

Innovating a future filled with
acceptance, inclusion and love



2019 ANNUAL REPORT

MESSAGE FROM OUR LEADERSHIP

In 2019, with your support, MDSC made a significant impact in the lives of people with Down syndrome and their families across the Commonwealth.

We advanced a wide range of initiatives to create more opportunities for people with Down syndrome to live meaningful, fulfilling lives throughout the lifespan.

Over the last 12 months we worked on everything from making systemic changes in disability policy to providing critical programs for individuals with Down syndrome and their families.

Key Program Offerings

Our Annual Conference delved deep into the promising developments in Down syndrome research and the exciting potential it has for the future. We helped families make sense of what's to come in Down syndrome research, and gave them confidence to navigate the research world in 2019 and beyond.

Our Parents First Call program provided new and expectant families with 24/7 support from our team of trained parent mentors. We now have more than 60 volunteers across the state who are available to listen, share their journeys, answer questions, and provide valuable information.

Our new playgroup, just for parents of children with Down syndrome from 8 to 12 years old, rounds out our program offerings so that now we have social activities for families and self advocates all the way from infancy through adulthood.

Meanwhile, we continue to offer a range of personalized supports that meet families "where they're at": a Single Mom's Social; a 'Family with Twins Social', baby massage and sign language classes; support groups for Spanish-speaking families and families of diverse backgrounds; Complex Needs Support Group; New Family Socials; and Grandparents Get Together.

A new joint collaboration with Heartbeats for Down Syndrome, which integrates the support group for cardiac patients with Down syndrome into our signature MDSC CARES Program, provides care packages for families whose children with Down syndrome are experiencing an extended hospital stay and/or ongoing complex medical care.



Maureen Gallagher



Jud DeCew

For the past two years, our Resource Parent Volunteer Program has provided personal support to MDSC families seeking resources and guidance related to education, including fact sheets and webinar materials. Through the program, parents of children with Down syndrome are trained on best practices in education and peer-to-peer support.

The MDSC's self-published education manual, Meaningful Inclusion for Students with Down Syndrome - A Resource Guide for Elementary Educators, has become an essential guide for special education teachers and parents here in Massachusetts and beyond. Now, we are excited to announce that in 2020, a revised 2nd edition will go to press. The manual has sold over 3,000 copies.

As part of our Strategic Plan, we are committed to serving individuals with Down syndrome for their entire lives, including during the teen years and throughout adulthood. Our Self Advocate Programs will continue to be a critical part of our programming.

Our Self Advocate Advisory Council gives self advocates with Down syndrome 22 and older opportunities to lead, network and socialize while advising MDSC on issues important to all individuals with Down syndrome throughout the Commonwealth.

Our signature Advocates in Motion (AIM) Program for teens and young adults ages 13 to 22 helps young people develop leadership and self-advocacy skills, form meaningful relationships with peers, and build self-confidence in an encouraging environment.

Statewide Advocacy

MDSC has made statewide advocacy a hallmark over the last 10 years, helping move legislation that is changing lives - the Down Syndrome Information Act, Real Lives Bill, National Background Check Bill, and the most recently passed Organ Transplant Bill.

Our 2019-2020 Statewide Legislative Platform includes two priorities for this 2-year session. The Higher Education Bill allows people with intellectual disabilities to access the Commonwealth's state colleges and universities to gain skills necessary to work and live as independently as possible as adults. The ABA Therapy Bill would require insurance companies to cover at-home ABA services for individuals with Down syndrome, when needed. In November, MDSC was at the MA State House, where MDSC Family Support Director Sarah Cullen presented testimony in support of the bill.

In March of 2020, due to Covid-19, our advocacy efforts have expanded to working with State and National organizations to ensure that people with Down syndrome and other disabilities are not disproportionately impacted. Legislative advocacy during the time of Covid-19 is as important as ever and we'll continue making our collective voices heard by connecting with lawmakers on a range of critical issues facing our community.

Public Awareness and Employment Initiatives

MDSC's Board of Directors last year once again made raising public awareness about our community as our organization's top priority. Through our Buddy Walk Program and Your Next Star Employment Campaign, we raise awareness at events throughout the state, online and in traditional news outlets.

It was another banner year for our Buddy Walk Program in 2019. We were thrilled to have a special return appearance by Massachusetts Governor Charlie Baker, who came with his wife Lauren. Governor Baker has been a steadfast supporter of policies and funding to support individuals with Down syndrome and other intellectual disabilities.

We were proud last year to take our Your Next Star Employment Program to the next level. In June 2019, MDSC piloted a comprehensive Your Next Star Academy, an ambitious attempt to

help transform the employment landscape for people with Down syndrome. The pilot served 12 young adults with Down syndrome with a weeklong bootcamp that helped participants sharpen their employment seeking skills, boost their confidence, and strengthen interpersonal and "people" skills to enable them to interact effectively and professionally with supervisors, co-workers, and clients.

Achieving our Strategic Plan

In 2020, our Management Team begins the final year of our Board of Directors-approved 5-year Strategic Plan, an ambitious blueprint for expanding our resources, programs and advocacy for the future.

At the center of our 2016-2020 Strategic Plan is designing a program-and-services model that serves individuals and families across the lifespan; builds a community that fosters and sustains a sense of belonging; and increases capacity to ensure that the MDSC has a sustainable financial foundation for the future.

Our program-and-services model will be achieved, in part, through the creation of a robust, accessible website with in-depth information on all topics related to Down syndrome. It will include a comprehensive, easily-accessible repository of best practices, resources and information on all things Down syndrome. The site will include four Centers of Excellence – the Center on Inclusive Education, National Parents First Call Training Center, Legislative Action Center, and our Your Next Star Employment Center.

So many of you, in your own individual way, have helped MDSC achieve our mission in 2019. Working together, we have had a tremendous impact.

Whether you served in a leadership role, significantly contributed to one of our walks, hosted a community fundraiser, made a contribution to one of our many programs, or funded a grant to make our work possible, we salute you for your support.

In closing, we look forward to working together with you to make critical strides to ensure our loved ones with Down syndrome have every opportunity for a meaningful fulfilling life. And we offer our best wishes for you and your family to stay healthy and safe in 2020.

Your leadership and support is truly valued and appreciated.



Maureen Gallagher, MS
Executive Director, MDSC



Jud DeCew, PhD
Board Chair, MDSC

ABOUT THE MDSC

The Massachusetts Down Syndrome Congress (MDSC), established in 1983, began as a non-profit organization made up of parents, professionals and anyone interested in gaining a better understanding of Down syndrome. Its roots trace back to a group of parents, in a living room in 1983, chatting about their children with Down syndrome and how they could connect and educate families, schools and communities. Thirty-five years later, with over 5,000 members, the MDSC has an energetic Board of Directors, a dynamic management team, and a vision to ensure that every person with Down syndrome has the opportunity to reach their full potential.

MISSION STATEMENT

To ensure that individuals with Down syndrome in Massachusetts are valued, included, and given the opportunities to pursue fulfilling lives by providing information, networking opportunities, and advocacy for people with Down syndrome and their families, educators, health care professionals, and the community-at-large.

OUR VISION

The MDSC wants to be recognized by people with Down syndrome and their families, educators, health care professionals, and the community-at-large as the preeminent organization in Massachusetts for information, networking, and advocacy for and about Down syndrome.

OUR PURPOSES

- To better educate the public about the possibilities and potential of all people with Down syndrome throughout their lifetime.
- To provide a clearinghouse of information and resources related to Down syndrome and other intellectual and developmental disabilities including best evidence-based practices in Massachusetts.
- To enable networking, social/friendship opportunities and direct supports for all people with Down syndrome and their families throughout Massachusetts.
- To advocate that all individuals with Down syndrome in Massachusetts have high quality education, which includes transition planning and life-long learning.
- To advocate for improved systemic change and policy in issues such as community inclusion and employment for adults with Down syndrome.
- To empower all people with Down syndrome to become effective self advocates.
- To advocate for all individuals with Down syndrome to have access to high quality medical services and research.
- To ensure that expectant and new families receive accurate and up-to-date information and desired supports.





INNOVATING A FUTURE FILLED WITH ACCEPTANCE, INCLUSION AND LOVE

When MDSC was founded in 1983, the world was a different place for our loved ones with Down syndrome.

Medical professionals were not trained on best practices for delivering a diagnosis, early intervention was rare, an inclusive education was virtually unheard of, and there was no expectation that students with Down syndrome would go on to college or the competitive workforce.

Fortunately, in part because of the work of MDSC, we have come a long way. Students with Down syndrome can now experience an inclusive education. Employers are starting to understand the value that employees with Down syndrome add to the workforce. Life expectancy has more than doubled, and the general public is becoming aware of the amazing qualities of people with Down syndrome.

As an organization and a community, we have Shaped the Future to get to where we are today. Still, there is a long way to go. That's why we chose as our theme for 2019, Shaping the Future, because as far as we've come, there is still so much more to do to ensure that all our loved ones with Down syndrome have every opportunity to lead inclusive, fulfilling lives in the community.

As the premier Down syndrome organization in Massachusetts, we understand that people with Down syndrome should have the ability to lead meaningful, fulfilling lives across the lifespan.

The future is indeed bright, and we know just how diligently we must work to get there.

2019 FINANCIAL STATEMENT

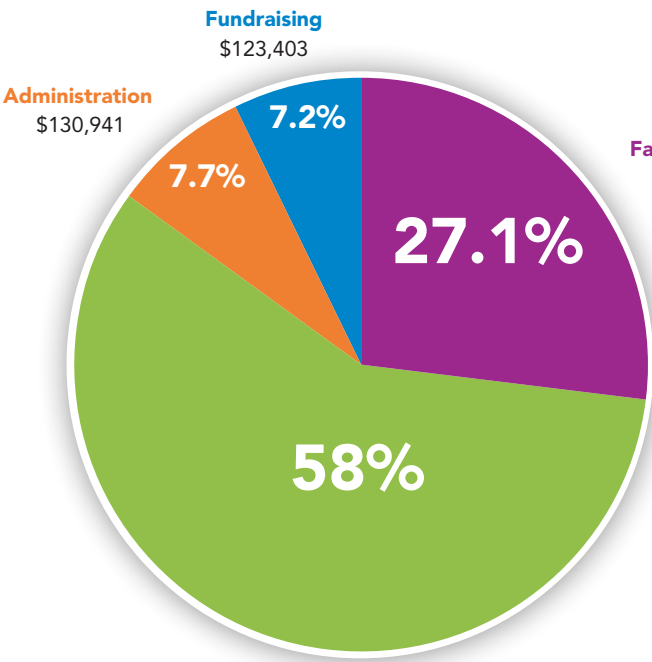
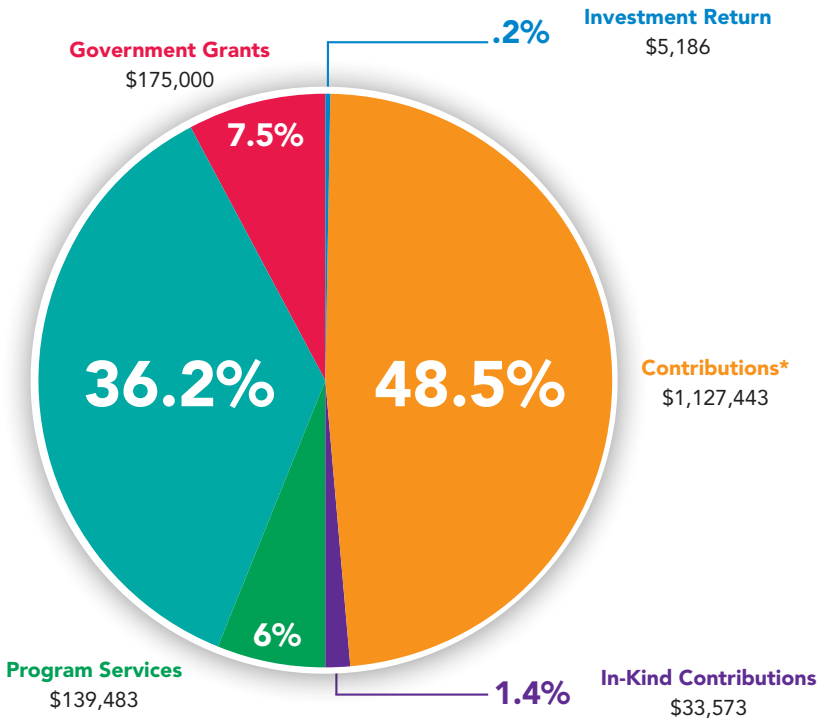
Connecting Revenue with Expenses

For Fiscal Year Ending June 30, 2019

REVENUE

Total Revenue \$2,322,551

Fundraising Events
\$841,866



EXPENSES

Total Expenses: \$1,710,043

*\$846,628 of the total amount of contributions are donor restricted funds.
For more detailed financial information, please contact us at mdsc@mdsc.org.



PARENTS FIRST CALL

Shining a light to guide families
on the road to acceptance

Ben and Marissa O'Donnell remember exactly where they were, driving to Logan Airport, when they got the call from Newton-Wellesley Hospital with the news that their first child would be born with Down syndrome.

"The last thing I remember her saying was 'The Massachusetts Down Syndrome Congress will be an amazing resource for you – I wish my other families had groups like them'," the O'Donnells recall. "We got to the airport, but we never boarded the plane. We sat in the parking lot and cried."

And so began the O'Donnells journey toward accepting the diagnosis and their future son Calvin. After several days that were "a blur," Marissa remembers finding a receipt on which she had scribbled "MDSC." Nervously, she reached out and within hours were paired with Parents First Call volunteers Oliver and Kinnon Foley, who had their own beautiful child with Down syndrome, Tenley. They were booked for dinner the following night.

"I believe that when we look back on our son's journey, that prenatal contact will remain one of the most important mile markers of his life," they say. "In Oliver and Kinnon's story we heard our own. In their candor, we were comforted and coached to honor our feelings. In their joy, we began to see what would be in store for us."

Thus began their relationship with the MDSC. While still pregnant, they attended an expectant parent small group get-together and a New and Expectant Parent social. They met more families like the Foley family and grew excited to join their ranks.

"When Calvin George O'Donnell joined the world on August 30, we only saw him as our own – not a diagnosis – proud of our extra special baby boy."

"The MDSC will forever be part of our family. When we couldn't see the road in front of us, they were there to shine a light. We will always be grateful that along with Calvin came the most beautiful, supportive community of new friends and families in Massachusetts and beyond."

*"The MDSC will forever
be part of our family.
When we couldn't see
the road in front of us,
they were there."*

Ben & Marissa O'Donnell

Parents First Call is a bedrock program for the MDSC, providing new and expectant families with 24/7 support from our team of trained parent mentors for more than a decade. PFC continues to grow in size and scope, with more than 60 volunteers across the state available to listen, share their journeys, answer questions, and provide valuable information.

Parents First Call now has more offerings than ever to meet the particular needs of each of our members. In 2019, we launched a new Playgroup, just for parents of children with Down syndrome from 8 to 12 years old, to add to our 4-7 Playgroup. And a new joint collaboration with Heartbeats for Down syndrome, which integrates the support group for cardiac patients with Down syndrome into our signature MDSC CARES Program. Parents First Call also hosts a Single Mom's Social; a 'Family with Twins Social', baby massage and sign language classes; support groups for Spanish-speaking families and families of diverse backgrounds; New Family Socials; and Grandparents Get Togethers.





162

new and expectant families received personal
one-on-one support, information and guidance
from our First Call Program in 2019

PUBLIC POLICY

Giving self advocates a voice about their future

There is one weekday each spring when 15-year-old Evan Messina of Cambridge, instead of going to school, excitedly puts on a suit and jacket and catches the T with his mom en route to the Massachusetts State House.

The special occasion is MDSC's Annual Down Syndrome Advocacy Day, where Evan is joined by hundreds of like-minded advocates ready to raise awareness with his legislators.

"He goes for the rally, and he loves to get dressed up," says Evan's mom Julie, but he's also coming to understand what his disability is and why he needs to speak up for himself. "It's therapeutic to be affecting change in a positive way, and it's been through MDSC's support that he first got involved in civic engagement," she says.

Julie, as president of the 3-21 Foundation, a non-profit education partner of MDSC, and Evan, now in high school at Cambridge Rindge and Latin, have a particular interest in MDSC's top priority legislation, the Higher Education Bill. It would give students with intellectual and developmental disabilities more opportunities to attend college.

"It's therapeutic to be affecting change in a positive way, and it's been through MDSC's support that he first got involved in civic engagement."

Julie Messina

"MDSC makes it so easy for everyone to advocate, providing the training materials and the paperwork. All we have to do is show up, have lunch, and meet with our legislators."

Still, Evan, a true self advocate, goes further, writing a personal letter to his legislators every year.

"I need help to learn," he wrote to Senator Joseph Boncore last year, "but I want to go to college because I want [to earn] a diploma."

As Julie says, "it's really important for him to advocate for himself and MDSC is giving him the chance."

MDSC has made statewide advocacy a hallmark over the last 10 years, establishing itself as a leader in disability policy by helping move legislation that is changing lives. The list of successes is long -- Organ Transplant Bill in 2016, Real Lives Bill in 2015, National Criminal Background Check Bill in 2014 and the Down Syndrome Information Act in 2012. On the national level, MDSC helped pass the Achieving a Better Life Experience (ABLE) Act, a landmark bill that gives people with disabilities the ability to create tax-free savings accounts.

In June 2019, we held our 6th Annual Advocacy Day at the State House, emceed by Mark Ockerbloom of Boston25 News. The event has become a launching pad for the eventual passage of our key policy initiatives, and we continue to push for our priority Higher Education Bill, which will remove barriers that preclude people with intellectual disabilities from attending college.





250

people attended the Buddy Walk on Washington
and Down Syndrome Advocacy Day, taking
action to create systemic change

EDUCATION

Providing critical guidance, resources, and support for educators and parents

As a member of MDSC's Education Task Force, Susan Connolly of North Grafton is intimately involved in MDSC's programming, using her own expertise to help improve educational opportunities for students with Down syndrome.

When her first son, Brendan, was born with Down syndrome, Susan and her husband Fred immediately engaged with the MDSC community through the Buddy Walk, D.A.D.S. program and Annual Conference.

"Brendan is doing great and it has a lot to do with the many resources and connections I've found through the MDSC."

Susan Connolly

Not long thereafter, Susan, a teacher by trade, discovered the immense value of MDSC's Educators Forum, where she gleaned information to help her in so many aspects of her life -- advocating for Brendan, developing professionally, assisting her fellow educators and becoming an ambassador for MDSC's educational programming.

"I've changed tremendously as a teacher because of MDSC," she explains. "I've been able to assist colleagues. I've gathered information from MDSC to bring to Brendan's school. I've given recommendations to implement a co-teaching model. I've also been someone who's reached out to other parents to make sure they know the MDSC is there for them."

Now, Susan says, she has the confidence to seamlessly integrate her various roles as parent, teacher and Education Task Force member. Every year she helps ensure her Grafton school district is well represented at the Educators Forum. And for Brendan's new teachers, she is sure to purchase and gift them with a new copy of MDSC's Educators Manual, a comprehensive guide of best practices for educating students with Down syndrome.

"I've given it to friends. I've highlighted things. I've said call me. I've said call the Task Force," she says.

"Brendan is doing great and it has a lot to do with the many resources and connections I've found through the MDSC."

In 2019, MDSC established a new collaboration with the 3-21 Foundation adding a parent-focused educational intervention program for sharing instructional strategies, resources and activities, which will improve academic outcomes for students with Down syndrome. In addition, MDSC's Education Resource Parent Volunteer Program provided personal support to MDSC families seeking resources and guidance related to their child's education. Thousands of families took advantage of MDSC's education-related workshops, webpages, conferences and webinars.





2,517

General and special educators, paraprofessionals, administrators, specialists and parents **learned best practices in educating students with Down syndrome** through MDSC webinars, workshops, educators guide and our two major conferences – the Educators Forum and the Annual Conference

ADVOCATES IN MOTION

Fostering Independence, Confidence & Self-Determination

Even before her daughter Amy was old enough to join MDSC's Advocates in Motion Program, Cathy Polewarczyk knew she would love it. "Amy couldn't wait to be a part of it. And when she turned 13, oh boy," she remembers.

Now, as an 8-year veteran of the program, Cathy can hardly believe how far Amy has come -- it's like she's a different person. "She was like velcro to me before," Cathy says. "Now, she knows everyone, and she absolutely loves it. That's a lot of growth in her."

In fact, every summer break Amy eagerly anticipates the email with the following year's A.I.M. schedule. When it arrives, it goes right on her calendar.

Amy herself says her favorite activities are yoga, the dances and karaoke. "I love being with friends," she says. But her mom points out just how much she's gotten out of the more skills-based aspects of the curriculum. "It's helped her to develop independence, her confidence, and her self-determination."

"She was like velcro to me before. Now, she knows everyone and she absolutely loves it. That's a lot of growth in her."

Cathy Polewarczyk

Amy's growth is perhaps best illustrated by her involvement in the Buddy Walk Program. As an integral, perennial member of Team AIM, Amy throws her full self into raising awareness and funds. With permission, she sets up shop in front of her local grocery store in Worcester.

"She'll go over, get the people's attention, and explain that she's raising money for AIM for the Buddy Walk," Cathy says. "She answers their questions really well. She's using her self-advocacy skills and she couldn't be prouder."

But the benefits of A.I.M. extend to the whole family, which Cathy, who served as A.I.M.'s facilitator for parent education programming, knows well.

"The guest speakers that have come and helped us through the transition years have been phenomenal," Cathy says. "Plus, the group is a great place for networking. Nobody is alone, there's no judgment, we share resources, and we have laughs."

In 2019, the MDSC's A.I.M. Teen & Young Adult Program expanded offerings and explored new territory while providing fun, challenging, educational programming for 107 teens and young adults from 13 to 22. During AIM Hangouts and socials, the youth participants brainstormed what their future holds while parents discussed employment and how their children can find their passion. In 2019, participants developed leadership and self-advocacy skills, formed meaningful relationships, and built self-confidence, not to mention having fun with dance, yoga and sports, and at events like their annual Halloween and holiday parties.





192

self advocates between 13 and 22 gained leadership skills, life skills, and made friends in our Advocates in Motion Program

PUBLIC AWARENESS

Helping families teach their communities about life with Down syndrome

Danielle and Anthony DeCotis of Middleton are fond of saying that the Buddy Walk & Family Festival is the best day of their year.

"I get to see so many old friends, and meet new people," says Danielle. "Everyone is happy to be there and we're like one big, happy family. Part of that is that everyone knows we're making a difference by supporting the MDSC and all their programs."

**"It's a lot of work,
but it's so worth it
—all our hard work
over the years HAS
made a difference."**

Danielle DeCotis

The day itself may be the DeCotis's favorite, but the "making a difference" part happens in the months leading up to the event, held every October during Down Syndrome Awareness Month. That's when Danielle and Anthony, with a huge supporting cast of friends and family, put the fun in fundraising. They hosted a "Whiskey & Wine Mixer" at their nightclub Mixx360, had bake sales at soccer games and organized fundraisers for Matthew's class.

Last year, the couple held an event that topped them all – a blowout birthday party at their house to celebrate Matthew's 10th birthday, two weeks before the walk for their Matthew's Troops Buddy Walk team.

As chairs of the Buddy Walk Committee, the DeCotis's enthusiasm put Matthew's Troops at or near the top of our Buddy Walk leaderboard year in and year out. "It's a lot of work, but it's so worth it," Danielle says. At Matthew's school's recent 4th grade Open House, she adds, "I sat there looking around at all the familiar faces of parents and their children who we've gotten to know and it hit me – all our hard work over the years HAS made a difference."

Hundreds of Buddy Walk Team Captains and families have made the Buddy Walk Program, with its three walks across Massachusetts, what it is today – a celebration of the lives of all people with Down syndrome.

Recognizing that people with Down syndrome should have every opportunity to lead inclusive fulfilling lives in the community, the MSDC has made public awareness a top priority.

In 2019, we celebrated 23 years of our signature Buddy Walk & Family Festival in Wakefield and 7 years of the Buddy Walk & Harvest Fair. Other public awareness and fundraising initiatives that MDSC members participate in include the Boston Marathon and Falmouth Road Race as well as our beloved annual Hockey Game with the Boston Bruins Alumni. We know that by working together to engage our community we can educate others about the immeasurable value all people with Down syndrome bring to the world.





7,700

families, self advocates and friends came together at our
Buddy Walks and other awareness and fundraising events
to celebrate the lives of people with Down syndrome

ADVANCING MEDICAL CARE AND RESEARCH

Improving lives through powerful partnerships

Over the past three decades, as Massachusetts has become a hub of innovative Down syndrome-related advancements – including cutting edge medical care and scientific research – MDSC has remained at the center of it all. We have done so by establishing our own initiatives as well as public and private partnerships including powerful collaborations on the state, regional and national levels.

In June 2019, our steadfast advocacy alongside disability partners around the country paid dividends when the National Institutes of Health announced a historic 65% increase in Down syndrome research funding.

Here in Massachusetts, we have developed fruitful alliances with each of the state's top-flight Down syndrome clinics – Mass General Hospital, Children's Hospital and the UMass Medical Center – as well as OB-GYN departments in all the major hospitals. And at our 35th Annual Conference in 2019 with support from our presenting sponsor the National Down Syndrome Society, we made research our theme, highlighting innovation in clinical trials as well as studies and initiatives underway nationwide that aim to improve the lives of people with Down syndrome.

That's not all. We formed a formidable partnership in 2019 with our neighbors at LuMind IDSC, joining forces to promote a common vision of improving the lives of individuals with Down syndrome. According to Lumind IDSC President and CEO Hampus Hillerstrom, his organization has found immense value in presenting and exhibiting at MDSC's conferences, as well as leveraging MDSC's network to recruit focus group participants.

"We are glad to be playing a supporting role as MDSC has gotten even closer to research in the last few years," Hillerstrom says, "and we have benefited tremendously from MDSC's ties to the community. It's been a mutually beneficial relationship."

Now, in 2020, as MDSC endeavors to collaborate on yet another research-based initiative – the New England Down Syndrome Research Symposium, scheduled for November 2020 – with the Alana Down Syndrome Center at MIT and the LuMind IDSC Foundation, we are continuing to work towards innovative approaches to improving the lives of all people with Down syndrome.

"MDSC has been at the center by establishing our own initiatives as well as public and private partnerships on the state, regional and national levels."

Our efforts in the area of medical care and research are deep and broad. We educate healthcare professionals through Grand Rounds and Operation House Call (a collaboration with The Arc of Massachusetts). We help families and researchers make mutually beneficial connections by tasking our Medical & Scientific Advisory Council with identifying the best studies to promote. We facilitate communication between healthcare providers and scientists to promote the development of best practices for providing medical care, therapies, and Down syndrome research. And we stay on top of the latest medical and scientific developments to ensure our members have access to up-to-date, accurate information and resources pertaining to Down syndrome. At the MDSC, we understand the promise and pitfalls of scientific innovations and strive to provide all the support and guidance our members need to make informed decisions.





855

Healthcare professionals received up-to-date accurate information about Down syndrome through MDSC medical outreach programs

SELF ADVOCATE ADVISORY COUNCIL & ALLEN CROCKER INTERNSHIP

Elevating opportunities for self advocates to take pride in their abilities

For Graham Campbell of Lexington, it was perhaps only natural that he would translate his love of music -- including classical and opera -- into a passion for playing piano. But it wasn't easy. "It's a big challenge for people with Down syndrome to learn to play piano," says his mother, Susanna, noting the difficulties with dexterity that accompany Down syndrome. "Even just isolating one finger takes a lot of practice."

But Graham has mastered that and so much more, including the complex process of learning to read music. The payoff has been priceless. "Music has been a great way for him to advance, express himself and feel confident."

**"His sense that people
love it is important to
him. MDSC has really
elevated opportunities
for him as a real,
professional musician."**

Susanna Peyton

Through his connection with MDSC and the Self Advocate Advisory Council, Graham has bolstered his self-expression and self-confidence both musically and otherwise.

While he played in church a couple times over the years and honed his performance skills at the Berkshire Hills Music Academy, it was at the MDSC Annual Conference in 2017 where he first performed for a crowd of hundreds at the DCU Center in Worcester, playing Für Elise at the formal Awards Luncheon.

Since then, he's appeared on stage for a crowd of thousands at MDSC's Buddy Walk & Family Festival and played an entire set at our annual MDSC Support Group Leader Retreat. But according to Susanna, what is special about an MDSC crowd is not the size or formality, but the attention and appreciation he gets.

"At MDSC, he's guaranteed to have an audience that is connected and excited, and knows how hard he's worked," she says. "His sense that people love it is important to him. MDSC has really elevated opportunities for him as a real, professional musician."

As a member of the Self Advocate Advisory Council, Graham has been involved in many other MDSC activities -- from dances, karaoke, and council meetings to the annual Advocacy Day at the State House and annual conference programming for self advocates.

And his involvement on the SAAC has only enhanced his sense of belonging in the MDSC community and in the world. "He has a real sense of 'I'm a person with Down syndrome'," says his mom. "That identity is something he's comfortable with and is proud of when he's performing at MDSC events. We are very grateful for that and for all MDSC does for all self advocates."

Our Crocker Internship and Self Advocate Advisory Council (SAAC) give self advocates like Graham opportunities to drive the MDSC mission, connect and lead. The 17-member SAAC advises the MDSC Management Team on issues of importance to self advocates. They meet every other month to plan events for peers, problem-solve issues, and discuss ways to get more peers involved in the MDSC and grow our adult community.

SAAC members took on leadership roles at the Annual Conference and Advocacy Day, organized a team for the Buddy Walk & Family Festival and sang the National Anthem at our Bruins Alumni charity hockey game.

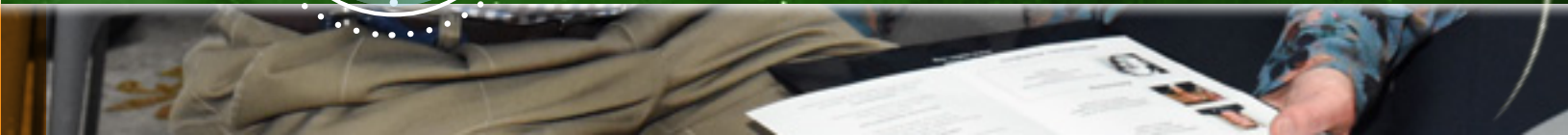


Photo by Keith Toffling



80

adults with Down syndrome participated in leadership activities and joined the new networking and socializing events organized by self advocates for self advocates



YOUR NEXT STAR EMPLOYMENT INITIATIVE

Connecting Self Advocates to Meaningful Employment Opportunities

When MDSC piloted its Your Next Star Job Preparedness Training Academy last June at the site of Colletley's Cookies' bakery in downtown Boston, Samantha Gibbs of Reading was one of a dozen individuals with Down syndrome who signed up.

The weeklong boot camp was eye opening for Sam, her parents Lisa and Rob said, as she learned about the sheer variety of jobs available in the competitive workforce. "Instead of saying 'I love it! I love it! I love it!' to everything, she realized that she can think about the vocation that she wants to choose, not just what she's offered," Lisa says.

The *Your Next Star* initiative was established in 2015 as an outreach vehicle to help employers understand the value that people with Down syndrome bring to the workplace. In 2019, with the launch of the Academy, the Your Next Star employment initiative was taken to the next level, directly serving job applicants with Down syndrome and building a pipeline between qualified candidates and our employer network.

"You know, I was skeptical at first, but she fits right in with everyone and we love having her a part of our family."

Bunratty's Tavern employee about their new hire, Samantha Gibbs

As Lisa and Rob discovered, the Academy was eye opening for them too. A parent orientation included an expert primer on navigating the maze of state and federal employment benefits. And simply seeing Sam go "off to work" every day, they say, "gave us pause to think, one day, she's actually going to be doing this."

After graduation, when Sam got a summer job waiting and busing tables at Bunratty's Tavern, she was ready, her parents say. "She had learned about being punctual and working hard at the Academy. I really think that experience set her up to be successful there."

Sam and her classmates who completed the YNS Academy are looking forward to meaningful, fulfilling, active lives including working in the community at a job of their choice.

2019 was another banner year for MDSC's Your Next Star (YNS) Employment Initiative with the launch of the YNS Job Preparedness Training Academy in June. A collaboration between MDSC, PriceWaterhouseCoopers' Boston office, Colletley's Cookies and 70/30 Partners, the heart of the Academy was a 32-hour intensive bootcamp that helped 12 participants sharpen their employment seeking skills, boost their confidence, and strengthen interpersonal and "people" skills. In the wake of the bootcamp, Academy staff worked with graduates to arrange paid internships in positions that aligned with their interests.



A photograph of three people smiling. In the center is a young girl with glasses and a pink and black striped shirt, holding a certificate. Behind her are two women, one in a floral top and one in a green cardigan. The background shows an office setting with a window and a fan.

YOUR
NEXT
STAR

CERTIFICATE
OF COMPLETION
This Certificate that
Samantha Gibbs

10,500

employers, human resource professionals, partners
and others reached through presentations of the
Your Next Star employment campaign

MDSC LEADERSHIP

MDSC Board of Directors

Board Officers:	Board Members at Large:		
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MDSC Management Team

Maureen Gallagher Executive Director	Nonie Darsigny Special Events Coordinator	Joshua Komyerov Communications & Operations Director
John Anton Legislative Advocacy Specialist	Jeanne Doherty Family Support Program Specialist	Katy Newman Family Support Program Specialist
Reaghan Bik Development Director	Colleen Endres Teen & Adult Services Director	Jacquie Sherman Executive Assistant / Project Manager
Elaine Crowley Administrative Director	Laura Green Program Specialist	Kristen Tenglin Membership Services Director
Sarah Cullen Family Support Director	Launa Kazeroid Resource Specialist of Western MA	

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