

2021-2024

Strategic Plan



*Approved
May 15, 2021*

Introduction

For 50 years, MEND has served the most vulnerable families, individuals, and seniors, *with dignity and respect*. Over the decades, MEND has grown from an agency operating out of a Valley garage to become a trusted community anchor, responding to the needs of thousands of vulnerable community members with crisis services and long-term intensive case management supports. Our services have remained sensitive and responsive to the changing needs of the community even as the agency has operated with fiscal constraints.

Those who access direct services at MEND tend to be predominantly low-income, people of color, and homeless or at-risk of being homeless, who reside in the San Fernando Valley. From its founding, MEND has created and sustained a welcoming environment that embraces all races, cultures, and people. We approach our work as a partner with the people we serve, employing non-discriminatory practices at all times. We listen to our community and invite their feedback in surveys, focus groups and questionnaires.

The strategic plan reflects these values and engagement with the community.

MISSION

With dignity and respect, MEND's mission is to meet the immediate needs of individuals and families and increase their access to opportunities that strengthen their capacity to thrive.

VISION

All individuals and families served by MEND flourish for generations to come.

Today, MEND operates several key programs and services:

- Community Nourishment Programs which include Food Bank, Food Pantry, Buen Provecho Farmer's Market and Little Health Market
- Clothing Center, including diaper and personal care product distributions
- Homeless Care Services, which includes providing fresh clothing, a bag of food, and a grab and go meal from our kitchen
- Comprehensive Case Managed Services: Family Support and Wellness Programs (Pathways to Wellness and Hope & Care Community Ambassador Program)

During the development of the last strategic plan, the leadership team and the Board of Directors emphasized the importance of offering both relief from the effects of poverty and providing the level of support needed to move clients toward thriving. The 2018-21 strategic plan also created the framework for an agency turnaround as, at that

point, MEND carried significant debt and accumulated deficits of over \$1.4 MM between 2011 and 2017. The turnaround was accomplished, and the organization is in a strong position programmatically and financially.

To sustain this, our Board and executive staff have put in place strict oversight measures that ensure that MEND maintains healthy financial reserves and budgets. But these measures were also critical to ensure that MEND can meet the needs of the community, thus ensuring efficient delivery of services, during normal and uncertain times.

The key accomplishments over the last three years included:

- Establishing reserves for the first time in the agency's history and having sufficient cash on hand to weather occasional shortfalls.
- Eliminating all debt and returning the organization to fiscal health.
- Pursuing and receiving local, state, and federal funds for the first time in the agency's history, projected to reach just under \$1MM for FY 2020-21.
- Launching comprehensive case managed services to vulnerable families.
 - The **Family Support Program** (FSP), which launched in the summer of 2018, focuses on those families who have depended on MEND for essential services for 10+ years, including those who have relied on support for multiple generations. Guided by individualized plans created collaboratively with a case manager, over the two years of its existence, the program has enrolled and worked with 71 families, even during the pandemic, helping them address and improve overall functioning and self-sustaining.
 - The **Pathways to Wellness** (PtW) program, kicked off in 2019 (just months before COVID-19 struck), helps food-insecure clients with chronic conditions improve their health and wellness. PtW works with about 250 participants each year helping them access food resources, while addressing the issues that contribute to their health challenges. In 2020, to limit exposure to COVID infection, enrolled clients received home deliveries of 27,156 pounds of food – enough for 22,630 meals.
 - As the northeast San Fernando Valley became the epicenter of COVID-19 infections in late 2020, MEND started and deployed the **Hope & Care** program, whose outreach teams go out into the community to offer mental health and COVID information and resources (such as for testing and vaccines.) as well as PPE and home sanitation kits. The team conducts thousands of instances of door-to-door canvassing per month (reaching 18,000 individuals in 2020). Funding for this program, a mix of federal, state, and local dollars, continues through June 2022.

COVID-19: A Time for Transformation

In 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic required an agile and flexible response to ensure continuation of our services – and meet the expanded need caused by the economic repercussions of the crisis. During this time, we found ourselves taking an even more critical look at our programs, operations, and sustainability as we prepared our next strategic plan.



Defining Strategy

*"Strategy without tactics is the slowest route to victory.
Tactics without strategy are the noise before defeat." Sun Tzu*

As we began our look ahead, we considered the many theories and approaches to strategic planning. Chief among the points of discussion among executive leadership and the Board's strategic plan committee was to develop a shared vocabulary, particularly regarding what is considered strategic and what is considered tactical.

Too many nonprofits lay out goals, tactics, and activities to achieve growth, hit targets, make improvements, or achieve key performance indicators, and call them strategy. For MEND, the two are quite different. Strategy is not daily routine tasks.

Strategy is visionary and aspirational – a picture of the desired future based on information, experience, analysis, stakeholder input, grounded in a realistic, achievable framework. Strategic thinking also outlines the resources needed to achieve the vision.

Tactics are the concrete actions required to execute the goals and objectives framed within the strategy. The timeframe is short, and the results are tangible.

Sue Barrett in *Smart Company* magazine asserts that to define strategy thorough assessment is key: you must "decide what challenges you are solving, understand the current realities, and recognize that core competencies drive the value proposition for our stakeholders." Barret asserts that being strategic requires a combination of things:

understanding core competencies, taking some risks, focusing on the future, and “making... decisions based on evidence and calculated hunches.”¹

We also knew based on experience that we had to avoid rapid growth in too many directions as well as the trap of “we’ve always done it this way.” There are many “lanes” in which we can serve our community but trying to be in all of them is a surefire way to repeat the past. Ann Latham in Forbes states, “Without a strategic framework... the organization will run in too many different directions, accomplish little, squander profits, and suffer enormous confusion and discord.”²

In his book Good Strategy, Bad Strategy³, Richard Rumelt asserts, “The most basic idea of strategy is the application of strength against weakness. Or if you prefer, strength applied to the most promising opportunity...A good strategy doesn’t just draw on existing strength; it creates strength.”

Strategic Issues Analysis

Developing our strategic framework required an honest analysis of our challenges and a careful attention to community needs.

Process/Stakeholder Participation

The Center for Nonprofit Management was engaged to conduct a comprehensive community needs assessment (CNA), which was completed in early 2020. The process included gathering input through interviews, surveys and focus groups from key stakeholders such as community members, program participants, and staff – as well as data gleaned from external sources such as the U.S. Census Bureau, the Federal Register, Aspen Institute, the City of Los Angeles, and various news outlets, among others.

Key strategic opportunities that emerged include:

- Modification of service delivery strategies to address transportation barriers; consider opportunities to provide services locally in high need neighborhoods either through expansion, co-location, or even mobile services.
- Consider other high-need communities and expand populations served (e.g., those above poverty line but below living wage)
- Consider modifying days and hours of service. For the clients that are working or who have childcare responsibilities, it is often difficult to participate in programs offered only during regular working hours.
- Identify options for childcare that encourage parents’ participation in MEND services.
- Consider expanding program eligibility to those living just above the poverty line and up to living wage. Local data shows that the cost of rent alone places an

¹ <https://www.smartcompany.com.au/marketing/sales/so-what-does-being-strategic-really-mean/>.

² <https://www.forbes.com/sites/annlatham/2017/10/29/what-the-heck-is-a-strategy-anyway/?sh=ccca1537ed84>

³ Rumelt, R. (2017). *Good Strategy/Bad Strategy: The difference and why it matters* (Main ed.). Profile Books.

extreme burden on these individuals and families, which places them at risk of falling into homelessness.

- Expand the Family Support Program so that more families can be connected with services and resources specific to individual needs (like homeless diversion or support accessing services available to undocumented community members), particularly in moments of crisis (e.g., facing eviction and homelessness, loss of a job). Consider a similar case managed model for individuals.
- Explore opportunities to increase population-specific services for seniors (age 55+) who are at greater risk of social isolation, homelessness, and chronic health conditions.
- Evaluate opportunities to increase household income: entrepreneurship, paid transitional jobs, job placement & retention services
- Expand financial literacy classes to include a focus on helping individuals and families understand various public benefits, and to create a plan to increase earned income while decreasing reliance on public benefits.
- Increase access to group and individual counseling to give MEND clients the tools and capacities to work through trauma and periods of poor mental health. Group interventions can foster trusting relationships and create a system of support where they can help each other in times of need.

In addition to the needs assessment, staff, executive leadership, and Board of Directors participated in surveys to complete a SWOT analysis as well as further assessment current programming, identification of historical fundamental challenges, risks in the current environment, and delineating actions to overcome those challenges and risks.

SWOT Analysis	Strengths <i>(Internal)</i>	Weaknesses <i>(Internal)</i>
	Opportunities <i>(External)</i>	Threats <i>(External)</i>

Strengths (Internal)

- Loyal Donors/Funders
- Strong Fundraising & Marketing Strategy
- Increasing Financial Stability
- Board Moving More Toward Governance; Supportive, Credible
- Strong Leadership Team and Staff - Unity
- More Proactive Decision Making
- Culture of Respect, Dignity, Integrity, Transparency, Ethics
- Internal Controls
- Family Support Program
- Food Programs
- Adaptable & Agile
- Reputation/History/Community Connection
- Volunteers

Weaknesses (Internal)

- Fear of Change/ Board Slow to Make Decisions, Disengaged
- Sacred Cows/ Set in our Ways
- Under-staffed/ Overreliance on Volunteers/EE Comp
- Lack Income Diversity/Avoiding Gov S/Overreliance on Foundations
- Still Financially Fragile
- Doing Too Much, Little True Innovation
- Not addressing root cause of poverty/Lack of transformative change
- Need Stronger Outcomes Measurement System/Data
- Clothing Program
- Low Brand Recognition Outside Core Supporters
- Facility Shortcomings – renovations required to repurpose space; too little parking; not using physical space of building efficiently
- Outdated technology

Opportunities (External)

- Pursue Deep Collaborations/Co-Locate Services
- Government Funded Services
- Policy-Advocacy
- Cost Sharing Models/Sub-contracting
- Programs That Improve Clients' Situation
- Enhance Outcomes Measurement System To Show Real Impacts
- Evolve Business Model/Diversify Income/Social Enterprise
- Reactivate More Donors/Increase Planned Giving & Major Gifts
- Increase Brand Recognition through Cause Partnerships
- Leverage COVID service recipients as small dollar donors/volunteers
- Come through COVID intact
- Renovate Building for more flexible space; expand parking lot

Threats (External)

- Continued COVID Disruptions/Potential 50th Gala Cancellation
- Uncertainties about Funding/Funding Cuts/Decreased Donations
- Competition for Funding
- Increasing Client Need
- Funder Changing Priorities/Breaks After Decades Of Support
- Others' Competitive Edge
- Economic Uncertainties
- Lack of Awareness of MEND

Between 2018 and now, MEND experienced dramatic upheavals as a part of the necessary turnaround and realignment that was part of the last strategic plan. Carefully considered decisions were made to:

- *Sell our secondary property.* The original MEND building housed the education and training programs mentioned below. Selling this 18,000 square foot building supplied us with the cash to retire debt and build healthy financial reserves.
- *Close underperforming and underfunded programs.* Our education and training programs and free clinic, while well-intentioned, were not achieving measurable impact and as a result were underfunded. Though we attempted to lease the clinic to a licensed federally qualified health center (FQHC), we found none could justify the cost required to build a practice in a fairly saturated market.

A collaborative monograph written by Leap Ambassadors Community and others, entitled "Funding Performance: How Great Donors Invest in Grantee Success" the authors outline several phases of change for nonprofit organizations.

They point out these are not necessarily linear phases nor are they experienced by every nonprofit. Likewise, an organization may cycle through several phases. In brief, they are:

- **Crisis phase** is characterized by cost-cutting, renegotiation, and even fire sales of properties. Cash-flow planning is the most important financial tool.
- **Survival phase** means the imminent danger of closing has passed, and leaders have the breathing room to develop six-months-and-beyond scenarios using conservative financial projections.
- **Stabilization phase** lets organizations restructure to focus more on core mission or programs, pursue alternative management models, or become part of a more stable entity.
- **Reimagining phase** provides an opportunity to rethink how mission and programs get done. ⁴

As we assessed our key strategic issues and institutional culture in the context of the last several years of intentional change as well as the unplanned impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic, MEND has moved from crisis, through survival and into the stabilization phase. We are also poised to move into reimagining as we stand on steady and solid ground.

⁴ https://leapambassadors.org/funding-performance-monograph/?utm_medium=email&utm_source=sharpspring&sslid=MzMxNTQwMzc2NDA0AAA&sseid=MzlyMLM0NTGxtAAA&jobid=a3f479a5-8d4f-457b-8858-534830f23ec3

Considering how historical decisions created our challenges, the Board and executive leadership assessed our fundamental challenges and solutions to avoid repeating them as illustrated in the table below.

Fundamental Challenges	Solutions to Avoid Repeating History
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “Because we always have” thinking, retaining underperforming legacy programs • Saying yes when we should have said no • Launching well-meaning programs without sufficient thought as to whether they were financially sustainable • Approving deficit budgets and assuming debt • Fundraising strategy was not unified or consistently implemented • Granting volunteers authority to start and run programs without consideration for sustainability and measurable impact • Mistaking activities and tactics for strategy • Board’s understanding of good governance as fiduciaries 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Careful planning, strategic fundraising, realistic budgets, avoiding debt • Develop a diverse Board committed to good governance and to fostering networks of support and giving • Developing strong fundable programs • Take advantage of opportunities such as unique partnerships that expand impact without inflating expenses • Prioritizing programs/services that are in alignment with client/community needs with solid sustainability plans • Being willing to change course – not doing things because we have always done them

We also spent some time studying other impactful nonprofits as well as service delivery models that could help us address unmet needs identified in the CNA while remaining sustainable. What we found was that the most impactful nonprofits are laser-focused on key mission-related priorities and strive to achieve maximum impact in those areas and leverage the strengths of others for other need areas. For example:

- Goodwill provides services for various high-need populations with a unifying principle: achievement of employment outcomes. An integrated service model includes numerous partners who offer education, training, childcare, mental health, and other wrap-around needs.
- LIFT serves low-income families by focusing on the needs of the parents and leveraging the core competencies of partners to meet the needs of the children.
- Extraordinary Families provides foster care and adoption services as its core; services to transition age youth concentrate on three key domains: mentoring, education planning and employment. Other needs are met by a network of collaborative partners.
- Westside Foodbank supplements its food distribution with population-centered programs operated by partners.

Considering the complex needs of the people MEND serves, knowing that we do not possess the core competencies required to meet them all, coupled with the fact that we have approximately 8,000 square feet of former clinic space available, it became clear: *our greatest strategic opportunity lies in developing robust partnerships, with some co-located at MEND.* Our scan of providers and research confirmed that co-located providers “make it less likely that families fall through the cracks. Hard-to-reach and at-risk groups appear more likely to participate in ... services that are integrated and co-located”⁵ and “Organizations benefit most from sharing spaces in terms of cost-effectiveness and increased service capacity. Clients experience access to many services in one place and higher quality service provision.”⁶

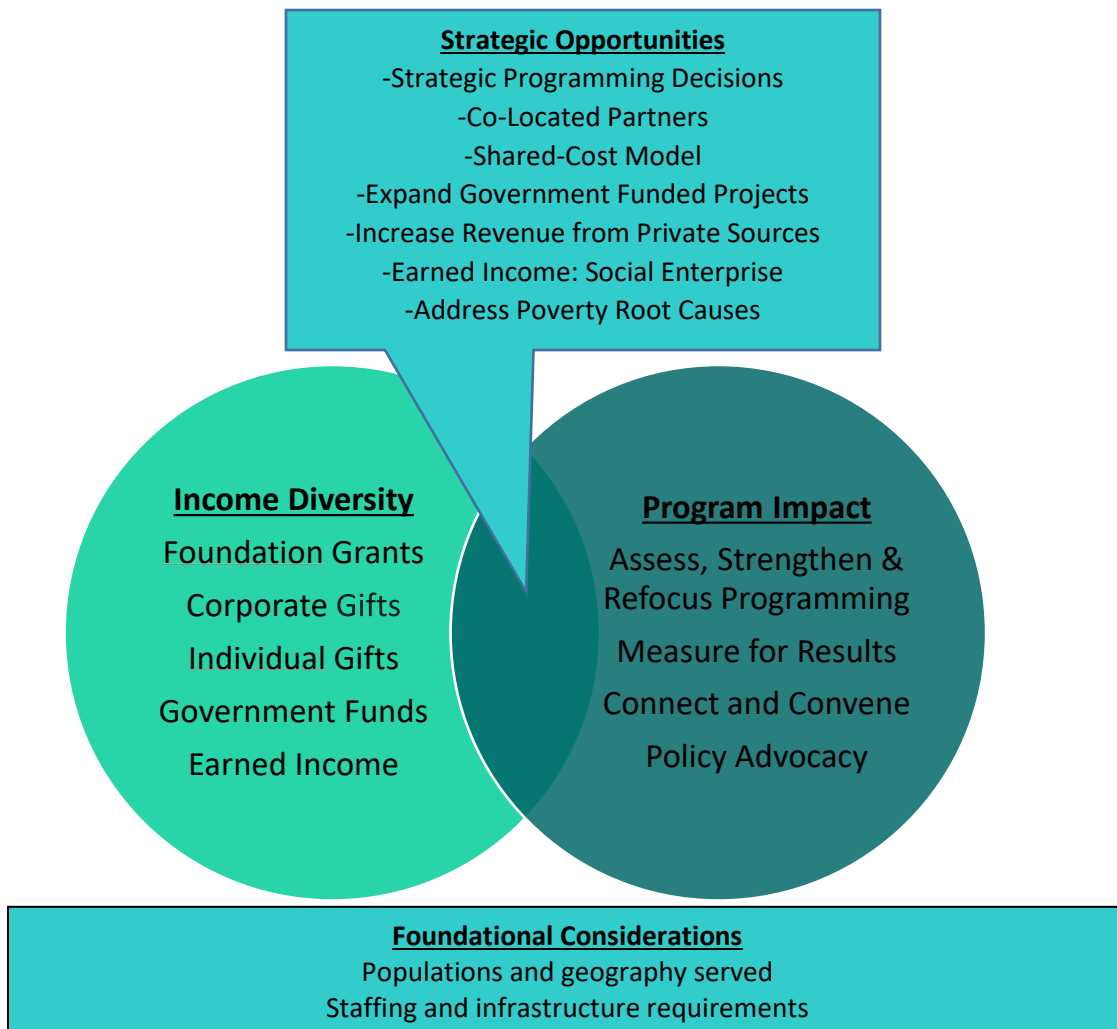
The ultimate aspiration is to form a resource hub made up of a coalition of providers who collaborate to produce community level change. The high COVID case rate in Pacoima confirmed for us the importance of building community resilience to avoid any future similar consequences in a crisis.

⁵ <https://www.education.vic.gov.au/Documents/about/research/colocation/Co-location%20Services%20Summary.pdf>

⁶ <http://www.orgwise.ca/sites/osi.ocasi.org.stage/files/resources/building%20co-location,%20a%20report%20prepared%20for%20marion%20county%20coalition%20on%20youth%20and%20the%20early%20intervention%20and%20prevention%20initiative%20-%20collaboration%20of%20local%20organizations%20colo.pdf>

Strategic Framework

For MEND to implement tactics, having a clear strategic framework with core set of strategic imperatives that serves as a blueprint turns the vision into reality. After careful situation analysis, we determined that we should focus on two key strategic imperatives – defined as the essential elements that underpin the strategy opportunities). Our first imperative is financial sustainability through income diversification, providing a more balanced revenue portfolio which allows us to be responsive if there are any sudden changes (such as funder priority changes, drops in giving, etc.). The second, program impact, helps fulfill our mission to not only meet immediate needs, but also to give our participants access to the tools and resources they need to thrive. That is the value we create with our donors' financial investments. At the nexus of those imperatives lie the strategic opportunities that give our mission statement life.



Our strategic framework becomes our touchstone from which we focus all our actions, plans, investments, decisions and keep us on track.

Strategic Priorities and Objectives

Over the next three years, MEND's overarching priority centers around resilience for both our organization and the people we serve. Each annual phase is described below:

Year 1: Emerging Resilience

“Managing the consequences of past performance is the first step toward building a resilient organization.” Unknown

MEND's previous 3-year strategic plan focused on correcting long-term endemic challenges and restoring the organization back to financial health. It was imperative that MEND return to a place where it could sustain operations and weather storms such as the COVID-19 pandemic. In fact, we recognize that if we had not taken the steps we took, we may not have survived. The ability of MEND to continue serving the community is a testament to its will, passion, and thoughtful leadership. Subsequently, the lesson of 2020 and our response in the face of COVID-19, is how resilient we and our community are. As we move out of crisis response mode, the greatest opportunity is to cultivate, build on and advance the lessons learned as we move forward during uncertain times.

As vaccines continue to roll out and restrictions recede, our focus will be on assessment of our current work to ensure that our services support the growing resilience and capacity emerging within our community. We will begin to enlist partners as collaborators and tenants, as well as making necessary adaptations to our infrastructure and continuing to build our financial strength. This is, therefore, a year of recovery and rebuilding.

Year 2: Cultivating Resilience

“Resilience is not only recovering from disaster; it’s about laying the groundwork for success.” Martina Linnenluecke

At its core, “Organizational resilience is ‘the ability of an organization to anticipate, prepare for, respond, and adapt to incremental change and sudden disruptions in order to survive and prosper.’”⁷ Nonprofits by their very nature are subject to the continuum of both incremental and sudden changes. Being dependent on funding streams that are sometimes unpredictable – whether it be from economic downturns, natural disasters, changes in funders' priorities, and now, pandemics – adapting readily is essential to ensuring that we remain a steady presence for our community.

While it is mission critical to achieve resilience, it requires preparation, planning, and flexibility, centered around a prudent business model. After a year of recovering and

⁷ <https://www.ckju.net/en/dossier/organizational-resilience-what-it-and-why-does-it-matter-during-a-crisis>

rebuilding post-COVID, we are committed to intentional planning. Using the Shewhart Cycle (also known as Plan-Do-Check-Act) as our basis of decision making and proof of concept testing, we will be able to better maximize our resources.

Year 3: Realizing Resilience

“Resilience is all about being able to overcome the unexpected. Sustainability is about survival. The goal of resilience is to thrive.” James Cascio

A resilient community is one with readily available resources in order to respond to, withstand, and recover from adverse situations. This is true too of MEND. Overcoming challenges is not the endpoint; *thriving* is.

By the third year of this plan, the vision is to have a set of embedded business practices that guide our work, programs and partnerships that coalesce to fulfill the promise of our mission.

Community Resilience

In a parallel process, through our direct intensive program services and those of our onsite partners, these three years will be dedicated to building the resilience of the individuals and families we serve so they develop the tools to manage past traumas and skills to bounce back from emerging challenges.

Resilience Factors



Enhancing Resilience ⁸

⁸ <https://www.afsa.org/enhancing-resilience>

Strategic Priorities

The following four major focus areas will guide our work over the next 3 years. Annually, workplans, indicators, and measures will be developed by the staff and leadership allowing for maximum responsiveness to changes in our community's needs.

Priority 1 – Financial Integrity: Cultivating a viable and sustainable business model

Objectives:

1. Maintain and grow government support
2. Expand fee for service options through foodbank shared cost model, and other partnerships
3. Generate rental income from co-located partners
4. Increase investment earnings and reserves through portfolio diversification
5. Increase annual giving from private sources
6. Explore opportunities for earned income through a social enterprise

What Success Will Look Like:

- MEND has sufficient resources to cover all operational costs and generate surpluses
- We can set aside funds into reserves
- Audits that inspire trust that resources will be used to achieve maximum impact

Priority 2 – Program Excellence: Adopting measurable and transformational outcomes

Objectives:

1. Evaluate current programming to identify and improve mission impact (tangible results) and financial viability (covers costs, generates revenue, fundable/viable model)
2. Measure and report key client outcome and impact metrics; implement improvement plans
3. Develop evidence-based, fundable programs that reinforce equity, bolster the community safety net, and promote resiliency
4. Influence policy decisions that address root causes of social and economic conditions that contribute to poverty

What Success Will Look Like:

- Current MEND programs achieve excellent client outcomes and maintain adequate funding
- New programs are developed with intention and sustainable planning
- MEND achieves individual and community level impact

Priority 3 – Robust Collaborations: Leveraging expertise and core capabilities of other providers

Objectives:

1. Leverage high-performing partner services to provide holistic support to persons MEND serves
2. Build a coalition of nonprofits that offer reciprocal benefit and collective community-level impact

What Success Will Look Like:

- MEND becomes a vibrant community of providers that work collaboratively to transform lives
- By leveraging each other's resources, talents and capability, the safety net is strengthened
- Through data shared among the collaborators there is demonstrated effectiveness in improving the lives of people in our community



Priority 4 – Organizational Vitality: Improving fundamental capabilities and core strength

Objectives:

1. Attract, develop, and retain diverse, skilled, and engaged members of the Board of Directors
2. Develop appropriate staffing and infrastructure plans that support program success
3. Invest in building staff skills and capabilities
4. Leverage volunteer support to maximize program outcomes

What Success Will Look Like:

- The Board represents the community served and fulfills its governance and fiduciary responsibilities
- The Board contributes to MEND's success through strategic support of leadership and fundraising
- MEND staff has the skills and resources to achieve program excellence and transformational outcomes

Monitoring the Plan

The executive leadership team: CEO, COO, CFO and CDO will monitor this plan. If any goals and objectives are falling behind, a full review of reasons will be made. If adjustments in the plan are necessary, they will be reported as a part of quarterly monitoring reports presented at quarterly meetings of to the strategic planning committee and the full Board.

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