



# CHILDREN'S LAW CENTER **ANNUAL REPORT**

2020

# Since our founding in 1996, Children's Law Center has reached more than 40,000 children and families across the District.

Last year was a year unlike any other – but it didn't stop us from helping children and families navigate the pandemic that turned choppy waters into a stormy sea.

In 2020, we reached thousands of children and families:



Reached  
**1 of every 9 children**  
living in DC's poorest  
neighborhoods.

Collaborated on  
**400 cases with**  
**pro bono attorneys.**



**Trained 1,930**  
judges, pediatricians, parents,  
social workers, youth, pro  
bono lawyers and caregivers.

Partnered with District agencies, the  
DC Council and community leaders to  
**find and implement city-wide**  
**solutions that benefit all DC kids.**

Children's Law Center fights so every child in DC can grow up with  
a stable family, good health and a quality education.

# PIVOTING IN A PANDEMIC

## ADAPTING TO MEET AN INCREASED NEED

Profound loss – of loved ones, normalcy, social connections and learning. This is how most children experienced 2020. Sadly, crisis and loss were the everyday reality of many DC children, even before the pandemic. For 25 years, Children’s Law Center has assisted children in crisis – and helped them build a future supported by stable families, good health and quality education.

At the beginning of 2020, many children were already navigating rough seas. Some were safe atop well-built boats, thanks to Children’s Law Center’s past support. Others were struggling to keep their rickety boats afloat. Then the pandemic hit like a tsunami – and even the strongest boats were at risk of capsizing.

When COVID-19 closed the city last March, Children’s Law Center staff pivoted quickly – checking in with every child and family we work with. Some needed food, medicine or diapers. Others needed help to adapt to the virtual world so they could continue behavioral health treatment via FaceTime. Accessing homework



**The pandemic tested the resilience and creativity of DC’s children and families in new ways. One foster mom turned her home office into a schoolroom – with details that ensured a sense of continuity for her foster child with special education needs, like buying a rug to match the rug in his classroom.**

packets – and then virtual classes – was a struggle for many without a car, a computer or WiFi.

As the weeks turned into months, the hardships increased. We addressed new crises and worked to prevent future ones by helping families identify and address problems before they became too big to solve. We adapted our legal strategies to our clients’ changing needs: arranging visits at the park between



**The pandemic caused abrupt school closures and the shuttering of summer camps. Thanks to the generosity of our Children Can’t Wait Fund campaign co-chairs Diana and Stephen Goldberg, we distributed summer activity kits (including devices for students with special needs) to more than 350 DC children like Jonathan and Elmer Jurado.**





Thanks to a generous donation by Alfred Street Baptist Church, Children's Law Center distributed 8,000 see-through masks to families like the Watsons.

children in foster care and their birth parents; securing remote services so developmental windows wouldn't close; ensuring families had safe places to stay when exterminators rid apartments of pests so homes were healthier for children with asthma.

## BUILDING TOWARD AN EQUITABLE FUTURE

The pandemic highlighted DC's deep systemic inequities and health disparities, and the racial justice protests created political pressure for change. To lessen the impact of these longstanding inequities, Children's Law Center advocated for emergency legislation to ameliorate the impact of systemic racism: ensuring foster youth turning 21 would not lose their homes and support during the crisis and that lack of access to computers wouldn't prevent students from joining their online classes.

With an eye toward a more equitable recovery, we also continued our decade-long fight to improve DC's behavioral health system and made it a top priority in the DC Council's budget. We advocated for a new Department of Buildings that will take a public health approach to ensuring rental housing is safer and healthier for DC's families. We fought for

an Ombudsperson for Children office that will help resolve systemic issues and day-to-day problems for DC's foster children. We called attention to the over-policing of Black students and students with disabilities and advocated in partnership with other organizations across the District to move the city to police-free schools.

The pandemic left thousands of children and families struggling to stay afloat in boats battered by the crisis. They will need legal help well after all the vaccines are distributed and classrooms are full. Children's Law Center will be there, helping DC's children and families patch their boats and paddle through the stormy seas yet to come.

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*When the pandemic emerged, we knew that those who had the least would be harmed the most, so we decided to step up. That is why Greg and I increased our gift to Children's Law Center.*

JULE CAHILL CRIDER, DONOR SINCE 2005

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Many of the children and families we serve carry the heaviest burden.

**30,000**

Nearly **30,000** of DC's Black or Latinx residents have been infected with COVID-19 compared to just 10,000 white residents.

**5x**

Unemployment in neighborhoods East of the River **skyrocketed to five times the rate** of neighborhoods in Wards 2 and 3.

**4+ MONTHS BEHIND**

During the first six months of virtual school, **at-risk students fell five months behind in math and four months behind in reading.**

# TAPPING INTO YESENIA'S INNER CREATIVITY TO COPE IN A CRISIS

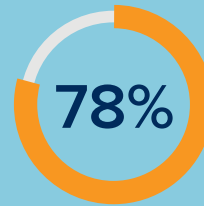
"Yesenia was always a creative child," Mr. Sorto says of his 12-year-old daughter. "But she was also anxious and hyperactive, and her learning difficulties made it hard for her to learn without special help. The pandemic just made it so much harder for her to focus and learn."

Like so many children, Yesenia struggled with distance learning. She no longer received the hands-on help she had in school, and her autism made it difficult for her to connect socially with other students through the screen. She became depressed and developed new behavioral health issues – including angry outbursts, crying and withdrawing from activities she once enjoyed. She lost her love for school. Her dad grew concerned and called the family's Children's Law Center lawyer.

"Yesenia struggled without the help she was used to receiving in school – she just didn't want to do anything," Mr. Sorto explains. "My biggest concern was that her behavior changed completely. The pandemic was leaving her behind – academically and socially."



Thankfully, Children's Law Center had worked with Yesenia before the pandemic. She was referred by her pediatrician because her school was not accommodating her needs. We advocated for her to attend a new school where she received specialized learning support that could better accommodate her autism. We also obtained extra hours of education support to help her catch up. And importantly, her new



**NEARLY 78% OF  
CHILDREN WITH  
AUTISM HAVE AT  
LEAST ONE MENTAL  
HEALTH CONDITION.\***

\*University of British Columbia's department of psychology and the  
AJ Drexel Autism Institute at Drexel University (Pennsylvania), The  
Journal of Clinical Psychiatry, 2020.

school was committed to engaging with Mr. Sorto, finding English-Spanish interpreters to keep him updated on Yesenia's progress. However, these supports didn't work virtually, and Yesenia was quickly falling behind again. Children's Law Center worked with her school to identify and implement new strategies to help her adapt to distance learning.

"Yesenia is artistic and creative – she loves to paint and write stories," says her attorney Kate Rheaume. "We advocated for the school to present her lessons in a way that naturally interested Yesenia, and they started using comic books to encourage her to read and held art class first thing each morning."

As a result, Yesenia began engaging with school again, opened up more during her classes and even started attending some of the school's virtual social events.

"Things changed when Children's Law Center got involved," says Mr. Sorto. "With help from her lawyers and her school, Yesenia is now active in her classes and motivated to learn – and her recent grades are A's."

Today, Yesenia attends school partly in-person and partly online – but fully excited to learn. She's better able to connect with her teachers and classmates, and she loves shopping for art supplies with her dad. As Mr. Sorto notes: "The happy and energetic girl I knew is back."

\*We always provide clients the option to change their name or use initials when sharing their story. Names in this story have not been changed, and the family chose the stock photo that is used.

# SOLVING PROBLEMS AND AVERTING CRISES FOR CHILDREN

## THE PANDEMIC PUT ENORMOUS STRESS ON ALL FAMILIES.

Twenty-five years of building trusting relationships and professional partnerships allowed us to solve problems and avert crises for many children whose families were hardest hit by the pandemic.

But the sheer magnitude of the problem means we couldn't reach all children. As the waves of the pandemic rise and fall, the need for behavioral health supports will continue to grow. The District's complex behavioral health system was hard to access before the pandemic; increased need will make timely care even harder to find.

## FIXING A BROKEN BEHAVIORAL HEALTH SYSTEM

Securing timely, quality behavioral health care for children has been a top priority for Children's Law Center for more than a decade. Thousands of children we have worked with – including children in the foster care system and students receiving special education services – have needed our help because their behavioral health issues had gone unaddressed.

We have successfully advocated for programs that address the child psychiatrist shortage, provide crisis intervention and embed behavioral support in pediatrician's offices. Today, thanks to support from The J. Willard and Alice S. Marriott Foundation and in partnership with a broad coalition of behavioral health groups and community organizations, we are pushing for reforms across the entire behavioral health system.

To reach children where they spend the most time, we have been working with multiple intergovernmental groups, including the School Based Behavioral Health Coordinating Council, to build a stronger school behavioral health program and to increase the number of trained counselors in DC's public schools. In 2020, the program was on track to reach more than 160 schools.

Then the pandemic hit. School behavioral health providers were a lifeline for many students. Having



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*We are thrilled to be working with Children's Law Center to combine our efforts and focus on mental health services that children and families in the Black community need more than ever. Through our partnership, the foundation seeks to ensure cultural competency and caring for African Americans who struggle with mental illness.*

**TRACIE JENKINS,  
EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR,  
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already built trusting relationships with students and families, these counselors were able to help keep students connected to school and solve emergent problems.

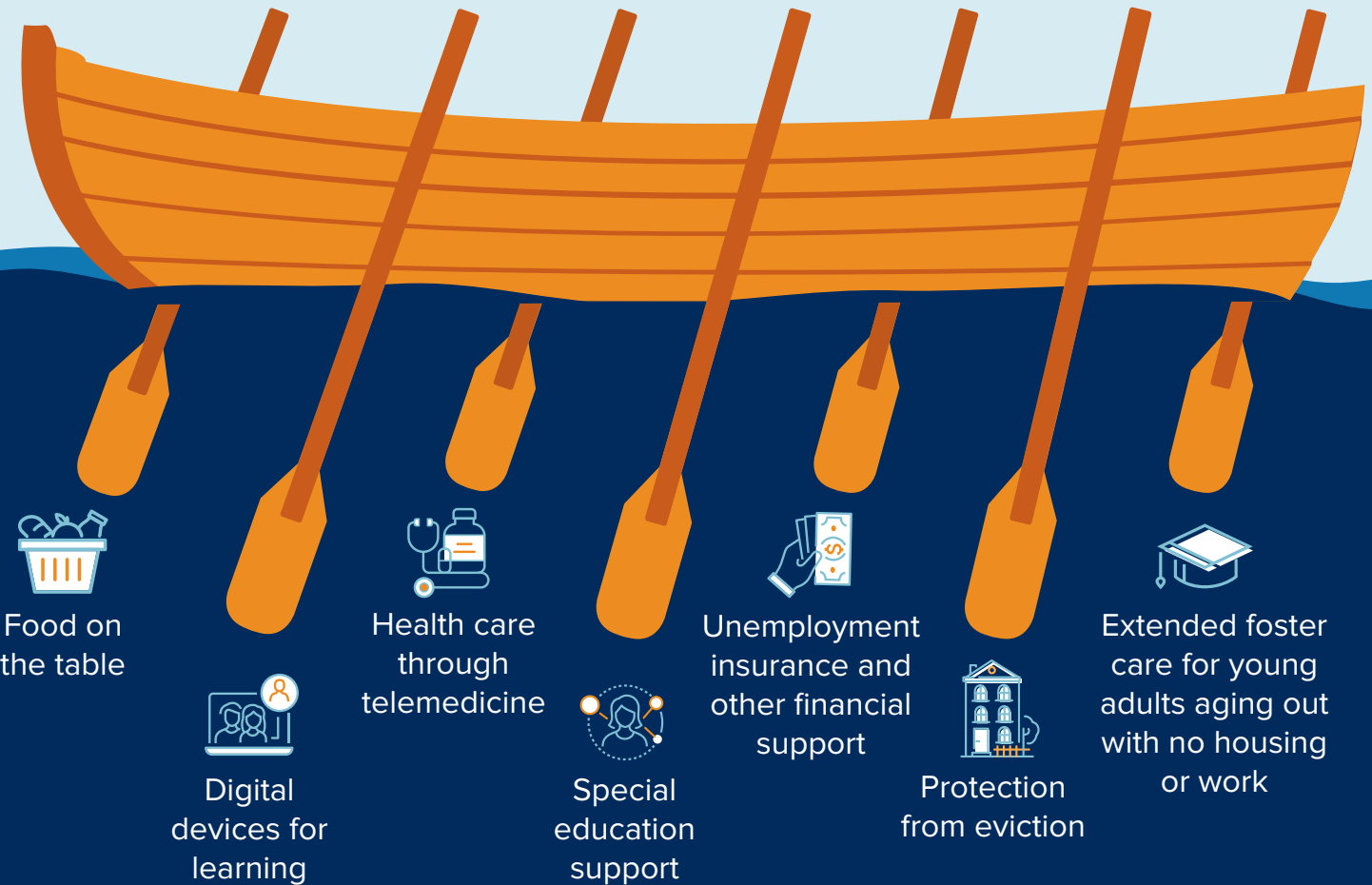
However, balancing competing priorities, the mayor's proposed budget slashed funding for the school behavioral health program and the community-based organizations that support it. We spent the first four months of the crisis leading a campaign to restore this critical funding.

Because of our advocacy, the DC Council reinstated \$10 million – ensuring tens of thousands more children could receive behavioral health support.

The school behavioral health program has played a critical role in supporting students who are struggling with learning remotely. And as more students return to in-person learning, counselors will be available in more schools than ever before – identifying and addressing each student's behavioral health needs before a child potentially considers self-harm or even suicide.

# PROTECTING CHILDREN'S BEHAVIORAL HEALTH

The pandemic's toll on our collective mental health made headlines. For the tens of thousands of DC children who swim daily in the stormy sea of trauma, racism and poverty, the pandemic has caused even more harm. Our immediate priority was to prevent the toxic stress on parents and children that leads to learning loss, child abuse and behavioral health crises. Through legal assistance and policy advocacy, we are making sure families have the paddles they need to navigate through the storm:



*Children's Law Center is the driving force for children's mental health reform in DC. They are strategic, collaborative and effective – a winning combination. Their work has already improved the lives of thousands of children.*

**DR. LEE BEERS, M.D., PRESIDENT, AMERICAN ACADEMY OF PEDIATRICS**

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Special thanks to Allison D. Pugsley (Hogan Lovells US LLP), Rochelle-Leigh Rosenberg (Crowell & Moring LLP), Ann Sultan (Miller & Chevalier Chartered) and Jamie Yood (WilmerHale) for their assistance with the advisory board.



# CHAMPIONS FOR CHILDREN

## 2020 CHAMPIONS FOR CHILDREN COMPETE FOR DC'S KIDS!

Through our Champions for Children Campaign, law firms and corporations challenge themselves, their corporate contacts, associates, partners, vendors and staff to raise critical funds for Children's Law Center. These generous contributions strengthen families and ensure positive health and education outcomes for DC children. While all participants are Champions for Children, our 2020 campaign winners are:



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2020

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The DC area's top law firms, government lawyers, and in-house legal departments turn to Children's Law Center for meaningful pro bono opportunities. Pro bono lawyers find success with our cases regardless of experience because of our commitment to high-quality training and mentoring. Many lawyers attest that taking a Children's Law Center pro bono case both develops their skills and touches their hearts – because our cases are life-changing.

Thank you to the following pro bono partners who – because of their tenacious advocacy – help us reach more of our neighbors in need:

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*For the past 18 years, I have witnessed Children’s Law Center putting in the work for the children of DC. Today, I remain honored to partner with them as part of their innovative approach to building a more equitable future for every child in our community.*

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*Cranemere is proud to support Children's Law Center, a first-rate nonprofit, which shares our deep commitment to a more equitable society. They are providing emergency relief for children during the pandemic without losing sight of long-term needs.*

EVAN R. FARBER  
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Thanks to an innovative partnership between AmeriHealth Caritas DC and Children's Law Center – the first of its kind in the nation – we were able to fight for more kids like Kamira this year. At the end of our first year of partnership, we saw dramatic results. Before we intervened, children were going to the ER an average of seven times. When we successfully advocated for landlords to fix unsafe housing, the children went to the ER fewer than one time. These visits add up – our research shows that just one intervention can reduce Medicaid costs by tens of thousands of dollars.



*Each year, Children's Law Center is fortunate to receive generous financial support from law firms and corporations. Thanks to these partners, we extend our impact in the community by serving more children and families and providing critical legal assistance on matters impacting a child's family, health and education.*

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<sup>●</sup>Rapid Response donors' support enabled Children's Law Center to immediately pivot amidst the pandemic to address the urgent and ever-changing needs of our clients.

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**Children's Law Center Executive Director Judith Sandalow received the American Bar Association's 2020 John Minor Wisdom Public Service and Professionalism Award. The ABA presents the award to individuals who have made outstanding contributions to the quality of justice in their communities, ensuring that the legal system is open and available to all.**



Thank you to the 2020 members of our Kite Club, Children's Law Center's most generous individual and family foundation donors. You allowed us to provide a deeper level of support to each and every child and family we work with and remain at the forefront of legal and systemic advocacy during an especially challenging year.

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• **Legacy Society members who have named Children's Law Center in their estate plan.**

• **Rapid Response donors' support enables Children's Law Center to immediately pivot amidst the pandemic to address the urgent and ever-changing needs of our clients.**

*Knowing the incredible stress and trauma DC families are experiencing during the pandemic, and the critical role Children's Law Center plays in ensuring kid's mental and physical health, our family was moved to double our annual gift. I encourage fellow child advocates to join us in supporting this life-changing organization.*

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**Ms. Thurston didn't think twice about welcoming Averi into her home. She knew her sister struggled with mental health issues and needed help raising Averi. When the pandemic hit and the Court shifted to remote hearings, Children's Law Center made sure the circumstances didn't delay Averi's adoption. Today, Averi is an energetic toddler who lights up the room with her smile. She often leads her mom and siblings with a Baby Shark sing-a-long.**



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*Over the last 15 years I've been a proud Children's Law Center pro bono attorney, Kite Club donor, and board member. Being a part of the Children's Law Center family is without a doubt one of the most rewarding endeavors of my life. I am grateful to have found an organization that values children, families and equity as much as I do.*

**MELISSA WILEY,  
DONOR SINCE 2006**

“  
*I gave to Children's Law Center because every employee works extremely hard to advocate for DC's children and families. It was especially important to me to support Children's Law Center's work during the pandemic.*  
 ”

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**Children's Law Center secured the financial support that Ms. Dabney and her son, Sebastian, were entitled to because of Sebastian's disability. It took a huge weight off Ms. Dabney's shoulders knowing she could focus on her son's needs during the pandemic.**

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# HELPING CHILDREN SOAR



*I applaud the efforts of Children's Law Center in seeking stable and loving homes for DC kids, for helping to create interventions and structures for good quality education, and for helping to mitigate the risks of asthma, violence, mental illness and other health risks that children face.*

**DR. CHRISTINE GRADY,**  
CHIEF, DEPARTMENT OF BIOETHICS,  
NATIONAL INSTITUTES OF HEALTH CLINICAL CENTER

*As an adult physician, I see things that could have possibly been corrected if things were done well when these adults were children. And that's what the Children's Law Center stands for.*

**DR. ANTHONY FAUCI,** DIRECTOR,  
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF ALLERGY  
AND INFECTIOUS DISEASES

Children's Law Center proudly honored Dr. Christine Grady and her husband, Dr. Anthony Fauci, as our 2020 Distinguished Child Advocates during our virtual Helping Children Soar Benefit. During an interview in their backyard with Executive Director Judith Sandalow, they each shared how they discovered their passion for ethics and science, explained how they work together to support each other's careers and discussed how the pandemic is impacting the lives of DC's kids. To view recordings of the two-night event, visit [helpingchildrensoar.org](https://helpingchildrensoar.org).

Learn more about the critical issues impacting DC's children and families. Watch recordings from our Community Conversations at [childrenslawcenter.org/communityconversations](https://childrenslawcenter.org/communityconversations)

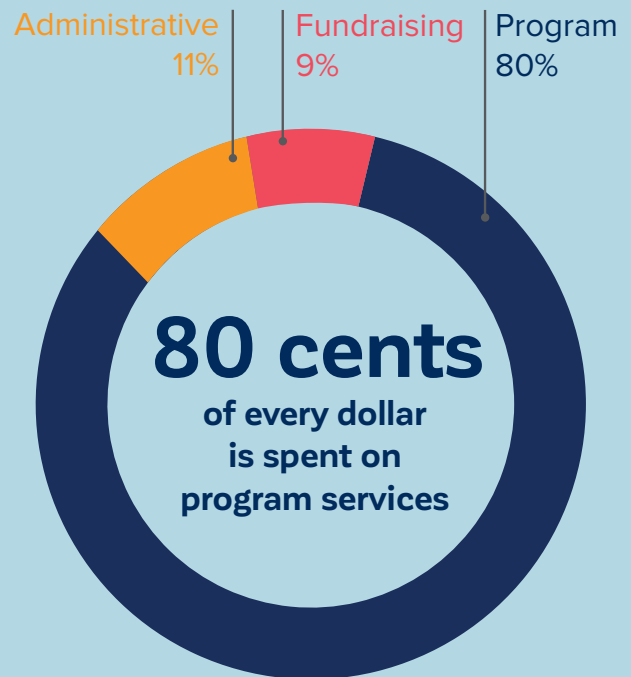
- The Shutdown's Impact on Children & Families
- Supporting Students' Emotional Health
- Returning to School during a Pandemic
- Ensuring Healthy Housing for All
- Ethics of a Vaccine with Dr. Christine Grady
- Telehealth
- And upcoming 25th Anniversary events

# 2020 FISCAL YEAR FINANCIAL STATEMENT

**OCTOBER 1, 2019 – DECEMBER 31, 2020**

## REVENUE AND SUPPORT

DC Court Contractual Service	\$ 7,216,191
Grants	\$ 1,995,970
Contributions	\$ 2,058,854
Donated Goods & Services	\$ 892,718
Paycheck Protection Program*	\$ 1,277,538
Other Income	\$ 365,545
<b>TOTAL REVENUE AND SUPPORT</b>	<b>\$ 13,806,816</b>
Children Can't Wait Fund*	\$ 502,537



## EXPENSES

Total Legal Programs	\$ 10,506,310
General and Administrative**	\$ 1,448,242
Fundraising	\$ 1,136,027
<b>TOTAL EXPENSES</b>	<b>\$ 13,090,580</b>



\*Forgivable loan application pending.

\*The Children Can't Wait Fund was launched by our most generous supporters who see a brighter future where all of DC's children can thrive and are committed to sustaining Children's Law Center as an anchor institution for generations to come.

\*\*Children's Law Center has increased our investment in our diversity, equity and inclusion program. Those costs are reflected in the administrative portion of our budget.



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