



COMMONWEALTH of VIRGINIA  
DEPARTMENT OF SOCIAL SERVICES  
*Office of the Commissioner*

Danny TK Avula MD, MPH  
Commissioner

December 29, 2023

**MEMORANDUM**

**TO:** The Honorable Glenn Youngkin  
Governor of Virginia

The Honorable Barry D. Knight  
Chair, House Appropriations Committee

The Honorable Janet D. Howell  
Co-Chair, Senate Finance & Appropriations Committee

The Honorable George Barker  
Co-Chair, Senate Finance & Appropriations Committee

Michael Maul, Director  
Department of Planning & Budget

**FROM:** Danny TK Avula MD, MPH

**SUBJECT:** Annual Report on Adoption of Special Needs Children

This report is submitted in compliance with Item 354 F.1 and 2 of the 2022 Appropriation Act, which states:

*Items 354 (F.1.) and (F.2.) of the 2021 Appropriation Act provides:*

- (1) *“Out of this appropriation, \$1,500,000 the first year and \$1,500,000 the second year from the general fund shall be provided to implement pilot programs that increase the number of foster care children adopted.”*
- (2) *“Beginning July 1, 2017, the department shall provide an annual report, not later than 45 days after the end of the state fiscal year, on the use and effectiveness of*



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*this funding including, but not limited to, the additional number of special needs children adopted from foster care as a result of this effort and the types of ongoing supportive services provided, to the Governor, Chairmen of House*

*Appropriations and Senate Finance Committees, and the Director, Department of Planning and Budget.”*

Please contact me if you have questions at (804) 726-7011.

DA:kc

Attachment

cc: The Honorable John Littel, Secretary of Health and Human Resources

**Virginia Department of Social Services  
Annual Report on Special Needs Adoptions  
August 2023**

**Report Mandate**

Items 345.F. of the 2022 Appropriations Act

*F.1. Out of this appropriation, \$1,500,000 the first year and \$1,500,000 the second year from the general fund shall be provided to implement pilot programs that increase the number of foster care children adopted.*

*2. Beginning July 1, 2017, the department shall provide an annual report, not later than 45 days after the end of the state fiscal year, on the use and effectiveness of this funding including, but not limited to, the additional number of special needs children adopted from foster care as a result of this effort and the types of ongoing supportive services provided, to the Governor, Chairmen of House Appropriations and Senate Finance and Appropriations Committees, and the Director, Department of Planning and Budget.*

The 2022 Appropriations Act, Item 345.F. provides funding to increase the number of finalized adoptions of children and youth with special needs. These are children with significant behavioral or medical challenges who tend to be older, in care longer, and who have had multiple foster care placements.

**State Fiscal Year 2023 Funding Plan and Results**

Due to the complexity of the new initiatives planned, the need for increased capacity to develop new and competitive solicitations for services in state fiscal year (SFY) 2023, and competing priorities, some of the proposed initiatives were unable to be implemented or had significant delays. Table 1 shows the initial allocation of appropriated funds to support each aspect of the VDSS funding plan for permanency, family recruitment, or support services for special needs children and youth in foster care versus the amount spent or not spent for each planned initiative in SFY 2023. VDSS is unable to carry over any unexpended balances from SFY 2023.

*Table 1: SFY 2023 Appropriated Funding Plan for July 1, 2022 – June 30, 2023*

Type of Service	Allocated Amount	Expended Amount
Family Engagement Coaches/High Acuity Rapid Response Care Coordinators	\$516,238	\$84,098
Kin First/Family Recruitment Training	\$110,000	\$0.00*
Public Affairs to support VDSS-Division of Family Services Branding and Recruitment	\$90,000	\$19,106
Family Advisory Council - New Request for Proposal	\$89,038	\$7,058
Adoption Share, Inc. - Expanded Recruitment Portal to Foster Care/Adoption Recruitment Portal	\$188,000	\$212,546
Foster and Adoptive Family Recruitment Contractor Incentives	\$42,000	\$13,500
Adoption Conference	\$90,000	\$233,998
Family Engagement Conference	\$90,000	
Foster Care/Reunification Conference	\$90,000	
Adoption Resource Exchange of Virginia (AREVA) Contract Workers	\$134,724	\$95,621
Respite Care Coverage	\$60,000	\$0.00
<b>Total SFY 2023 (July 1, 2022 – June 30, 2023)</b>	<b>\$1,500,000</b>	<b>\$665,927</b>

\*Due to procurement delays, the cost of the training was charged to a different cost center

### **Regional Family Engagement Coaches**

VDSS had prioritized hiring five Regional Family Engagement Coaches. However, the priority shifted to hiring Placement Support Specialists (previously referred to as High Acuity Rapid Response Care Coordinators) to support local departments of social services (LDSS) in their work to prevent children in foster care from having to stay in the offices of LDSS and finding appropriate placements for those children. This work is in support of the Governor’s Safe and Sound Task Force.

In 2023, the Placement Support Specialists supported 24 agencies in securing placements for over 30 youth. Many of these children had been in foster care for extended periods of time and were legally available for adoption. Through their work engaging multidisciplinary teams, Placement Support Specialists were able to ensure that these youth were placed with relatives, family-based homes or in congregate care.

VDSS continues to pursue hiring Regional Family Engagement Coaches and is working to finalize the job description and begin recruitment. Regional Family Engagement Coaches will assist LDSS in reinvesting in family engagement for children in foster care when termination of parental rights has already been achieved. Coaches will also support the development of effective relative discovery practices, the utilization of Family Partnership Meetings to facilitate family decision-making, and the utilization of relatives & natural supports to create wrap-around service plans for children and kinship foster parents. Coaches will host regional roundtable meetings to staff cases and provide consultation to support agency implementation of family centered practice and decision making and to collaborate with VDSS Regional Resource Family Consultants to provide practice assistance to agencies when needs are identified.

### **Kin First/Family Recruitment Training**

VDSS was able to partner with international family engagement experts, Kevin Campbell and Elizabeth Wendel, which was made possible through funding established by Governor Youngkin for the Safe and Sound Task Force. Due to this special funding, it was not necessary to access special needs adoption funding for this purpose. On March 31, 2023, they introduced the philosophy and framework of Family Seeing™ to state leaders across Virginia. Mr. Campbell's work has spearheaded improved performances of child welfare systems throughout North America, Australia and Western Europe through the implementation of the Family Seeing™ practice framework centered around engagement of networks of family member and other important adults to promote the safety, healthy development, and healing of children and youth involved with government systems. VDSS remains focused on improving the experiences of families through the development of a Kin First culture that drives our child welfare work by recognizing families as the architects of plans that ensure safety and well-being of children. The theory of change in Family Seeing™ is that parents, relatives, and other caring adults, within the context of culture, are the agents of change in children's lives (not case managers, models, and services). Through this approach, agencies and staff will stand in support of families as the families create solutions to challenges and increase opportunities each day to build health, resilience, and well-being.

VDSS Regional Child Welfare Practice Consultants have been participating in coaching sessions led by Mr. Campbell and Ms. Wendel. Over 30 LDSS are participating in Practice Accelerators, which are four-day coaching and training sessions where LDSS participate in small learning

collaboratives to practice framework with some of their most challenging cases. VDSS plans to pursue continued collaborations with Mr. Campbell and Ms. Wendel into the next fiscal year.

### **Public Affairs to support the VDSS/Division of Family Services (DFS) Branding and Recruitment**

In order to support the many VDSS Permanency Unit promotional campaigns (e.g. Foster Care Month, Adoption Month, the ongoing need for foster/adoptive parents, etc.), appropriated funds were used to hire a qualified and highly experienced public relations and marketing expert to assist the VDSS Division of Public Affairs. VDSS filled this position in January 2023. This position is responsible for providing project management and oversight, and strategic recommendations for campaign objectives, messaging, and output and performance measures for DFS. The staff person in this position is currently working on three adoption and foster care media campaigns and is developing a comprehensive scope of work for the pending Requests for Proposals (RFP) to solicit proposals from qualified vendors to implement a statewide marketing and promotional campaign for the *Faster Families Highway for Recruitment* portal for SFY 2024.

### **Parent Advisory Council**

The VDSS-DFS Parent Advisory Council (“the Council”) was implemented in September 2021 to facilitate the involvement of parents with lived experience in state level policy decision-making. A total of 11 birth parents representing all five regions of the state made up the original council. At the time of this report, 10 of the original 11 members remain on the Council. The Council represents a diverse set of parents who have lived experience in either a child protective services case, in-home case, and/or foster care and adoption. The Council meets virtually once a month with smaller meetings occurring for time-limited projects and initiatives. Individual members have also participated in activities that are specific to their personal experiences and interests. DFS continues to use the support of the Permanency Project Manager to coordinate the Council’s activities as well as serve as the liaison between the Council and DFS, with the Family Engagement and Resource Family Program Manager providing oversight. DFS had hired a contractor to be the liaison between the Council and DFS, starting in January 2022; however, the contractor and DFS agreed that it was not the right fit, which stalled some of the activities planned this year.

Throughout SFY 2023, the Council provided input on numerous initiatives across all program areas. The Council’s input was sought for prevention programs, including the Thriving Families, Safer Communities grant for which two Council members joined the planning workgroup, and evidence-based programs used in in-home cases. The Council provided input to the protection program for brochures on water and gun safety and marijuana usage. The Council also provided input and participated on several kin first and permanency efforts, to include Foster Care Month, Reunification Month, Kinship Month, the Permanency Conference, the

Kinship Notification and Appeal legislation, the *Faster Families Highway for Recruitment* portal, foster parent enhanced maintenance payments, the impact of changing barrier crimes legislation, the foster parent recruitment video, and the Kids Choir Contract training series for volunteers working with families involved in the child welfare system. Several of the Council members provided input during the 2023 Session of the Virginia General Assembly on bills that impacted child welfare programs. This was an extraordinary feat given the quick turnaround needed for stakeholder responses.

One of the most significant activities that occurred this year was the creation of the Council's bylaws and selection of officer roles. Four parents volunteered to take on the roles of the Chairperson, Co-Chairperson, Secretary, and Coordinator for the Council. These officer roles went into effect in February 2023. The creation of bylaws and officer roles provided the Council with more structure and a framework by which to operate as well as increased sustainability. This will also provide the Council members more opportunities to develop their leadership skills.

The other significant activity that occurred this year was the Council's first in-person meeting, which was held in January 2023 in Richmond, Virginia. Five of the ten Council members were able to attend this in-person, all day meeting. The Council used this time to get to know each other in-person and to develop strategic goals for the coming year. DFS remains committed to supporting the Council's activities and providing opportunities to provide input on all DFS initiatives. The Council will be instrumental in assisting with the creation of Virginia's next federal strategic plan, the Child and Family Services Plan (CFSP).

### **Recruitment Portal**

Adoption-Share, a non-profit organization that leverages technology to create a more modernized, efficient process for recruiting, engaging, and selecting foster and adoptive families, expanded its Family-Match Program to provide VDSS and each locality in the Commonwealth with access to a new recruitment tool aimed to assist local departments in identifying the most compatible and capable families willing to meet the unique needs of children and youth in foster care. The Adoption-Share, Family-Match Program's *Faster Families Highway for Recruitment* ("the Highway") portal, was fully implemented in SFY 2023. The online public facing portal facilitates the recruitment, training, and approval of resource families for children in foster care and manages inquiries from prospective foster parents in a more efficient and geographically organized way. All 120 LDSS across Virginia were fully enrolled by December 31, 2022. As the Highway continued to grow with more prospective families, LDSS across Virginia are steadily logging in and becoming more acquainted with the system. To promote increased system use and ensure LDSS are maximizing the capabilities the Highway has to offer, the Family-Match Director continued to be available to assist users via phone, email, and video conferencing, upon request. Throughout the year, the Family-Match Director provided 14 localities with requested one-on-one and small group support. This one-on-one support involved a question-and-answer



period, a walk-through demonstration of the tool with screensharing, and guidance on incorporating the Highway LDSS OnRamp weblink and the Quick Response (QR) code into recruitment efforts.

Throughout SFY 2023, Adoption-Share has monitored the user behaviors of families and LDSS staff and worked with VDSS Regional Practice Consultants to develop a list of priorities needing to be addressed as Adoption Share and VDSS work towards developing state specific policies and procedures regarding the Highway.

In February 2023, the Adoption-Share CEO and Family-Match Director met with the VDSS Adoption Program Manager, Adoption Policy Specialist, and the Piedmont Regional Consultant to initiate a plan to begin drafting policies and procedures for the Highway. The meeting entailed a program update, Strengths/Weaknesses/Opportunities/Threats (SWOT) analysis, prioritization of needs, and an initial plan for drafting policies and procedures. The SWOT analysis results included the following:

#### Program Strengths:

- Increase in agency logins
- Increase in family registration
- Increase in family recruitment
- Adoption-Share's effective communication and responsiveness
- Tool Kit Tuesday emails
- Family Coordinator communication with families

#### Weaknesses:

- Staffing shortages within the LDSS
- Turnover within the LDSS
- LDSS not having dedicated staff focused on recruitment
- Not having written guidance and expectations regarding the utilization of the Highway.

#### Opportunities:

- Public Affairs can be better leveraged
- Consortium for Resource, Adoptive, and Foster Family Training (CRAFFT) can be better leveraged
- Mutual Family Assessment (MFA) services can be better leveraged
- The development of a volunteer program-VA Kids Corp- for adults interested in supporting children in foster care, their families, and foster families- could be another opportunity for families hoping to eventually foster to gain experience prior to fostering

- Virginia Code § 63.2-900, which requires collaboration amongst LDSS, provides additional leverage that VDSS can utilize to show LDSS how the Highway promotes collaboration
- Negative press regarding LDSS can be leveraged to provide a call to action, directing families to the Highway

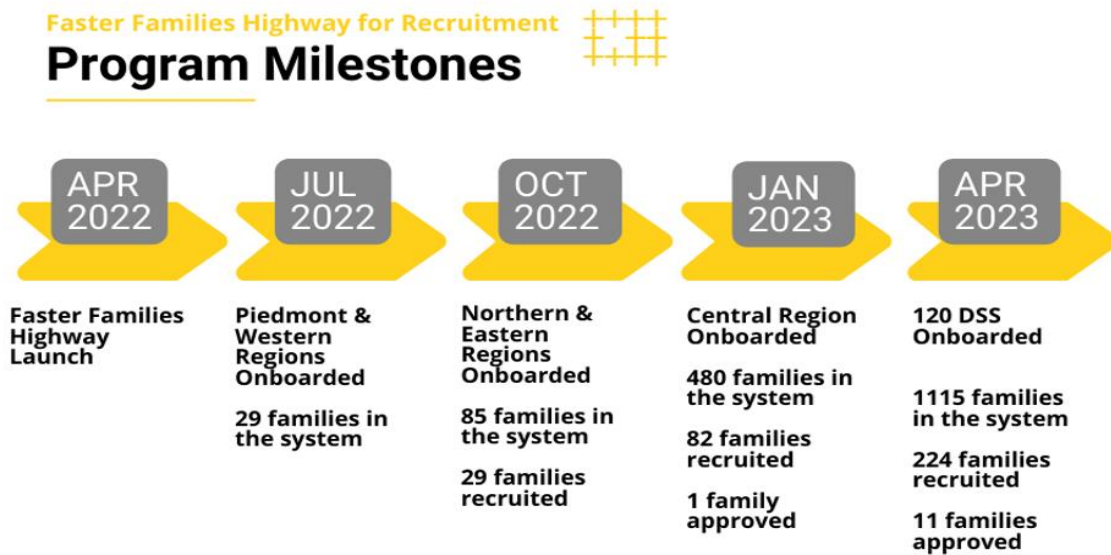
Feedback to Address:

- LDSS who do not respond to families in a timely manner
- There are situations that occur in the Highway, which the LDSS report are problematic, but VDSS is not informed; therefore, VDSS is unable to address those issues (e.g. VDSS is not getting holistic feedback)
- Some LDSS continue to express negativity and resistance to change
- Some LDSS staff are not focusing on the right things

Upon reviewing the SWOT analysis, meeting participants agreed that developing a policy and procedure addressing the timely response of LDSS to families in the Highway was the biggest priority. Following the meeting, Adoption-Share was tasked with providing VDSS a revised 'script' for responding to families which addresses what to do with families who are members of tribes or kinship families, how to select families, how to outreach to families, and how to remove families from the Highway along with expected timeframes.

Figure 1 demonstrates the growth of the portal in the past contract year. Because the foster parent approval process takes approximately six months, the number of approved families will always lag behind the number of families recruited.

Figure 1: Faster Families Highway for Recruitment Program Milestones



### Family Recruitment Contractor Incentives

VDSS created an incentive opportunity for foster and adoptive family recruitment contractors (Virginia One Church, One Child, Jewish Family Services/Connecting Hearts, and Extra Special Parents) to provide more focused efforts to recruit foster families for youth residing in congregate care. A contractor will receive \$500 for each recruited family that attends three or more sessions of the Parent Resources for Information, Development, and Education (PRIDE) training. PRIDE is a curriculum developed and approved by the Child Welfare League of America and is a required state curriculum to become a certified foster parent in Virginia. This initiative led to 68 individuals and families completing the PRIDE training and becoming eligible foster parents. The incentive ended on June 30, 2023, as VDSS will now be assisting the LDSS in the search, engagement, and placement of youth with relative or fictive kin through the new RFP, FAM-23-019. VDSS will partner with new contractors to work collaboratively with LDSS to place youth residing in congregate care with relatives or fictive kin in order to support timely reunification and permanency. This initiative also attempts to place older youth, who have resided in non-relative home-based care for twelve months or longer, with relatives or fictive kin before aging out of the foster care system.

### Adoption and Family Engagement Conferences

In SFY 2023, VDSS collaborated with *It's My Affair*, an event management vendor, to coordinate and manage two in-person conferences. The "Journey to Permanence" conference was a two-day conference starting on December 7, 2022, in Hampton Roads, Virginia. This was the first in-person conference since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. Invited attendees were employees who support or provide direct services to children and families affiliated with the welfare system.

Attendees also included community partners, local agency attorneys and guardians ad litem. Attendees had the opportunity to network during a meet and greet reception and to participate in an array of workshops and resources to support both public and private community partners in the areas of family engagement, kinship, recruitment, foster care, pre- and post- adoption, and the Interstate Compact on the Placement of Children. Conference participants had the opportunity to choose from various sessions to discuss topics and develop recommendations. The conference opened with a general session and keynote speaker, Adrian McLemore, before moving into breakout sessions. Adrian spoke about his experience as a child in foster care. During lunch, a panel of Council members shared their lived experiences, which was well-received by the attendees. Twenty-three conference speakers and panelists facilitated 12 workshops throughout the full-day event. Based on the post-conference survey, 91% of conference attendees indicated they were either satisfied or extremely satisfied with the conference quality and topics presented.

On April 3, 2023, VDSS and *It's My Affair* hosted a two-day conference titled “Building Together: Prevention in Partnership.”. Invited attendees were people who support or provide direct services to children and families affiliated with the child welfare system. The conference hosted an array of workshops and resources to support both public and private community partners by providing best practices in preventing child maltreatment and in fostering community partnerships. Prevention services support post-adoption families by reducing the risk of an adoptee’s re-entry into foster care, and by preventing entry into foster care in the first place by reducing the number of children that will need adoptive families. Conference participants had the opportunity to choose from nine various sessions to discuss topics and develop recommendations. Twenty-six conference speakers and panelists facilitated sessions and 12 community partners provided exhibits throughout the event. The conference opened with a general session and keynote speaker, Dr. Donna Beegle, who spoke on the subject titled, “Breaking the Iron Cage of Poverty.” During lunch, a panel discussed the Thriving Families, Safer Children Through Family Resource Centers - The Importance of LEX (lived experience) Leadership initiatives. From a post-conference survey of attendees, 91% responded as being satisfied or extremely satisfied with the conference quality and topics presented.

### **Adoption Resource Exchange of Virginia (AREVA)**

VDSS continued to support AREVA using appropriated funds. AREVA is a service offered by VDSS that connects families with children who are available for adoption within Virginia. AREVA is one tool used to help LDSS reach the federal goal of permanency within 24 months, as mandated in § 471 of title IV-E of the Social Security Act (42 USC § 671), and the requirement for LDSS to file Adoption Progress Reports, as outlined in Virginia Code § 16.1-283. The purpose of AREVA is to increase opportunities for children waiting to be adopted by providing services to child-placing agencies having custody of these children. AREVA utilizes AdoptUSKids on a national level, community partners, and Virginia’s Kids Belong, and work with LDSS to host match events in each of the five regions of the state. These events have been

very effective in recruiting families for waiting children. Working with various stakeholders helps to increase visibility of youth available for adoption through the creation of youth profiles on recruitment sites and increasing adoption awareness across the state.

Virginia's Kids Belong "I Belong Project" (IBP) is a joint initiative, diligent recruitment, and adoption program. IBP, in collaboration with AREVA, Regional Resource Family and Permanency Practice Consultants, coordinated child specific video and picture events targeting children placed in congregate care for whom termination of parental rights (TPR) had been achieved. There were six IBP shoots that took place throughout the state in close proximity to congregate care facilities where targeted children were placed. Permanency Practice Consultants worked with LDSS to identify the children eligible for video shoots and supported efforts to coordinate transportation to and from the locations of the shoots. As a result, 72 children in need of adoptive families participated, resulting in 833 family inquiries during 2022. There has been a 201% increase in inquiries from 2021 to 2022.

Annually, during November's National Adoption Month, AREVA works collaboratively with LDSS, Virginia's Kids Belong, CBS Channel 6, and WSLC Channel 10 to promote recruitment initiatives for youth available for adoption. In November 2022, the initiative resulted in over 600 adoption inquiries being received. As a result of these combined recruitment efforts and initiatives, 22 children have been placed in pre-adoptive homes between 2021 and 2022 and 11 adoption were finalized between 2022 and 2023.

From January 1, 2022, through December 31, 2022, there were a total of 2,499 inquiries from child and youth registrations completed or initiated by AREVA. Inquiries are tracked at initial inquiry and at 15, 30, and 90 day intervals after the initial inquiry. AREVA sends a comprehensive inquiry list to the LDSS twice per month. AREVA follows up with the LDSS within 15 days of receipt of the inquiries. AREVA continues to work collaboratively to expand promotional efforts for youth awaiting adoption and plans to develop and provide resources to increase LDSS response when inquiries are received from the public.

As of November 2022, Virginia no longer displays photos of children on recruitment sites. In an effort to limit the digital footprint of children in foster care, Virginia has elected to only provide photos to inquiring families at the time of initial inquiries.

### **Respite Care Coverage**

The VDSS Respite Care Program promotes and supports stability for children placed with resource families by offering short-term relief to resource families caring for children through temporary, substitute care for the child on an emergency or planned basis. Access to respite care also revitalizes resource parents, thus strengthening their ability to continue caring for the child. Respite care supports efforts to achieve timely permanency by helping transition children from

one resource family to their adoptive family, helping transition children from congregate care placement to a resource family, and relative respite care may also lead to relative adoption or transfer of custody of the child to a relative.

VDSS set aside \$60,000.00 of appropriated funds in response to the overwhelming request for respite services in SFY 2022. Due to increased oversight, and less of a demand for respite services than was anticipated, these funds were not needed. In future years, efforts will be made to identify additional ways to provide respite to foster parents, including time-limited access to laundry services, housekeeping services or food delivery services on an as needed basis.

**SFY 2024 Funding Plan**

For SFY 2024, VDSS has determined how best to use these appropriated funds to maximize resources and continue support of services for special needs youth in foster care and increase permanency for the more than 700 special needs youth in need of an adoptive home. As the impact of COVID wanes, VDSS has greater capacity to invest in innovative efforts to increase permanency for children in foster care. In the next state fiscal year, VDSS will continue to more closely monitor and report expenditures bi-monthly to ensure funds are fully spent by the end of the fiscal year and the Permanency Team will meet weekly to discuss progress towards implementing SFY 2024 initiatives. The VDSS spending plan for SFY 2024 is highlighted in Table 2 below.

*Table 2: SFY 2024 Appropriated Funding Plan for July 1, 2023 – June 30, 2024*

Type of Service	Allocated Amount
Family Engagement Coaches/High Acuity Rapid Response Care Coordinators	\$365,019
Kidsave – Weekend Family Miracles	\$249,119
Public Affairs to support DFS Branding and Recruitment	\$90,000
Adoption Share, Inc. - Expanded Recruitment Portal to Foster Care/Adoption Recruitment Portal	\$246,100
Permanency Conference	\$142,000
Prevention and Protection Conference	\$142,000
Virginia Adoption Search Mutual Consent Registry Project	\$29,038
AREVA Contract Workers	\$176,724

Respite Care Coverage	\$60,000
Total SFY 2024 (July 1, 2023 – June 30, 2024)	\$1,500,000