In 2023, Maine's My Alfond Grant marks 10 years of automatically enrolling all resident newborns into the United States' first statewide, universal Child Development Account (CDA). The My Alfond Grant Program—originally called the Harold Alfond College Challenge—was the vision of Maine businessman and philanthropist Harold Alfond. Mr. Alfond wanted every Maine child to have the opportunities that higher education can bring, and he wanted to ensure economic prosperity for the state through a more educated workforce. He created the Harold Alfond Foundation, the private family foundation that provides funding for the Alfond Grants and also for the My Alfond Grant Program.

This Policy Brief provides an overview of My Alfond Grant and the growth of the CDA in the 10 years since it made a major policy-design change, implementing automatic enrollment. This Brief also includes strategies and lessons regarding partnerships and communications that have helped to improve My Alfond Grant's ability to connect with Maine families.

An Overview of the My Alfond Grant CDA

The Alfond Scholarship Foundation (ASF), which operates My Alfond Grant, invests $500 for every state-resident baby in a single scholarship account in Maine's NextGen 529 plan. The Finance Authority of Maine (FAME), a quasi-independent state agency that administers NextGen 529, helps to administer My Alfond Grant. Families that wish to save for their child's postsecondary education can open their own NextGen account, and their savings will be linked with their Alfond Grant. Families receive printed quarterly communications via mail or can access electronic equivalents. The communications reflect the total value of their child's savings: the Alfond Grant, any family contributions, and any matching grants awarded by FAME. Upon withdrawal, Alfond Grants and FAME matching grants will be paid directly to institutions of higher education.

By the spring of 2023, Maine's CDA had invested over $72 million for more than 145,000 children. Also by the end of 2023, the total value of My Alfond Grant Recipients' investments in Maine's NextGen 529 plan was $384,034,586.
In the fall of 2023, the oldest statewide opt-in Grant recipients, whose parents were required to open a NextGen 529 account, will start high school. The oldest automatic grantees will be in the fifth grade then. Youth will begin requesting distributions for higher education from My Alfond Grant in 2026, when the 2008 “pilot year babies” will graduate from high school and begin to pursue postsecondary options.

Key Partnerships and Educational Materials

As with other statewide CDAs,7 My Alfond Grant uses a 529 savings platform and connects with families through partnerships and myriad communication strategies. Awareness, engagement, educational aspirations, and family savings are key areas of focus. The most fundamental relationships for the My Alfond Grant CDA are those with ASF, FAME, and the Harold Alfond Foundation.

State agencies help to provide both breadth and depth to My Alfond Grant Program’s reach. ASF has worked with the Maine Department of Education to ensure that the CDA’s educational materials align with state learning standards, to develop online tools for building educational aspirations, and to support career exploration for Grant recipients. An Alfond Aspirations Toolkit includes age-based guides for teachers and parents: (a) Invest in ME Kindergarten, developed in partnership with FAME; (b) MAGTown, and (c) Middle School MyPlan (Figure 2).8 The goal for these initiatives is to provide off-the-shelf tools that teachers can use with students in the classroom and that parents can use at home.

ASF offers training to Maine Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) case staff and other state employees across multiple divisions. Working with FAME and DHHS, ASF developed messaging and protocols for case staff sharing information about the Alfond Grant with foster families and adoptive families. In addition, ASF has connected with Maine’s early-childhood education community. Through these collaborations, ASF shares information with families, facilitates contact information updates, and encourages families to engage with the activities and resources ASF has developed.

As these and other engagements illustrate, partnerships are key to the My Alfond Grant model.9 At the child’s birth, hospitals are the first place where many families hear about the $500 Alfond Grant. Every Maine hospital identifies a Champion—usually a maternity ward employee—to facilitate and coordinate sharing of materials with families and to encourage contact card completion.10 From aggregate data provided by FAME, ASF monitors contact card completion, shares best practices and training with hospital staff, and delivers baked treats as an annual thank you.

Partnerships with youth- and family-serving organizations help ensure that Maine’s most vulnerable families learn about the grant.11 Head Start programs and libraries are key partners. As grant recipients grow older, Boys and Girls Clubs and other nonprofit partnerships become central. The underlying strategy: Make sure families hear regularly about the Alfond Grant from a trusted source. These partners share information and encourage families to engage with the Program, including working to encourage and support family updates of contact information with My Alfond Grant as part of the partners’ intake processes. ASF provides training to Head Start and other nonprofit staff, who are encouraged to include engagement with the Alfond Grant in family goal-setting (e.g., learning about the grant, creating a MyPlan, updating contact information, signing up for electronic delivery of quarterly communications, and checking grant value online).

Partnerships with Maine employers are also part of the My Alfond Grant history.12 ASF has embarked on a significant statewide initiative to encourage employers to facilitate payroll deduction for college savings. With FAME, ASF provides training, tools, and resources to employers and employees alike. Business Champions are highlighted on the ASF website and social media. Some employers even offer a company match when an employee sets up contributions to a college savings plan via payroll deduction. One interesting and recent shift in this effort relates to messaging. For many years, ASF spoke with employers about the return on investment that comes from supporting a more educated workforce. Now, with many employers focused on attracting and retaining employees—and on employee financial wellness—a pledge to facilitate and support payroll deduction for college savings helps employers demonstrate their commitment not only to their employees but also to employees’ families.

Digital and Print Communications With Maine Families

Several state treasurers identified raising awareness of enacted CDA policies and programs and communicating with families as items of paramount importance for implementing successful statewide CDAs.13 Importantly, these topics have been a priority in Maine since the CDA’s inception. In the early years of the My Alfond Grant, communications were primarily focused on print materials, including the contact card mentioned above. Now, those communications are supplemented with a robust online presence.

Through the combination of print and electronic communications—including a congratulations card and contact card shared at the hospital, a Welcome Kit at home, and numerous other communications—My Alfond Grant achieves eight direct touchpoints during a baby’s first year. Approximately 9 months after a child’s birth, FAME mails the Alfond Grant Update, a paper communication, to that beneficiary. The update includes the current value of their...
Figure 2. Online Alfond Aspirations Toolkit

**Invest in ME—Kindergarten**

Developed jointly by the Alfond Scholarship Foundation and FAME (Financial Authority of Maine), the Invest in ME Kindergarten program helps our young learners think about what they want to do when they grow up, builds early awareness of saving and spending, and more. New electronic activities that are aligned with Maine Learning Results, along with teacher and parent guides, are introduced 4 times a year.

- Coloring
- Classroom posters
- Money sorting
- Saving tips

[LEARN MORE]

**MAGTown**

Get your child dreaming about their future by showing them how to explore MAGTown, our interactive storybook landscape full of opportunities. Visit Big City, Small Town, and Country settings in Maine to click on buildings and listen to what the people who work in them have to say about their job. The included Downloadable Activity Guide helps to connect activities and exploration in the classroom to home.

*Explore with Pre-K to 3rd graders*

- Online tool
- Explore landscapes
- Interactive
- Sort by job

[LEARN MORE]

**MyPlan**

MyPlan makes it fun to get ready for your child’s future education. Choose tasks each month that will help you DO, SAVE, and LEARN. The easiest way to get started is to make a plan and commit to taking small steps now—regardless of your child’s age. Turn your good intentions for your child into good actions and even better outcomes!

*MyPlan is for parents of children of all ages – infants through high school*

- Quick Start or Build Your Own
- What if Calculator
- Activities to do with your child
- Completion tracker

[START PLANNING]
child’s Alfond Grant, age-based tips, information on ways to engage with the CDA, and encouragement for the family to start or continue their own savings efforts for their child’s future education. If a child also has a NextGen 529 account, FACE mails a similar communication, the Quarterly Summary (Figure 3). Different from the official NextGen 529 account statements sent by the account service provider, this Quarterly Summary includes all of the information found in the Alfond Grant Update along with the current value of family contributions into linked NextGen accounts and matching grants awarded by FACE. The summary enables a family to see in one place the value of savings and grants invested for their child’s future education. These foundational communications have been part of My Alfond Grant operations since the very beginning in 2008.14

Through My Alfond Grant’s recently expanded online presence, families can access the current value of an Alfond Grant (as of the close of the previous day’s business; Figure 4), obtain electronic copies of the four most recent Alfond Grant Updates, and update their contact information. When a family member clicks on the link to a desired action (e.g., to check the value of their child’s grant), they are taken over a virtual “speedbump” that lets them know they are moving to a NextGen 529 website managed by FAME.15 On that site, they are prompted to verify the child’s identity by sharing the name of the child and the mother, as well as a few other pieces of information. Visitors who complete the verification process can create a username and password, which enable immediate access on subsequent visits.

The My Alfond Grant website includes explainers, age-based tools and resources (including a Parent Planning Guide and the Aspirations Toolkit detailed above16), and recognition for partners and Champions. My Alfond Grant materials are available on the site, including a Welcome Sheet translated into six languages.17 Blog posts and electronic newsletters are archived there as well.

My Alfond Grant uses the social media platforms Facebook, Instagram, and LinkedIn to communicate with families and partners. Print and digital communications link to the My Alfond Grant website and to the social media accounts for the CDA, which also offers a quarterly e-newsletter to parents and caregivers, another to business and community partners, and a third to hospital Champions. Online banner ads targeted to desired audiences encourage families to visit the website, check the value of their child’s grant, view tips and resources, and generally engage with the CDA (Figure 5).

My Alfond Grant’s digital media strategies continue to evolve and improve in light of testing, which garnered these key findings:
(a) Communications that include images of a mother and a child outperform all other images, (b) Adding an indirect call to action is often more effective than a direct one (e.g., “learn more” is more effective than “check the value of your child’s grant”), (c) Expanding age parameters to engage grandparents boosted engagement significantly, and (d) Targeted placement of banner ads appears to improve engagement.18

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Figure 3. My Alfond Grant Sample Quarterly Summary

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Activity</th>
<th>Activity</th>
<th>Change in Value</th>
<th>Value</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Alfond Grant</td>
<td>$100.00</td>
<td>$100.00</td>
<td>$100.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NextGen 529</td>
<td>$100.00</td>
<td>$100.00</td>
<td>$100.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Matching Grant</td>
<td>$100.00</td>
<td>$100.00</td>
<td>$100.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total $100.00</td>
<td>$300.00</td>
<td>$300.00</td>
<td>$300.00</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

NOTE: You should rely on the information contained in your official account statement and not this Quarterly Summary, which is sent to you for your convenience only.

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Image courtesy of My Alfond Grant.
Figure 5. Banner Ads Used in My Alfond Grant Digital Message Testing

Images courtesy of My Alfond Grant.
Conclusion

My Alfond Grant has achieved statewide reach with a small staff, excellent administrative processes, valuable partnerships, and strong communications.

After 10 years of automatic enrollment, My Alfond Grant is now looking to the future. Early plans are underway for 2026, when the first disbursements of Alfond Grants will be made directly to higher education institutions. Once the recipients begin to use their Alfond Grants, Maine will begin to realize philanthropist Harold Alfond’s motivating goals: educational opportunity for every Maine child and economic prosperity for the state.

Notes

1 Child Development Accounts are sometimes referred to as Child Savings Accounts, or CSAs. In 2007, the SEED for Oklahoma Kids experiment, a large-scale study with randomly selected newborn children, first modeled an automatic, universal CDA policy in partnership with the Oklahoma State Treasurer’s office and the Oklahoma 529 College Savings Plan.


3 The Harold Alfond College Challenge began as a local, hospital-based pilot (2008) and then became a statewide “opt-in” CDA (2009–2012) before the change to automatic enrollment for babies born in 2013. During the opt-in period, parents wanting to participate were required to open an account for their child with NextGen 529, Maine’s education savings plan, before the child’s first birthday. In the final year of the opt-in model (2012), about 40% of eligible Maine children were enrolled and received the $500 grant. Since the 2013 shift to automatic enrollment, 100% of eligible children have received the grant. Additional information on the origins and history of Maine’s CDA can be found at www.MyAlfondGrant.org and in Center for Social Development briefs: Clancy and Lassar, College Savings Plan Accounts at Birth: Maine’s Statewide Program (2010), and Clancy and Sherraden, Automatic Deposits for All at Birth: Maine’s Harold Alfond College Challenge (2014).

4 Per a memorandum of understanding, FAME receives birth record information from Maine’s Office of Data, Research and Vital Statistics to facilitate automatic funding of the Alfond Grants. Other ways that FAME helps to administer My Alfond Grant are detailed elsewhere in this Brief.

5 Families that wish to save for their child’s future education do so in their own account, of any type. Families cannot add directly to their child’s Alfond Grant in the scholarship NextGen 529 account, which is owned by the Alfond Scholarship Foundation. If families open and own their own 529 account, they may choose an investment that is more or less aggressive than the Alfond-selected option, withdraw savings easily for personal or financial reasons, and benefit from the state tax deduction (see Clancy, Sherraden, and Beverly, Child Development Accounts at Scale: Sample State Legislation, 2019). If they choose to open a NextGen 529 account, FAME uses the child’s name, address, and date of birth to then link that account with their child’s Alfond Grant. Only NextGen accounts are linked with a child’s Alfond Grant.

6 Families that do not have a NextGen 529 account are sent similar communications showing only the value of the child’s Alfond Grant. Currently, an Alfond Grant recipient is eligible to receive a $100 Initial Matching Grant from FAME if the family deposits at least $25 in the child’s own NextGen 529 account before the beneficiary’s first birthday. If six consecutive automatic contributions are made from the family’s payroll or bank account, the beneficiary is eligible to receive a one-time $100 Automated Funding Grant. Family contributions are eligible for a 30% NextStep Matching Grant up to a $300 match per year. These grants are only for NextGen accounts opened by or for the benefit of Maine residents. See Finance Authority of Maine, Help Your Child Succeed! Open a NextGen 529 Account [Brochure] (2022).

7 Clancy, Sherraden, and Beverly, Child Development Accounts at Scale: Sample State Legislation (2019).

8 Invest in ME Kindergarten provides four electronic toolkits encouraging saving and thinking about the future. MAGtown, an interactive landscape for children in the period from prekindergarten through Grade 2, encourages them to explore future careers. Middle School MyPlan, a tool for students in Grades 6 through 8, aims to support future success by teaching them to set goals for what they can “Do, Save, and Learn.”


10 The contact card helps My Alfond Grant stay in touch with families. Mothers record their name, address, phone number, email address, and child’s name, as well as the child’s date of birth and hospital of birth. The card provides FAME with complete and updated information, building on initial birth-record data shared with FAME by Maine’s Office of Data, Research and Vital Statistics. ASF employs multiple strategies to encourage information sharing and collect updated contact information from families and other sources. Contact cards are provided at the hospital and also sent home two more times during the baby’s first year. Additionally, ASF staff and partners regularly include the cards in parent interactions. Families can also update their contact information at any time starting at the MyAlfondGrant.org website. And, FAME uses national change-of-address databases to capture updates on families that have not directly updated information. On materials for hospital Champions, see My Alfond Grant (2022).

11 My Alfond Grant, Community Organizations.

12 My Alfond Grant, Maine Employers.

13 In 2018 and 2019, Pennsylvania, Nebraska, Illinois, and California enacted laws creating automatic, universal, at-
Acknowledgments

The authors thank the Harold Alfond Foundation for its extraordinary vision and commitment to My Alfond Grant, the Board of Directors of ASF for its stewardship of the Program, and FAME for its diligent and steadfast attention to and support of the CDA and its administration. The many partners described in this Brief—from hospitals and community partners to Maine employers and state agencies—all have been instrumental in My Alfond Grant’s development and growth. Most fundamentally, we are grateful to Maine families for their engagement with the My Alfond Grant and for all they do, each day, to support their children’s future.

Support for this publication comes from the Charles Stewart Mott Foundation and an anonymous donor. We are grateful to Eva Giles and Sandy Beverly for offering comments and to Chris Leiker for editorial assistance.

Authors

Colleen J. Quint is the President and Chief Executive Officer at the Alfond Scholarship Foundation.

Margaret M. Clancy is the Policy Director in the Center for Social Development at Washington University’s Brown School and Director of the center’s SEED for Oklahoma Kids experiment.

Suggested Citation


Clancy and Sherraden, Automatic Deposits for All at Birth: Maine’s Harold Alfond College Challenge (2014), provides details about past communication protocols and an example of a sample Quarterly Summary from 2013.

This two-step process is necessary since FAME, as the state agency helping to administer grants, holds the data used to verify a grant recipient’s identity before the visitor can access protected information.

My Alfond Grant, A Parent’s Guide to Planning & Saving for Your Child’s Future and My Alfond Grant Aspirations Toolkit.

The My Alfond Grant Welcome Sheet is available online in French, Spanish, Swahili, Somali, Portuguese, and Arabic.

Strategic communications have improved in large part due to a grant from the Charles Stewart Mott Foundation. The grant has enabled “A/B” testing of digital media strategies. Each quarter for the past 2 years, ASF has developed and deployed a pair of messages to test against each other, seeking to discern which images, messages calls to action, and behind-the-scenes strategies yield the strongest outcomes.