Ishtar Espejo Castello is the Director of Fundación Aladina and was selected as a UICC Young Leader 2019/2020. Fundación Aladina’s main objective is to help children with cancer and their families. Spanish hospitals provide medical treatment, so we strive to ensure all other needs are covered and to find ways in which to improve the quality of life of the patients and families.

As a result of the pandemic, we faced problems in two areas:

1. How could we continue to reach patients and families when access to hospitals was banned for all non-essential services?
2. How could we protect ourselves as an organisation?

Adapting our services

Supporting patients and their families

When Spain went into lockdown in March, we could no longer deliver our support services. We reacted quickly by making our services available online for all patients and their families. All the services we could provide digitally we did, including play therapies, group activities, sessions with psychologists and physical exercise.

Our most successful program is called “Together from home” and through it we aim to offer kids fun activities and workshops. The most innovative and successful of these has been the digital dog and horse-assisted therapy sessions.

There are many studies that support the beneficial effects of sick children interacting with pets. It brings them joy and helps them overcome anxiety and fear. When COVID-19 restrictions made it impossible for dogs to visit the kids in the hospital we decided to continue the weekly meetings online.

Either individually or in an online group setting, kids get to see their favorite pets, teach them tricks and just play with them. These sessions are led by certified specialists who facilitate and ensure their success. Since April there have been 86 sessions with horses and 156 with dogs.

The silver lining has been discovering that through this modality we can access more children and hospitals than ever before. Like many other organisations, who underwent digital transformations we are certain we will maintain some online programs even after we are allowed access to hospitals again.
Despite these positive results, it hasn’t been an easy road. There is a clear digital divide among the population, many families were lacking access to digital devices or were unfamiliar with how to use technology making it difficult for us to support them.

We believe that social distancing restrictions are going to remain in place for the foreseeable future so we are working to improve the range of programs we can offer to ensure our services will continue to support those who need them.

**Providing financial assistance and PPE**

We needed to ensure that restrictions, which very quickly had a negative effect in the economy would not take a toll on our children. For this purpose, we doubled the yearly amount destined to helping families with low-income or extraordinary needs.

We purchased and coordinated donations of surgical masks and other protective gear to hospitals as well as other useful products such as toys, food and drinks and made a donation to support a line of COVID-19 research.

Construction and improvement projects in hospitals all over Spain have been put on hold. The amounts already budgeted for these purposes have been redirected to other projects which are currently more essential. For instance, converting all the rooms in the Hospital Niño Jesús' pediatric ICU into negative and positive pressure rooms and other pandemic related needs that have arisen.

**Protecting ourselves as an organization**

We recognised the need to develop a strategic contingency plan to address our most pressing issues.

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<th>Measures taken to ensure financial stability</th>
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<td>- Maintaining relationships with donors and members</td>
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The key objective of the organisation during these challenging times is to ensure financial stability which will allow us to continue delivering our services. Fortunately, our income sources were sufficiently diversified to ensure survival.

In terms of donors and members we expected our attrition rate to increase dramatically, which fortunately has not been the case at all. Furthermore, we have continued generating a steady number of new members and supporters.

On the other hand, some of our sources of income have been halted such as collaborations with schools and events. We are trying to convert them to the digital realm and generate new fundraising opportunities such as by SMS and online donations. In addition to this, companies in the private sector have frozen their donation processes or have donated to pandemic relief efforts, so there has been a decrease in donations from that sector.

In response to the changes in both our finances for 2020 and the way we deliver our services, it was essential to revise our budget and devise a new strategy for the coming months. Priorities have shifted dramatically and the budget needed to address those changes in order for us to be as cost-effective as possible.

We are now giving more importance than ever to communication. Remaining relevant is harder than ever but essential to ensure that cancer patients are not overlooked as a result of the pandemic. We have devised a number of campaigns to tackle different issues, from sending support from our organisation and children to all the collectives who remained active during lockdown, to trying to convey how life for cancer patients is even harder during COVID-19 to garner support.

An additional measure taken to protect the organisation was ensuring the safety of our staff. We supported the transition to remote working whilst making a big effort not to reduce the number of employees, work-time or salary.

**Looking to the future**

As fall approaches we are once again full of doubts as to what the situation is going to be. We have devised different plans trying to take into account the possible scenarios but we have come to realize that it is key to remain flexible and react quickly to whatever may happen in order to get the best results.