San Francisco museums are “a collective village,” as Carol Tang puts it. While visitors come from all walks of life, the village faces challenges.

“Without diversity, these spaces only reinforce the only spaces of society,” Tang, the executive director of the Children’s Creativity Museum, told me. “People should feel like, in museums, their time matters, their families matter.”

While local museums don’t track visitors by race, museum professionals like Tang and city leaders say there is enough anecdotal evidence to suggest that San Francisco has a race problem when it comes to the diversity of its museum-going audience.

Based on community listening sessions they’ve held with local residents in recent years, the problem is rooted in accessibility.

Just to walk through the doors of the Exploratorium can cost a family of four (two adults and two kids) $140, and that’s only for general admission tickets. The same family visiting California Academy of Sciences on a weekday, daytime ticket costs more than $40 for an adult and $3 tickets to the California Academy of Sciences had the most admissions in 2022, according to a July report of a state-funded program — Museums for All — that SFMFA can be beneficial to both them and the community.

A 2018 evaluation of the program helped her in-duce her family to museums in the city and that, without the program, she would have had a harder time affording the experiences.

“Just being able to take your kids, take your family, to these museums exposes them to all things San Francisco has to offer,” she said. “It also shows that these things are for them as well, that they also belong in these spaces.”

“Ideas of feeling comfortable, affordable, and you’re not alone, that shouldn’t exist.”

Affleck is the executive di-rector of the Association of Children’s Museums. Like me, he’s Black, grew up in a low-income family, often. Arthur Affleck thinks about this often, that they also belong in museums.

“All of us deserve to have our spirits enriched by these spaces,” Affleck said. “Children can do that for children, and they can do that for adults.”

Some of the program’s cre-ators told me that despite SFMFA’s recent success and ongoing outreach efforts, there remain cultural institutions, which they declined to identify, that have yet to be convinced that SFMFA can be beneficial to both them and the community.

A 2018 evaluation of the national Museums for All ini-tiative showed that when mu-srooms make it possible for low-income people to visit, they see an increase in mem-bership sales and develop, deeper connections with the surrounding communities.

Based on the conversations I’ve had with officials who led San Francisco’s version of the pro-gram, the same is happening in the city.

“Museums are supposed to be places that bring people together,” Tang said. “If they aren’t doing that, then they shouldn’t exist.”

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Museums For All boosts diverse crowds

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Museums For All boosts diverse crowds

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