2021: A Pivotal Year Poised for Growth
Think of Us operates as a research and development lab for child welfare, driving systems change so that those touched by the system, people with lived experience, are at the center of designing, imagining, and building.

We work to shift the child welfare system across the Six Conditions of Systems Change – policy, practice, resource flows, power dynamics, mental models, & relationships and connections – so that every person has the conditions to Heal, Develop, and Thrive.
Letter from Sixto

As we leaned into the power of aligned contribution while integrating proximity, 2021 has been a pivotal year for Think of Us. A growing group of allies are joining with us to build what we want to see in the world – a child welfare system that holistically supports children and families.

This vision requires addressing current system failures – racism, criminalization of poverty, family policing, chronic underfunding, repudiation of identity and culture, lack of public and political will, disenfranchised communities, and powerful people and institutions who make life-changing decisions for others without deference to their leadership, wisdom, and experience.

Meaningful, measurable change requires a 360° perspective. Without the discernment and perspectives of those who have actually experienced child welfare, system leaders will continue to create solutions designed to solve the wrong problems. As a result, the system intended to help children, youth, and families heal will only add to their trauma.

We continually ask, “What is our aligned contribution?” In 2021, this has looked like building the infrastructure for policy and research that moves the needle toward a system that centers lived experience. I’m proud that we have listened to what the needs were. And that we’ve taken action – providing technical assistance to 44 states and Washington D.C., engaging tens of thousands of people with lived experience, and mobilizing communities with practical steps to support foster youth affected by the abrupt end to pandemic relief programs.

As we look to the future, Think of Us is seeking system transformation, not system reformation. We are confident in the path forward because of our deep commitment to our community of people with lived experience. We’re not elevating those with lived experience so that they will put forth the Think of Us agenda – We integrate lived experience so that the expertise, needs, and understanding of those with lived experience is the agenda.

We are grateful for your belief in Think of Us and willingness to live with us in the discomfort of challenging the status quo. As our work, team, and influence grow, the support of our partners, funders, and most importantly, people with lived experience, is valued now more than ever.

In Service,
Sixto Cancel

Sixto Cancel
Founder + CEO Think of Us
Highlights of the year

Think of Us continues to Spark, Support, and Co-Drive strategic projects in child welfare, leveraging tech, data, participatory research, and state and federal partnerships to transform the system to center lived experience. Here are some of our key highlights in 2021.

This proximate policy work was featured by CNN.

38,000 young people are now represented in the only centralized network of people with lived experience, leveraging data on foster youth needs and experiences to inform policy and tailor opportunities for people with specific lived experiences to engage relevant systems change initiatives.

Think of Us participated in 26 engagements with the White House, elevating the priorities and expertise of child welfare advocates and directly informing the Build Back Better plan and a Foster Care Listening Session, among other initiatives.

Virtual Support Services made 14,399 connections to resources for kinship caregivers and transition-age foster youth in its first year, supporting prevention and basic needs.
have committed to dramatically reduce or eliminate group care in child welfare following the release of Away From Home, an in-depth report on the experiences and perspectives of young people who have recently lived in institutional placements in foster care.

In an op-ed for the New York Times, Founder and CEO Sixto Cancel shared the Think of Us vision for prioritizing placement of foster youth with kin, in response to which letters to the editor were published.
Dig deeper into the contributions we made in 2021.

The Check for Us Report

An overview of the national outreach campaign and key takeaways for the benefit of the child welfare ecosystem.

DOWNLOAD REPORT
Away From Home

An in-depth report on the experiences and perspectives of young people who have recently lived in institutional placements in foster care.
The Digital Youth Museum
An interactive display of artwork, poems, and artifacts about the child welfare system, created by young people who have experienced it first hand.

VIEW DIGITAL YOUTH MUSEUM
A Call to Action for Transition-Aged Foster Youth During the Pandemic

An implementation report of the Check for Us initiative, written in collaboration with the Youth Law Center.

DOWNLOAD REPORT
The Think of Us blog

Launched in 2021, demonstrating our unique voice and expertise in the child welfare ecosystem.
Our financial and operational growth

Thanks to the dedication and generosity of so many, 2021 was our most impactful year yet. We expanded operational and financial capacity to support the organization’s broadening scope of work: adding subject matter experts to the leadership team, investing in best-in-class tooling, & setting ambitious strategic goals for fund development, project management, and organizational practices for the coming year. Our commitment to transforming child welfare continues to inspire donors, funders, and influencers to join us in the work of centering lived experience.

FY22 projections: **7.4 million** in revenue committed against **8.8 million** in budgeted expenses.
Our Path Forward in 2022 as we continue to drive systems change.

The work of Think of Us is expanding rapidly at the intersection of tech, data, and partnerships. We are publishing new research, building new tools, and engaging a national community of lived experience. Our aim is to systematically center lived experience, not only within our projects but throughout Child Welfare.
2022 Strategic Priorities:

Generate transformational change in child welfare to center lived experience and establish the conditions in which people can Heal, Develop, and Thrive.

Create proof points for how things can be done differently; provide direct, real-time connection with those working in and experiencing child welfare.

Influence the child welfare field through unique data and deep relationships with key stakeholders.

Ensure that Think of Us as an organization is poised for impact and scale.
Some of our key projects in 2022 include:

**The Center for Lived Experience**

Strategic Planning for the Center for Lived Experience is underway as we define foundational pillars, cast vision to stakeholders, explore initial projects, assess technical infrastructure needs, and onboard key staff.

This first-of-its-kind proximate policy, research, and community organizing initiative will launch in 2022, aggregating insights, data, and experiences of those who have experienced foster care, to inform the biggest state and federal systems transformation initiatives. Our goal is to revolutionize best practices so that every stakeholder across the child welfare ecosystem embeds lived experience into their work.
Some of our key projects in 2022 include:

**Virtual Support Services**

This flagship project transforms resource referral, redistributing power to the help-seeker. In 2022, VSS will expand to the State of Georgia, prioritize scouting transformative resources to further build the Partner Collaborative, and be submitted for application to the Federal Prevention Services Clearinghouse as an intervention for kinship caregivers.
Some of our key projects in 2022 include:

**Foster Youth Experience Database**

With 50,000+ engagements with current and former foster youth in 2021, we are building a centralized network with two goals: to facilitate opportunities for proximate policy work, resource acquisition, and research participation; and to leverage data on needs and experiences of foster youth to inform policy and practice. Addressing two roadblocks to holistic integration of lived experience in child welfare – access and understanding, the network will identify people with specific lived experiences to engage with relevant systems change initiatives. For example, an American Indian youth with an Indian Child Welfare Act (ICWA) initiative.