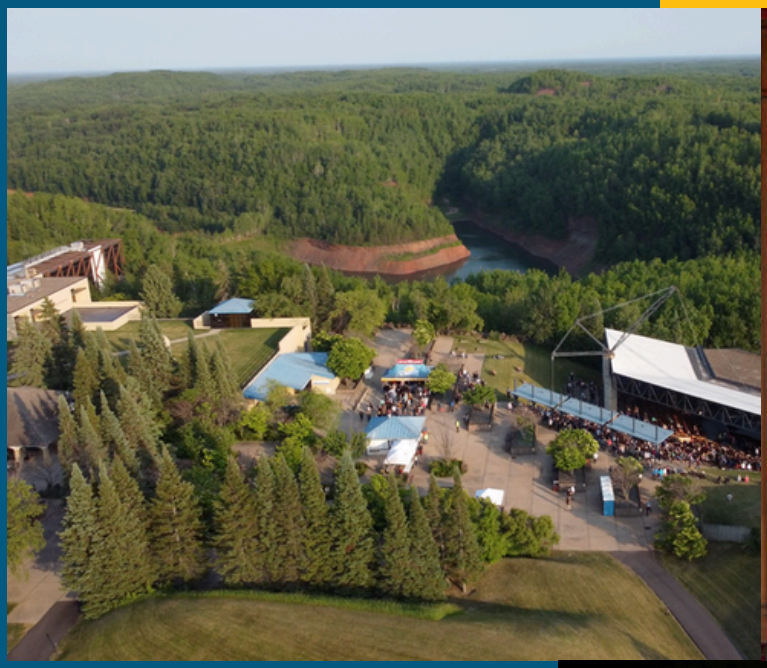
Minnesota Discovery Center

Fiscal Year
2026
July 1, 2025 – June 30, 2026





ANNUAL REPORT



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1005 Discovery Drive, Chisholm, MN



We bring the Minnesota Iron Range stories to life — past, present, and future.

Welcome To Our Nonprofit Organization!

A MESSAGE FROM OUR EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR



Dear Friends,

Fiscal Year 2026 was a year of momentum and connection at the Minnesota Discovery Center. Across our campus, we continued to build on what makes MDC special: a welcoming place where the stories of Minnesota's Iron Range are preserved, protected, shared, and continually being written. From our Museum and Research Center to the educational programs, community events, recreation opportunities, and family experiences we offer, MDC welcomed thousands of people through our doors this year.

I am especially proud of our reach. Our work is deeply rooted on the Iron Range, but its impact extends far beyond our campus. Families explore their genealogy through the Research Center. Students learn regional history through field trips, educational programs, and classroom visits. Global researchers utilize our online databases. Adventurers experience the area's unique landscape through our recreation programs. And community members gather here for celebrations, remembrances, and meaningful conversations.

FY2026 brought exciting growth. The continued expansion of Redhead MTB Park's trailhead and trail system strengthened our region as an outdoor recreation destination. Our events and venue rentals reached new audiences and generated important earned revenue. Making all Family Discovery Days free and launching the Discovery Fund helped expand access to learning for families and children across the Iron Range.

None of this happens without people. I am grateful for my committed MDC team, our Board of Directors, and the volunteers, donors, partners, sponsors, members, and visitors who believe in our mission. Our success is built on these relationships.

Looking ahead, I am thinking intentionally about MDC's long-term future: how we can build on more than four decades of history to imagine a better, brighter future for the next generation. That means strengthening our financial sustainability, caring for our collections, expanding access and belonging, and investing in our people and community.

Char Conger, Executive Director of the Minnesota Discovery Center

73
EMPLOYEES



30
VOLUNTEERS



743
FIELD TRIP STUDENTS



20,000+
ARTIFACTS PRESERVED AND PROTECTED



1,439,228
GENEALOGICAL RECORDS MAINTAINED



54%
INCREASE IN MEMBERSHIPS





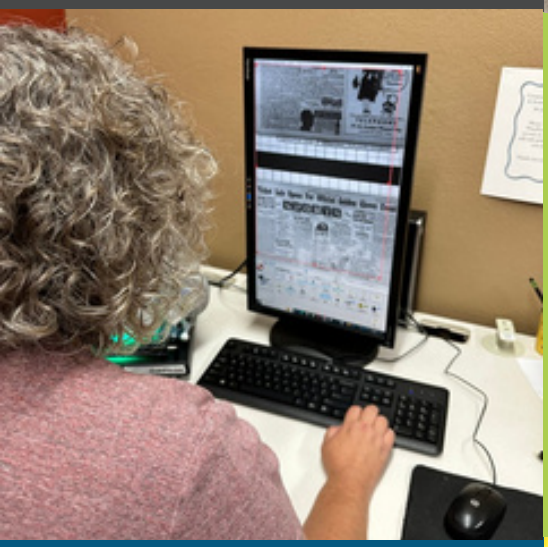
30,388
TOTAL VISITORS



53
SUMMER CAMPERS



15
INTERNATIONAL SPECIAL INTEREST GROUP TOURISTS



3
MAJOR RENOVATIONS UNDERWAY



27.72%
INCREASE IN ANNUAL REVENUE



4,400,000+
SOCIAL MEDIA VIEWS

THE MUSEUM

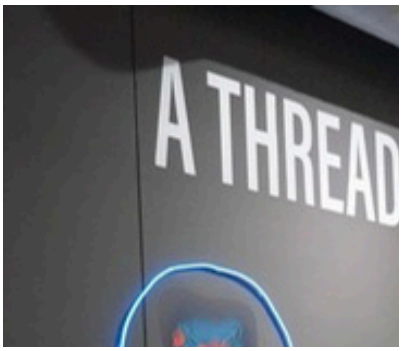
Traveling through time in 33,000 square feet

Under the direction of Museum & Research Director Allyse Freeman, MDC's exhibits were brought into the present in terms of narrative, scope, and relevance.

Building upon last fiscal year's implementation of pop-up exhibits (which are small, niche exhibits made in collaboration with community partners), Allyse launched *Dig Into History: Excavations at the Hibbing Workers Hall* (October 29, 2025) and *Range Fiber Arts Guild: Celebrating 50 Years of Creativity* (April 16, 2026). These pop-up exhibits spotlighted community members, highlighted Iron Range traditions, and gave people fresh reasons to come back to MDC on return visits.

However, the big story in the Museum was the much needed, long awaited, painstakingly researched Hall of Geology renovation, which was a three-year labor of love made possible by Minnesota Historical Society and Department of Iron Range Resources & Rehabilitation grants ($100,000 each). The Duluth-based firms BrownKnows Design and Šek Design Studio were hired to help fabricate the exhibit.

15
PERMANENT EXHIBITS





2
POP-UP EXHIBITS















1
MAJOR RENOVATION

A RENOVATION OF MAMMOTH SIZE

Updating the Hall of Geology's science and narrative

The renovations incorporated the many scientific advancements made since the Hall of Geology was originally created nearly five decades ago. Additionally, the exhibit's narrative was refined to focus specifically on Iron Range geology and paleontology rather than Minnesota broadly.

Allyse and the Museum team developed three guiding questions to shape their research: First, which geologic processes created our region's iron ore? Second, what kinds of life forms lived here in the past? Third, why does the Iron Range's landscape look the way it does today? By answering these questions, they demonstrated how life on the Iron Range today is inextricably connected to earth-shattering (literally) events that took place over 3 billion years ago.

The Great Oxygenation Event (≈2.8 billion years ago) saw the rise of cyanobacteria, single-celled organisms that use photosynthesis to create food. The byproduct (oxygen) reacted with dissolved iron to create hematite.

During the Cretaceous Era (≈145 to 66 million years ago), the Iron Range was an ancient seaway home to giant crocodiles, many-toothed Ichthyodectids, long-necked Plesiosaurs, feathery Dromaeosaurs, and more.



Dromaeosaur fossils have been found at the former Hill Annex Mine State Park!

There were once active volanoes on the Iron Range!

The Algoman Orogeny (≈2.5 billion years ago) was a mountain-building era involving continental collisions, compressions, and subductions, which resulted in the metamorphosis of rock and the formation of iron deposits.

The Pleistocene Epoch (≈2.6 million to 11,700 years ago) was one of multiple ice ages that scoured Minnesota's surface. During glaciation, bedrock was scraped away and sediment was deposited, forming today's 10,000+ lakes.

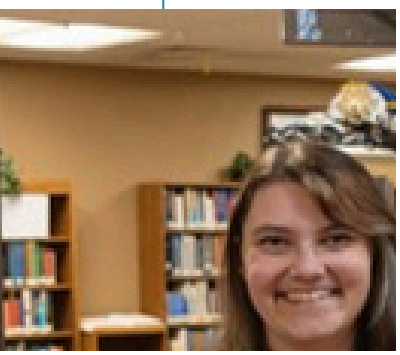
THE RESEARCH CENTER

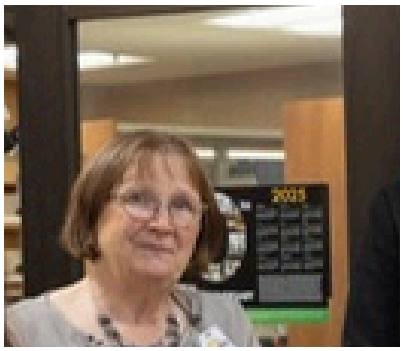
Preserving the history of the Iron Range for 46 years

Originally established in 1980, the Research Center is a key driver of MDC's mission. With 1.4 million+ records in its genealogical database (plus other archival materials), the Research Center is one of the largest collections of local research materials in the Midwest. People from all around the world rely on the Research Center's assistance.

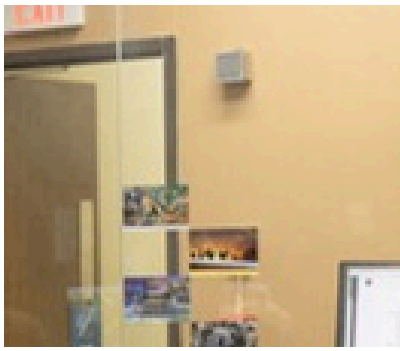
There are big changes on the horizon for the Research Center. In FY2025, the Minnesota Department of Education's Capital Project Fund granted MDC funds to transform the Research Center into a multi-purpose space outfitted with infrastructure that enhances access to critical work, health, and education services. The planning process took all of FY2026, and the renovations will be completed midway through FY2027.

MDC is also actively working on migrating the Research Center's digital archive to a more robust, user-friendly, and accessible system called PastPerfect. To prepare for the update, Collections Manager Cara Mooney processed 46,511 records. Uff-dah!





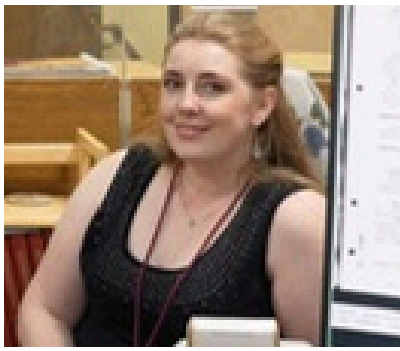
21
COUNTRIES SERVED

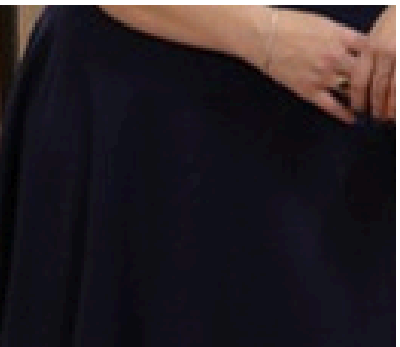


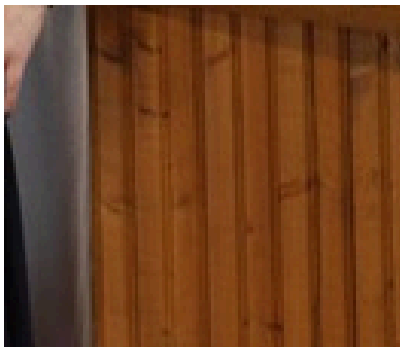




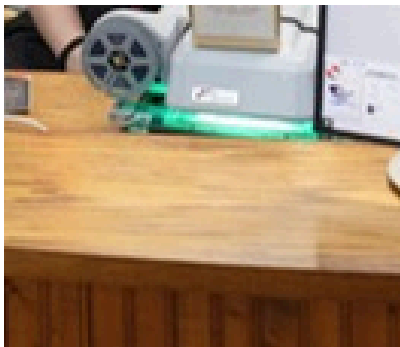
50
STATES SERVED







1,631
REQUESTS COMPLETED



ENCOURAGING LIFELONG LEARNING

Launching new, free, adult-centric educational programming



Along with renovation planning, another significant development happened within the Research Center in FY2026. Research Center Specialist Alex Montcalm took the initiative to conceptualize, propose, plan, and launch an entirely new educational program. Entitled *The Research Center Presents*, this program is intended to be an affordable (attendance is free), accessible form of continuing education for all Iron Rangers.



Presenters speak on a variety of subjects with local impact, such as labor history, political history, traditional arts, heritage crafts, genealogy, and more, telling Iron Range stories through their unique lenses. Four presentations took place during FY2026.

First, Tye Hiltunen (an MDC intern) presented his thesis, *Iron Women: Socialist Women of the Minnesota Iron Range*, explaining how women played a crucial role in shaping the area's historically socialist culture through labor militancy and challenging domestic gender roles.



Second, MDC's Allyse Freeman and Gary Kaunonen screened the in-house documentary, *Blue-Collar Battleground: The Iron Range Labor Story*, and answered questions about unions, strikes, protests, and busts during a follow-up Q&A. Third, Allyse presented a deep dive into the Hibbing 7 Strike (which spanned 1987-1991) to celebrate Women's History Month. Fourth, Alex gave a genealogy "how-to" presentation about how to start researching your family history.



THE EDUCATION DEPARTMENT

Fostering a love for learning in the next generation

The Education Department was busy during FY2026. Education & Recreation Manager Gary Kaunonen led seven Family Discovery Days (FDDs): Fossils X3!, Fiber Arts Fun, Small Things Matter, International Archaeology Day, Maamawai Giwii-Kikendamin/Together We Learn, Sled & Snowshoe Spectacular, and Summer Fun & Safety. All FDDs except one involved collaborations with outside organizations.

ECE Specialist Marie Sams launched a new family-centric program: Wild Roots, a small play-based learning community. It was an immediate favorite of guardians and their little ones (as was the Play Studio and MDC's new Bijou-style playground).

MDC held the 15th Annual Iron Range Science & Engineering Festival. While attendance was lower than previous years, this year's headliner—Maynard Okereke, the Hip Hop M.D.—was a hit with the students. Hawk Ridge Nature Preserve, the International Wolf Center, UMD's Traveling Planetarium, Iron Mosquitos FRC 5653, local geologist Kim Berry, and MDC's Allyse Freeman also presented.

576
IRSEF STUDENTS





863
FAMILY DISCOVERY DAY ATTENDEES















200
WILD ROOTS ATTENDEES

LAUNCHING THE DISCOVERY FUND

Ensuring access to quality programming for all Iron Range kids

Most of MDC's offerings are free or inexpensive; the profit made from costlier events (for example, concerts) is used to make those free and low-cost offerings possible. Keeping offerings economically accessible is essential to ensuring equitable access to quality educational and cultural programming, especially in a historically low-income region like the Iron Range. According to data from the U.S. Census Bureau, 12.8% of Iron Rangers live below the poverty line. The poverty rate for just kids (under 18) is a staggering 24.1%.

Toward the end of FY2026, MDC's leadership decided to take a step further to mitigate socioeconomic barriers affecting our service population: they launched the Discovery Fund, a scholarship program that enables all children in the Taconite Assistance Area to participate in field trips, summer camps, educational/cultural programs, classroom visits, and more.



MDC's 2026 Night of Discovery Gala (which technically takes place in FY2027 but warrants a mention here) will be the first major fundraising push for the Discovery Fund. All proceeds made from the Gala will directly aid local kids.





Those wishing to donate to the Fund may do so via the MDC website or by emailing Char to make arrangements.















THE RECREATION DEPARTMENT

Engaging locals and driving tourism via reclaimed mineland

In FY2026, Education & Recreation Manager Gary Kaunonen launched new outdoor interpretive recreation tours designed to get folks in touch with the Iron Range's unique natural resources. Plus, he added three new winter recreation offerings: downhill sledding, kicksledding, and on-campus snowshoeing.

Additionally, MDC teamed up with other local organizations (particularly the Department of Iron Range Resources & Rehabilitation, the City of Chisholm, Discover the Range, Ride the Range, and Iron Range Off-Road Cyclists) to promote year-round outdoor recreation on the Iron Range. The two main goals of this ongoing effort are to (a) help locals realize the amazing assets available to them and (b) to drive tourism to the area and thus diversify and boost the local economy.

The renovation of Redhead MTB Park (the addition of a pump track, a skills course, and flow trails) was big part of the outdoor recreation push. The Environment and Natural Resources Trust Fund and IRRR provided funds to made it possible.

149
INTERPRETIVE RECREATION TOUR PARTICIPANTS





82
SHUTTLE VAN RIDERS









253
EQUIPMENT RENTALS







GETTING FOLKS OUTSIDE AND ACTIVE

Recreation + Education = Success

Summer/Fall Rec

During the new outdoor interpretive recreation tours, participants hiked and biked through Redhead MTB Park, kayaked in the Glen Mine Pit Lake, walked along MDC's paved path, and shuttled past nearby mining sites while learning about the area's geology, labor history, limnology, immigrant culture, and industrial history (and admiring the landscape).

















Winter Rec

Folks were eager to brave our region's infamously frigid winter in the name of fun. Families enjoyed the new sledding hills. Kids tried snowshoeing for the first time during field trips and FDD: Sled & Snowshoe Spectacular. Teens and adults rented snowshoes to hike nearby trails, trek across our campus, and go on interpretive moonlight tours to the Glen Location.

COMMUNITY CULTURE

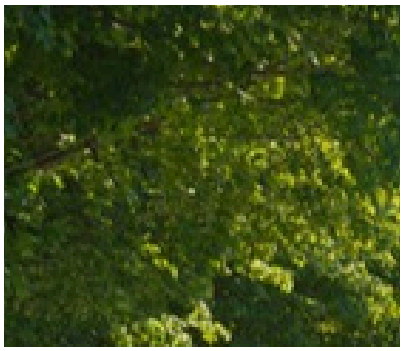
Cultivating connection, community, and cultural vitality

Here at MDC, we strive to be an essential gathering place at the heart of community life. We do our best to create affordable, accessible opportunities for people to learn, play, connect, celebrate, and build memories together. And without our community, we wouldn't—and couldn't— exist!

Important kid-centric programs like Youth Mental Health Night and Youth Mental Health Days couldn't happen without volunteers, sponsorships, and grants from the community. Cultural events like Bands, Brews, & BBQ couldn't be sustained if the community didn't show their support through attendance and food and beverage sales. We keep running social events like Thursday Night Trivia because we know Iron Rangers will brave the snow for the chance to connect with others.

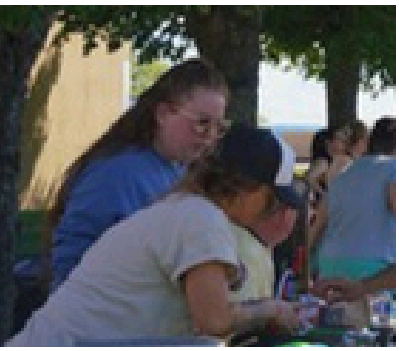
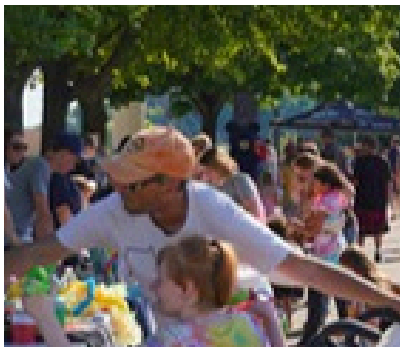
While tourists may visit once, our local community returns to us time and time again, supporting us so we can support them. Together, we grow. Together, we create meaning. Together, we tell Iron Range's stories for generations to come.

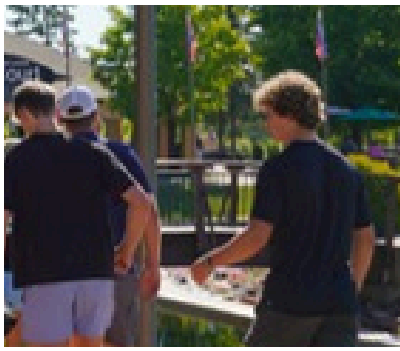
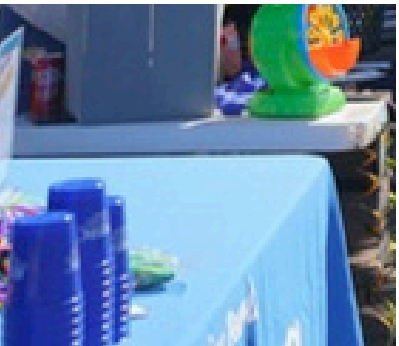
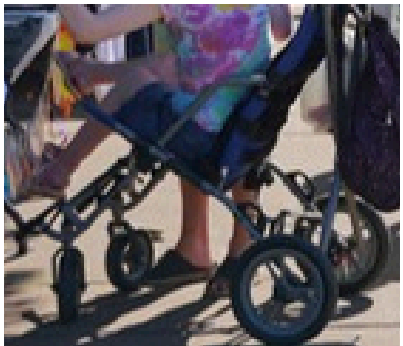
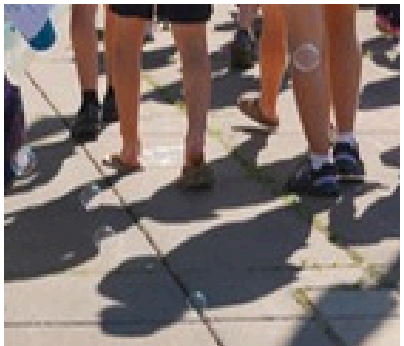
1,387
YOUTH MENTAL HEALTH NIGHT & DAYS ATTENDEES



911
BANDS, BREWS, & BBQ ATTENDEES

505
THURSDAY NIGHT TRIVIA ATTENDEES


EARNING MISSION-SUSTAINING REVENUE

Channeling event, venue, and catering profit into nonprofit work



In FY2026, we hosted 10 weddings for $16,332 in net profit. Our rental fees and associated costs tend to run lower than other nearby wedding venues, making weddings at MDC an affordable option for our clients and a profitable enterprise for us. The hard work of our Building & Grounds crew makes MDC a particularly beautiful (and thus attractive) venue.



In FY2026, we had 40 non-wedding venue rentals. People rent our spaces for a variety of reasons, the most common being family celebrations, holiday parties, and corporate meetings. We made $4,600 in net profit from non-wedding venue rentals. Clients frequently praise Catering & Events Director Katie Toumi and her team for their professionalism.



Some people don't know this, but MDC has its own in-house culinary team! It consists of Executive Chef Tom Head and Banquet/Catering Cooks AJ Loisel, Brock Smith, and Sam Ziebarth. During FY2026, we catered 128 events (in-house, external, onsite, and offsite) for a total $162,137 in net profit from food and beverage sales.



MDC's Summer Concert Series is a highly anticipated seasonal highlight on the Iron Range. The 2025 series had 3,447 attendees and made $60,701 in net profit, sponsorships included. The 2026 series had 4,091 attendees and made $137,000 in net profit, sponsorships included. (Note: these are per-series figures, not fiscal year figures.)



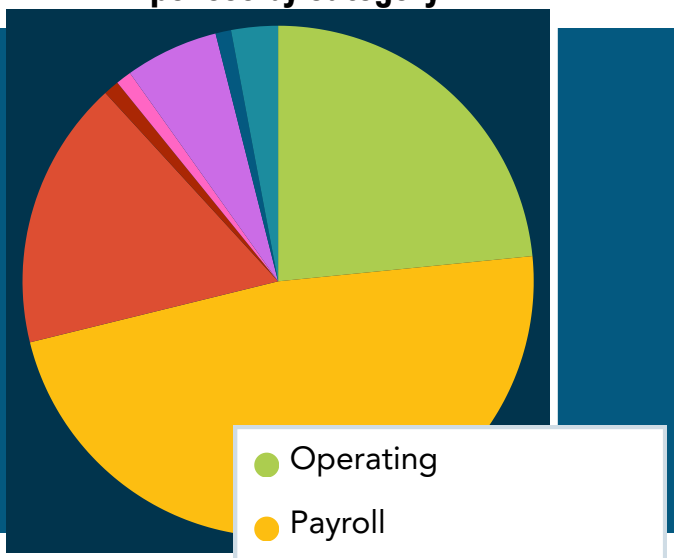
We hosted our first annual gala in FY2026. Entitled Night of Discovery, it took place on September 5, 2025, and it had 136 attendees. Funds were raised for general purposes—exhibit repair, program expenses, etc. After COGS, we raised $2,489. The second annual gala, which takes place in FY2027, will raise money for the Discovery Fund, our scholarship program for Iron Range youth.

Minnesota Discovery Center's

FISCAL YEAR 2026 FINANCIAL REPORT

In its capacity as a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization, the Minnesota Discovery Center operates a state-owned asset that has been dedicated to serving the people and preserving the stories of the Cuyuna, Mesabi, and Vermillion ranges. Our annual expenditures of roughly $3.142 million are supported through a blend of public funding, earned revenue, and private contributions. This support allows MDC to deliver programs and services that benefit people across our region, across the nation, and beyond.

Expenses by Category



Operating: 24%

Payroll: 49%

Capital Improvements: 17%

Museum/IRRC: <1%

Education: <1%

Concerts: 6%

Programs & Events: 1%

Grant Paid Programs: 3%

Rounded to the nearest whole number.

MDC receives operating support from the State of Minnesota through the Department of Iron Range Resources & Rehabilitation. Under our lease agreement, MDC receives operating funds, capital funds, and matching funds annually to provide critical services for the public, including the preservation and management of historical records and collections.

Private support also plays a vital role. Sponsorships, donations, and grants help fund educational programming, community events, outreach initiatives, and day-to-day operations. Additionally, earned revenue from admissions, memberships, events, Research Center services, venue rentals, catering services, bar services, equipment rentals, gift shop sales, and other activities helps sustain our operations and ensures that regional history remains accessible to the public.

In our fiscal year spanning July 2025 through June 2026, we saw growth in both memberships and other earned revenue, reflecting strong community support. Our financials will be audited in September 2026 by Esterbrooks. Based on preliminary audited results, there are no concerns with our FY2026 financial statements. Once finalized, the audited financials will be available on our website.

Statement of Activities

Category	Amount (in thousands)	Category	Amount (in thousands)
Support		**Operating Expenses**	
Grants	$2,825	Operating	$931
Donations & Sponsorships	$70	Payroll	$1,892
Other	$480	Capital Improvements	$675
Total Support	$3,375	Total Operating Expenses	$3,498
Revenue		**Program Expenses**	
Total Earned Revenue	$686	Museum/IRRC	$10
Total Support & Revenue	$4,061	Education	$12
		Concerts	$236
		Programs & Events	$23
		Grant Paid Programs	$126
		Total Program Expenses	$407
		Total Expenses	$3,905

Balance Sheet

Category	Amount (in millions)	Category	Amount (in millions)
Assets		**Liabilities & Equity**	
Cash	$1.4	Liabilities	$1
Fixed Assets	$4.4	Equity	$15
Other Assets	$10.1	Total Liabilities & Equities	$16
Total Assets	$16		

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