

# Fight for Children reinvents its business model post Fight Night

Keith Gordon, president and CEO of Fight for Children, talks about the D.C. group's next phase.

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Fight for Children was more prescient than it could have imagined [when it decided in late 2019](#) to stop holding its epic annual Fight Night bashes before Covid-19 could make that call for the nonprofit organization, as the virus tore through the country's events scene.

Well before the coronavirus descended, the D.C. group knew in 2019, its 30th year, it would have to reevaluate its mission and budget after sunsetting those Fight Night events, its largest fundraiser with upward of 2,000 guests and \$2 million in average annual revenue. But the pandemic, as it did in so many arenas, added urgency to that process.

Now after months of planning, Fight for Children is reinventing itself as a new youth sports collaborative, enrolling smaller nonprofits that teach life skills and provide community support along with sports lessons as its members and, in turn, offering them financial, operational, advocacy and leadership backing to help them grow, from back-end accounting help to executive coaching. The larger group is focused on nonprofit members that offer free programming, particularly to lower-income, underserved neighborhoods, but this time stretching beyond the District, and into the Maryland and Northern Virginia suburbs.

“There were scary estimates of a third of nonprofits not making it through the pandemic,” said [Keith Gordon](#), president and CEO of Fight for Children. “That was a big motivator to take some action.”

The new Fight for Children Youth Development Institute, as the collaborative is now called, has signed up 26 nonprofits across 19 sports, comprising \$55 million in collective budgets. They include the Alexandria Boxing Club, Alexandria Soccer Association, Beacon House, City Kids Wilderness Project, DC Grays RBI, DC Panthers Water Polo, DC Scores, Dreams for Kids DC, FirstTee – Greater Washington, Fort DuPont Ice Arena, Girls on the Run DC, Junior Tennis Champions Center, KEEN Greater DC – Baltimore, M.A.D.E. Basketball, Open Goal Project, Outward Bound Chesapeake Bay, Prince George's Tennis & Education Foundation, SOUL, Teens Run DC, The Grassroot Project, The VIVA School, The Washington Ballet, Washington Nationals Youth Baseball Academy, Washington Tennis & Education Foundation, WINNERS Lacrosse and Wrestling to Beat the Streets D.C. Together, they employ about 540 people full and part time and serve more than 30,000 children locally.

For its end, Fight for Children has recruited partners to provide programming, operations, mentoring, support and even equipment for its nonprofit members — including Assist Development Consulting, Hello Insight, Fiscal Strength for Nonprofits, Edge Work Consulting, LeagueApps and Children's National Hospital, with which it had [already formed a partnership in 2019](#) to fund and open a new pediatric sports medicine center at Silver Spring's Inventa Towers, the former home of Discovery Inc.

As it rebrands, Fight for Children is ramping its staff back up — it had originally shrunk after its final Fight Night and in the early days of the pandemic from nine full-time staff, as well as a host of part-time, consulting and contracting help, to three full-time employees, including Gordon. It had eliminated its office space and slashed overhead expenses. Its roughly \$3 million from that last Fight Night hurrah had yielded it a financial runway.

But the group has since hired [James Kallusky](#) as its new chief program officer in June to help launch the institute and now is looking to fill another full-time role working in fundraising and communications — currently Fight for Children is getting its funding from grants and the charitable trust of its late founder, Joe Robert, as well as contributions from its board members, D.C.'s Learn24 Office and two rounds of \$150,000 in Paycheck Protection Program funding. When not working remotely, its team now takes up coworking space at 1250 Connecticut Ave. NW, though Gordon said it will evaluate whether it needs more permanent space as it grows. And it plans a brand new event, albeit not necessarily on the scale of Fight Night, for this spring in D.C. to help raise more funds.

It's also brought on three new board members in [Teri Smith](#), chief operating officer of the NFL Players Association, real estate veteran and Jarvis Commercial Real Estate LLC founder [Ernie Jarvis](#) and [Aaron Hyland](#), president of the D.C. region for iHeartMedia Inc.

Gordon said he's in talks with potential corporate sponsors for the new institute, though that process remains early. Thus far, it's received backing from the Verizon Foundation, Morris & Gwendolyn Cafritz Foundation and Enterprise Holdings Inc., among others.

In fiscal 2020, Fight for Children logged \$856,660 in total revenue, a 40% drop from the \$1.41 million in brought in in fiscal 2019. It ended 2020 with an \$843,106 deficit, though that's lower than the prior two years given last year's significantly fewer expenses. As of the start of 2021, the organization reported \$4.1 million in net assets.

“For the first time in many years, we really have a comprehensive programmatic focus, which is a game-changer,” Gordon said. “We know what our role is. Historically we’ve always been a convener, a collaborator. We’re not a direct service provider to these kids, and we’re very clear about that. But what we are doing is continuing to help these great organizations with what they’re doing.”