2019 Annual Report

ALSO INSIDE

- Meeting This Moment: Responding to the Covid-19 pandemic together
- Focus on Equity: Just-A-Start’s updated vision and mission
Friends,

Typically, our annual report is retrospective, an opportunity to share our progress from the previous year and celebrate our community’s successes together. But this year, amidst a global pandemic and a widespread movement for racial justice, merely looking back wouldn’t meet the realities of this moment or the urgency of our work and the needs that have arisen. In addition to the ways that the world has changed throughout 2020, Just-A-Start itself has also evolved, and we’ve emerged with an updated vision and mission to carry us into the future.

We want to share it all with you—not only the past year, but how we’re stepping up right now and how we’re moving forward. In this Special Edition report, we’ll highlight important 2019 milestones as we usually do and also explore our more recent response to the pandemic and the remarkable outpouring of support from donors. We also reflect on the heightened sense of purpose that guides our continued commitment to stable housing and economic opportunity for all.

In this year more than ever, we’re reminded of the transformative power of community—the Just-A-Start community and the broader community around us—in the face of challenges and uncertainty. For all of the ways you make Just-A-Start’s community strong, we thank you.

Sincerely,

Carl Nagy-Koechlin
Executive Director

Peter Munkenbeck
Chair of the Board of Directors
Residents return to 50 York Street

Two years after a devastating fire destroyed Just-A-Start’s 16-apartment building at 50 York Street, we were eager to welcome residents home. Determined to rebuild quickly, we were able to invite all of the previous residents to return to modern new apartments, and resident Carmen Fajardo was thrilled to take her place in her community once more. She shared her story at the ribbon cutting:

"Today, looking at this beautiful new structure brings back a lot of memories. About 27 years ago, as I was passing by the old St. Patrick’s Church that was being converted into affordable housing, I met a JAS employee who asked me “Would you like to apply for housing here?” Thus the journey of developing great relationships with neighbors and creating wonderful memories had begun. We all know what we went through together as 50 York residents after the fire, and nothing will ever be the same again. However, most of us are so lucky to be here today continuing the journey in this new building equipped with all the newest technology, an elevator, an air conditioning system, a community room, a terrace, security cameras, and even an original stained glass window from the old building.

We feel very lucky and happy to have a place that we can call home today. Throughout our unforgettable ordeal, Just-A-Start stood with us every step of the way. It has been a long journey for all of us but we are here today stronger than ever." —Carmen Fajardo, 50 York Street resident

YouthBuild students build their futures

YouthBuild students made their mark, from the classroom and the job site to the community and the State House. In 2019, the program added the Retail Industry Fundamentals track to its career exploration curriculum, offering students another path to pursue in addition to construction. Students put their construction skills to work on projects big and small, from refurbishing the Cambridge Community Center’s gym to completely renovating a single-family home in Cambridge. And one student who found that construction was the path for him shared his story in front of a crowd of hundreds of peers and legislators at YouthBuild’s annual State House Lobby Day. After beginning the program in 2019, Shane Frazier earned his HiSET and set his sights on a career in construction.

“Growing up, I was always frustrated with school. I felt lost in big classes and I wasn’t interested in most subjects. The school tried to put me into alternative programs but nothing worked. But that all changed when my daughter was born. I always knew I would need my education but wasn’t sure how I could do it.

Things were very different at YouthBuild. I liked being in smaller classes. The teachers were better prepared to help and actually cared about the students. Not only did we take academic classes but we also learned real life skills. It taught me patience and how to be a part of a larger process. And it turns out I’m pretty good at construction and I plan to make it my career. School began to make more sense too. I was finally understanding the material, and I recently completed my HiSET.

YouthBuild has also helped me to improve as a person. My attitude has changed for the better. I do my best to make better decisions in life and I have a better understanding of what it means to be a man. Last but not least I have learned to set goals and no one beside myself can stop me from reaching those goals. I would recommend YouthBuild to anyone who feels like giving up. I am living proof that what you put into the program is what you will get out of it.” —Shane Frazier, YouthBuild
The IT Careers Program charges up

After its debut in 2018, the Information Technology Careers Program graduated its second cohort in 2019. The group of 18 students entered the program as aspiring tech employees and spent nine months developing the technical and soft skills that would complement their diverse backgrounds, making them an asset to any employer. Nirmala Shrestha earned the distinction of class valedictorian and went on to work at Santander Bank as an IT Help Desk Specialist.

“I feel really proud and honored to be one of the participants of this program. I remember coming to JAS for the first day as a student—I was a little bit nervous. I had a dream, but it was not well defined. Soon, after a few months, the path was clear and visible. Shifting careers from customer service in a grocery store to an IT professional has been a paradigm shift dotted with various difficulties. It was not easy at the beginning, but it was not impossible. Attending classes, working a full-time job, and doing all those assignments on time made me so strong that now I am confident to embark on any mission.

After I finished my classes, I got an opportunity to work for Santander Bank as an IT Help Desk Specialist. I received a warm welcome and encouragement from all I met at the workplace. I understand the limited presence of women in the IT sector everywhere - probably I am a vanguard in my workplace. My request is to promote women in the field of information technology. We can make a positive difference.”—Nirmala Shrestha, IT Careers Program graduate

A legacy of affordable homeownership in Cambridge

YouthBuild, JAS’s Real Estate Department, and the City of Cambridge celebrated a groundbreaking at 152 Fifth Street, the culmination of a first-of-its-kind collaboration. East Cambridge homeowner Claire Perry bequeathed the house to JAS in 2016, thirty years after JAS had helped to subsidize her down payment and participants in JAS’s Summer Youth Program first performed work on the home when she moved in. With Ms. Perry’s gift, we committed to maintaining the property’s affordability and undertook a full renovation with construction work completed by YouthBuild students. The house then became a beautiful home to a new Cambridge family through the city’s First-Time Homebuyer Program.

Creating Opportunity: Spotlight on Rindge Commons

JAS began planning for Rindge Commons, bringing students, residents, staff, and city officials together to imagine the future of 402 Rindge Ave. Cambridge is a thriving city with many resources, but opportunities for family-sustaining work, quality education, and affordable homes have not been accessible to all residents. With this landscape in mind, we imagined a different future for the wraparound parking lot at Rindge Tower, and began to design a mixed-use addition that would bring together a state-of-the-art education and job training center, affordable housing, and services available to the entire neighborhood.

Informed by conversations with residents and students about their needs, plans for Rindge Commons emerged to:

- Create an integrated training center to strengthen and expand JAS’s education and training programs
- Give the community over 100 new affordable apartments, including family-sized units
- Offer affordable childcare to the neighborhood with the inclusion of a pre-Kindergarten program
- Provide residents, neighbors, and community groups with new public meeting space

Stay tuned for updates about the project!
Renewing Our Commitment to Equity: Our Updated Vision and Mission

Just-A-Start began 2020 by kicking off a process to revise our vision and mission. You know us for our track record of creating secure homes and connecting residents with sustaining careers, and this work absolutely continues. But with 50-plus years of history behind us, it was time to revisit and update our vision and mission statements to better align with our work and aspirations. After several months of reflection, we’re proud to share the results.

OUR VISION

An equitable community where everyone can secure a solid economic foundation.

OUR MISSION

To promote equity by creating access to stable housing and building pathways to economic opportunity.

‘Resident Needs Assessment’ completed

Just-A-Start completed its comprehensive Resident Needs Assessment, in partnership with Enterprise Community Partners, and shared the results in a series of Data Walks for residents. The survey was an important opportunity to learn more about residents’ needs and challenges on areas from education and employment to health and food access. 143 residents were interviewed and shared their experiences and suggestions for strengthening community well-being. The results also became the foundation of JAS’s future planning, informing goals for improvements to housing, activities, and community services.

A milestone leadership transition

Just-A-Start celebrated a leadership transition, honoring Deborah Ruhe’s retirement after five years of service as the organization’s second Executive Director and welcoming Carl Nagy-Koechlin to lead JAS forward. Carl came to JAS from Housing Solutions for Southeastern Massachusetts with 35 years of community development experience and a commitment to Cambridge’s thriving economic, civic and community life. Welcome, Carl!

Deborah Ruhe (departing Executive Director), Jesse Lyons (Director of JAS YouthBuild), Samuel Gebru (JAS Board Member), Carl Nagy-Koechlin (incoming Executive Director), and Becky Jacobson (Annual Fund Manager) at YouthBuild’s Day of Service

2019 YEAR IN REVIEW

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Renewing Our Commitment to Equity: Our Updated Vision and Mission

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Side by side, our vision is the type of community that we aspire to help create, and our mission articulates the sense of purpose that fuels our work each day. These statements are our guide not only to what we do, but just as importantly, why we do it.

These statements are also aspirational, as they should be. We want to take our work from transactional to transformational. While most of our efforts are devoted to the hard work of helping people secure stable housing and pursue economic opportunities, we also aspire to play a role in correcting the injustices that have deprived so many community members of these essential elements of security and a fulfilling life.

Revising our vision and mission was an energizing opportunity to come together, see our work with fresh eyes, and create the path forward. As the world continues to change and people’s needs evolve, we too will evolve and continue finding ways to build pathways to economic opportunity.
A Caring Community in Action

Like everyone else, Just-A-Start jumped into action as the COVID-19 pandemic closed in on us. How would we continue delivering services? How could we address the COVID-related needs of our residents and students? How could we continue our programs and protect the safety of our staff and community?

We were determined to answer these questions. We devised ways to deliver our services and continue our training programs virtually, and most urgently, we committed ourselves to assisting our residents, students and program participants through the crisis by launching our Safe & Secure Fund. In short order, donors responded to the call and contributed an extraordinary $135,000 to fund more than 193 small grants to those who have been hit hardest by the economic impact of the pandemic. Meanwhile, we collaborated with fellow partners serving the community to deliver masks, offer food assistance, and connect our students and residents with whatever additional resources we could.

As the pandemic continues to make clear the racial and economic disparities around us, this outpouring of support has ensured that the people hit first and hardest don’t have to struggle alone. We remain committed to helping our community not only weather this crisis but to emerge on more solid ground.

Thank You

When the pandemic hit, so many people in the JAS community were faced with sudden job loss, food insecurity, and health challenges. Extraordinary support from donors meant that families had the urgent resources needed to pay critical bills, stock their pantries, and remain safe at home during this crisis.

▶ You gave YouthBuild students the ability to safely continue their classes online at home
▶ You supported residents who were ill with coronavirus and needed help to make it through
▶ You were there for parents caring for their children without the usual resources at school
▶ And you extended a hand to families facing weeks without income

“During COVID-19 a lot of students including me have lost any source of income. Being able to rely on our teachers and community has given us hope that we’re not going through this alone.”

“I was extremely grateful for the $500 gift card that was sent to me. I was able to pay my cable bill so my WiFi could stay on and I could continue my classes online. I also paid a portion of my rent and light bill with it. Now I don’t have to worry about this month. I can focus on my online classes and staying safe. For the people that have helped us, we thank you for all that you have done.”

“I was self-employed and got denied unemployment benefits. As the sole provider in the household, I find myself with zero income. This money was totally unexpected and I am very grateful.”

“I tested positive for COVID-19 and was obligated to stop working. I have been under a lot of stress trying to figure out how to feed my kids and pay my bills. This money is a life saver.”

“My kids used to eat breakfast and lunch in school. Now I spend much more on groceries due to the confinement, and this leaves me with no money to pay bills. These funds will help a lot.”

SAFE AND SECURE FUND

$135,000 Raised for the fund

193 Small grants distributed to JAS residents and students

500+ Recipients and family members

JUST-A-START’S PANDEMIC RESPONSE
Nourishing Neighbors Together

Everyone deserves to have enough food to eat, but job losses and other economic strains quickly impacted many community members’ ability to keep their cupboards stocked. JAS jumped into action alongside several partners and funders to ensure that no one would go hungry.

“Food For Free has been delivering food weekly to over 100 JAS residents. Food For Free is not only nourishing our residents but helping with their mental health as well. One woman who was working and busy is now not working and is struggling with fear and stress. Now she’s able to not only eat properly but to use cooking to relieve stress and anxiety. Another resident who was only eating a small breakfast and lunch, skipping dinner so her children could eat, is now using her FFF deliveries to help her family all eat three hearty meals together. Many residents sustain themselves with FFF’s deliveries of fresh vegetables, fruits, and dry goods.”

–Nancy Porcaro, JAS Community Coordinator

A new partnership between JAS, Life Science Cares, About Fresh, and the Cambridge Volunteer Clearinghouse helped to stock JAS’s residents and students with fresh produce. JAS’s funder and partner Life Science Cares secured a several-ton donation of fruits and vegetables, delivered weekly by About Fresh. The Cambridge Volunteer Clearinghouse then partnered with JAS to recruit volunteers to distribute the produce boxes across Cambridge—880 25-pound boxes, to be exact!

“Thanks a lot for the fruits and vegetables. They came at the right moment. Buying groceries is so difficult for me these days.” – JAS resident

Physically Distant, but Tightly Connected: Programs Adapt

The pandemic was no match for JAS’s programs. As students resumed their studies from behind their screens, teachers sent books, computers, and WiFi hotspots home so they could stay connected despite the distance. Without access to the Biomedical training lab, IT classrooms, or the YouthBuild construction job sites, the instructors brought the learning home with hands-on kits to practice chemistry experiments, computer hardware assembly, and hand tools and building skills. Program staff maintained open lines of communication with students, delivering food to students’ families, calling regularly to check in, and even hosting online Town Halls where students could exchange ideas and share support with one another. Education & Training even hosted their first virtual career weeks, where students interviewed and networked with employers online, and 44 new Bio and IT graduates celebrated in virtual ceremonies this summer.

Meanwhile, the Financial Opportunity Program quickly transitioned its tax site into a hybrid model. For two months, the program was the only free tax site in the Greater Boston area that continued to offer in-person services, reserving appointments for participants with more complex tax situations or technology limitations while successfully assisting most filers remotely. The hybrid model ensured that 267 community members could still safely secure their much-needed refunds—returning $346,178 to participants along with tax site-integrated financial coaching.
Discover our community inside!
Together we are Just-A-Start.
1,500 residents
100 students
800 housing program participants
46 staff
15 Board members
300+ donors and partners
One community

Financials

FISCAL YEAR 2019 | JANUARY 1–DECEMBER 31, 2019
Audited December 31, 2019

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<td>Total Liabilities and Net Assets</td>
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Statement of Financial Position

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The financial information shown here represents that of Just-A-Start Corporation operations only. Excluded are the JAS rental properties.

Our Programs

- Affordable Rental Housing
- Homeownership Development
- Condo Resale Program
- Resident Services
- Housing Stabilization and Mediation Services
- Financial Opportunity Program
- Home Improvement Program
- Condominium Stewardship
- Biomedical Careers Program
- Information Technology Careers Program
- Summer Youth Employment
- YouthBuild

Join us to create stable housing and build pathways to economic opportunity!
Just-A-Start | 1035 Cambridge St. #12 | Cambridge, MA 02141 | www.justastart.org

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City of Cambridge, Department of Human Service Programs
City of Cambridge, Office of Workforce Development
City of Somerville, Mayor’s Office of Strategic Planning and Office of Housing and Community Development
Commonwealth of Massachusetts, Attorney General’s Office
Commonwealth of Massachusetts, Department of Elementary and Secondary Education
Commonwealth of Massachusetts, Department of Housing and Community Development
Commonwealth of Massachusetts, Executive Office of Health and Human Services
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Community Economic Development Assistance Corporation (CEDAC)
Economic Development & Industrial Corporation of Boston
Food For Free
Greater Boston Legal Services
Housing Families
Institute for Health and Recovery
Kendall Square Association
Local Initiatives Support Corporation (LISC)
Malden Redevelopment Authority
Massachusetts Association of Community Development Corporations (MACDC)
MassHire Metro North Workforce Board
MassHousing
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MIT Job Connector
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Somerville-Cambridge Elder Services
Somerville Center for Adult Learning Experience (SCALE)
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- Life Science Cares*
- Massachusetts Housing Investment Corporation*

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