



Impact Report

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A Note From Lou Giramma, CEO



Dear Friends and Families:

We had always planned that 2020 would be a year like no other. It was to be the culmination of our VISION 2020 strategic plan, the transition to our new name and brand, and the emergence of a unified agency as we prepared to celebrate our 40th anniversary. We know too well that 2020 turned out to be a year like no other for different reasons. As I reflect on last year, I am amazed at what the agency accomplished in spite of the intense challenges with which we were presented. I am humbled by the commitment and hard work of every member of the Aspire Living & Learning community and hopeful for a brighter 2021.

The pandemic presented Aspire with an extraordinary set of challenges because of its unpredictable and volatile course. We have grieved the loss of community members. Our hearts ache for everyone who was lost as well as for their loved ones. We have had to pivot time and again: keeping everyone as safe as possible, developing new ways of delivering effective services both in homes and online, managing unpredictable revenue and expenses, and keeping everyone informed about what was happening. What we have learned is that we have a strong team — resilient, flexible, and creative — and as a result, the people we serve have continued to grow and develop.

In spite of the COVID-19 challenges, we were able to successfully complete major strategic initiatives. In the early fall, the agency reestablished itself with a new name and brand and emerged as Aspire Living & Learning. This change marked the completion of an important phase in the agency's journey. After close to 40 years of providing high-quality services and supports, the agency designed a vision for the future that includes having a transformational impact for those we serve as well as other stakeholders.

We are also very excited about a change in the agency-wide leadership structure, which is a major step toward the paradigm of a unified agency. The creation of an executive team solidifies the movement from a state-focused organizational structure to one that is service-focused and better able to insure high-quality service impact.

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I believe that our success during this time has been driven by our commitment to a unified vision to build strong communities by empowering individuals. Aspire embraces a vision where all employees, providers, and individuals we support have the opportunity to grow and develop into our best selves. Working together across all locations and service areas allows us to provide innovative, high-impact services delivered by a well-trained, professional workforce.

When you invest in Aspire Living & Learning, you join us on the journey. Thank you for all your support and we look forward to celebrating our 40th year with you in 2021.

Warm regards,
Lou Giramma, CEO

Board of Directors

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Joshua Mello
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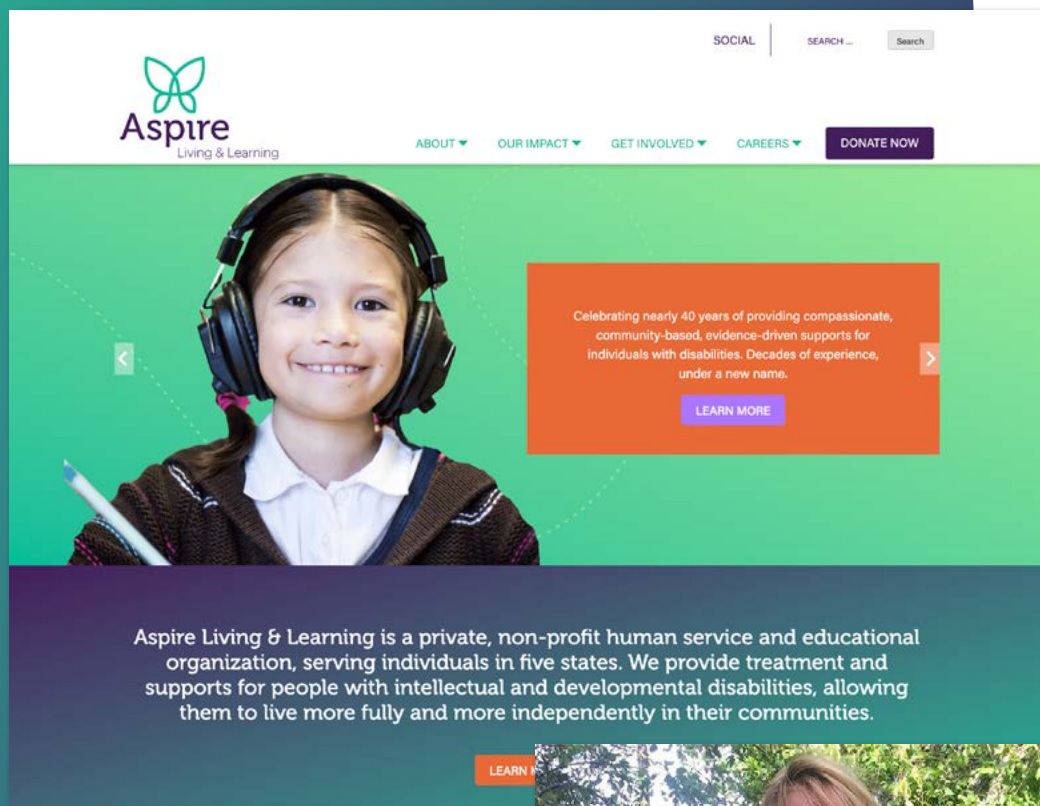
Photo: Lou with longtime Board Member and current Chair, Michael Chater, at the Aspire Living & Learning POW Center for Behavior Services in Maryland.

Spotlight on CEO Lou Giramma: Transformation and Impact

Lou Giramma joined Aspire Living & Learning in 2011 as the Massachusetts state director. In 2015 he was hired into the CEO role, where his focus on leadership and impact have helped transform the agency.

Lou's childhood in a close knit neighborhood in Rhode Island showed him the significance of community. "My parents immigrated from Italy. I grew up in this neighborhood with a family-run bakery. A guy named Peter worked there. He was part of the family business and part of the community. He had a developmental disability, but we never thought about that at the time. He just delivered the bread. It never occurred to me that he wouldn't or shouldn't be part of the community." Lou sees empowering the people we serve as vital to the development of strong communities. It's the essence of his vision for our work now and into the future.

Lou noticed early in his career that non-profit human service organizations didn't always develop effective leadership structures or the developmental opportunities necessary to meet each person where they are, whether they were persons served or employees. "Human services has often fallen down around good leadership and good management." What he saw too often were inconsistent services and uneven outcomes, with gaps in leadership. Since then, his service commitment has been to the field as well as the individuals we support.



Decades of Experience, Under a New Name

On September 1, 2020, and on the eve of its 40th anniversary, the agency formerly known as The Institute of Professional Practice, Inc. (IPPI) announced its new name to a virtual audience from across its five-state service area. Aspire Living & Learning's 1,200 employees, along with supported individuals, family, community partners, and stakeholders were invited to a [YouTube livestream](#) where agency CEO Lou Giramma made the big reveal.

The rebrand marked an important milestone for the agency. Just as our work creates opportunities for transformation, we too are transforming as an agency. We re-emerged under a new name. And as we look to the future, Aspire Living & Learning is an agency focused on impact — on the people we support and employ, on the communities where we live and work, and on the work of creating a more inclusive world.



**Watch Our Brand
Launch Video!**

Aspire

Living & Learning

Four Decades on the Cutting Edge of Disability Culture

In the 1970s and 1980s, states across New England woke up to the need for a seismic shift in the way they engaged with citizens living with intellectual and developmental disabilities. Before this era, it was sadly common practice to “warehouse” people with such disabilities in massive, poorly funded, poorly staffed institutions where placement was viewed as the end of the line. People relegated to state facilities were treated as if simply maintaining their existence, in those facilities, was the best life they could hope for.



As states grappled with the civil and human rights implications of these practices, a movement to close large state facilities swept the region, with a newfound focus on returning people living with disabilities to their communities — and restoring them to their rightful place as full members of those communities.

The transition was relatively swift, and more than a little chaotic. Communities were ill-equipped to reabsorb and welcome back their neighbors. Policymakers and caregivers were uncertain what real community inclusion looked like, where each individual would be fully connected to their communities yet also retain access to the health, social and educational services they might need to become their best selves.

The shift required new principles, new ways of thinking, new methods of care, new innovations in purpose and practice — in short order, it required an entirely new paradigm in disability culture.

The founding professionals of Aspire Living & Learning rose to meet this challenge.

For years already before the shift, a uniquely qualified group of experts had been working to provide community-based services for Vermont adults and children living with intellectual and developmental disabilities — services that received national recognition for excellence from the U.S. Department of Education and the

U.S. Department of Labor. With their groundbreaking expertise now in high demand, they first began to offer technical assistance and consultation to states across New England. Before long, they answered appeals from parent groups, government agencies, and people with disabilities themselves to evolve into an organization that could provide services directly to those who needed them.

From 1985 forward, Aspire Living & Learning's work in Vermont, New Hampshire, Connecticut, Massachusetts, and Maryland has set the standard for partnering with and helping to empower people with disabilities to grow into their best selves, fully engaged in the civic, work, and social life of their communities. Following the lead of the people we serve, Aspire Living & Learning has established a breadth of experience and an unmatched reputation for quality as a leader in the field.

As we embark on the next 40 years of service, we are committed to remaining at the leading edge of this work, pushing the envelope until we achieve a world in which bridges between “abled” and “disabled” are no longer needed. We work to break down this binary “us” and “them” thinking — and envision a society in which humanity recognizes itself as one.




Photos Previous Page: (Clockwise from top) Original location of Aspire Living & Learning, Airport Road, Berlin, VT; Vice Presidents George Durham (middle) and Kim Kelly along with Tim Sullivan (left) longtime NH State Director; Agency finance team circa 1990, (L to R: Sarah Fish, Sheila Forester, Mary Clifford, Sarah Miller); Lilian Jarvis, Payroll; Sue Spaulding, Accounts Payable.

This Page: (Top) New construction of the agency's headquarters in Berlin, Vermont. Circa 1997. (Bottom) Longtime President and Founder, Roger Strauss. Circa 2012.

Partnerships as a Path Forward

Elizabeth Dias is an intelligent 9-year-old girl who loves swimming and water parks. Like many children this past year, she's engaged in distance learning instead of attending school in person. It hasn't been easy, and she relies on her mom to help manage her time. Unlike most children, Elizabeth was diagnosed with autism as a toddler. Back then her parents worried that she might not achieve the kind of independence and ability she's showing today.



When Elizabeth started preschool at age 3, she struggled in the special education classroom. Her mom, Katherine Montoya, remembers that time: “My daughter was not listening. I saw my daughter was not progressing.”

Elizabeth’s challenges were many. “She was not toilet trained, first of all,” Katherine said. “She was nonverbal. She had a lot of self-harming behaviors, throwing herself on the ground, throwing herself against the wall, smashing her head on the floor.”

Elizabeth’s situation provoked a familiar feeling of anguish that many parents of children with autism experience. Like all parents, Katherine wanted her daughter to communicate, to



Like all parents, Katherine wanted her daughter to communicate, to learn, to be ready to take on the world.

learn, to be ready to take on the world. And like parents of children with special needs everywhere, Katherine had to become adept at treatment, advocacy, and special education law while juggling a full-time job and family life.

By the end of that year, the school district had referred Elizabeth and her family to the School Partnership Program with Aspire Living & Learning. School districts are under tremendous pressure, which forces them to juggle as vigorously as the parents of the students with autism. Aspire’s School Partnership Program is a solution that brings critical expertise to school districts, students, and their families in Connecticut and New Hampshire. For more than 20 years, Aspire has helped children with autism and other special needs get the right supports to thrive in their school and family environments. We utilize Applied Behavior Analysis, commonly shortened to ABA, a proven approach to address the challenges of autism.

Part of what makes ABA successful is early and intensive work by highly trained therapists and behavior analysts. Prior to certification, practitioners undergo extensive coursework, supervised practical work, and testing.

Increasingly, educators are seeking these credentials, but not every school district has the resources or student numbers to enable them to put a full ABA team in place.

The school district in Elizabeth’s town is a typical example of an instance where the School Partnership Program works well. Though the district sees the benefit of ABA services, it does not have the resources to build out a program itself,



We've found that open communication and teamwork are the key elements of our success.

so they've contracted with Aspire. Aspire staff work hand-in-hand with teachers, special educators, other services providers, administrators, and the family to support the student.

We've found that open communication and teamwork are key elements of our success. Megan Strand, one of Aspire's behavior analysts puts it this way: "Our program is one with the school, not just this company coming from the outside that nobody really knows."

The Aspire team consists of a behavior therapist for each student, as well as the behavior analysts who oversee the therapist's work. The behavior therapist works intensively one-to-one with the student on individualized strategies that enable them to learn, communicate, and interact throughout the school day.

Katie Dubowsky, who is also a behavior analyst in the program, describes the broad scope of supports: "We work on behavior, we work on language, we work on academics. It's very comprehensive."

Aspire operates in our own classroom spaces, and we support students across all the day's

activities as students move throughout the school. Our vision for every student is to learn alongside their peers as a full member of the school community.

When Elizabeth joined the program, the first priority was communication skills. Elizabeth started learning to communicate, at first with an application on an iPad and later with spoken language.

Katherine recalls: "The first year was very difficult, but as with everything, slow and steady wins the race. She started doing what she needed to do. I was very, very happy."

Over the course of three years, not only did Elizabeth learn to participate in classroom activities, her spoken language emerged and became fluent. "She won't stop talking now!" jokes Katherine. Elizabeth learned that when she was frustrated she could use words instead of tantrums to solve problems. Her increased communication and self-control enabled her to focus on academic skills. Once Elizabeth was responding to the typical rules and routines of school, she exited the School Partnership Program.

Story continues...

Up to the challenge!

Our educators continue to go above and beyond to creatively inspire and engage their students in today's challenging environment!



When COVID-19 lockdowns made in-person learning impossible, **Elissa Cunningham**, an occupational therapist at the Aspire Living & Learning Academy, worked with students remotely on mastering skills that promote successful learning.

We also work with families to empower them to bring home successful strategies. Elizabeth's mom Katherine says the communication from Aspire was excellent. "They were very good about getting her teacher trained [and] teaching the people at the day care and coming here to my house teaching me and my husband. They were very good about making sure that everyone involved in Elizabeth's life was aware of what her needs were and how to treat them."

Learning language can be a long and frustrating process for children with autism. Accelerating that growth is a huge motivator for the staff working with students in the program. Megan the behavioral analyst recalls an unforgettable moment when another student finally connected with her. "He made eye contact with me, said what he wanted, and I understood him. And just that moment of relief in his face knowing that somebody understood him." With intensive treatment most students make significant communication gains, opening doors to new friendships, and fuller participation at school and at home.

We're deeply grateful to the school districts and parents who entrust us to participate in the education of their children. During this difficult year, we've been so impressed by the continued teamwork that has allowed us to pivot our supports as needed for each student and school. Some students and their

therapists are working together online, while others have returned to in-person learning, and still others are following a hybrid model.

In the next year we will all be working hard to recover and return to our normal practices. The pandemic has taken its toll. In the meantime, education can't wait. Students like Elizabeth keep living and learning every day.



They were very good about making sure that everyone involved in Elizabeth's life was aware of what her needs were and how to treat them.



Revealing Our Heart

An Interview with Marilyn Nyanyo

We can't think of a person who represents the heart of Aspire Living & Learning better than Marilyn Nyanyo. Marilyn is a Program Manager at a staffed residence in Massachusetts. Marilyn was honored for her exceptional work during the COVID-19 pandemic at the MITC Software's national Celebrate Our Direct Support Professional Heroes event on Nov. 11, 2020.

The state of Massachusetts was hit hard by the pandemic last spring. When the stay-at-home orders were announced, a few of Marilyn's team members left their jobs to take care of their children or protect family members. But with Marilyn leading the way, most stayed on as essential workers. Helping the four women who live in the home became a marathon of calming fears, creating meaningful activities, and following evolving safety procedures. It also became a time that revealed the true heart of Aspire's direct support professionals.

“Once you're exposed you don't want to bring it home or spread it around. It was really, really tough...The individuals just didn't understand and they were feeling the pain too. Some days everyone was crying. We were really scared.”

When Marilyn's program had to quarantine, the staff worked 12 hours a day, but work didn't stop there. Marilyn lived at the house for a week at a time.

“Once you're exposed, you don't want to bring it home or spread it around. It was really, really tough,” Marilyn said. “The individuals just didn't

understand and they were feeling the pain too. Some days everyone was crying. We were really scared.”

With the stress and exhaustion from taking care of everyone, Marilyn and the staff had to dig deep to meet the new COVID-19 demands on top of their regular responsibilities. “When you love what you do, you go the extra mile,” she said.

Marilyn speaks highly of the support Aspire provided to staff. “The senior management and administration were very helpful to us,” she said. “They were coming in the morning bringing us coffee and volunteering to bring us dinner and lunch. Each day we had people coming around checking on us to see what we needed. And just to talk. I really appreciate that they were checking on us. You know you're not alone.”


At the beginning of the pandemic, the hospitals were not letting any non-hospital staff inside. One of the individuals Marilyn supports was being treated at the hospital, but the overwhelmed nurses could not address her behavioral needs. Ultimately, they allowed Marilyn inside to support the individual. She was the first non-hospital staff allowed in with a patient.

Seeing people in the COVID-19 ward was wrenching. “I just cried,” she said. “Those who were going through that, who didn't have anybody there for them, that really broke my heart.”

Story continues...

While it's been very difficult and heartbreaking at times, Marilyn realizes the pandemic has brought the staff closer to together. "It gave me a different perspective about how we relate to each other and how the team works. It gives you a sense of belonging and love for one another."

That feeling has its roots in Marilyn's experience as a part-time relief staff member when she was in college. She was planning a career in business and accounting, until she made those first connections to individuals with disabilities, and as a result, switched careers.



[The pandemic] gave me a different perspective about how we relate to each other and how the team works. It gives you a sense of belonging and love for one another.

"I have the heart [to want to] help people, and I really put myself into my work," she said. "I come from West Africa, in Ghana. You move from where you are to be with different people. It creates a family, they become your family."

At the time, she was working for more than one agency, but chose Aspire for a full-time job because of the teamwork she found. "I knew a lot of people who started as DSPs

and worked their way up. That inspired me," she said. She worked her way up, too, and became a shift supervisor and then the house manager.

Marilyn is clear on the commitment needed to do this work well. Beyond the pandemic, Marilyn is focused on empowering the four women living in the home. Each resident has her own staffing around the clock to help with communication and participation in all aspects of life. The women themselves interview and spend time with potential staff, so they have a real say in who works with them. This opportunity for input affords individuals a sense of choice and control which is important to ensuring a good match, leading to a better quality of life. Marilyn makes sure the relationship is a good fit right from the start.

Marilyn also prizes communication from the heart. She makes time to talk — with her own supervisor, with the staff, and with the four women they all support. This connection keeps everyone working together to identify and solve problems before they escalate. "We help each other," she said.

Marilyn knows that families are key too. Their engagement and support mean everything. "The families support us and ask us what we need. They thank us, and that is something money can't buy," she said. The paycheck is important, but the individuals and their achievements mean just as much. "Sometimes when

you are looking for work you are looking for the paycheck. In human services, you have to go above and beyond to teach individuals. And they teach you."

When Aspire Living & Learning launched its new name, Marilyn was thrilled. "We aspire to achieve something higher, to help individuals feel a sense of belonging in their community," she said. "Day by day, we are all living and learning. The individuals are learning, and I'm learning day by day too."

She feels great about a name that showcases what she does every day. We couldn't agree more.

Congratulations, Marilyn!



One Year Later

Last year, the world was moving so quickly, information was changing daily, and uncertainty and fear seemed pervasive. One year later, vaccine rollout is bringing hope, children are getting back into the classroom, businesses are opening, and Aspire Living & Learning is finding safe ways to help the people we support get back to doing the things that they love.

During great uncertainty, our community counted on us to continue providing extraordinary and uninterrupted support to families. And thanks to a community of supporters, dedicated employees and providers, and the generosity of donors, Aspire Living & Learning delivered.

- We sourced more personal protective equipment, required face-masks while at work, and exercised renewed precautions while working with the individuals we support.
- We provided educational resources and increased access to mental health care, crisis support counseling, and hazard pay so that employees and providers could remain physically and mentally healthy in order to provide excellent services.
- Aspire found innovative ways to provide uninterrupted supports and services to people who were sheltered at home.
- In partnership with Walgreens and CVS, we hosted COVID-19 vaccine clinics and provided opportunities for employees, providers and supported individuals to be vaccinated.

Thank you for part in supporting these life-saving efforts.

Keeping up with Kim

From surviving cancer to cruising the Caribbean, Kim Florio is determined to lead a full life.





Kim Florio wants the world to know that she's the best chemo patient ever. In fact, if they gave awards for that sort of thing, Kim is confident she would win.

When Kim received a cancer diagnosis several years ago, it was a big relief. Kim first came to Aspire Living & Learning with painful skin growths all over her body. Her doctors had been unable to diagnose or treat her successfully. After getting support, Kim found the right doctor.

"I was diagnosed with skin lymphoma," Kim said. "My doctor said I had to do chemo therapy for the rest of my life."

Like all of us, Kim has had to limit her activities since the pandemic. But that hasn't dimmed her enthusiasm or her social life.

She finally had an answer and the right treatment to manage her condition. Since then, she has gone to the hospital every week, sitting in the infusion chair, and enjoying a few snacks and laughs with the nurses.

"I overcome things like going to chemo and come out like a champ," Kim said. "I do wonderful things like bingo, Pizza with Jesus, and Voices of Us, and vacations."

Pizza with Jesus is a local church group, and Voices of Us is a group of self-advocates that meet to socialize and learn how to make their voices heard. Last year they went to the Maryland State House to meet with legislators. Her vacations included a trip to North Carolina to see family. She took a cruise to the Bahamas and loved shopping and going out to eat on the ship. At home, her favorite restaurant is Red Lobster. If you hear that Kim eats with gusto, that is true!

While Kim has a love for life, her life has not been without difficulties. "When I was born with both hip sockets out of place, I was in so much pain, but I overcame all obstacles that came along with the surgery. My parents were there to support me through the process. I lived with my parents until they passed away. When my parents passed away years ago, a friend of my parents took care of me for about three to four years."

It was then that Kim met Sandy Chilton, Aspire Living & Learning's Maryland Senior Director of Program Operations. Sandy could see that Kim's circumstances were challenging and her health needs unmet. It took some persistence to navigate the system, but eventually, as Kim



I overcome things like going to chemo and come out like a champ.

puts it, “another life began [with] this wonderful agency that took interest in my well-being.”

From there, her health and social life blossomed. Kim moved to the staffed residence Emmorton Road. “I lived there for several years with two other individuals. While at Emmorton I was able to make new friends,” she said. Kim now lives in an apartment with one roommate and direct support professional support. “After moving to Eastview Terrace, I resumed normal relationships with my niece and nephew. I communicate with my nephew on a daily basis. When my nephew comes to visit it makes me smile.”

Kim and her roommate make their own decisions and split up responsibilities around the apartment. “It has been a wonderful experience living and learning at home,” she said. Their direct support professionals, Marian, Maria, and Nikki, help with their goals, transportation, shopping, and budgeting. Kim has gotten to know their families, too.

Like all of us, Kim has had to limit her activities since the pandemic. But that hasn’t dimmed her enthusiasm or her social life. She’s contin-


uously emailing, texting, posting on Facebook, and FaceTiming her family and friends. She’s already planning for the Ultimate Feast at Red Lobster as soon as the pandemic is over.

Just before the pandemic, Kim had to have surgery, and serious complications meant she ended up with a surgical fix that she didn’t really want. Even as the pandemic was bearing down, Kim advocated with her doctor for a second surgery to address what had happened.

They did it, and she recovered beautifully. It’s no surprise then that Kim recently won an award from the agency for “most determined.”

Kim inspires us every day with her joy and resilience. “I’m happy because I got my nephew, my niece, my roommate, Maria, (and) Marian. I stay happy all the time. I don’t sit down and get sad and depressed.”

Her advice for others going through a hard time? “Keep doing what you’re doing. Don’t give up.”



91% of revenue is used directly to provide programs and services to people we serve, 9% goes to administrative support.



No Walls

Removing artificial barriers, gives individuals room to soar.

If you were watching the series “The Crown” last fall, you probably saw the story of Queen Elizabeth’s cousins with disabilities. Sisters Katherine and Nerissa both had intellectual disabilities and lived at home with their family.

In 1941, at the ages of 15 and 22, they and several of their cousins were suddenly and permanently institutionalized. We can only speculate about the family’s motivation for this choice, but it was not unusual for that time, in neither the United Kingdom nor in the United States. “The Crown” imagines that their mother felt she had to do it to preserve confidence in the monarchy at a critical time during World War II.

The episode is a stark reminder of the shockingly low expectations placed on the lives of individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities in the past. In a time of crisis, the contributions these young women might have made were cut short. While our understanding and support of people with intellectual and developmental disabilities has come a long way from that era, our culture is still haunted by low expectations. As we face our own time of crisis, there is the risk of losing hard-won gains, but also the opportunity to recognize the resilience and potential of people with intellectual and developmental disabilities.



The pandemic brought a sudden and profound change to the delivery of day supports in our Massachusetts operations.

The pandemic has had an outsized impact on people with these disabilities. They have died at a rate two to three times higher than the general population. There are not enough direct support professionals in the workforce to meet the need, and the pandemic has only worsened the situation. With fewer professionals in the workforce, individuals have a smaller pool of professionals to choose from, resulting in even

less control over their supports. And, individuals across the country have lost their right to see their families and participate in activities still available to the general public. Disability advocates know that it's far too easy for society to take a step backward.

However, at Aspire, the day program model is taking a step forward.

The pandemic brought a sudden and profound change to the delivery of day supports in our Massachusetts operations. There, the service system relies heavily on congregate settings like group homes and center-based day programs. Access to flexible community supports is determined in large part by each state's rules and how funding is structured. Staffing ratios, funding levels, and licensing requirements are built on these models.

Prior to the pandemic, the Electric Ave. community-based day service program in Fitchburg, Mass., supported more than 100 people. Most had been supported by us for years, and the majority are also residents of our staffed homes. But the reality of this program was that too often people were doing the same old things, or waiting around for the next activity, or transitioning needlessly multiple times per day just to access a limited range of outings.

Story continues...



Douglas controls his own schedule of community activities, he doesn't have to tell you things have changed—he looks great, and happy.

The challenges faced by individuals supported at Electric Ave. are varied and significant: severe communication impairments, unsafe behaviors, deafness/blindness, and complex medical needs. Empowering individuals with this level of disability is a constant struggle against low expectations. In 2019, recognizing that we needed to expect more from our services and from the individuals we support, we began the transformation of the services housed at Electric Ave. to the No Walls model.

Under the No Walls model, participants stopped coming to Electric Ave. Instead, they began choosing what activities to do and when, leaving from their home and traveling directly to the activity site. In 2019, four individuals who were living in one of our staffed residences piloted the program. Before No Walls, Aspire had created a self-fulfilling prophecy for participants — staff assumed the individuals wouldn't know how to participate safely in new community activities, so they rarely tried to expand their horizons.

As No Walls began, people were apprehensive about the unknown, but the benefits of the change were quickly apparent. The four men all experience serious behavioral challenges, though it was obvious from their responses that many of the new activities were a joyful experience. They traveled all over Massachusetts; hiking, fishing, swimming, and visiting tourist sites. They checked out batting cages, bowling, and apple picking. One of them, Jamie, has tried more than 15 new activities, and it turns out he's game for just about anything.

Jamie doesn't speak, but his smile lets you know when he likes something. Jamie struggles with pica, an eating disorder, so his trips have to be carefully planned with an experienced direct support professional. But with that effort, Jamie's been able to discover a lot more of his community. No Walls has even helped Jamie cope with the loss of his devoted parents. Before they passed away, they visited regularly and brought dinners and gifts for the whole house. No Walls has helped Jamie find new experiences to fill the space created by their loss.

Story continues...

Direct Support Professionals are Heroes!!



We celebrated Direct Support Professional Appreciation Day on Sept. 17. Pictured above left are Massachusetts direct support professionals being surprised with balloons, backpacks, and a goodie platter. Above right is Stephen Reyes, a peer support specialist in Maryland, posing with a certificate of appreciation. We awarded this to Stephen as a sign of our grateful recognition of his service and support to individuals in our day options program.

“When a person knows what they like to do, they can connect with people who share their interests.”



Jamie's housemate Douglas just wants to be one of the guys, whether that's at the music store, a bar, a concert, or hanging with friends. Douglas loves to talk, but he didn't get the choices he wanted at Electric Ave. As a result, he was often disruptive and angry, placing himself and others at risk. Now that Douglas controls his own schedule of community activities, he doesn't have to tell you things have changed — he looks great and appears happy. He's giving back too, volunteering for Meals on Wheels and watering trees at a veterans home.

As this transformation unfolded, many of the direct support professionals still working at Electric Ave. were curious but skeptical. A second staff residence made the shift to No Walls in early 2020.

Just as people were starting to warm up to this new approach, the pandemic hit. What followed may have been the best thing to happen to the day program. For safety, the Electric Ave. day program was closed and repurposed as a COVID-19 recovery center. Suddenly everyone was home. Looking back, it was a precarious moment.

One possible outcome was to completely lock down the residences for the duration, as nursing homes have (which is how everyone started out). Little was known about what was safe to do in this new world. But as mask use and social distancing rules were clarified and stay-at-home orders eased, the opportunities of the situation emerged. Everyone was home, but this meant everyone was in effect participating in something akin to No Walls.

It quickly became obvious that individuals were really enjoying not having to wait around or make all those transitions like they did previously. Even though the pandemic required staying outdoors in the community, the power of these experiences substantially improved individuals' quality of life. The evidence can be seen in the reduction of behavioral incidents and the pride individuals take in their new choices.

The No Walls model of day supports has changed expectations. From the expectation that individuals have a right to experience the wider community comes the expectation that individuals will participate in community life. When a person knows what they like to do, they can connect with people who share their interests. They become a part of things — and they're missed if they don't show up.

Story continues...

Participation leads to the expectation of contribution: as a volunteer, as an active member, as a supportive friend. It also leads to the recognition that the expectations of employment and civic engagement — to support oneself and to help run one's community — are not solely reserved for those without disabilities.

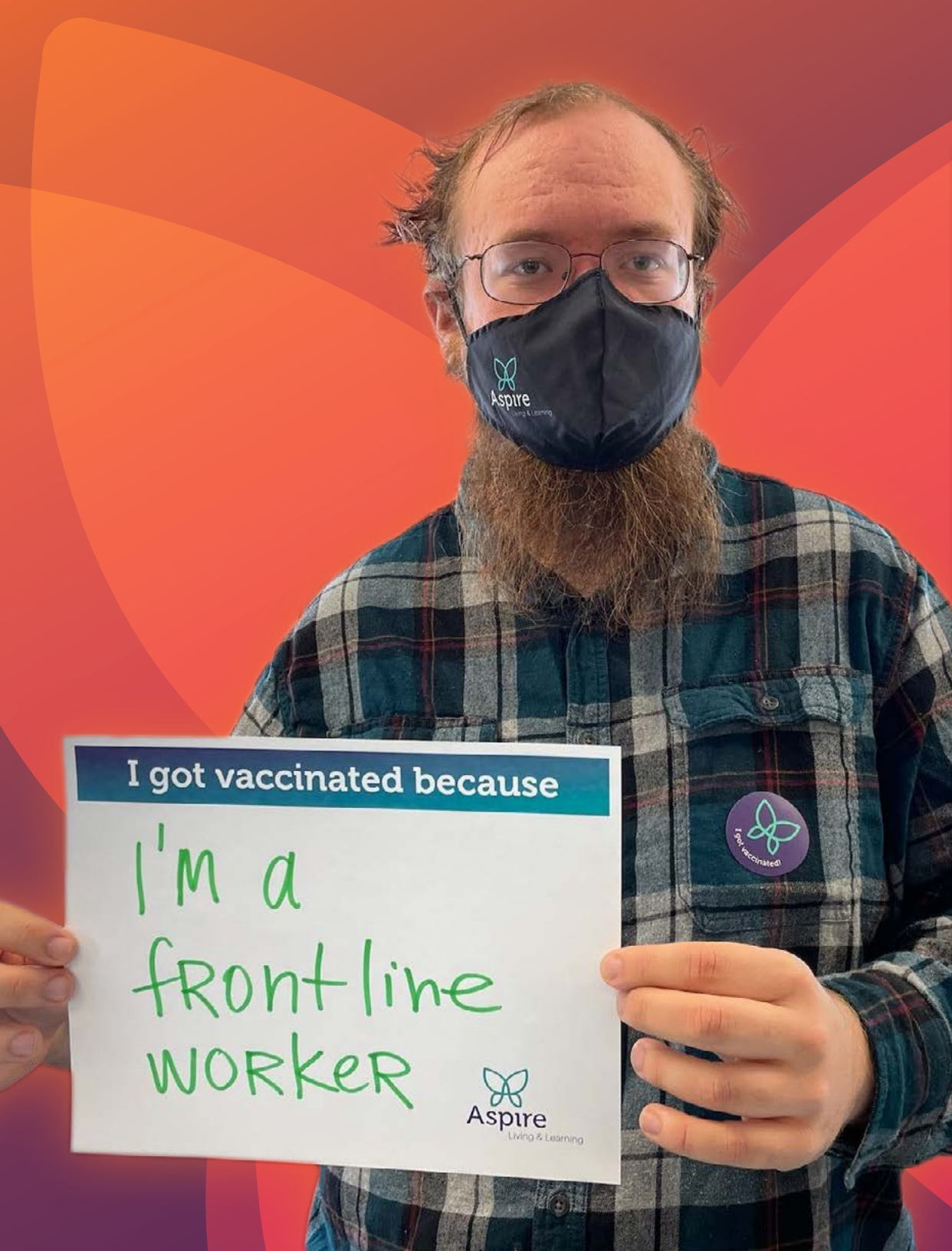
There is no single path to No Walls. Maybe it is connecting with a neighbor on a walk and ending up with a job doing yardwork or walking their dogs. Maybe after trying a bunch of new things, it's discovering a passion for cars that leads to a job at the local dealership. Or perhaps it's meeting a first true love when visiting the statehouse to tell your story at a public hearing.

While vaccinations have provided a light in the distance, we still don't know when the pandemic will end. What we do know is that whenever that happens, there will be no accepting low expectations. Many individuals will never return to Electric Ave., because No Walls has given them different expectations for their own lives — and for us. Those who do return will come in a different way than they did before the pandemic, perhaps for a pit stop, a meet-up, or to check out an adaptive class.

We are excited to empower all those we support to pursue a great life, wherever that takes them.

Expectations...to support oneself and to help run one's community are not solely reserved for those without disabilities.






Essential and Committed

While we were sheltering in place, Tristan Aho was clocking in.

Much has been said about the isolation of the pandemic: how we're staying home, binge watching television, baking bread, and making friends with birds. We're also realizing that the ability to live safely is made possible by the uninterrupted labor of those who care for others, and also those who stock, deliver, clerk, and clean at grocery stores, hardware stores, restaurants, and online marketplaces. They have been called heroes, and they are. These are our quiet neighbors and devoted family members, with and without disabilities. The consciousness we now have about how important these workers are to keeping everyone going — how truly interdependent we all are — is an awareness that is long overdue.

Tristan Aho is one of those essential workers. He is a maintenance worker at a superstore in Manchester, N.H., and has worked three days a week throughout the pandemic. We worried about him at the beginning — what if he was exposed, what if he exposed the direct support professionals who help him? Tristan was adamant: his job was important and he was going to keep doing it. He convinced us, and he was right. Tristan appreciates the help he gets, but he's much more concerned with the help he gives.



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Tristan enjoys completing maintenance tasks, especially when a display case needs some disassembly and putting back together to clean completely. He had to put maintenance tasks on the back burner for a while when the pandemic required a switch to mostly disinfection tasks. Even though he didn't enjoy it as much, Tristan

pitched in and switched gears to help out. Tristan appreciates the raise and the hazard pay he's received this past year, so that makes the change in responsibilities easier. He never hesitates to go to work because, as he puts it, "It gets me out of the house!"

Tristan is employed competitively, meaning his wages and benefits are similar to those without disabilities performing the same work, and he is fully integrated with coworkers without disabilities. Tristan has a direct support professional on standby in case he needs support. He's planning to stay with the superstore for the long haul to learn different roles and advance within the company. While he doesn't feel ready to take on full-time employment just yet, he's confident that in the future he'll be supporting himself. "I appreciate that the government spends money on me, but there are others who need it too," he says.

Work isn't Tristan's only passion. After difficult teenage years, he found a love for music. "Music really saved my life," he said. Tristan builds, repairs, and plays guitar. Before the pandemic, he'd been playing with friends in public, in particular rocking out at the Shaskeen Pub in Manchester, but also volunteering his time to play for others at a program for the elderly. Tristan volunteered and also worked at the Manchester Community Music School. For a time, he had a small guitar repair business.

Story continues...



I like that my parents can visit me, but also that they are an hour away.

Losing in-person musicianship has been rough, but he's found a technology solution that helps him jam online. Tristan's direct support professional is also a musician, and they rock out sometimes too.

Getting through this year has drawn on Tristan's other source of joy — humor. He is all about puns. If you want to get a hardy laugh (or a good groan), check out his Facebook page, Pun God. He has more than 7,000 followers and is looking forward to putting some more time into posting there. "Humor is the other thing that's really saved me," he said.

It's not surprising that Tristan is an essential worker. His civic spirit is strong. Beyond his musical gigs, he volunteered at the Ukrainian Club (he claims to be the only non-Ukrainian member) after a friend mentioned that they needed some help. Recently, he's been thinking about how to help people experiencing homelessness by taking advantage of the great sales they have at the superstore. "I see that some days we have shoes for \$5 or a bottle of Advil for \$1. I'm already here and can hop on it. The homeless could really use them." He's spent his own money to give blankets and shoes to those

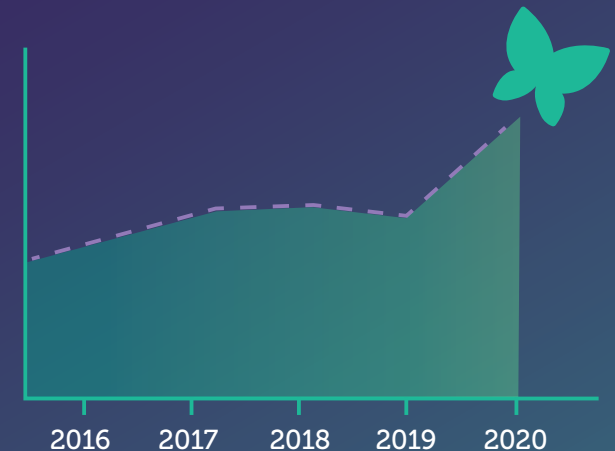
in need and he's sure there is a way to combine his efforts with others looking to make a difference.

Tristan is deeply engaged with his community in his chosen city of Manchester, even though he grew up in rural New Hampshire. "I like that my parents can visit me, but also that they are an hour away," he said. Tristan has a roommate who is a shared living provider through Aspire. "I don't need someone to limit me. I want someone to be available when I need them. I get stressed and I have to vent to someone who really understands me."

Tristan is planning for more independence in the future. "I'm going to have my own apartment. I want to get married someday and adopt a child," he said. When asked why adoption, he says, "There are so many kids out there who need families."

Some essential workers don't like being called heroes, and Tristan doesn't see himself as one either. What we see is a thoughtful, hard-working guy who makes a difference. Thank you Tristan. People like you make the world work for all of us.

Our impact is on the rise!



In just 5 years, the agency has seen a 13% growth. This means we grew our programs and supported more people.



Aspire

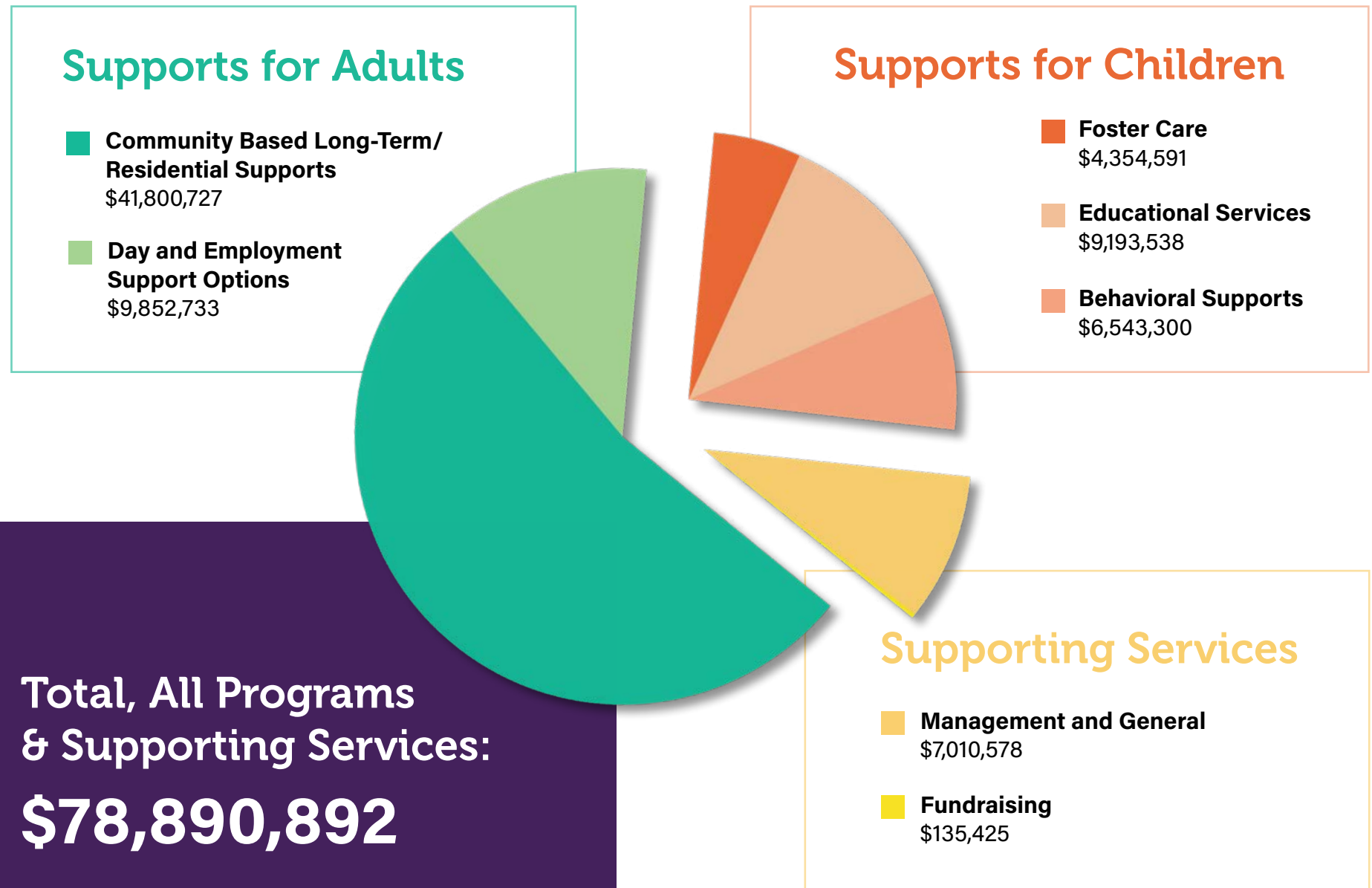
Living & Learning

Financial Report

July 2019 - June 2020



Total Expenses by Program for the Year Ending June 30, 2020

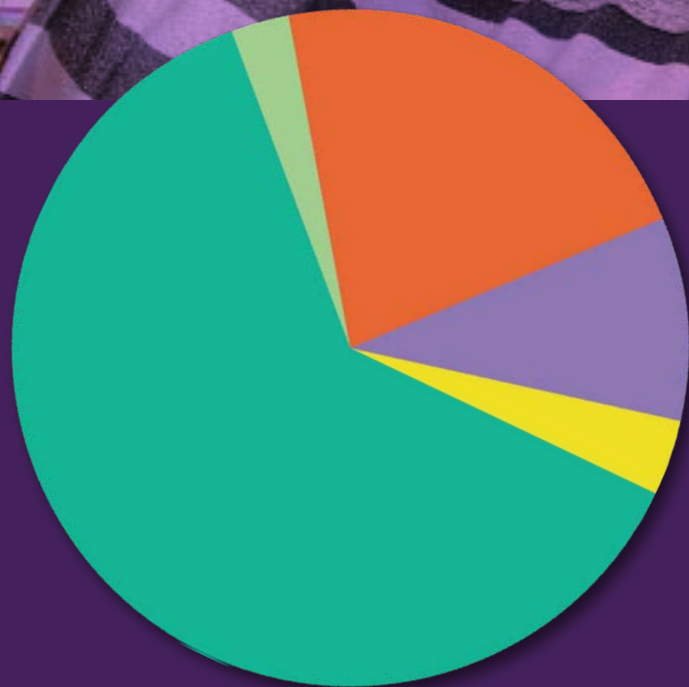




Day and Employment Support Options

Salaries, Wages, and Benefits	\$8,077,312
Supplies and Travel	455,677
Service and Professional Fees	537,643
Offices and Occupancy	549,910
Deprecation, Amortization, Insurance, and Interest	232,191

Total: \$9,852,733



Community Based Long-Term/Residential Supports

Salaries, Wages, and Benefits	\$26,078,365
Supplies and Travel	1,110,653
Service and Professional Fees*	9,121,008
Offices and Occupancy	4,073,368
Deprecation, Amortization, Insurance, and Interest	1,417,333

Total: \$41,800,727

**Professional fees include payments to home providers.*

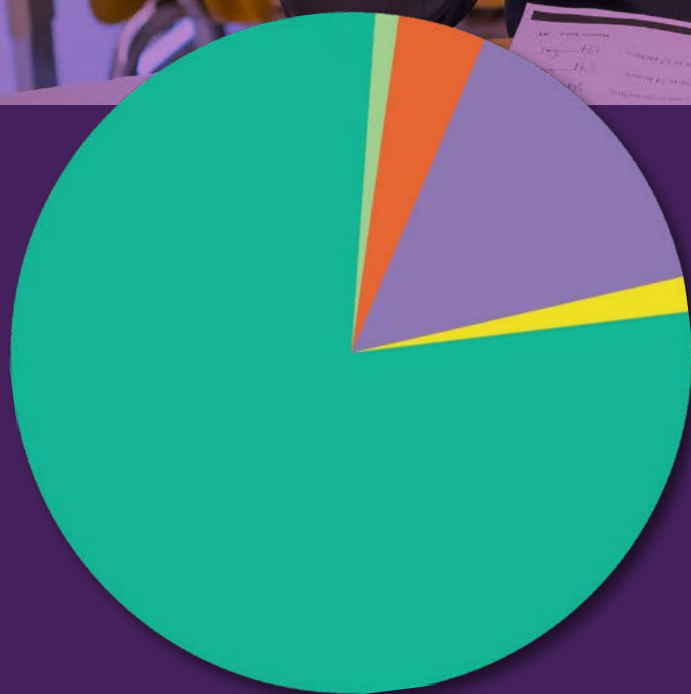
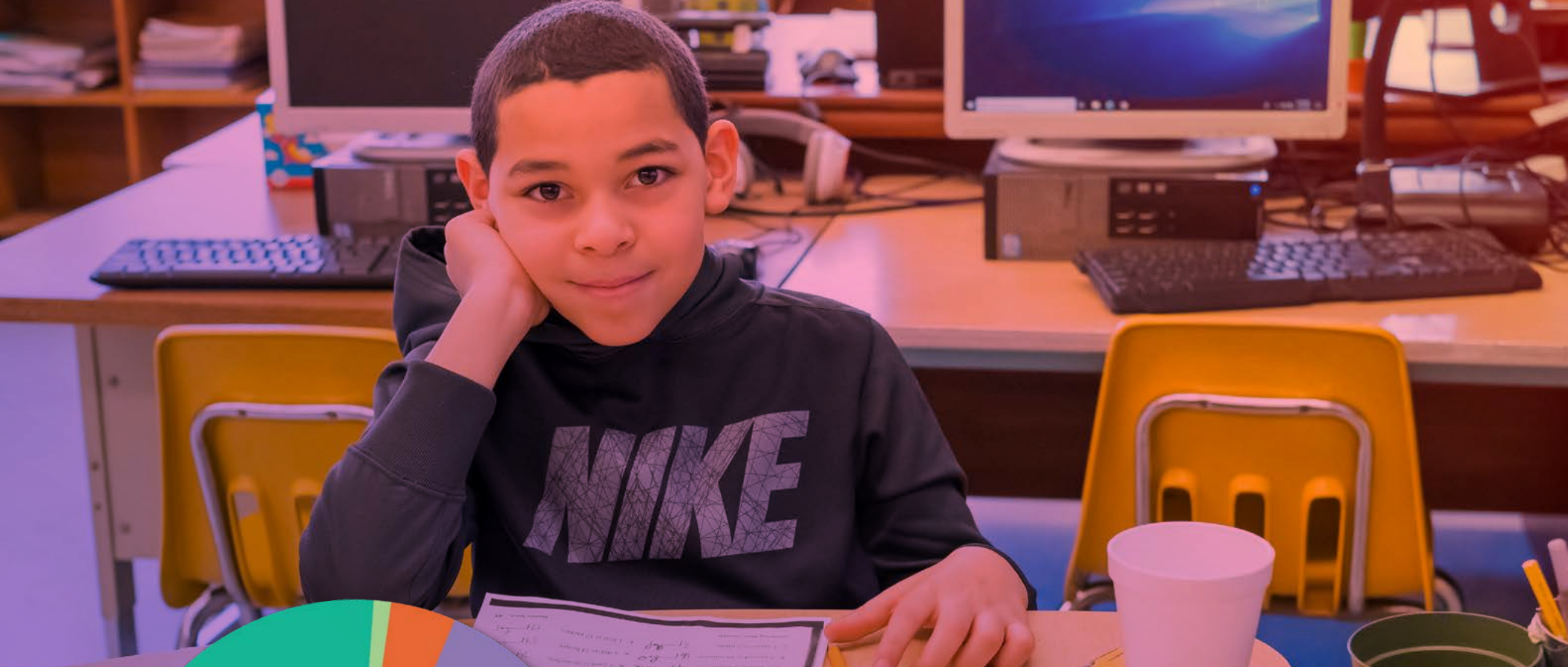


Foster Care

Salaries, Wages, and Benefits	\$1,630,498
Supplies and Travel	113,388
Service and Professional Fees*	2,006,820
Offices and Occupancy	546,735
Deprecation, Amortization, Insurance, and Interest	57,150

Total: \$4,354,591

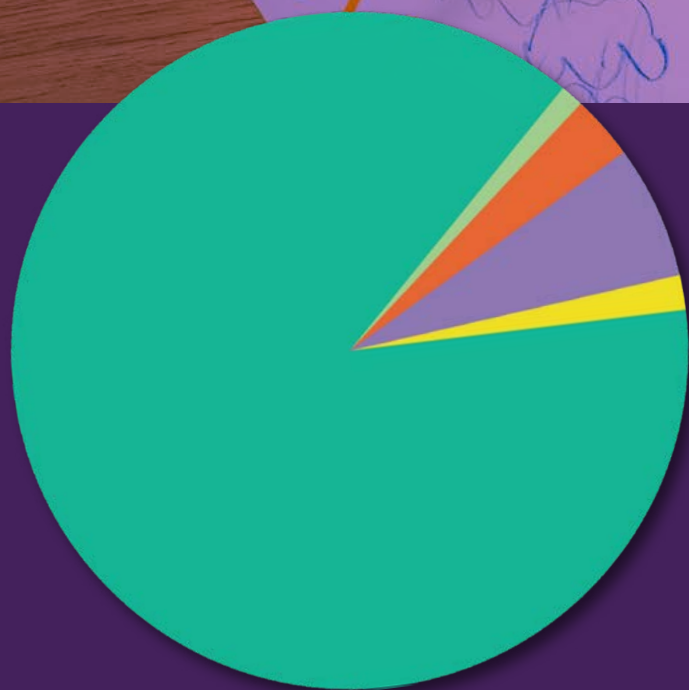
**Professional fees include payments to foster care families.*



Educational Services

Salaries, Wages, and Benefits	\$7,183,610
Supplies and Travel	99,080
Service and Professional Fees	382,273
Offices and Occupancy	1,383,162
Deprecation, Amortization, Insurance, and Interest	145,413

Total: \$9,193,538



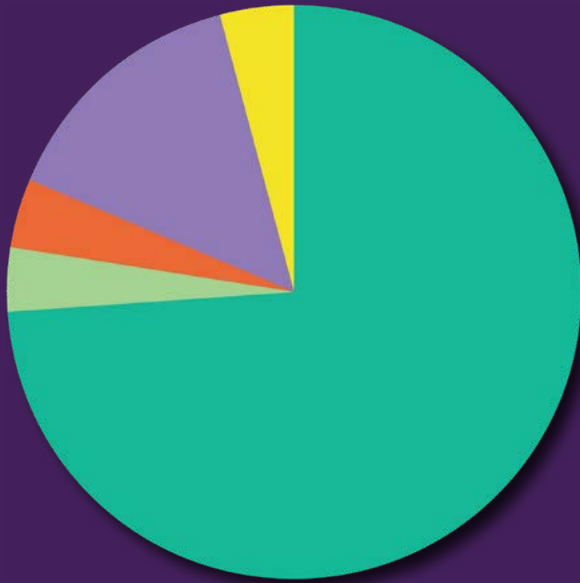
Behavioral Supports

Salaries, Wages, and Benefits	\$5,754,999
Supplies and Travel	76,241
Service and Professional Fees	190,675
Offices and Occupancy	418,799
Deprecation, Amortization, Insurance, and Interest	102,586

Total: \$6,543,300

Supporting Services

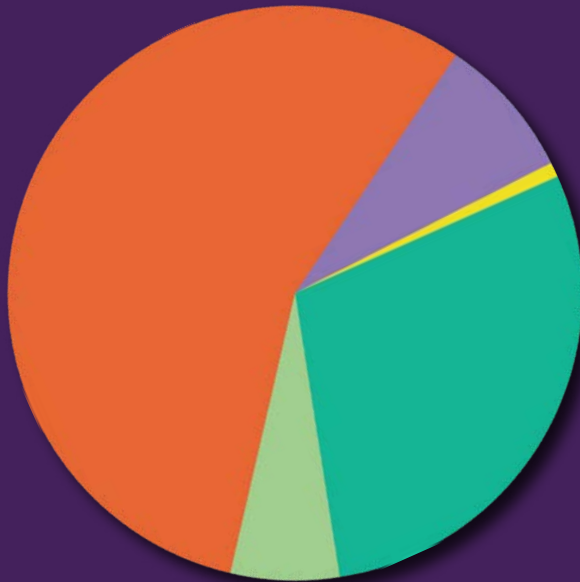
Management and General



Salaries, Wages, and Benefits	\$5,192,180
Supplies and Travel	257,136
Service and Professional Fees	273,893
Offices and Occupancy	1,007,170
Deprecation, Amortization, Insurance, and Interest	280,199

Total: \$7,010,578

Fundraising



Salaries, Wages, and Benefits	\$39,749
Supplies and Travel	8,053
Service and Professional Fees	75,852
Offices and Occupancy	10,844
Deprecation, Amortization, Insurance, and Interest	927

Total: \$135,425

