues to be a critical issue in the Ozarks. Like most complex issues in our community, housing needs and solutions exist on a spectrum, housing impacts and is impacted by many overlapping systems, and each resident has their own personal story of how housing has influenced their life.



In the Community Focus Report catchment area there continues to be **Heightened Attention on Housing Quality** through public attention and community planning. Non-profit programs like Restore SGF and Habitat for Humanity provide support for home restoration to

address Springfield's aging housing stock, though these funds are sensitive to funding and contractor availability. The City of Springfield is piloting a Rental Inspection program in the West Central neighborhood to increase the safety of rental homes by requiring regular inspections for basic health and safety items. These actions to improve housing quality address some



Room in The Kitchen, Inc.'s expanded emergency shelter.
Source: Community Partnership of the Ozarks

structural issues of the housing market and improve the lived experience of residents.

The community continues to invest in **Dynamic Programs to Support Home Ownership**. Drew Lewis Foundation's Blue House Project and RISE program supports affordable home ownership. Since 2013, the Springfield Community Land Trust has created equitable pathways to homeownership through

permanent housing affordability. On average, these homeowners finance just 71% of their home's appraised value, providing nearly 30% equity at purchase—often eliminating PMI and reducing monthly housing costs. These programs are local initiatives without federal funding support. However, state and federal governments have shown an interest in increasing home ownership; it will be interesting to learn how enacted policies may impact ownership opportunities at the local level.

Springfield and the surrounding communities exhibit a strong commitment to **Community Collaboration**. Collaboration happens between local governments and agencies through funding support. Recent housing and emergency shelter development projects have only been possible

through cross system support, including Sankofa apartment complex (supported by the City of Springfield's Low Income Housing Tax Credit funds), Drew Lewis' Broadway Cottage Courtyard (supported by the City of Springfield for stormwater mitigation), and new emergency shelters constructed by Crosslines, The Kitchen, Inc., Salvation Army, and Victory Mission. Collaboration happens between agencies through community planning in initiatives like Community Partnership of the Ozarks' Housing Collaborative, New Day, and Ozarks



Legislative Impact

The ROAD Act was passed in 2026 to address the affordable housing crisis. This federal act affects zoning, manufactured home regulations, investor activities, and increases to home repair and construction projects. The legislation represents a federal focus on housing and is the largest legislation related to housing in decades. Existing federal funding has become unstable with delayed award notices, application timelines, and shifting priorities.

House Bill 595 went into effect in 2025. This law prohibits municipalities from enacting ordinances that mandate landlord acceptance

of federal rental assistance, restrict tools landlords use to screen tenants, cap security deposit amounts, and require "right of first refusal" on lease renewals or sales of property. Senate Bill 973 went into effect in 2026. This law establishes and expands the framework for land banks, which will increase municipalities' ability to rehabilitate abandoned properties.

Springfield City Council enacted a residential rental license/inspection pilot program for all single family and duplex residential

rental properties in the West Central Neighborhood in November 2025. Springfield City Council adopted a new Land Development Code in April 2026; the last comprehensive update was in 1995. Key updates make it easier to develop "missing middle" housing, increase options for accessory dwelling units, and reduce the number of required parking spots. Housing strategy is an identified priority for City Council.

Regional Perspective

Housing is a regional issue which amplifies the multidimensionality of safe, affordable, and accessible housing, particularly given the steady population of the area which is now more than 500,000 residents. The intersectionality is exhibited across the Community Focus Report.

The recent Iron Grain District development near Republic, MO has been successful, and it's located close to several distribution centers. Transportation, of course, is an issue for individuals and families living within Springfield

and across the Community Focus Report catchment area. Regional planning which builds on knowledge and understanding is critical. The City of Springfield has done some careful thinking around LIHTC, including supporting developments that make a 30-year commitment to affordability which would benefit regional partners.



Ribbon Cutting at New Day.

Source: Community Partnership of the Ozarks

Alliance to End Homelessness (OAEH). Supportive programming, like CPO's New Day facility fosters "connection, healing, and personal growth." New Day's partners include Burrell Behavioral Health, Jordan Valley Community Health Mobile Unit, Legal Services of Southern Missouri, Missouri Division of Social Services, and Springfield-Greene County Health Department, among others. Collaboration also happens at the individual and neighborhood level through registered

accessible housing, lack of affordable housing, and housing's intersection with poverty.

Accessible housing refers to physical design meeting the needs of different populations. Historically, accessible housing has referred to those designed for people with physical disabilities, but there are benefits for everyone can benefit from these design choices. According to the Census Bureau's American Community Survey, the Springfield area population is aging, and the lack of diversity in our current local housing stock may not meet their needs in the future.

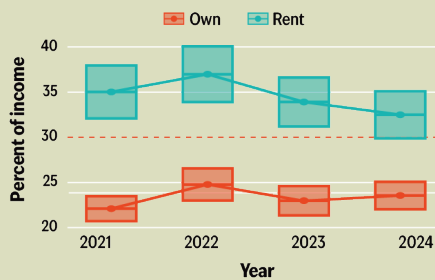
have shifted. A main incentive communities rely on, the Low-Income Housing Tax Credit, expires after a set time period, meaning that housing that was developed to be affordable is no longer required to be rented below the market rate. Approximately 18 units' affordability will expire in the next 3 years. According to the most recent Unsheltered Report conducted by CPO and Missouri State University in 2024, 69% of participants who were sleeping somewhere not meant for human habitation reported having at least one disabling condition, although only 23% of those disabled individuals were receiving disability benefits of any kind. Even if a single individual was receiving the maximum monthly Social Security Insurance benefit of \$994, the federal Fair Market Rent (the estimated cost of standard rental housing and utilities) for Springfield is \$883.

The third red flag identifies how **housing and poverty intersect**. According to the ACS, 18.4% of Springfield residents are living in poverty. Inequality has negative impacts on community and individual health for everyone. This intersection impacts several red flags identified in other chapters of this report. The shortage of affordable housing makes it more difficult for people who are experiencing homelessness to obtain housing and makes it more difficult for anyone who has housing to maintain their housing stability. While decreased home ownership rates could indicate shifting priorities of younger generations, it doesn't appear that is the case in the Springfield Ozarks. Low-income renters are paying a higher percentage of their income for housing and utility costs, meaning that residents who rent are under more financial stress than residents who own their home.

Key Metrics

Average monthly housing costs

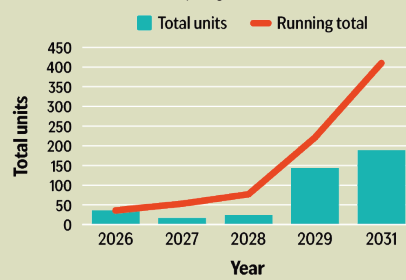
Greene, Christian & Webster Counties



Source: American Community Survey, Custom Tabulation

Expiring LIHTC units by year

Springfield, MO



Source: Missouri Inclusive Housing

neighborhood associations (Springfield has over 20!). Neighborhood associations provide a grassroots but centralized avenue for everything from planning development to organizing kickball tournaments.

The Springfield Ozarks, like the rest of the nation, continues to face challenges with housing, primarily because there simply is not enough housing available. The lack of housing is impacted by rising construction costs, zoning restrictions, and a mismatch between the housing to be developed and the needs of communities. Within this general system gap, three specific Red Flags are lack of

There is likely to be a pronounced need for Potential gaps are housing that is single level, smaller square footage, located close to resources, and affordable for fixed incomes. There is also a shortage of housing available to meet the needs of people with different incomes. Addressing this gap primarily happens through supporting a housing developer with incentives to build **affordable housing** and through supporting individuals and families directly with rental subsidies; both of these systems rely heavily on federal funding, which has become more unstable over the last two years as federal priorities

Stewardship advances in local plans as state, federal protections roll back



Blue Ribbons

- Environmental stewardship embedded in long-range community and regional planning
- A healthy natural environment supported by both professional and volunteer efforts
- Rich ecosystem of decades-strong conservation and environmental educators serving all ages



Red Flags

- Antiquated residential trash collection model and legislative risk to solid waste/recycling
- Federal and state rollback of environmental protections, agency capacity, citizen participation and local control
- Extreme weather threatening life and infrastructure with growing frequency

The natural environment remains one of the region's most attractive, valuable assets, drawing new residents and millions of visitors annually. With the support of local governments, advocacy groups, educational institutions, and an army of educated, willing volunteers, it continues to thrive.



Concern for the health of the **natural environment** has been included in **long-range plans and projects**. Examples include the Lake Springfield Plan, Renew Jordan Creek, and James River Water Trail. Natural communities are being recognized, restored and actively managed, and local water resources are being recognized as potential drivers of economic development, outdoor



*Paddling on the Finley River; Clean Water defines us, refreshes us, and sustains us.
Source: Loring Bullard*

recreation, and quality of place amenities.

Overall, our community continues to enjoy the benefits of excellent outdoor air quality. The Ozarks Clean Air Alliance (OCAA) has worked since 2008 to protect and improve air quality in the region, which is largely affected by emissions from on-road and off-road vehicles. To target emission reduction, the Department of Energy invited OCAA to apply for certification into the DOE's Clean Cities and Communities program, which

aims to advance the nation's environment, energy security, and economic prosperity by building partnerships with public and private stakeholders. The program advances alternative domestic fuels such as biodiesel, ethanol, electricity, propane, and compressed natural gas, and promotes advanced technologies and practices that reduce fuel consumption and harmful emissions. OCAA was accepted in 2024, and the Ozarks Clean Fuels Coalition (OCFC) was formed. Funded by the DOE, the program is managed through the Ozarks Environmental and Water Resources Institute (OEWR) at Missouri State University and is an affiliate of OCAA. OCFC provides public and private fleets in the region with annual funding, technical assistance, targeted grants, and educational workshops to support conversion to alternative fuels. It is also mapping current alternative fuel infrastructure, identifying the needs of fleets and communities, determining infrastructure gaps, and building a stakeholder network, while interns support the program and gain experiential learning. With this program established, OCAA can now shift focus to other pollution sources like particulate matter and education about air quality challenges, better practices, and solutions.

Our healthy natural environment is supported **by local nonprofit, quasi-governmental, and educated volunteer organizations**. These groups gather data, complete hands-on projects, cooperatively utilize various grant sources and track the success of their collective efforts. Many local organizations – several in existence for more than 25 years – have active and



Legislative Impact

A primary legislative concern is the Missouri Department of Natural Resources' attempt to restructure or eliminate the very successful 30+ year-old waste district program, including the state Solid Waste Advisory Board, the associated grant program, and the districts themselves. The State's Solid Waste Advisory Board is the program's oversight body, with chairpersons predominantly from Springfield or Greene County. District O has distributed \$9,494,664.74 in grant funding since the

first round of grants in 1994. Through a wide variety of projects, the district has enabled area municipalities, nonprofits, businesses, and institutions to expand established businesses, foster innovative approaches to recycling, divert materials from landfills, establish recycling drop-off centers, and provide educational resources. With grant funding, the City of Springfield's Household Chemical Collection Center is made available to all residents of the 5-county area at no charge. District O also helped to fund the very unique and successful glass recycling program in Springfield's downtown entertainment

district. To date, over 2 million adult beverage containers have been collected and recycled, and the project is now financially sustainable.

A more recent issue, PFOs and PFOAs are a very complex problem to address. At the end of the Biden administration, the Environmental Protection Agency had begun to promulgate rules and guidelines regarding PFOs and PFOAs. The Trump administration has dismissed PFOs and PFOAs as a concern; however, the matter will not go away and will need to be addressed at some point.

Regional Perspective

Environmental and conservation components, including water, wildlife, and air, do not recognize political boundaries and, as such, environmental professionals have been looking at a broader regional approach for decades. Several of our oldest and most successful nonprofit organizations have included regional partners since their beginning. This has led to many successful regional partnerships, collaborations and projects, including:

- The Chadwick Flyer Trail: once completed, it will connect the cities of Springfield and Ozark via a multi-modal pedestrian-bike trail.
- The new Northeast Community Park: A 40-acre park behind the Praise Assembly Church has been opened to the public, funded by donations from church members, an Outdoor Recreation Infrastructure Grant, and the Landowner and Community Assistance Program (both from the

Missouri Department of Conservation). The park emphasizes connection, nature, movement, and accessibility where people of all ages, backgrounds, abilities, and interests can come together.

- Springfield - Greene County continues to be a leader in innovative and efficient recycling and disposal technologies and services. Several components offer services to the region, including the household hazardous waste collection facility and the Noble Hill Landfill.

effective environmental/conservation education initiatives for all ages and abilities with professional-level presentations from trained staff or volunteers. These include OCAA, OCFC, SPS, Watershed, JRBP, City of Springfield Environmental Services, Greater Ozark Audubon Society, Wonders of Wildlife Museum and Aquarium, MSU, the faith community, and many others, covering topics from youth education to technical assistance on habitat restoration, septic tank installation, and alternative fuel infrastructure such as electric charging stations.

Unfortunately, the natural environment is regarded as a highly controversial and divisive political matter, with support shifting from administration to administration. The current **federal and state administrations have both eliminated regulatory protection and agency staff and programs**. At the same time, direct steps have been taken to allow or encourage actions that damage our natural environment and the people whose job or vocation it is to protect it. Some examples include:

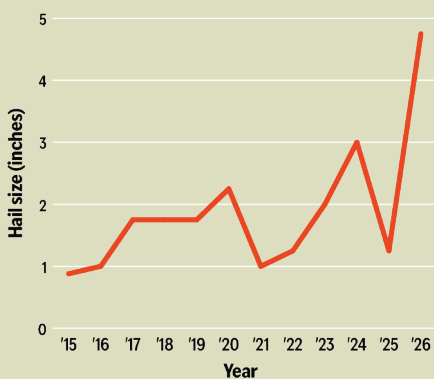
- EPA Discontinuing Ozone and PM Advance Programs affecting over 600 member communities

does have its extremes - heat, cold, ice storms, tornadoes, severe storms, and flooding. As catastrophic rain events occur more, the unfortunate accompanying loss of life is also increasing. Traditional methods and safety messages may need to be reviewed and revised, with new warning systems. People who are new or visiting may not be familiar with the behavior of our creeks, rivers, and streams during flood events are especially vulnerable, although locals are not immune.

Springfield/Greene County is a leader in environmental management, including sectors of wastewater, storm water, recycling, and solid waste/recycling and disposal, which includes the City's Integrated Solid Waste Management System. Yet Springfield still operates under an **inefficient arrangement for the collection and transportation of residential trash**, with services provided by as many as 12-15 private companies. This leads to multiple garbage trucks on residential streets, resulting in unnecessary vehicle emissions, wear and tear on the streets, and serious safety concerns. A 2025 Waste Composition Study revealed that more than 50% of what goes into Springfield's Noble Hill Landfill can be recycled instead of unnecessarily taking up valuable landfill space. Landfills and associated available space have declined significantly, with only 17 remaining in Missouri. Several of those are estimated to have 10 or fewer years of remaining useful life. The Noble Hill Landfill currently has approximately 50 - 60 years of use remaining. In 2026, a thorough review of the City's Chapter 94, which outlines trash service and associated matters, was undertaken. At the time of this writing, these recommendations have been presented to Springfield City Council and are awaiting direction.

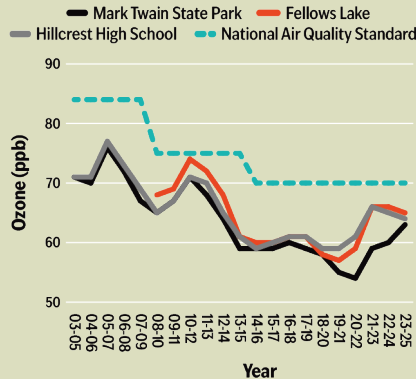
Key Metrics

Maximum hail size recorded per year



Source: National Oceanic & Atmospheric Administration

Regional ozone levels



Source: Springfield City Utilities

Local businesses and philanthropic individuals or foundations also support environmental and conservation education efforts.

A May 2025 ribbon-cutting ceremony celebrated the new Environmental Educational Pavilion at Lost Hill Park. The pavilion was made possible by support from Bass Pro Shops, the Missouri Department of Natural Resources, and an Outdoor Recreation Infrastructure Grant from the Missouri Department of Conservation. Additionally, a native food forest was planted in the park, thanks to a partnership with Boulevard Brewery.

- Withdrawing from climate-related organizations globally
- Reducing state support for air quality protection and solid waste district grant programs
- Governor removing citizen representatives from Air and Water Commissions
- Eroding federal vehicle standards, which could make future standards difficult to achieve

Extreme Weather remains a serious concern to the health and safety of our citizens and visitors. Though considered mild, our climate



Agencies collaborate and modernize while vacancies strain response



Blue Ribbons

- Cross-agency collaboration
- Awareness, education, and response to mental health
- Enhanced technology use



Red Flags

- Gun-related and violent crime
- Substance use
- Staffing shortages

Public safety entities continue to evolve their approach to public safety through stronger collaboration, improved mental health response, expanded use of technology, and awareness of emerging challenges. These efforts highlight both our progress and the critical areas where continued focus is needed.



The community continues strengthening public safety through **interagency collaboration**. The Crisis Communication Council, established at the 2025 Leadership Summit for Preparedness, brings together all public safety agencies across the county. The Springfield-Greene County Office of Emergency Management leads planning efforts, while partner agencies enhance interagency practices and procedures, creating an environment necessary to

effectively share real-time information, provide coordination during large-scale incidents, and activate the Joint Information Center for unified communication.

In 2025, Springfield Police Department (SPD) launched the Street Outreach Team to engage and support individuals experiencing homelessness. In 2026, through the Enhanced Street Outreach Team, SPD

by 2040 and disabling injury crashes by 2050 through coordinated education, engineering, and enforcement.

Awareness, education, and response to mental health is also a priority in public order and safety. Since 2022, SPD and Centerstone have operated a mental health co-responder program that connects people in crisis to needed services. Eight co-responders

currently support peak call times and maintain 24/7 on call availability, with a goal of reaching full around the clock coverage in 2027.

In 2025, 9-8-8 operators began co-locating within the Springfield Greene County 911 center, allowing crisis counselors and emergency communications staff to work side by side when residents are in emotional distress or suicidal crisis. This collaboration ensures residents

receive the right level of support quickly.

The Greene County Sheriff's Office enhanced behavioral health services within the jail through a full time Behavioral Health Liaison. This addition to the mental health team works on site, improving response times, increasing access to resources, reducing clinical workload, streamlining operations, and expanding service opportunities such as Medicaid application access for individuals preparing to reenter the community.

The community is advancing public safety through **enhanced technology use**. In 2026, SPD launched a Drones as a First Responder



SPD Graduation 2026
Source: Cris Swaters

expanded this model by partnering with Centerstone, Community Partnership of the Ozarks, Mercy and Cox hospitals, for a 90-day pilot, including increased utilization of the Jail Diversion program administered by Springfield-Greene County Health Department and Municipal Court.

Through Vision Zero, SPD and Public Works are improving pedestrian and driver safety. The Safer Streets SGF Plan, adopted in 2024, commits to eliminating traffic fatalities



Legislative Impact

Senate Bill 71, passed in May 2025, further advances public safety support by creating the Public Safety Recruit and Retention Act Scholarship. This program covers tuition for eligible public safety personnel with at least six years of service, as well as their dependent children when personnel have at least ten years of service. By easing financial barriers to education, the Act strengthens recruitment, retention, and long term workforce stability across Missouri's public safety agencies.

Missouri's 2024 "Valentine's Law" strengthened road safety and accountability by creating the offense of aggravated fleeing and establishing clear felony penalties when a driver flees from lawful detention and creates danger, injury, or death. By presuming a driver is fleeing when they continue after seeing lights or hearing sirens, the law simplifies enforcement and supports faster

case progression, reducing risks to officers and the public.

In 2023, Missouri also formally recognized 9-1-1 Telecommunicators as First Responders through Senate Bill 24. This designation not only affirms their critical role in emergency response but also expands access to mental health resources previously limited to other first responder groups.

Regional Perspective

Across the region, stationary and mobile Automated License Plate Reader (ALPR) technology has become an essential tool for law enforcement, providing real-time intelligence that accelerates investigations, strengthens coordination, and supports both crime-solving and life-saving missions. Officers rely on ALPR alerts and historical vehicle data to rapidly locate suspects or missing individuals, including a case where a vehicle stolen at gunpoint was quickly found, leading to a safe felony stop and arrest.

During a major homicide investigation, distinctive vehicle details captured by ALPR cameras provided the crucial lead that confirmed timelines, supported witness accounts, and helped identify individuals connected to the crime. In another case, detectives used ALPR data to locate a suspect vehicle involved in an armed robbery the same day. ALPR tools also support federal cases. Deputies located a vehicle tied to the possession and distribution of child

sexual abuse material, leading to an arrest and recovery of critical digital evidence. The system contributes to life-safety responses as well, including the successful location of a suicidal individual tracked through ALPR data and intermittent phone pings, ensuring urgent care. Collectively, these outcomes show how ALPR technology turns vehicle-movement data into actionable intelligence that enhances situational awareness and strengthens public safety across the region.

program utilizing two Skydio drone docks positioned on rooftops offering remote deployment options, giving officers rapid visual access to unfolding incidents and improving safety. In addition, SPD trained 30 patrol officers to deploy drones at street level to assist in a wide variety of calls for service. The Springfield Fire Department (SFD) continues to use drones for special operations and search-and-rescue missions.

Gun-related and violent crimes remain a significant concern in the community. SPD has seen a steady decline in shots-fired calls, reaching a four-year low of 187 in 2025. Although the number of people injured by gunfire rose 33 percent from 2024 to 2025, it remains substantially lower than the number of injuries recorded in both 2022 and 2023. Data from the Greene County Sheriff's Office shows 18 known juveniles from 2024 through June 2026 used a weapon

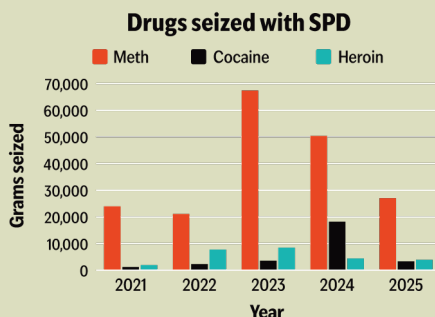
To improve access to life-saving resources, the Springfield Fire Department installed Naloxone Resource Distribution Boxes at all 13 fire stations and the Fire Academy in 2026, providing free Naloxone kits and information on available treatment and addiction resources, supporting department community risk reduction efforts to reduce incidence of overdose in our community. Each box holds ten kits, and each kit comes with two doses of nasal Naloxone. Fire Station 13 on W. College St. distributed 150 kits in the first week.

Although overdose fatalities have declined, overdoses themselves continue, showing the need for ongoing collaboration among community partners to respond to increasingly complex drug threats.

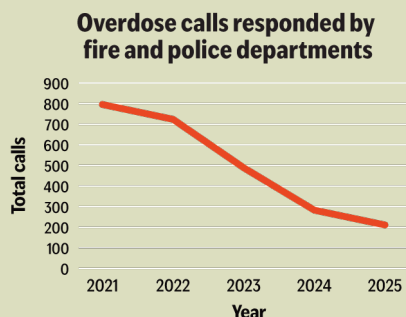
Staffing shortages continue to challenge public safety operations across multiple agencies. As of June 30, 2026, SPD reported 43 sworn and 8 non-sworn vacancies out of 360 and 94 authorized positions, respectively. The Greene County Sheriff's Office faces gaps as well, including 5 medical vacancies, 36 detention vacancies, and 5 patrol openings.

Springfield-Greene County 9-1-1 reports 15 openings, adding pressure to emergency communications during already high-demand periods. At the Greene County Prosecutor's Office, the number of new lawyers entering the field has declined by 30% over the past 15 years, creating additional strain on filling those vacancies. These shortages highlight the importance of sustained recruitment, retention, and support strategies across all public safety sectors.

Key Metrics



Source: Springfield Police Department



Source: Springfield-Greene County Health Department

SPD also implemented a Virtual Realtime Crime Center powered by Axon/Fusus in 2026, strengthening public-private collaboration. Through Fusus, businesses and residents are able to securely register their cameras, helping officers quickly identify useful footage and speed investigations. In July 2026, Springfield-Greene County 9-1-1 completed its transition to Next-Generation 9-1-1, replacing the legacy copper-based system. This upgrade increases system resilience, improves data available to first responders, and accelerates delivery of emergency calls to the correct center, which enhances reliability for the entire community.

during the commission of a crime. This tracking, which began in 2024, focuses on weapon use rather than possession. **Substance-use issues** continue to evolve as modern synthetic opioids become more potent. New drug trends have made overdoses harder to reverse, as fentanyl and similar opioids bind more tightly to receptors, reducing the effectiveness of standard naloxone doses. A 2026 study from the American Society of Anesthesiologists found that a single dose may not fully reverse respiratory depression in people exposed to high levels or more potent synthetics.

New fields and trails open as pools age and indoor space runs short



Blue Ribbons

- Community collaboration
- Trails and connections
- Sports tourism



Red Flags

- Greenspace preservation
- Stable long-term funding source
- Indoor sports event capacity

Outdoor experiences consistently top any list of the area's top amenities, including Springfield's Forward SGF plan, which envisions a city rebrand as "Basecamp of the Ozarks." Residents and visitors love easy access to natural areas as well as sports and recreation centers. But quality recreation areas are expensive to build and maintain, and despite community buy-in, stable funding remains a challenge.



Community collaboration is a longtime Blue Ribbon for Springfield, and particularly for parks, trails and recreation. New projects are typically funded through a mix of public/private partnerships, grants, donations, tax revenue, and bonds.

Spring Forward Sales Tax revenue, approved by voters in 2024, generates \$30 million a year for Forward SGF initiatives to move the needle on several projects. Master planning for five parks begins in Fall 2026 and covers all four City Council zones. McDaniel Park construction begins for an accessible playground funded through Hatch Foundation,

TrailSpring, and Abilities First, plus a 783-foot pump track, pavilion, restrooms, and parking. Meador Park pickleball upgrades, co-funded with Ozarks Pickleball Club, break ground in 2027. The Dickerson Park Zoo Bald Eagle exhibit and accessible playground are expected in 2027, while Lafayette Park master plan implementation is underway with Springfield Public Schools.



Historic Fasnicht Park is one of five locations selected for a Park Master Plans 2026.

Source: Springfield-Greene County Park Board

Praise Assembly continues developing Northeast Community Park on its north Glenstone campus, in an area previously called a "play desert." The park's \$250,000 accessible playground opened in July 2026, funded through donations, grants, and community partners.

Longtime partnerships with Ozark Greenways, Friends of the Garden, Friends of the Zoo and Springfield Sister Cities Association continue to support park development and supply a pipeline of volunteers.

The City of Springfield is designating new Spring Forward Sales Tax revenue for **trails and connections**, including:

- **UnGap the Map**, \$1 million for projects such as extending the planned Chadwick Flyer north of Sunshine Street, connecting the Jordan Creek Greenway to Grant Avenue Parkway along Grand Street, spanning Ward Branch Greenway across Campbell Avenue.
- **Grant Avenue Parkway North** \$1 million for a greenway extension along Grant Avenue, between College Street and Hillcrest High School.

- **Frisco Highline Connector**, \$500,000 to connect the Frisco Highline Trail to the Grant Avenue Parkway.

- **Chadwick Flyer Trail**, \$1.8 million to connect Kissick Avenue to the Trail of Honor, pending right-of-way acquisition. Plans call for connection to nearly 4 miles of trail in Christian County, including a bridge over U.S. Hwy 65. North of the Trail of

Honor all the way to Sunshine Street, another 4.3-mile segment has been designed.

Ozark Greenways is completing a 30-year plan to connect trails on Springfield's east and west sides. Construction is planned in 2027 to extend South Creek Greenway from National Avenue to Glenstone Avenue, and from the trail's western terminus to the Wilson's Creek Greenway, spanning under U.S. Hwy 160/West Bypass. These are expected to open by late 2027.

The Huddle Up Group 2025 Sports Tourism Strategic Plan, released by the Springfield Sports Commission

notes growing momentum in sports tourism bookings. Notably, the National Christian Homeschool Basketball Championship returned for its 18th year in Springfield; the



Legislative Impact

Missouri voters renewed the state's 1/10-percent Parks, Soils and Water Sales Tax in August 2026, with the proposal approved in every county and passing statewide at 82 percent.

This tax has provided dedicated funding for state parks and historic sites and soil and water conservation efforts since first approved by voters in 1984. Voters have renewed the tax five times. Annual tax

revenue is split between Missouri State Parks and the Soil and Water Conservation Program, both administered by the Missouri Department of Natural Resources.

About 75 percent of the Missouri State Parks annual budget comes from this tax, allowing for free admission and quality visitor experiences at the state's 57 state

parks and 36 historic sites. Amenities tied to the tax include visitor centers, cabins, lodges, restrooms, shower houses, playgrounds, park accessibility improvements, and maintenance and upkeep of 1,000 miles of trail and 3,000 campsites.

Regional Perspective

Recreation is an area in which the Springfield region truly behaves as a single community. Residents cross city lines regularly to reach a trail, a ballfield, or a pool.

Numerous communities in the region are investing. Willard's Better Together Playground, a nearly \$1 million inclusive park recognized as a National Demonstration

Site, opened in 2024 after a two-year partnership between Willard Parks and a local nonprofit.

Also north of Springfield, Springfield South Kiwanis Club partnered with the Hatch Foundation, Abilities First and City Utilities to build the Hatch Playground at Miller Park, adjacent to Fellow Lake. The accessible playground opened in May 2025.

Republic issued \$9.9 million in parks bonds in 2023, funding The Rush aquatics park, now a regional draw, plus courts at Miller Park and a pavilion at JR Martin Park. Nixa is developing the 52-acre Eoff Family Century

Farm Park on donated Century Farm land. Ozark opened the 10-acre Garrison Springs Community Forest in 2024 and completed a Master Parks Plan in 2025. The Chadwick Flyer Trail will eventually link Springfield to nearly four miles of trail in Christian County.

The challenges are shared as well. Republic's Regional Sports Complex is on hold pending further financial study. Strafford Sports Center, the area's only four-court tournament facility outside the Fieldhouse, closed in 2026.

2026 Championship brought about 10,000 visitors, with \$5.87 million in estimated economic impact. The Sports Commission's top 15 2025-2026 tournaments brought more than 25,000 visitors with nearly \$20 million in estimated economic impact.

Cooper Sports Park and Killian Sports Complex a multi-year renovation, with 19 newly turfed sports fields for softball, baseball, and soccer. The \$27.5 million project was funded with generous ARPA designations from the City of Springfield and the State

to the Ozarks Empire Fairgrounds; the Ozarks Lunkers arena football team will play its third season there in 2026.

 The 2001 and 2006 Countywide Parks Sales Taxes provided capital funding for parks until the final tax sunset in 2012. Identifying a **stable long-term funding source for parks, trails and sports infrastructure** has been a Red Flag since 2009. While grants, donations, ARPA and now Spring Forward tax revenues enable development of new projects, funding lags for maintenance and upkeep of older and historic facilities.

The Parks Board is not the only budget that needs stability. Federal funding has not yet been released for the \$25 million federal RAISE Grant, announced in 2024 to fund additional UnGap the Map projects. Despite popular support and heavy use of trails, Ozark Greenways works with limited capacity for operations and capital funding, compared to other trail groups in the region.

Park inventory and greenspace has been a Red Flag since 2005 and was noted in the City of Springfield's Vision 20/20 plan. Despite the abundance of scenic waterways and natural areas around the city, the number of acres designated as public parkland have not kept up with population growth.

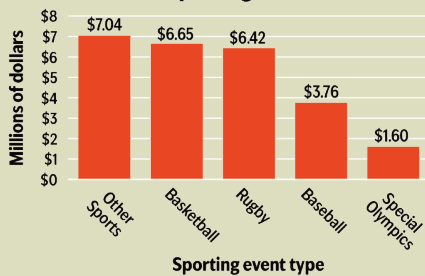
The National Parks and Recreation Agency's community standard is 10 acres of parkland per 1,000 residents. The 2021 Parks and Recreation Master Plan counted 10.3 acres per 10,000 residents, and we fall far behind the target of 2.5 acres per 1,000 residents for Mini Parks, Neighborhood Parks, and Community Parks.

The 2025 Huddle Up plan from Springfield Sports Commission emphasizes that indoor sports capacity is critical to sustaining sports tourism growth, and that Springfield is falling behind in hosting events for basketball, volleyball, wrestling, and other indoor sports. The primary growth obstacle is **spaces to accommodate indoor sporting events** and their audiences.

The Park Board's Fieldhouse SportsCenter offers four indoor basketball courts. Plans are in place to expand the Fieldhouse, but funding has not been identified for the project. The privately-operated Strafford Sports Center, the area's only other four-court facility available for tournaments, closed in 2026.

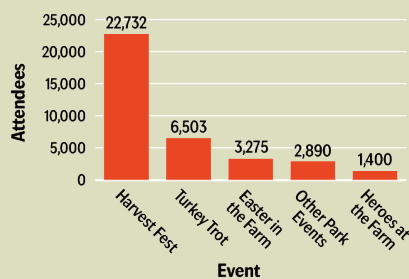
Key Metrics

2025-26 Estimated economic impact of sporting events



Source: Springfield Sports Commission

2025 Attendance at park board events



Source: Springfield-Greene County Parks Board

of Missouri. New fields are heavily booked with league play and tournaments, up more than 30 percent from before construction.

After 22 years, the Springfield Cardinals continue to draw fans to downtown Springfield, and the franchise announced a name change coming October 2026. The minor league baseball team's home field was rebranded to Route 66 Stadium, in partnership with O'Reilly, Mercy, Missouri State University, and the City of Springfield.

Opened in 2024, Wilson Logistics Arena continues to bring sports, events, livestock shows, concerts, banquets and expos

The Park Board's 2026 Outdoor Pool Assessment shows five out of six outdoor pools are near or beyond 50 years old, with an estimated lifespan of five years or less without significant repairs. Outdoor pools are not the only area requiring extensive rehabilitation, as there is now more than \$100 million in deferred maintenance in Parks assets.

In 2026, the Park Board set a goal of dedicating 20 percent of the department's \$35.8 million annual budget to capital investment; the budget included 8 percent in capital. With no new revenue source, achieving this goal will require reallocation of funds from other areas.



Trails and air travel expand while transit funding falls



Blue Ribbons

- Successful transportation advocacy
- Recent trails/sidewalks expansion
- Springfield-Branson National Airport (SGF)



Red Flags

- Funding challenges
- Active transportation and transit network gaps
- Safety & comfort

Transportation is a critical component of communities, serving as the link between residents and resources. A reliable infrastructure network enhances economic growth and the overall quality of life in the region. While most households rely on personal vehicles, mobility is a barrier for low-income families and retaining younger generations.



Our area has built a **strong reputation for success** through regional



Legislative Impact

Changes in federal transportation priorities between administrations can create uncertainty for long-term capital planning and grant programs, as demonstrated by the RAISE/BUILD grant transition. Additionally, legislation for transportation funding must be periodically reauthorized, at which time Congress or the President may introduce significant changes to the types of projects that are funded. Despite these shifts, the region has positioned itself well by preparing a variety of shovel-ready projects for any funding priority.

Trends in state legislation and funding present significant challenges to maintaining and modernizing the network. MoDOT continues to heavily invest in roadway safety and capacity, and yearly reductions in state transit funding have left the local system, operated by City Utilities, increasingly

collaboration, strategic planning, local investment, and consistent project delivery. Local governments, the Ozarks Transportation Organization (OTO), Southwest Missouri Council of Governments (SMCOG), Ozark Greenways, economic development organizations, and state partners have partnered to advance shared transportation priorities, strengthening the region's competitiveness for state and federal funding. This approach has helped secure



*Bike safety education event with Boys and Girls Club
Source: Community Partnership of the Ozarks*

significant infrastructure investments that support economic growth, improve mobility, and enhance quality of life. Transportation planning includes trails, bicycle and pedestrian facilities, and transit, creating a more connected, multimodal transportation system. The region's consistent track record has strengthened

reliant on utility ratepayers and federal grants. State transportation funding relies heavily on the state motor fuel tax. The rising popularity of electric vehicles, improved fuel efficiency, and inflationary pressures on construction materials mean the gas tax is an increasingly volatile funding source. Conflicts between the state General Assembly and MoDOT jeopardize overall funding stability. Fortunately, a resident of southwest Missouri was appointed to MoDOT's governing body, ensuring the region is reflected in decision-making. The City of Springfield faces a critical balancing act between promoting robust economic development and maintaining a safe, efficient transportation network. Without public-private partnerships or

Springfield's credibility with funding partners and positioned the region to compete effectively for transportation investments.

Springfield and Greene County continue to **strengthen regional connectivity through strategic investments** in trails, sidewalks, and multimodal transportation. Recent milestones include \$4.3 million in trail funding, completion of Grant Avenue Parkway to College Street, rehabilitation of the historic Jefferson Avenue Footbridge,

and a \$13.8 million Safe Streets and Roads for All grant to improve pedestrian safety along South Campbell Avenue. Planning continues for the Lake Springfield Master Plan, the Chadwick Flyer Trail connecting Springfield and Ozark, and completion of the Fellows Lake trail loop, expanding access to parks, neighborhoods, and regional

recreation. Together, these projects improve mobility, support economic vitality, enhance quality of life, and create safer opportunities for people of all ages and abilities to walk and bike throughout the region. Springfield's renewed Bronze-level Bicycle Friendly Community designation recognizes more than 15 years of community collaboration and continued progress toward a safer, more connected transportation network.

developer incentives, necessary transportation improvements are delayed, causing localized traffic congestion and infrastructure strain. Leaders are actively exploring independent local funding mechanisms for alternative transportation options, like the recently passed SPRING Forward sales tax in Springfield.

The region exhibits a strong desire for expanded sidewalk networks, trails, dedicated bicycle lanes, and enhanced public transit. There is interest from Amtrak in re-establishing passenger rail to Springfield; proponents highlight the potential for tourism and economic diversification. However, this vision faces severe roadblocks due to a lack of meaningful state or federal support.

Regional Perspective

Every day, over half of Springfield's working population travel from surrounding communities into the city for employment, with thousands of others travelling for healthcare, education, shopping, and air travel. Those trips increase demand on the urban transportation system, but they also reflect Springfield's role as the regional hub whose transportation investments support economic opportunity and

quality of life far beyond the city limits.

Regional mobility takes many forms. OATS Transit, the area's rural demand-response transit provider, completed more than 48,500 rural trips to or from the Springfield urban area during FY2026, in addition to nearly 47,000 contracted trips within the urban area for employment, medical, and other essential services. Trips connect rural residents to jobs, healthcare, and other opportunities while reinforcing

Springfield's role as the transportation and economic center. Riders can connect through the CU Transit Center to Springfield transit and intercity bus service. Meanwhile, an expanding regional trail network, including the Chadwick Flyer connection between Springfield and Ozark, is increasingly linking communities across jurisdictional boundaries.

As southwest Missouri grows, continued coordination will be essential. Roads, transit, trails and the airport should be viewed not simply as individual community assets, but as parts of an interconnected regional transportation network.

In 2025, **Springfield-Branson National Airport** had its third record-breaking year in a row, serving more than 1.55 million passengers, representing an increase of 9 percent over 2024 and 70 percent increase in total passengers since 2015. The number of airline seats available has had a steady incline, indicating growing passenger demand. As of July 2026, the airport has 15 nonstop destinations, tying the record for the most nonstops in the history of Springfield's airport. Most importantly, 2025 departing flights averaged 87.1 percent capacity, with an 8 percent increase in scheduled flights. More than 250 short-term parking spots were

have slowed major grants; fewer competitive opportunities exist overall. Sidewalks and trails suffer from chronic underfunding, leaving communities without resources to maintain or repair aging infrastructure. Springfield's 780 miles of sidewalk require far more than the \$1.2 million budgeted annually, with more than \$140 million needed for ADA compliance and gap filling.

Despite recent transit and trail expansions, **significant gaps still exist in both practical and recreational infrastructure**. 85 percent of populated city blocks are within a 10-minute walk of a bus stop, but long wait times often render The Bus infeasible for riders with inflexible schedules. As the

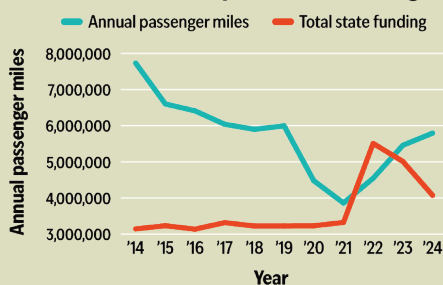
network gaps directly relate to the highest ranked respondent priority – for The Bus to provide access to essential services to those with no other transportation options or with limited mobility. Plans exist to close these gaps, but funding prioritization lacks for medium and long-term plans, while regulatory approvals slow progress on short-term improvement efforts.

Related to infrastructure gaps, **safety and comfort** of vulnerable road users is a perennial issue in Springfield, in part because there is not adequate separation between users of different transport modes. While drivers typically enjoy easy, safe access to destinations, pedestrians, cyclists, and other vulnerable road users often encounter gaps in accessibility (e.g., no sidewalk, no nearby crosswalk). Forced proximity to high-speed traffic risks the safety of pedestrians and cyclists. A notable strategy to reduce this discomfort has been the expansion of vegetated strips separating sidewalks and multi-use paths from the curb, which creates safety and comfort for all users. According to the 2024 *Safer Streets SGF* report, there were 61 injury or fatality crashes involving pedestrians, cyclists, or other vulnerable road users that year, and nearly half were because drivers failed to yield.

These statistics cannot capture how many more people might engage in active transportation if they felt safe. Moreover, the advance of electric mobility devices presents new challenges. While these devices provide more mobility, new safety issues have emerged. An electric scooter user is at risk when mixing with automobile traffic but presents a hazard for pedestrians and cyclists on slower-speed paths like sidewalks. For improved comfort and safety, each level of mobility must be given space within our transportation system.

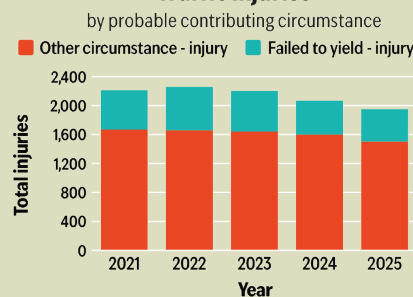
Key Metrics

Transit ridership and state funding



Source: Federal Transit Administration

Traffic injuries



Source: MO State Highway Patrol

added in 2025, including electric vehicle charging stations. Additionally, a \$10 million terminal apron expansion was completed in 2026, a down payment on a future terminal expansion project, which could add up to six more gates in the Roy Blunt Terminal.

Missouri's transit and active transportation systems face growing financial pressures. Missouri Public Transit Association reports Missouri as one of the **lowest per capita transit funders** in the nation, with continued funding reductions expected. State transit funding dropped from \$1.88 per person in 2023 to \$0.66 per person in 2026. These cuts strain City Utilities' ability to maintain service. Federal delays and shifting priorities

Springfield MSA population passes 500,000, commuters outside city limits have no public transit options, and travelers arriving at the airport only have access to private transportation. Transit ridership is growing but still lags behind pre-pandemic levels.

Within the city, transit to trail connections are lacking, and corridors to connect downtown to the existing Greenway trails have yet to be identified. Between disconnected Greenway segments, Springfield Bikeways route cyclists onto roads alongside vehicles, compromising the safety of the entire ride. 33 percent of ConnectSGF survey respondents live in households without a single car; an additional 29 percent have only one car. These

Thinking Beyond the Survival Budget

by John Schupbach



The cost of living in our region has been addressed in previous editions of the Community Focus Report and remains a central concern for everyone who calls this place home. While there are official measures of the standard of living, such as minimum wages and poverty line estimates, these standards continue to ignore the full picture of what is needed to sustain either a family or an individual. As we look ahead to the future of Springfield and the larger region, we must find creative and strategic ways to understand the true costs faced by everyone who lives here.

What does it take to survive?

Making ends meet may require different things for different families and individuals. Our region is unique, and we know that no two families or individuals experience the same challenges, have the same needs, or rely on the same support structures. There are ways to find out what it means to financially survive in our region. This will mean, however, that we must account for the real expenses people face, while also acknowledging how those expenses are different across the region.

What does it take to thrive?

After we account for the costs of our basic needs, what is left over? How is that money circulated back into our regional economy? It is important, in discussions of the cost of living and our quality of life, that we understand how the financial demands of our region can limit the region's full potential. Safety networks, economic markets, and public policy will always play a role, but how we build a region that thrives must go beyond building a region that survives.

Who is doing this already?

Estimating how far your money goes is not a new endeavor. We are lucky to be able to build on the work of others who are actively tackling this question.

- **Cost of Living Index:** The Council for Community and Economic Research helps us understand how far a single dollar can go.
- **ALICE Thresholds:** The United Way measures the strain of expenses on employed people who are just above the federal poverty line.
- **The Living Wage Calculator:** MIT publishes estimates of common costs people face, and what wage would be needed to cover those costs.

Explore more local research and data at cfophi.org.

Maile Auterson gives a tour of the SCG Market Garden during the Local Table Tour
Source: Community Partnership of the Ozarks

What Do We Know So Far?

There is already a wealth of information available publicly about some common costs faced by families and individuals. As you explore the tables below, think about how the unique experiences across the region may or may not align with these estimates. We can then take those observations to strategically craft new ways of understanding the difference between surviving and thriving in our region.

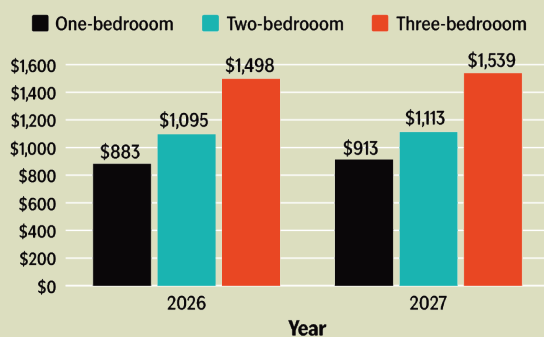
John Schupbach is the Data Research Analyst for Community Focus, housed in Ozarks Public Health Institute at Missouri State University. He uses a variety of analysis methods to think about complex questions in simple ways.



Big Rig Night
Source: Community Partnership of the Ozarks

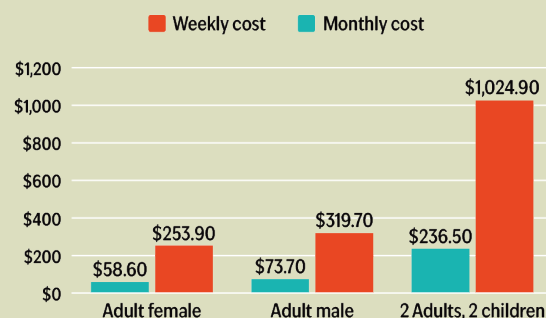
Fair market rental rates

Springfield, MO



Source: HUD

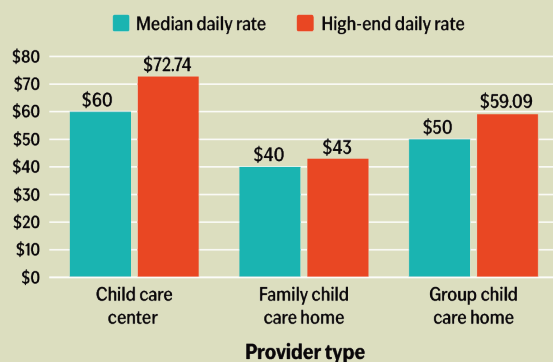
Estimated costs of groceries to meet minimum dietary needs



Source: FDA

Survey of the market rate of childcare

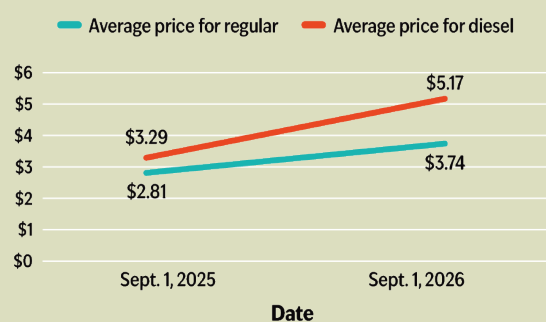
Greene County, MO



Source: MO DESE

Gas prices

Springfield, MO



Source: AAA

Where to Begin: Finding Solid Ground in a Flood of Information

by Dr. Jonathan Groves

People often think of “misinformation” as something that happens to them: They unknowingly fall prey to inaccurate, manipulative information in the flood of content on the online platforms they use every day.

If only it were that simple.

While scamsters and propagandists do muddy our information landscape, we ourselves play a role in how misinformation skews our understanding of the world. We often use cognitive shortcuts to avoid thinking deeply about hard, intractable problems, and we can be vulnerable to incorrect sources simply because those incomplete answers align with our previously held beliefs and biases.

For decades, media researchers have been considering information flows and their impact on the public. A framework developed by communication theorist David Berlo helps us think about the process:

Sender (Creator) >> Message >> Channel (Platform) >> Receiver (Audience)

The sender, message, and channel all contribute to how the audience receives, interprets, and understands the message. In the 20th century, this flow was largely seen as a one-way process, and historically, we as receivers could properly evaluate the small universe of information sources/senders within our purview. We read our local newspaper. We watched the 5 p.m. network news and the 10 p.m. newscast on our local station. Our information consumption was concentrated in manageable doses.

But the advent of the internet, social media, and interactive technologies have now made anyone with a smartphone a sender/creator with the potential to reach the world. Though this change has democratized content creation, it has also allowed many uninformed or incorrect opinions to surface as “news” and “information” on a round-the-clock basis. The volume and speed of today’s information ecosystem overwhelm even the most astute consumers.

Unfortunately, it is now up to us as the audience to recognize when we are engaging improperly with content that satisfies us emotionally but is factually wrong.



In his book “Thinking, Fast and Slow,” Nobel-winning psychologist Daniel Kahneman draws on his and others’ research to explain we more often rely on quick, intuitive thinking instead of deep, effortful work for our understanding and decision-making. That failure to slow down and ponder, to explore and test ideas, causes mistakes and misinformation to spread.

Since 2004, the Community Focus Report has collected and compiled data to explore community issues deeply and meaningfully. Dozens of local leaders from the business, nonprofit and government sectors contribute to the arduous work of identifying Blue Ribbons and Red Flags for a variety of categories in Springfield and Greene County. Each report takes months to compile.

The latest report has developed from a process of sifting, analyzing, and understanding that has evolved over more than two decades. It is the result of years of effortful learning, a dependable source of valid information with data to explore to help you slow down and make sense of the complexity of our community challenges and strengths.

For Springfield and Greene County, it is an invaluable starting point for improving the community.

Dr. Jonathan Groves is professor of communication at Drury University. From 2016 to 2024, he served as facilitator of the Community Focus Report for Springfield and Greene County.

Ways to avoid misinformation

Over the past decade, Dr. Jonathan Groves has presented to community groups about ways to navigate today’s complex information landscape.

Here are a few strategies compiled from the communication field to find accurate information amid the cacophony:

1. Examine the source and be wary of charismatic conversationalists. Do they practice an ethic of verification and perform original research or reporting? Do they reveal where they obtained the information from?
2. Before you share conclusions with others, examine the original data and documents yourself. Are the analyses presented supported by primary sources?
3. Recognize the trade-off between immediacy and accuracy. As news breaks, reporters are often still uncovering the facts, and in fast-moving situations, early reports are often incorrect or incomplete.
4. Compare and verify information across outlets. What are the factual points of agreement?
5. Identify the type of content you’re consuming, whether it’s news or opinion. Researchers and trained reporters gather facts. Commentators offer opinions.
6. View live talk shows skeptically – or avoid them altogether. Most shows are designed for entertainment rather than information, and most interviewers cannot catch every spoken error.

Collaboration for Community Action

by Janet Dankert

The Community Collaboratives initiative at Community Partnership of the Ozarks (CPO) is foundational to our mission and the creation of our organization. CPO was officially incorporated in 1998 through the merger of the Community Task Force and Ozarks Fighting Back. That initial Task Force provided the spark for what has grown into our Community Collaboratives—a proven framework bringing together stakeholders, community leaders, grassroots volunteers, service providers, and engaged citizens around specific focus areas to create meaningful, lasting change. Through this collective impact model, we work to build pathways that raise the standard of living and quality of life for everyone in Springfield/Greene County and the surrounding Ozarks region.

CPO has always served as a convener and a beacon of collaboration. We pride ourselves on being a trusted space where community members can come together across sectors to work together for our community. We provide the backbone support these initiatives require—offering dedicated staffing, meeting space, facilitation, technical expertise and assistance, and strategic guidance.

During the last three decades, our region has experienced rapid growth and some incredible changes. Alongside this growth, our Collaboratives have continually adapted to identify emerging needs and convene around these issues. Today, we have eight Collaboratives: Child Abuse and Neglect (CAN), Early Care, Education, Environment, Food, Housing, Interfaith, and Transportation. Guiding and connecting these efforts is our Council of Collaboratives, which ensures cross-sector communication and shared alignment across more than 240 participating organizations and thousands of annual volunteer hours.

Over the years, these groups have helped spark and support transformative local milestones, including identifying the need for and creation of Rare Breed and Jordan Valley Community Health Center, the annual Child Abuse and Neglect Go Blue campaign, and our region's designation as a Clean Cities coalition through the Department of Energy. This is not simply the work of CPO; it is the work of our entire



community coming together, demonstrating time and again that our collective impact will always be greater than what any single agency or person can accomplish alone.

The Community Focus Report has long been intertwined with the mission of our Collaboratives. For two decades, collaborative members have actively contributed subject-matter expertise to author report sections and drive action on the issues identified within them. As the Community Focus initiative has grown into its home in Ozarks Public Health Institute at Missouri State University, that partnership has entered an exciting new chapter. By joining our collaboratives with real-time data dashboards and indicator tracking, we can better understand our community's progress while measuring tangible outcomes. Together, we are taking collective action to address our region's most pressing Red Flags while solidifying and celebrating our community's many Blue Ribbons.

Janet Dankert is the President and CEO of the Community Partnership of the Ozarks. She leads CPO in its mission to build resilient families and strong neighborhoods through collaboration and resource coordination.



Springfield Ballet, celebrating 50 years in 2026, provides dance education for students as young as four years old to pre-professional dancers.

Source: Springfield Regional Arts Council

Public Health with a Community Focus

by Jaci McReynolds

Everyone deserves to live their healthiest life and thrive, but some people aren't doing as well as others. Lifestyle choices and health behaviors account for about thirty percent (30%) of these differences, but the physical environment in which people live, their access to health care and socioeconomic factors account for the other seventy percent (70%) of what influences their health.

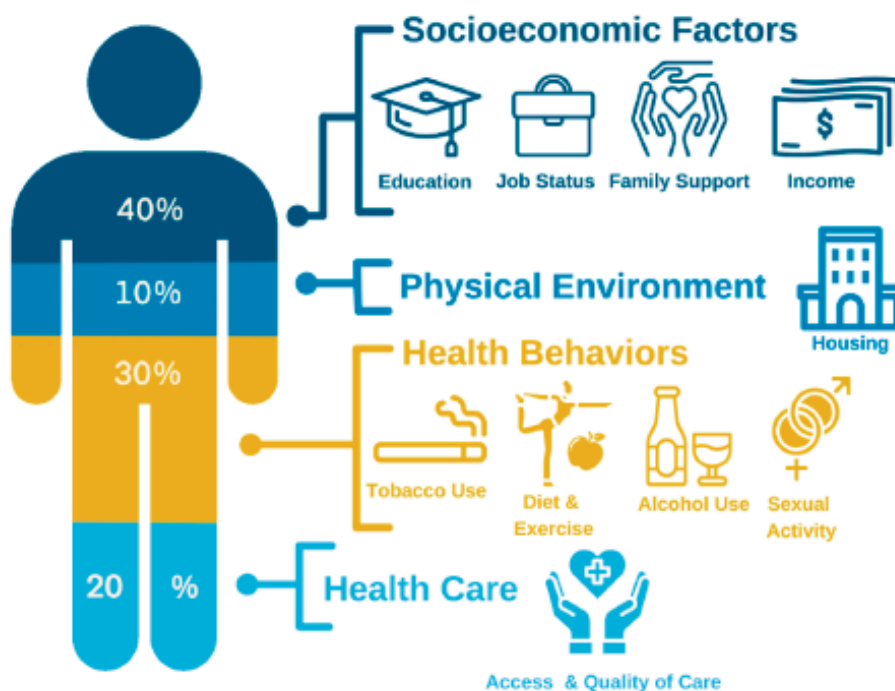
The health care system addresses individual health by treating illness and managing chronic disease through primary, specialty, emergency and hospital care. Public health looks at the health of the entire community and identifies and implements upstream interventions such as policies, mitigation, education and programs and services that will prevent disease, injury and death. Public health touches every one of us every day from assuring safe air, food and water to protecting us from diseases through handwashing and immunizations to preventing injuries through car seat installations, seat belt use, bicycle helmets, and poison prevention

to health promotion and education, and a myriad of other programs and services. But the public health system is much broader than state and local public health agencies. Schools, social services, civic organizations, local government, libraries, first responders, faith-based organizations, non-profits and other organizations also contribute. In fact, assuring health for everyone requires that we all work together to create the conditions in which each person can thrive. Charged with addressing public health issues across Missouri, Ozarks Public Health Institute

(OPHI) was formed by the Missouri State University Board of Governors in 2001 as a university-wide institute. OPHI serves as a convener, bringing together community members, academics, government, partners and stakeholders to facilitate collaboration around shared goals to improve public health for all Missourians. The experiences of people who live in our community are essential to this process. By embracing their ideas for change, working alongside them to co-design solutions and equipping them to lead change in their neighborhoods, we achieve more creative, relevant and sustainable solutions.

The Community Focus Report provides a framework for facilitating this work by identifying pressing needs through data analysis, community partner input and residents' lived experience. These "red flags" can then be addressed, leveraging our collective strength to shift them to successes, or "blue ribbons." By working together, guided by the framework of the Community Focus Report, we can collectively promote greater physical, mental, emotional, spiritual and social health for everyone, assuring them the opportunity to thrive. This is pure public health with a true community focus.

Jaci McReynolds is the Associate Director of Ozarks Public Health Institute at Missouri State University. She has worked in Missouri's public health system since 2002 and was instrumental in developing Missouri's Foundational Public Health Services (MO FPHS) model.



Factors that shape our health include socioeconomic conditions, physical environment, and health behaviors account for an estimated 70 percent of health outcomes, while clinical care accounts for about 30 percent. Source: UCLA



Learn more about the work of OPHI at missouristate.edu/ophi.

Community in Focus

Community in Focus: A New Partnership with Ozarks Public Broadcasting

Every two years, the Community Focus Report puts the same question to its contributing committees: what is working, and what needs our attention? The answers arrive as Blue Ribbons and Red Flags, written by folks who work in these sectors every day and by people who live with the results.

That model has carried this region for more than 20 years. It also meets the same limit every cycle. A printed page holds only so many words. Steering committee members spend months in conversation, and what reaches print is the distilled version. The story behind a Red Flag, the careful work that became a Blue Ribbon, and the thoughtful conversation about what to highlight gets compressed into a few paragraphs.

Beginning in January 2027, more of that conversation will have somewhere to go.

Community Focus and Ozarks Public Broadcasting (OPB) are partnering to produce *Community in Focus*, a monthly series.

Each episode explores a topic area, moving

through all 13: Arts and Culture, Business and Economic Development, Child Life, Citizen Participation, Community Health, Education, Faith, Food, Housing, Natural Environment, Public Order and Safety, Recreation, Sports and Leisure, and Transportation.

Each episode is a conversation between Community Focus Facilitator, Traci Nash, and two guests – one guest will be a subject matter expert whose work in the community connects to the episode focus and another guest will be a person with lived experience of the episode's topic.

Episodes will air on KSMU radio, on OPT HD and OPT WORLD television, on all major podcast platforms including YouTube, and on OPB websites. The show's format leaves room for short features and extended online segments

The partnership grew out of both organizations' mutual desire to extend the conversation beyond what the printed report can contain. We are thrilled to bring more story, data, and action to the community, to share our enthusiasm for this work with the broader community. We hope you'll stay tuned.

The first episode will air in January 2027. Schedules and episode details will be posted at optv.org and cfophi.org.



2026 Blue Ribbons & Red Flags by Topic



Arts and Culture

- Strong participation
- Cultural assets and networks
- Grassroots arts activity

Business & Economic Development

- Investing ahead of growth
- Resilient retention & expansion
- Investing in the capacity of people

Child Life: Early Childhood

- Child CARE WORKs
- Local momentum building around quality initiatives
- The Darr Family Foundation HUB at the O'Reilly Center for Hope

Citizen Participation

- Civic dialogue maturing, even amid disagreement
- Public participation moving community projects from vision to reality
- Neighborhood engagement

Community Health

- Mental health awareness & access
- Declining overdose deaths & increased naloxone saturation
- Overdose fatality review board

Education

- Educator pipeline is growing
- Institutional partnerships expand career and technical training
- Community commitment to student success



- Communication and coordination
- Sustainable, reliable, and diversified funding
- Arts education

- Persistent barriers to workforce participation
- Job quality and economic mobility
- Development predictability and community alignment

- The childcare subsidy crisis
- Early childhood remains a precarious field for workers and providers
- External factors

- Declining civic engagement
- Civic participation narrow and unresponsive
- Growth outpacing public trust in process

- Substance use
- Suicide mortality
- Heart health

- Social & economic barriers to learning
- Ongoing and emerging disruptions facing teaching and learning
- Greater volatility



Food

- Strong, diverse partner network
- Increased connection between farmers and consumers
- Statewide and regional alignment

Housing

- Heightened attention on housing quality
- Dynamic programs to support home ownership
- Collaboration

Natural Environment

- Environmental stewardship embedded in long-range planning
- A healthy natural environment supported by professional and volunteer efforts
- Rich ecosystem of decades-strong conservation and environmental educators serving all ages

Public Order & Safety

- Cross-agency collaboration
- Awareness, education, and response to mental health
- Enhanced technology use

Recreation, Sports, & Leisure

- Community collaboration
- Trails and connections
- Sports tourism

Transportation

- Successful transportation advocacy
- Recent trails & sidewalks expansion
- Springfield-Branson National Airport (SGF)

Faith

- Support for front-line workers & food security
- The Festival of Faiths & grassroots partnerships
- Crisis response & low-barrier aid

- Persistent areas of low access and food insecurity
- Funding cuts threatening local food organizations
- Civic and community infrastructure and participation

- Lack of accessible housing
- Lack of affordable housing
- Intersectionality of housing and poverty

- Antiquated residential trash collection model and legislative risk to solid waste/recycling
- Federal and state rollback of environmental protections, agency capacity, citizen participation and local control
- Extreme weather threatening life and infrastructure with growing frequency

- Gun-related and violent crime
- Substance use
- Staffing shortages

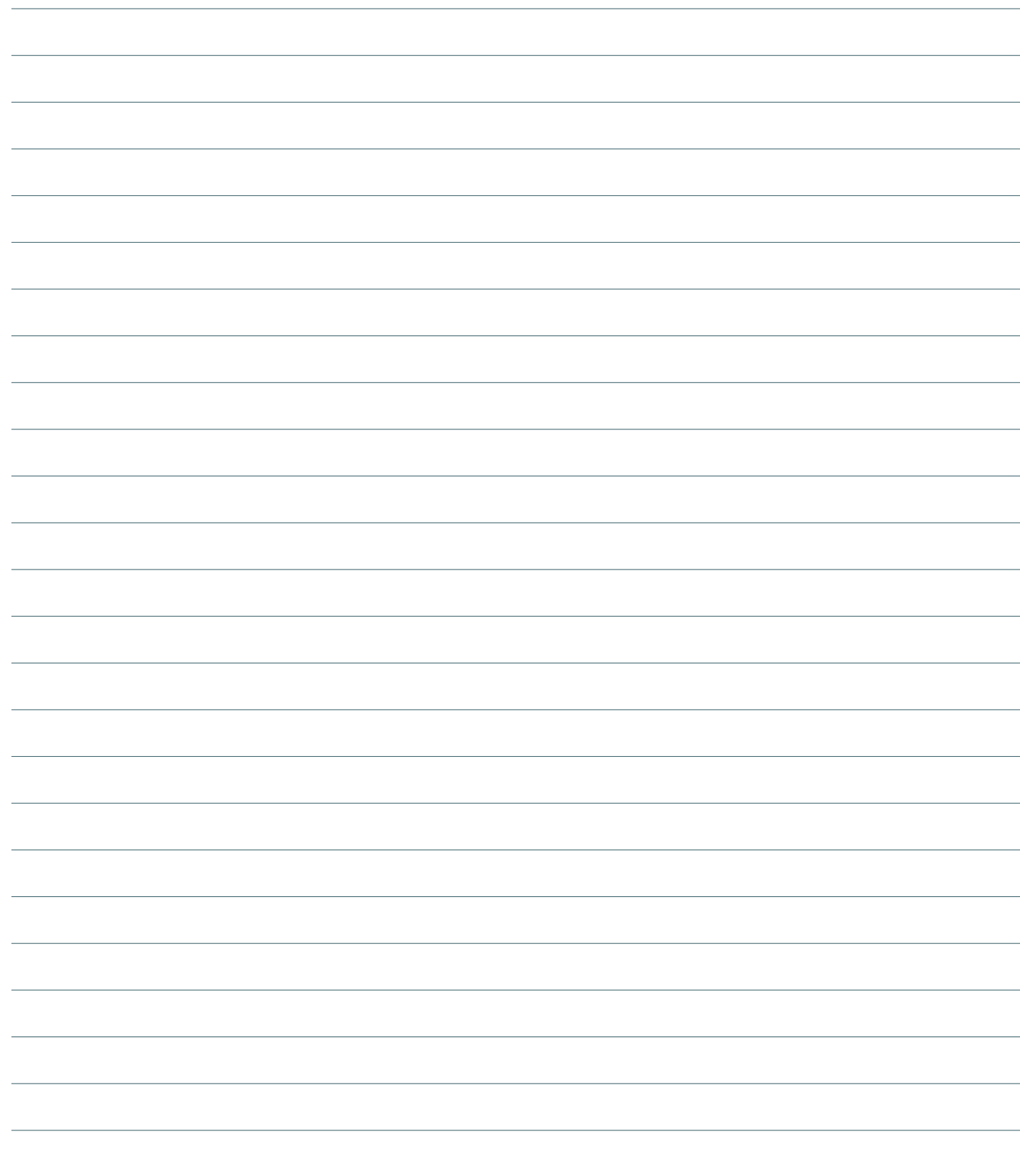
- Greenspace preservation
- Stable long-term funding source
- Indoor and event capacity

- Funding challenges
- Active transportation and transit network gaps
- Safety and comfort

Community highlights

Opportunities for growth

- Expanding community involvement and required resources
- Navigating polarization and building leadership resources
- Broadening participation and overcoming misunderstandings





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COMMUNITY **FOCUS**

A REPORT FOR THE
Springfield Ozarks Region

www.cfophi.org

