

Down Syndrome Network of Montgomery County, MD



STRATEGIC PLAN
2025-2029

CONNECT • EDUCATE • ADVOCATE

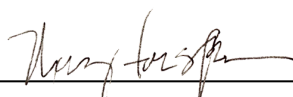
The process

Strategic planning serves as a planning activity for non-profit organizations distinct from operational plans and program service plans. While operational plans focus on day-to-day activities, and program service plans target specific stakeholder issues, strategic plans encompass broader objectives, aligning resources, and emerging opportunities to enhance the ability of the organization to carry out its mission. For the Down Syndrome Network of Montgomery County, MD (DSNMC), this strategic planning process establishes a more targeted and effective approach that will better position DSNMC to respond to the Down Syndrome community's evolving needs.

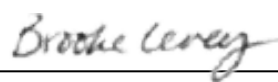
For a period of several months, DSNMC conducted a thorough evaluation, analyzing the challenges and trends through environmental scans, organizational document and data review, and dozens of stakeholder interviews and focus groups – encompassing more than 40 unique stakeholders across these sessions. This comprehensive review provided valuable insights, enabling informed decision-making and prioritizing initiatives based on the expertise of the board and staff, and importantly, the wisdom and lived experiences shared by families and individuals with Down Syndrome.

The selection of DSNMC's strategic priorities reflects a collaborative and inclusive effort involving staff and board members. Through a series of discussions, breakout sessions, and consensus-building activities, the team identified key objectives: enhancing communication to foster community belonging, supporting adults and transitioning youth, diversifying and strengthening resources, and evolving internal operations to meet future challenges. These priorities, collectively referred to as the CARE model—Communication, Achievement, Resources, and Evolution—form the cornerstone of DSNMC's mission to empower individuals with Down syndrome and their families.

These aligned priorities ensure a collective impact by fostering inclusivity, improving service quality, and creating a sustainable organizational structure. Ultimately, this approach solidifies DSNMC as a vital community resource, capable of adapting to health, educational, and social challenges facing our community while promoting resilience and sustainable growth.



Nancy Forsythe
DSNMC Board President



Brooke Levey
DSNMC Executive Director

Our Vision

We envision a world where all people with Down Syndrome feel a sense of belonging and are welcomed with fairness, enthusiasm, and encouragement while achieving their full potential through meaningful inclusion and unlimited opportunities.

Our Mission

Empower and support individuals with Down Syndrome, their families, and the broader community through education, partnerships, resources, and advocacy.



We Value

- The rights of people with Down syndrome to participate in decisions about their lives including choices about where they live, learn, work and play.
- The role of families in unlocking the development and potential of people with Down syndrome.
- The importance of a well-informed and accepting community.
- The diversity in our community, which will be reflected in our membership and board of directors.
- An engaged membership and competent leadership.
- The contributions of our volunteers.
- Grassroots education regarding policy issues.
- Research that is conducted within accepted human rights guidelines and focused on improving quality of life.
- The role professionals play in supporting the development and potential of people with Down syndrome.
- Creating opportunities for people with Down syndrome to be contributing members of the community.
- We value advocacy at all levels of government in support of self-determination, inclusion, and equity.

Introduction to the CARE Strategic Lens

The CARE strategic lens represents the four strategic priorities that will guide the Down Syndrome Network of Montgomery County as we continue to serve our community effectively and sustainably. These priorities—Communication, Achieve, Resources, and Evolution—reflect our commitment to addressing the needs of individuals with Down syndrome and their families while strengthening the organization’s capacity for long-term impact.

Each priority addresses a critical area of focus: fostering belonging through better communication; supporting individuals from birth to adulthood, in this Strategic Plan focusing on Transitioning Youth and Adults; ensuring financial sustainability; and enhancing organizational efficiency. By concentrating on these interconnected areas, the CARE model positions us to respond to evolving challenges, engage more deeply with our community, and ensure that the Down Syndrome Network remains a vital resource for years to come.





Communicate

Building a sense of belonging is at the heart of our mission, and effective communication is key to achieving it. This priority focuses on engaging less involved subpopulations within our community through enhanced communication strategies, intentional outreach efforts and a stronger and more cohesive brand identity. By fostering deeper connections, we aim to create a more inclusive and welcoming network for all.

Achieve

Supporting individuals with Down syndrome throughout their transition to adulthood and beyond is essential. This priority emphasizes creating pathways for housing, employment, post-secondary education, and lifelong supports, while also recognizing the unique needs of transitioning youth. By providing resources and guidance during the critical period of youth transitioning to adulthood, we can bridge the gap between childhood services & programs and adulthood, ensuring individuals with Down syndrome and their families are empowered to navigate this stage with confidence. A holistic approach that addresses both immediate and long-term needs fosters independence, inclusion, and a fulfilling quality of life.

Resources

A strong and sustainable future requires diverse and reliable funding streams. This priority focuses on broadening our financial base through grant development, endowments and trusts, expanding partnerships with business sponsors, and increasing revenue generation from program fees and fee-for-service programs. By building robust and varied resources, we can ensure long-term financial stability and continued support for our programs and services, while also enhancing our capacity to grow and innovate.

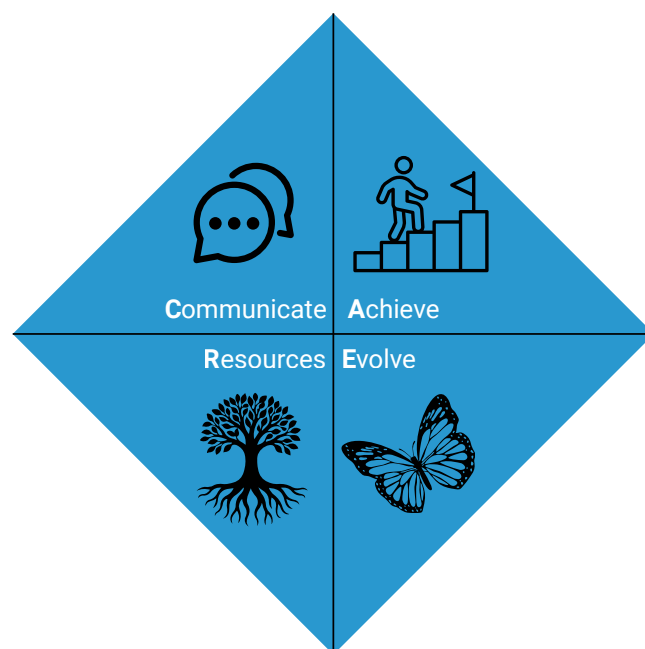
Evolve

To meet the growing needs of our community, our organization must evolve. This priority centers on enhancing formal staff structures and processes, improving the employee value proposition through better compensation packages & benefits (both paid and unpaid), and refocusing the board's efforts on strategic governance, fundraising, and oversight. By strengthening our internal framework, we can better serve our community with efficiency and purpose.



Unpacking the Guiding Image

This guiding image is structured as a diamond, evoking the form of a compass rose to symbolize its purpose in providing strategic direction for the Down Syndrome Network of Montgomery County over the next five years. Each quadrant represents a critical priority area, organized to reflect both their standalone importance and their interconnected relationships. The quadrants include two actionable verbs, Communicate and Evolve, highlighting that—amidst all the organization’s ongoing efforts—there will be a focused emphasis on enhancing communication and guiding the evolution of the organization to meet future needs. These dynamic actions are placed in positions to suggest forward motion and growth.



In contrast, the other diagonal focuses on two target activities, Achieve and Resources, which represent the community's core needs and the tools required to sustain and expand the network's impact. This structural placement suggests a critical balance between supporting adults and ensuring that resources are robust enough to meet evolving demands. The diamond layout further underscores the synergistic relationships between these priorities. Communication strategies are envisioned to directly support resource development and to enhance programming that fosters achievement for our members with DS. The organization’s evolution is intended to strengthen its capacity to serve adults and generate sustainable resources. This interwoven structure highlights the integrated approach required to achieve the organization’s mission and long-term vision.



Communicate Icon

The Communicate Icon is designed to capture the multifaceted nature of the communication strategy. The speech bubble includes dots that signify the integration of technology, particularly mobile devices, which are central to strategic communication efforts over the next five years. The outer circle, transected by lines, suggests the need for the organization's circle of influence to expand intentionally. These lines also evoke the image of a target, reinforcing that effective communication is not about broadcasting broadly but rather about crafting tailored, intentional messages that resonate with specific audiences. This icon reflects the goal of building deeper, more meaningful connections across all subpopulations.



Achieve Icon

The Adult Icon focuses on the core areas of support that the organization seeks to enhance for transitioning youth and adults with Down syndrome.



Resources Icon

The Resources Icon depicts a tree, symbolizing organic growth and vitality in funding and support. The branching canopy represents the expansion of opportunities, while the deep and spreading roots highlight the importance of sustainability. This imagery reflects the need for a diversified funding strategy that includes strong, deep relationships with donors, businesses, and other stakeholders. By emphasizing the importance of foundational relationships and natural growth, this icon encapsulates the organization's commitment to long-term financial stability and resource development.



Evolve Icon

The Evolve Icon, featuring a butterfly emerging from a chrysalis, captures the essence of the organization's transition toward its next stage of growth. This imagery symbolizes transformation, growth, and the realization of potential. It also calls back to the closing moments of the strategic planning retreat, where the group reflected on the quote beneath the sculpture in the courtyard, "Without change, there would be no butterflies." This icon represents the organization's commitment to evolving into a more structured and impactful entity while retaining its core mission and values.

Priority Area: Communicate

Key Strategies

C1. Develop and Implement an Outreach-Oriented Communication Strategy

Create a consistent and engaging multifaceted communication presence tailored to reach underserved subpopulations within our community, including multilingual content and targeted campaigns to build awareness and foster inclusivity within the community.

Key Activities

C1.1: Conduct an annual communications and website analysis to assess current engagement levels and identify gaps in reaching underrepresented groups. Consider development of analytics to track website, social media and other communications data.

C1.2: Using the traditional newsletter content, begin migrating multilingual content to social media, including success stories, event promotions, and educational resources, to broaden the reach, relevance, and inclusivity of social media platforms.

C1.3: Begin a weekly short-form video (e.g., Reels, TikTok, etc.) storytelling calendar giving a spotlight on why people connect to the organization, designed to highlight the breadth of stakeholders in the community—including individuals with Down Syndrome, families (including families that do not speak English as a first language), business sponsors, donors, partners, etc.

Priority Area: Communicate

Key Strategies

C2. Expand Community Outreach Initiatives

Launch a series of targeted outreach programs, including partnerships with local schools, healthcare providers, and community organizations, to connect with less engaged populations and encourage participation in events and programs.

Key Activities

C2.1: Expand partnership with Montgomery County Public Schools to enhance participation in events, open houses, and targeted information-sharing initiatives; leverage existing efforts, such as IEP support workshops, advocacy training, and outreach to connect with and empower families from underserved populations within our community.

C2.2: Organize an annual CME/CE event for healthcare, OT, PT, SLP, etc. designed to engage and grow the local network of health professionals with connection to the organization and with the local Down Syndrome Community.

C2.3: Develop a "Community Ambassador Program," recruiting and training volunteers from underrepresented subpopulations to act as liaisons and promote the network's activities in their communities.

Priority Area: Communicate

Key Strategies

C3. Elevate and Strengthen Organizational Brand Identity

Enhance our brand identity to ensure it reinforces the organization's mission, resonates with key constituencies such as donors and potential employers of individuals with Down syndrome, and strengthens our position as a trusted advocate and resource.

Key Activities

C3.1: Collaborate with a branding agency or consultant to craft an updated visual identity and messaging framework, including a refreshed logo, color scheme, and tagline that highlight the organization's mission, impact, and alignment with donor and employer interests.

C3.2: Redesign the website to reflect the new brand identity, incorporating employer-focused resources, donor success stories, and accessibility features, while ensuring streamlined navigation to engage key constituencies effectively.

C3.3: Develop a comprehensive style guide and conduct training sessions for staff and board members on applying the new brand consistently across all communications, including email, social media, presentations, and print materials.

C3.4: Conduct focus groups with representatives from key constituencies—donors, potential employers, and families of individuals with Down syndrome—to gather feedback on the new branding directions and ensure they resonate with their expectations, values, and needs.

Priority Area: Achieve

Key Strategies

A1. Build a Vibrant Social and Community Network for Self-Advocates

Foster opportunities for adults and transitioning youth with Down syndrome to build friendships, strengthen skills, and develop independence through fun, engaging activities and peer-driven networks.

Key Activities

A1.1: Expand staff support for the Self-Advocate Community Network (SACN) to include regular in-person and virtual social events, some of which should be joint with the teen groups, such as game nights, outings, skill-building workshops, and community service projects, designed to foster connections, and build confidence in transitioning youth and adults.

A1.2: Develop a staff-supported, self-advocate-led ambassador program within SACN, training self-advocates to plan and lead social events to represent the organization in the community, and to mentor transitioning youth in building these skills.

A1.3: Support families and caregivers of transitioning youth and adults in navigating the educational and adult services and financial systems with programming that maximizes familiarity with programs as well as inclusion and independence.

Priority Area: Achieve

Key Strategies

A2. Create a Hybrid Ecosystem for Employment and Career Support

Develop hybrid tools and partnerships to connect adults with Down syndrome to meaningful employment opportunities and career growth resources.

Key Activities

A2.1: Develop a database of employers currently employing individuals with Ds in our community. Build recognition of these employers into our Donor Stewardship program.

A2.2: Develop an employer outreach program, including online resources posted on our website, featuring the benefits of hiring individuals with Down syndrome, focusing on local success stories, best practices, and accommodations.

A2.3: Leveraging our communication channels, regularly feature items related to career readiness and employment, including the role of 'champions' in stimulating interest in employing individuals with DS in an organization.

A2.4: Develop a campaign to inform our membership about the importance of their role as internal 'champions' in stimulating employment of people with disabilities in their workplaces.

A2.5: Create a hybrid workshop series to assist with career readiness skills tailored to individuals with Down syndrome, and accessing supportive technology such as generative AI (like ChatGPT), online career/interest inventories, and online interview prep.

Priority Area: Achieve

Key Strategies

A3. Enhance Housing Independence with Technology and Community

Support Leverage innovative tools and resources to support housing independence for adults with Down syndrome, whether independently or within their family's household.

Key Activities

A3.1: Leveraging our communication channels, create a recurring feature story on an innovation in smart home technology (e.g., voice assistants, automated lighting, and wearable emergency devices) to support independent living for adults with Down syndrome in their own homes or shared spaces.

A3.2: Leveraging our communication channels, create a recurring "Home Independence Tip" feature to help families share routines and modifications within their homes that empower adults with Down syndrome to take on more independent living responsibilities while living with parents/caregivers.

A3.3: Launch the "OOF: Outstanding Opportunities to Fail" parent support group, a program that creates a safe space for families to discuss the anxieties, challenges, and successes of fostering independence for their adult children. Through facilitated meetings, parents will share strategies for engineering controlled opportunities for their children to experience failure and growth, while building a network of support to manage the emotional and practical aspects of this transition.

Priority Area: Resources

Key Strategies

R1. Expand Board Engagement in Donor and Sponsorship Recruitment

Equip and empower board members to take an active role in cultivating relationships with donors, sponsors, and supporters to secure sustainable funding.

Key Activities

R1.1: Develop a training program for board members to enhance their skills in donor cultivation, including storytelling techniques and leveraging personal networks for sponsorship opportunities.

R1.2: Revise the donor stewardship plan to assign board members to manage relationships with existing, long-term sponsors (e.g., SUW sponsors). This approach allows board members to gain hands-on experience with sponsorship stewardship, builds their confidence, and frees staff to focus on soliciting new sponsors and expanding sponsorship outreach.

R1.3: Establish a board-led task force dedicated to the development and promotion of a trust or endowment, ensuring long-term financial security for the organization.

R1.4: Conduct a strategic evaluation of the organization's funding portfolio to intentionally set goals for growing specific revenue streams (e.g., grants, sponsorships, fee-based programs) while monitoring and, if necessary, slowing growth in other areas to ensure a sustainable and balanced funding approach. This evaluation will clarify the role of each revenue source in securing the organization's long-term stability

Priority Area: Resources

Key Strategies

R2. Increase Corporate Partnerships to Diversify Revenue Streams

Develop and expand opportunities for corporations to engage with the organization through sponsorships, cause marketing, and volunteer initiatives.

Key Activities

R2.1: Launch a "Corporate Partner Program" with tiered sponsorship opportunities, recognizing corporate contributions through branding on events, materials, and digital platforms.

R2.2: Host an annual corporate engagement breakfast or luncheon to share the organization's mission, highlight partnership opportunities, and showcase success stories.

R2.3: Develop co-branded initiatives with corporate partners, such as "Round-Up for Down Syndrome" campaigns at local businesses, where customers can contribute directly to the organization's mission.



Priority Area: Resources

Key Strategies

R3. Establish a Focus on Strategy-Aligned Grants

Target grants that align closely with the organization's core mission and strategic priorities, leveraging existing relationships and new opportunities to maximize funding success.

Key Activities

R3.1: Develop a grant prospecting plan that prioritizes funders supporting initiatives for individuals with disabilities, family support, and inclusive community development that aligns with our strategic plan.

R3.2: Build collaborative grant proposals by partnering with other organizations, such as schools, healthcare providers, or housing initiatives, to increase competitiveness and expand the scope of funded projects.



Priority Area: Resources

Key Strategies

R4. Expand Fee-Based Revenue Opportunities

Develop and promote revenue-generating programs and services to diversify funding streams and increase financial sustainability.

Key Activities

R4.1: Expand fee-for-service programs that align with the organization's mission, such as workshops for families, training programs for employers, or consulting services for businesses on inclusive practices.

R4.2: Establish program fees for existing activities, such as social or career-readiness events, while offering financial assistance for families in need to ensure inclusivity.

R4.3: Evaluate and adjust pricing structures for fee-based services annually, ensuring competitiveness and alignment with organizational goals for cost recovery and growth.



Priority Area: Evolve

Key Strategies

E1. Clarify Board and Staff Responsibilities for the Future

Redefine and align the roles of the board and staff to enhance organizational efficiency, focus on strategy, and ensure operational effectiveness.

Key Activities

E1.1 Using the strategic priorities, create a multi-year staffing plan that supports organizational capacity to accomplish the strategic goals.

E1.2: Using the strategic plan, re-define role descriptions to be more strategy-aligned, focusing the board on governance, fundraising, and strategy while delegating programming and day-to-day operations to staff.

E1.3: Update Bylaws & develop Board Handbook that outline expectations, responsibilities, and best practices, ensuring clarity and consistency in governance.

E1.4: Reformat board and committee meeting agendas to emphasize progress on strategic plan, where board and staff jointly task analyze key activities, identify priorities and success metrics, and ensure alignment and accountability across roles.



Priority Area: Evolve

Key Strategies

E2. Formalize Organizational Processes and Policies

Establish comprehensive policies and streamlined procedures to support long-term organizational growth and accountability.

Key Activities

E2.1: Develop and adopt a formal Operations Manual that includes policies on finances, communications, human resources, employee conduct, and program management.

E2.2: Revise onboarding and training programs for new staff and board members to ensure a consistent understanding of processes, values, and strategic priorities.

E2.3: Conduct an annual policy review to identify areas for updates or new policy development, ensuring compliance with legal standards and alignment with strategic goals.

Priority Area: Evolve



Key Strategies

E3: Enhance the Employee Value Proposition to Improve Talent Acquisition and Retention

Strengthen the organization's ability to attract and retain high-quality talent by focusing on benefits, professional development, and workplace culture.

Key Activities

E3.1: (Funding-Dependent): Introduce stipends for professional development, tuition reimbursement for relevant certifications, incentive programs for meeting goals, and exploration of benefits packages. Consider enhancements to benefits including paid time off and retirement.

E3.2: (Non-Funding-Dependent): Create and promote flexible work policies, including remote work options and adjustable hours, to support work-life balance.

E3.3: Build a culture of recognition, including public acknowledgment during board meetings to boost morale and engagement.

This initiative will position DSNMC for long-term financial and organizational sustainability.

We are diversifying our financial resources. We are launching a fee-for-service structure for select programs and developing targeted marketing to build awareness and offer simple scholarship access. The BOD is engaging in new donor cultivation strategies and analysis of internal donor metrics will guide fundraising decisions. Peer benchmarking with successful Ds affiliates provides an assessment of the adequacy of our revenue/expenses profile and offers insights into impactful financial health.

We will bring sustainability and professionalism to our organization. We will complete the documents that govern our operations and practices to ensure effective governance. To better predict and plan for needs for personnel, we will conduct a staffing analysis to identify gaps, redundancies, and priorities. Continued consultant support will help ensure lasting alignment of governance, staffing, and revenue goals.

Acknowledgement

The Down Syndrome Network of Montgomery County would like to acknowledge and thank those who contributed to the development of this strategic plan. We are grateful to the following individuals and organizations:

- Evident Analytics
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- DSNMC Staff
- Education Committee
- Grupo Latino
- Self-advocate Community Network
- Transitioning Youth and Adult Committee
- New Family and Medical Outreach Committee