

Families First Discovery Pass Nomination

I. Cover Page

- **State Office:** New Jersey State Council on the Arts, within the New Jersey Department of State
- **Nominating Secretary of State:** Tahesha Way
- **Contact Information:** Corey Wolkenberg, Chief of Staff, corey.wolkenberg@sos.nj.gov
- **Program Title:** Families First Discovery Pass
- **Program Lead:** Allison Tratner, Executive Director, NJ State Council on the Arts
- **Program Description:** The Families First Discovery Pass program provides free or highly discounted admission to arts and history venues across New Jersey for families and individuals enrolled in state assistance programs, fostering equitable access to cultural experiences.
- **General Subject Area:** State heritage, public engagement, and social equity

II. Executive Summary

History The Families First Discovery Pass program was launched as a joint venture between the New Jersey State Council on the Arts and the New Jersey Historical Commission in partnership with the Departments of Human Services (DHS) and Health (DOH) and many of the best arts and historical organization across the state. This initiative was developed to provide families and individuals enrolled in state assistance programs with greater access to arts and history events, venues and programs statewide. The program aligns with New Jersey's commitment to equity and cultural inclusion, particularly for those benefiting from programs like SNAP, WFNJ, Child Care Subsidy, and WIC.

Designed to provide access to more than 85 participating arts and history organizations statewide, the program offers free or steeply discounted admission to museums, theaters, historic sites, workshops, festivals, and more. New Jersey families can utilize these benefits simply by presenting their Families First card or WIC Identification Folder.

Significance This initiative exemplifies innovation and equity in state government by helping to ensure that the state's arts and history experiences are accessible to low-income families, help cultural organizations engage new audiences, and to help contribute to the full scope of services aimed at strengthening families and communities

"We are proud to announce the Families First Discovery Pass because every New Jersey resident should have access to the rich history, arts, and cultural heritage of our state," said Secretary of State Tahesha Way. "These experiences improve our quality of life, strengthen our families and communities, and support lifelong learning."

The program leverages partnerships between state agencies and cultural organizations to maximize impact while utilizing state resources efficiently. It stands out as a replicable model for integrating public assistance with cultural engagement.

Impacts/Results

- **Access and Equity:** The program has increased accessibility to arts and history venues for many low-income families and individuals, providing opportunities that were previously unavailable
- **Engagement Growth:** Organizations have reported new and increased attendance, incorporation of economic access in equity plans, and re-examination and improvement of how their communities are being served.
- **Community Benefits:** Beneficiaries of the program have cited increased educational opportunities for children, improved family bonding experiences, and greater community pride.

Former Human Services Commissioner Carole Johnson emphasized the program's value: "Human Services' programs are here to provide opportunity and support to those in need and, with this initiative and partnership, our programs will now also open doors to our state's history and culture."

III. Supporting Materials

- **Testimonials:**
 - In 2024, the State Theatre reported: "Participating in this program allowed State Theatre New Jersey to welcome 1,817 Families First and WIC card holders in our community to over 70 live performances including Annie, Chicago: The Musical, and Mean Girls. At the heart of State Theatre's mission is removing economic barriers that prevent arts access and help to form life-long associations with the performing arts. During our 2023- 2024 season, we were able to subsidize more than \$119,922 in ticket costs for participating patrons. Without this program, many of our patrons would have little or no access to live performing arts."
 - In a 2023 information session, Grounds for Sculpture Executive Director Gary Garrido Schneider discussed how the Families First Discovery Pass program helped the organization work towards their Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion goals, while gaining thousands of new visitors through the program. In 2022, State Theatre New Jersey, with support from Bank of America, launched its DiscoveryTix Program, which allocates a set amount of \$10 tickets per performance for families enrolled in the Families First Discovery Pass program.
- **Data:** The program was launched in May 2019 with 85 participating organizations, and, as of November 2024, there are 175 participating organizations in 20 out of 21 counties.
- **Outreach:** To run the program, the division of labor between the partners efficiently capitalizes on existing work structures and networks. The State Arts Council communicates with participating cultural organizations, and actively enrolls new ones. The Department of Human Resources markets the program to over 450,000 families on state assistance, in both English and Spanish, via their website, direct mail, brochures, flyers, and posters. Both the Department of Human Services and the Department of

Health provide expertise on appropriate language as well as sensitive guidance for participating organization staff in welcoming audiences from this community. The Historical Commission provides additional support and marketing to the state's history organizations.

IV. Conclusion

The Families First Discovery Pass program demonstrates the power of collaboration and innovative public policy to make cultural experiences accessible to all. By connecting underserved populations with the arts and history, the program not only enriches individual lives but also strengthens New Jersey's cultural and social fabric. We respectfully nominate this impactful initiative for the NASS IDEAS Award to highlight its success and inspire similar programs nationwide.