



FIVE-YEAR STRATEGIC PLAN 2021–2025

Approved by Board of Directors - January 28, 2021

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Throughout its 44-year history, the Support Center for Child Advocates (*Child Advocates*) has been guided by thoughtful long-range planning and detailed strategic plans. “Vision 2020,” the last long-range plan, was completed in 2013 by our Board and staff, following more than a year of discovery, analysis, and appreciative inquiry. This strategic document governed our agency’s path effectively, and we accomplished or exceeded most of the benchmarks identified in the plan. Our goal to serve more children was realized. We accepted far more cases from the Family Court and City of Philadelphia, from whom we acquired significant additional funding to add new social workers and maintain optimal case handler–to–client ratios.

In response to community needs, we have grown to serve more children than ever, representing 1,100 children and training 3,000+ individuals annually in recent pre-COVID years. Now it is time again to set a future course for our agency. Our pathways of growth and change, constant throughout our history, have always been incremental and rooted in our experiences. Envisioning our future is critically important, and we traditionally follow our strategic plans closely.

The following plan—the result of more than eight months’ work by our Board, staff, and The New Group consultants—lays out goals for *Child Advocates* for the next five years, including:

- Advance principles of diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) and racial justice;
- Build agency infrastructure to support current practice and future growth;
- Strengthen the volunteer model;
- Expand virtual training programs through *Child Advocates Online*;
- Formalize and focus the agency’s policy work;
- Set up strong leadership for the future;
- Develop fundraising strategies to meet current and future needs; and
- Enhance holistic service to older youth clients to ensure successful transitions out of the child welfare system.

WHAT IS THE FOUNDATION UNDERLYING THE PLAN?

Child Advocates began representing children in the child welfare system in 1977 and, since then, has witnessed the disproportionate impact of the system on families of color. Today we understand that the child welfare system is inherently racist, and we must use our power and privilege to counteract this systemic racism and its impact on the communities we serve.

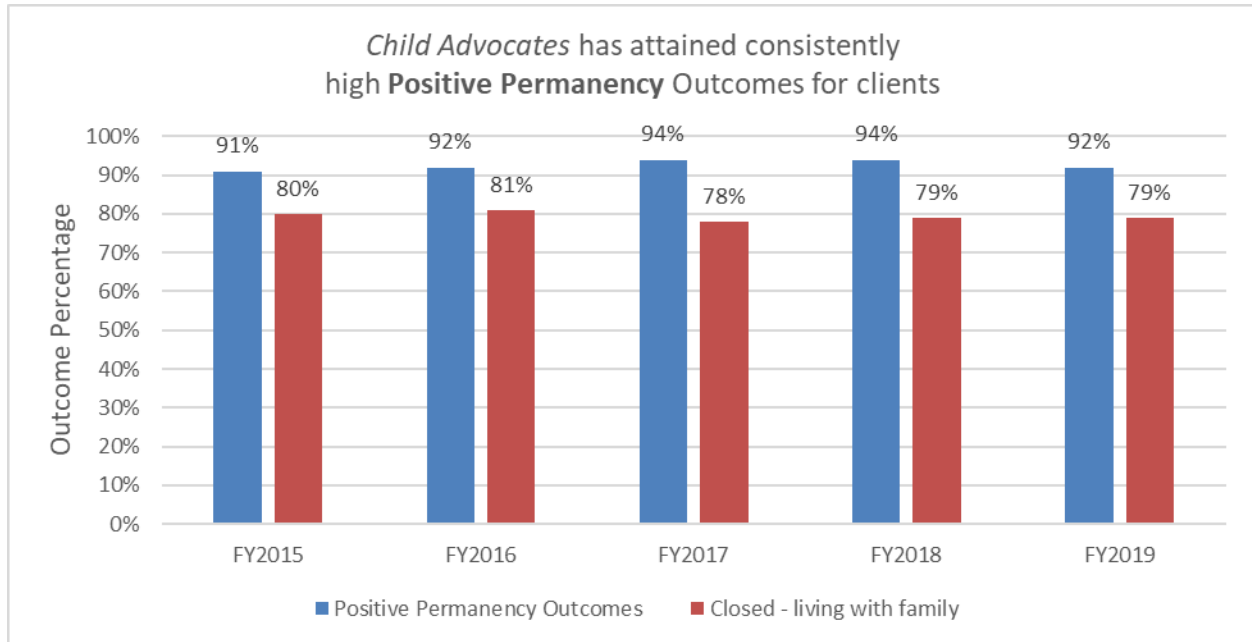
We began the strategic planning process in 2020, a year characterized by the effects of a global pandemic and a profound shift in our nation's attention to racism. These new realities impacted the inner workings of the agency, the communities we serve and the child welfare system as a whole. COVID-19 restrictions upended *Child Advocates'* normal practices and changed the way staff, volunteers, and the court system work. The pandemic's disproportionate impact on people of color highlighted the health and economic inequities that plague our communities. The pandemic also led to a recession, which further stressed our staff, clients and their families. In addition, our nation experienced civic unrest in response to racism and police violence against people of color.

As *Child Advocates'* staff and board deliberated, the country's heightened awareness of institutional and systemic racism inspired us to focus on addressing issues related to diversity, equity, and inclusion as they inform every aspect of our work. The events of this past year encouraged growth and made it possible to look at many traditional practices with fresh eyes, preparing the agency for change.

What is the foundation that this Strategic Plan builds upon for *Child Advocates'* next five years?

Child Advocates' most important strengths:

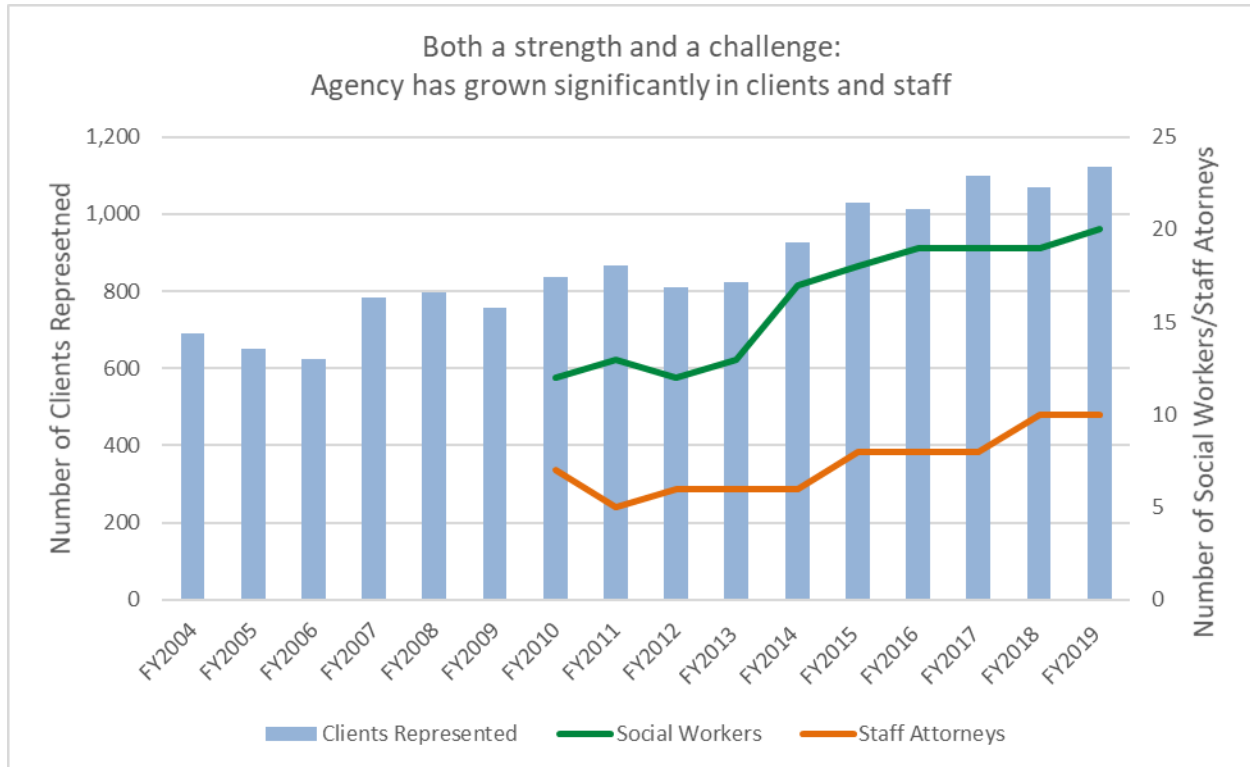
- **Reliably excellent** – The agency has an enduring mission and a long record of successful work in the community.
- **Needed** – There is a strong and growing need for expert legal and social worker support for Philadelphia children.
- **Unique** – In Philadelphia, no one else can or does provide such effective support for the most difficult cases in the child welfare system.



Child Advocates' most immediate challenges:

- Many key leaders are nearing retirement.
- Significant growth in the number of clients and increasing complexity of cases has created difficulties:
 - The agency's staff and systems are stretched too thin.
 - The volunteer model has not been adjusted or enhanced and shows signs of strain.
- Staff consider racial justice, social equity, and principles of diversity and inclusion integral to *Child Advocates'* work, but the implementation of a plan to thoughtfully incorporate these principles throughout the agency has been slow and detrimental to the retention and promotion of staff of color.
- Persistent problems in the child welfare system are frustrating and disheartening to *Child Advocates* staff and other stakeholders. There's a need to refine how policy work fits within the agency's mission.

- Whole-child representation is at the heart of what we do and becomes increasingly challenging as the number of children in Philadelphia’s child welfare system grows and as their needs become more complex. We must work diligently and continuously to improve our practice and support the staff and volunteers serving these children.



EIGHT STRATEGIC GOALS FOR 2021–2025

Below are the eight strategic goals of the Strategic Plan. For each, one Board Committee has primary responsibility for managing the implementation within an expected timeframe.

Each of the eight goals is important and is a high priority. Many of the goals intersect, overlap, or build off other goals.

	<i>Strategic Goal</i>	<i>Board-Level Leadership</i>	<i>Timeframe</i>
1	RACIAL EQUITY Advance principles of diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) and racial justice	Racial Equity Task Force/ Governance Committee	2021–2025
2	INFRASTRUCTURE Build agency infrastructure to support current practice and future growth	HR Committee/ Data & Technology Task Force	2021–2022
3	VOLUNTEER MODEL Strengthen the volunteer model	Volunteer Committee	2021–2025
4	VIRTUAL TRAINING Expand virtual training programs through <i>Child Advocates Online</i>	Executive Committee	2021–2022
5	POLICY Formalize and focus the agency’s policy work	Policy Task Force	2021
6	LEADERSHIP Set up strong leadership for the future	Governance and Leadership Committee	2021–2022
7	FUNDRAISING Develop fundraising strategies to meet current and future needs	Development Committee/ Finance Committee	2021–2025
8	OLDER YOUTH CLIENTS Enhance holistic service to older youth clients to ensure successful transitions out of the child welfare system	Executive Committee	2023–2025

On the following pages we lay out each of the eight goals with its high-level focal points for the implementation period. The Strategic Plan’s companion document, the *Implementation Plan*, will include detailed timelines, steps involved, and individuals responsible for leading the work.

EIGHT STRATEGIC GOALS FOR 2021–2025

Goal 1 – ADVANCE PRINCIPLES OF DIVERSITY, EQUITY, AND INCLUSION (DEI) AND RACIAL JUSTICE

Advancing diversity, racial equity, and inclusion (DEI) is the top priority of the entire Strategic Plan. The remaining seven goals cannot be achieved without the inclusion of thoughtful and purposeful measures to promote DEI and racial justice.

The plan’s focus on DEI and racial justice is the culmination of over two years of deep reflection and deliberations with agency staff, both with and without a consultant, about the status of the agency and the condition of the child welfare system. The Design Team also spent a significant amount of time reflecting on the racial composition of *Child Advocates’* Board and staff leadership and its volunteer attorney base, which is predominantly white. Meanwhile, approximately 70% of the clients of *Child Advocates* are Black or African American, 14% are Hispanic or Latino/a/x, and 8% are white. We recognize that agency leadership and its volunteer base do not reflect the community we serve, and we further acknowledge the continued overrepresentation of Black and Brown children in the child welfare system. Systemic oppression, institutional racism, and implicit bias affects our clients, staff, and the child welfare system as a whole, and the agency cannot fulfill its mission without focusing on these issues.

- 1.1 Create and implement a plan to diversify agency leadership, improve hiring practices, celebrate diversity, and provide reconciliation towards racial justice and social equity for staff within the agency.
- 1.2 Engage current staff, volunteers, and Board members in regular training and education that promotes inclusivity.
- 1.3 Create and implement a plan for new client-based advocacy strategies to overcome the effects of systemic racism and to combat racism in the child welfare system in Philadelphia.

Goal 2 – BUILD AGENCY INFRASTRUCTURE TO SUPPORT CURRENT PRACTICE AND FUTURE GROWTH

The plan envisions building agency infrastructure as necessary to stabilize current practice and to serve as building blocks for any substantial future expansion in caseload or other programmatic growth. We will spend approximately two years shoring up agency infrastructure first, before we continue to grow. Areas of focus include a salary study and increases where appropriate, to ensure we are paying our staff fairly, and support for the professional development needs of our staff. Diverse staffing in all departments as well as staff retention and development will be priorities throughout the next five years.

For example, our current data infrastructure is the gift of a generous pro bono partner but has not been able to keep up with the pace of our growth and our need for data. As a result, we need tools to enhance our data management, improve access to the data we do collect, and introduce software to support scheduling, time-keeping, and contract administration requirements. We need to strengthen our ability to work with and interpret data in order to support evaluation and learning efforts and drive data-driven decision-making.

- 2.1 Improve retention of a diverse staff by paying a living wage above market rate, providing clear opportunities for learning and advancement, and strengthening a climate of support and transparency.
- 2.2 Enhance the overall utility of client and volunteer data to improve advocacy practice.
- 2.3 Improve contract administration and IT support of the Client CRM Database.

Goal 3 – STRENGTHEN THE VOLUNTEER MODEL

Our volunteer model serves us well and allows us to contribute more than \$5 million in pro bono legal services to our clients in the child welfare system annually. We made a strong commitment to continuing this model, and in recent years we have added volunteer-oriented training programs and consulting staff attorneys to support our lawyer–social worker teams. However, several forces have made it difficult for us to sustain our model. First, the legal community is giving less support to pro bono work as cost pressures mount on private practice firms. Second, our work has become more complex over the years, fueled by increased programmatic detail and higher levels of expectation for professionalism in child welfare practice, yet the resources we devote to recruiting and retaining our volunteer attorneys have not increased. In fact, they have decreased as we have given the senior administrator who manages our volunteer workforce additional responsibilities. The work of recruiting volunteer attorneys has become more difficult; we are chronically short 50–60 volunteers to staff our cases, which increases the pressure on our social work and in-house attorney staff.

- 3.1 Enhance relationship building to recruit and retain enough volunteers, with emphasis on diversity in recruitment, to meet the agency’s needs.
- 3.2 Continue to develop and provide volunteer training programs and staff supports to volunteers for their successful engagement in this important work.
- 3.3 Create a clear set of performance expectations and an ongoing process for evaluating and improving the performance of volunteer attorneys, in pursuit of the high-quality, multidisciplinary service that is our hallmark.
- 3.4 Explore the use of scheduling and time-reporting software to reduce the administrative burden on staff.

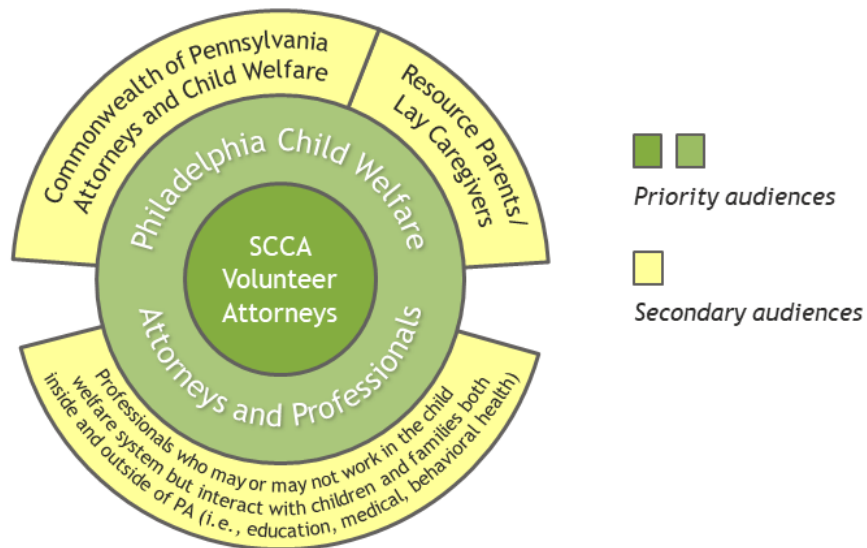
Goal 4 – EXPAND VIRTUAL TRAINING PROGRAMS THROUGH *CHILD ADVOCATES* ONLINE

Training of volunteer attorneys and others in the community has been a central and essential part of our work throughout our history, with our first Volunteer Training Workshop delivered to prospective volunteers at The Children’s Hospital of Philadelphia in 1975. In 2012, the Center for Excellence and Advocacy (CEA) was established to expand *Child Advocates’* capacity to respond to training needs.

For the future, this plan articulates a clear focus on two core audiences: our own volunteer attorneys and Philadelphia-area child welfare attorneys and professionals. CEA will expand online and virtual training programs through our Learning Management System (LMS) “*Child Advocates Online*” and by digitizing our training sessions. Digitizing our training allows us to fulfill CEA’s vision of “a skilled advocate for every child” and to expand our impact while also providing positive exposure to supporters of our work.

- 4.1 Anchor training in *Child Advocates’* values, agency culture, and working relationships.
- 4.2 Digitize much of the volunteer training to increase outreach and impact.
- 4.3 Strengthen implicit bias training for volunteers.
- 4.4 Prioritize training the core audiences essential to fulfilling *Child Advocates’* mission.

Center for Excellence in Advocacy (CEA) Core Audiences



Goal 5 – FORMALIZE AND FOCUS THE AGENCY’S POLICY WORK

Child Advocates’ system advocacy arises directly from whole-child client representation as well as from communication with advocates throughout the country: We learn from our cases and experience, and we name problems and solutions. We provide specific targeted feedback to, consult with, and put wider pressure on Philadelphia’s child welfare, dependent, and criminal justice systems to encourage them to reorganize so as to remove barriers to clients’ permanency and well-being. We continue to have an important role in many systemic reform initiatives both inside and outside government, and our independent “voice” lends credibility and effectiveness to our policy advocacy.

Going forward, we will pursue a more intentional, proactive approach to policy work and revitalize the Board’s engagement in this area. We seek to increase our effectiveness with strategic focus on selected goals supported by structured management and follow-up, while remaining available to respond to pressing community needs for policy advocacy.

- 5.1 Identify 3–5 specific policy priorities to be pursued systematically by the agency over the next 2–3 years. Prioritize making a difference in Philadelphia County by working on improvements to the policies and procedures of the Philadelphia Child Welfare system.
- 5.2 Respond to compelling issues of public policy and systemic reform as they emerge from case work and community needs.
- 5.3 Create a Policy Coordinator position to support *Child Advocates* staff in the policy work they are doing.

Goal 6 – SET UP STRONG LEADERSHIP FOR THE FUTURE

Our forthcoming leadership transitions will be the most significant in number and role in at least the last three decades, and thus will undoubtedly transform the organization. With thoughtful succession planning and diligent search efforts, we will assemble the next generation of staff leadership for the organization. We will improve recruitment of Board members of minority racial and ethnic groups and explore the participation of key client constituencies in our leadership so that our volunteer leadership better reflects the communities we serve.

- 6.1 Prioritize diversity when hiring for the leadership team.

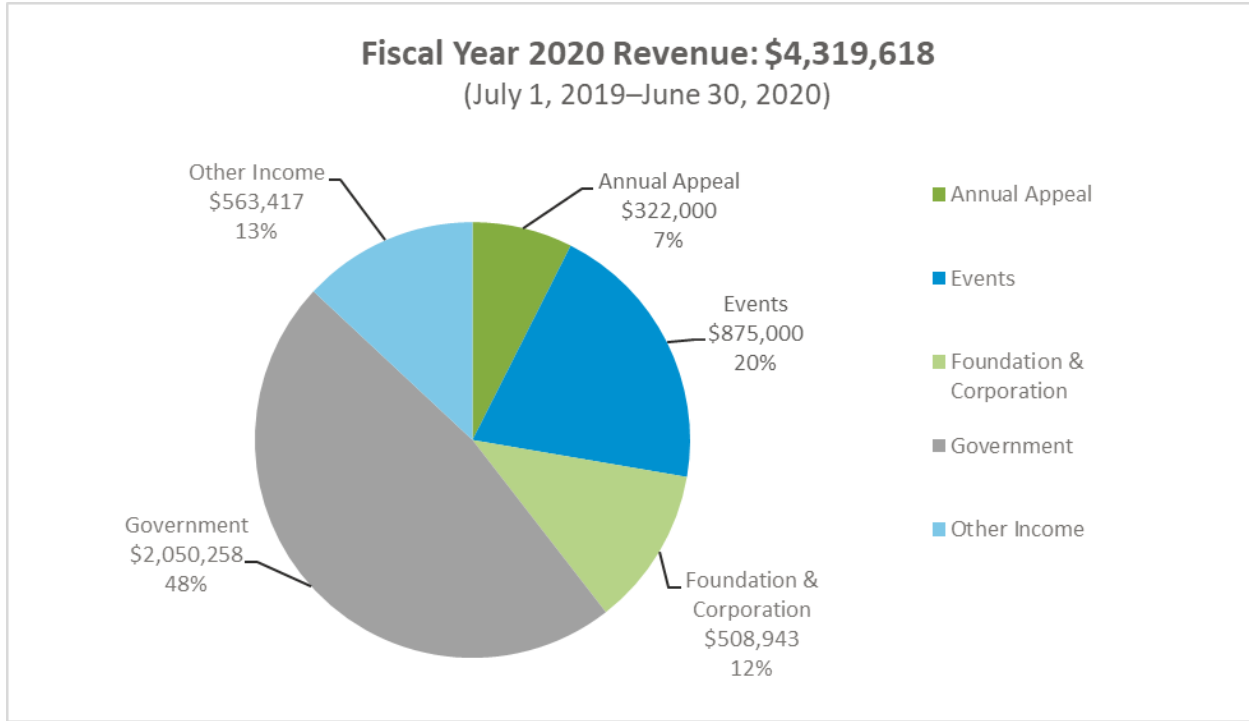
- 6.2 Build succession talent under all members of the Administrative Team.
- 6.3 Build a “co-pilot” model to broaden leadership and safeguard the agency.
- 6.4 Increase diversity on the Board of Directors.

Goal 7 — DEVELOP FUNDRAISING STRATEGIES TO MEET CURRENT AND FUTURE NEEDS

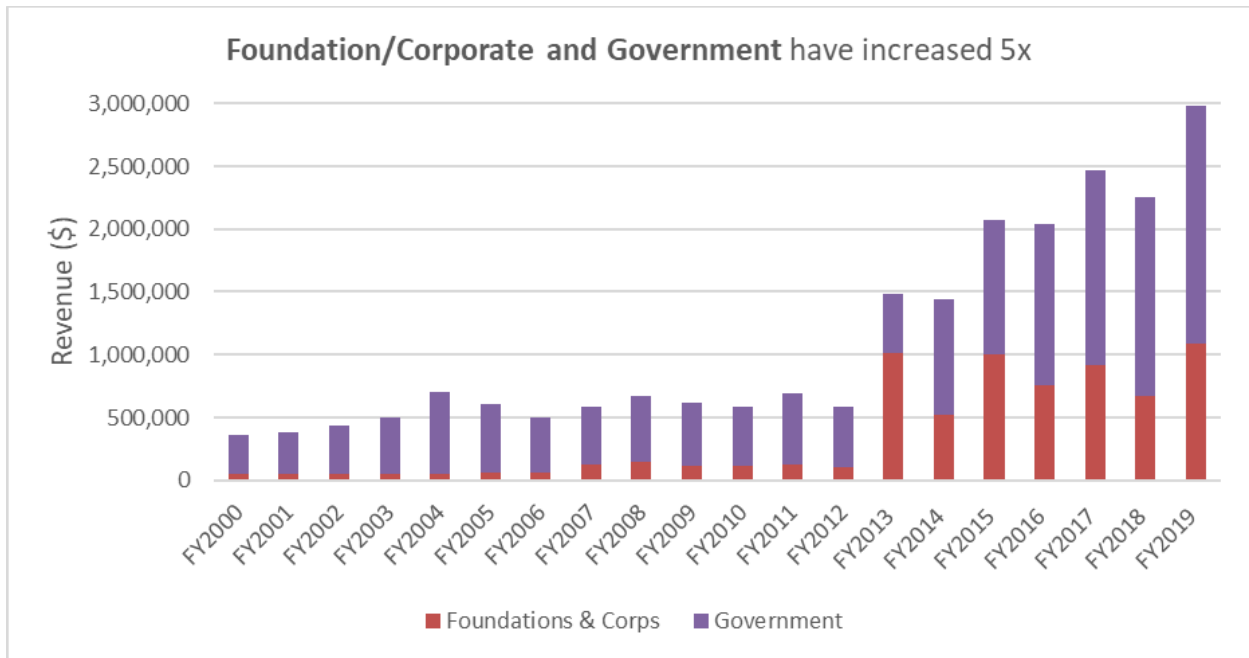
Impressively, *Child Advocates* has a long track record of making budget and delivering high-quality service to ever-growing numbers of children. With expenses exceeding \$4.5 million and government funding not likely to increase beyond (and perhaps retreat from) current levels (\$2.5 million in FY21), both current services and future expansions will rely heavily on improving charitable revenues. Proceeds from the sale of 1900 Cherry Street provided *Child Advocates* with first-ever endowment-level financial stability, with this fund targeted to current and future occupancy costs. We will need to substantially increase our endowment and other reserved funds, to secure future operational stability. We need to inspire new donors to embrace us, finding the message(s) that will capture their attention and commitment; they need to know *what we are doing and why*. Substantial increase in major gift funding will be a goal of the next five years, likely for targeted populations and focused outcomes. Our fledgling Planned Giving Program shows promise, especially given the maturity of our longtime-donor base. With a heavy reliance on special event fundraising, we will evaluate the role of events and the return on investment of resources.

- 7.1 Adapt fundraising based on changes in the external environment, including evaluating the contribution of events to our financial stability.
- 7.2 Develop a long-term resource plan, acknowledging the importance of multi-year major gifts.
- 7.3 Develop a policy for the use of *Child Advocates LLC* funds.

Note Child Advocates' revenue sources today versus just a few years ago.



And note the significant proportion now that is foundation and corporate support.



Goal 8 – ENHANCE HOLISTIC SERVICE TO OLDER YOUTH CLIENTS TO ENSURE SUCCESSFUL TRANSITIONS OUT OF THE CHILD WELFARE SYSTEM

We have the opportunity to again connect our sense of mission with a more focused attention to our clients, by asking: How do we continue to improve outcomes for our clients, and how should we approach getting there? A key focus of our strategic planning will be what we are trying to achieve in our direct-service casework, how we continue to improve the quality of our representation of child clients and how we address and combat racism affecting our child clients. With special focus on the futures of the older youth we serve, and informed by their voices, we will build partnerships that will serve them for years to come.

We examined the importance of supporting our older youth, age 16–25, as they age out of the child welfare system. Too often, these young adults are not fully prepared to take on the independent responsibilities required when leaving the child welfare system between the ages of 18–21 without family permanency. Without additional support, too many of the children aging out of the child welfare system end up in difficult straits. As part of the strategic plan, *Child Advocates'* Board of Directors clarified that it is not our mission to develop additional programming for these young adults, but it is our priority to strengthen the network of relationships we have with other agencies who can support them, and it is our priority to focus on making sure they connect with them to receive the support they need.

- 8.1 Create a plan to include client voice in the evaluation of services and supports for older youth in the child welfare system.
- 8.2 Strengthen and build partnerships with other agencies to benefit older youth.
- 8.3 Continue to develop and execute ideas that benefit our older youth, such as the Digital Locker.

STRATEGIC PLAN WORKING GROUPS

DESIGN TEAM

- Shakiya Brock (Social Work/Staff)
- Ann Butchart (Judge)
- Matt Duncan (Board/Volunteer Attorney)
- Cate Galbally (Administrative Team/Development)
- Alisa Gifford (Board/Strategic Planning Committee/Volunteer Attorney)
- Margie Gualtieri (Administrative Team/Staff Attorney)
- Cheneeta Harris (Social Work/Staff)
- Leah Katz (Volunteer Attorney)
- Meghan Johnson (Training/Staff)
- Jess Jones (Administrative Team/Social Work)
- KaSandra Rogiers (Board/Volunteer Attorney)
- Suzanne Root (Former Board/Volunteer Attorney/Strategic Planning Committee)
- Jodi Schatz (Administrative Team/Intake/Pro Bono/Training)

STRATEGIC PLANNING COMMITTEE

- Jeff Sotland, Chair
- Frank Cervone
- Deborah Cohen
- Matt Duncan (also Design Team)
- Dave Dzara
- Cate Galbally (also Design Team)
- Alisa Gifford (also Design Team)
- Jess Jones (also Design Team)
- Leah Katz (also Design Team)
- Shabrei Parker
- KaSandra Rogiers (also Design Team)
- Suzanne Root (also Design Team)

THE PROCESS BEHIND THE PLAN: HOW THIS STRATEGIC PLAN TOOK SHAPE

PHASE 1: DISCOVERY

From May to July 2020, in order to assess *Child Advocates'* current state and identify areas of focus for strategic planning, The New Group conducted:

- Eight one-on-one interviews and six focus groups with *Child Advocates* staff and volunteers;
- A quantitative analysis of program service and financial data; and
- A survey of *Child Advocates* volunteer attorneys, which received 109 responses.

Additionally, *Child Advocates* leaders conducted 23 external stakeholder interviews with 38 individuals in August and September 2020, hearing from a diverse sampling of child welfare community colleagues, donors, staff, and former clients.

Three reports detail the findings from this phase of work: *2025 Strategic Plan – Discovery Phase Internal Findings*, *2025 Strategic Plan – Volunteer Attorney Survey*, and *2025 Strategic Plan – Discovery Phase External Findings*. All three are included in the Appendix.

PHASE 2: DESIGN

From July to September 2020, The New Group led a Design Team comprised of *Child Advocates* staff and Board members. This group reflected on the findings from Phase 1 and looked ahead to the active strategic planning to be conducted in Phase 3. The group discussed complex future scenarios in order to encourage exploration of key issues. Their scenarios went forward to the Board of Directors in the next phase. The members of the Design Team are listed on page 14 and a copy of the Design Team scenarios is in the Appendix.

PHASE 3: STRATEGIC SCENARIOS

In the third phase of work, in October 2020, *Child Advocates'* Board of Directors contemplated three types of scenarios:

- *Crisis Scenarios* – what might occur given a significant decline in funding and/or a sudden leadership transition
- *Optimize Scenarios* – ways to “get better at what we do” and build infrastructure to support our steady growth. These topics addressed questions of considering children’s voice and safety; using data to better inform our practice and improve our outcomes;

diversifying leadership; improving staff satisfaction and development; and strengthening the volunteer model

- *Transformation and Growth Scenarios* – considering programmatic expansion in training, policy work, or number of clients served

Throughout these discussions, issues of racial justice and social equity informed every topic. The robust discussions during this phase allowed us to identify the Strategic Plan’s eight strategic goals.

KEY QUESTIONS THAT WERE CONSIDERED

As part of the strategic planning process, the Design Team, Strategic Planning Committee, and Board of Directors considered many key questions facing the agency. Debate over these questions informed strategic planning and led to decisions about the major goals and other important elements of this final Strategic Plan.

Some questions that were considered deserve particular mention here:

1. Should we move away from the volunteer attorney model toward staff attorneys?
Conclusion: No. The volunteer attorney model is central to Child Advocates’ work and yields many benefits: leveraging staff time, extending our reach into the community, and building more support and advocacy for children in the child welfare system. We should instead seek to strengthen it.
2. Should *Child Advocates* pursue continued growth and seek to serve more children?
Conclusion: No, not yet. After a period of rapid growth, it’s time to shore up the agency’s infrastructure before pursuing any additional growth.
3. Should we expand training programs to reach beyond people currently served?
Conclusion: No. We should instead focus on improving the practice of our two core audiences: our own volunteer attorneys and Philadelphia child welfare attorneys and professionals.
4. Should we expand our policy work? *Conclusion: No. We should instead focus it. As one Design Team member said, “It’s harder to move the needle if you are working on multiple needles.”*
5. Should we focus on longitudinal outcomes and expand programs to provide more longitudinal service? *Conclusion: No. We should stay focused on our core work with children, but we should instead improve longitudinal outcomes by partnering and connecting with other agencies working with older youth.*