Mission Control

Alaska Housing Finance Corporation

Management Innovation: Internal Operations

HFA Staff Contact
Daniel Delfino
ddelfino@ahfc.us

HFA: Alaska Housing Finance Corporation (AHFC)
Entry Name: Mission Control
Category: Management Innovation – Internal Operations

Last year, a bevy of relief programs gave our static datasets and single vendor platforms the hard goodbye. In their place, we created centers of gravity to connect a new constellation of disparate systems and data orbiting our program operations in real-time.

Respond to a Management Challenge or Opportunity

Starting in January of last year, AHFC received nearly $300M in rent and utility relief funds for a state more twice the size of Texas (and then some) but with less than 3% the population. Soon after, 14 partners representing 148 federally recognized tribes and the Municipality of Anchorage accepted our offer to deploy $73.4M in funds they had received through a joint application system.

In March of 2021, 10% of the state's population submitted 30k+ applications that represented 1/3rd of Alaska's rentals! Every renter, landlord and utility company needed the money yesterday.

We faced a multifaceted operational challenge:

- Balancing an expedited user experience with safeguards against waste, fraud & abuse
- Creating a response center for 8k landlords, 30k+ applicants, escalations and disputes
- Linking processing partners, applicants, landlords, utility companies, and AHFC through a secure online platform with real-time data access… using a system that didn't yet exist.
- Staff: Our funding (AHFC + partners) exceeded what states with 5-6 times our population got, but our available labor pool to do the same amount of work was considerably smaller.

It felt like trying to organize a space launch from a garage. We went operational in February.

Achieved Strategic Objectives

By June 2021, $60M in relief was already out the door to 13k households. We were one of the first states to launch and start paying funds, and we never looked back.

Customers Served	Services Delivered	Relative Impact
26,222 households assisted 66,454 people in apartments	$259M in rent and utility relief paid to-date	x6.5 times bigger than §8 in Alaska 9% of State's population benefited
8,000+ landlords & utilities	71,150 payments issued	1/3rd of all state rental units covered
Homeless Alaskans	New stabilization program created to help them become renters	Source of funds sufficient to house all unsheltered Alaskans
Applicants, Landlords, Utility providers	Dedicated Service Center with same-day callback capacity	Our new call center logged twice the statewide 211 system's call volume
	Online records access with real-time updates on status / payments	Decreased call volume, helped divert evictions and utility shut-offs
Processing Partners	Custom platform and training to manage and pay applicants	First real-time integrated service platform of its kind in Alaska

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Innovative

Every system on the shelf was built for something other than the new relief money. Any of them would have limited our operations to *their* functionality. We needed something that could work based on the operational resources available to us. Something that made sense for AHFC, our partners and customers. And it needed to change if priorities evolved. We had to build it.

"Necessity is the mother of all invention." Albert Einstein

Our solution cobbled together a network of several systems to support our program design and user needs (see visual aids). This was exceptionally challenging and labor intensive to build, but it allowed our systems to flow from the program design and not the other way around.

Implementing at Scale: Adaptable systems and processes are key
We had 30k+ applications connected to 8k+ landlords. Every step in the review taking 5 minutes was 2,500 staff hours we probably didn't have. Every stage of our application, processing and dispute systems was put to a stopwatch test to model our operational capacity. If prohibitive minutes per record appeared, the process changed until the throughput was right-sized. It's how we completed 27k+ income verifications in three weeks and go 13k payments out by June.

Staff: Realistic expectations
Across AHFC and its five nonprofit partners handling the processing, 130+ project-specific staff were onboarded from February to March. Their tenure averaged 4 months. We designed policies and scripts, online chat rooms, and carefully focused task assignments around these parameters. The limited number of people available to hire meant that systems and tech had to carry the load.

Customer Experience: Includes applicants, landlords, utility providers, processors
Each application involved a renter, landlord, payments processor and sometimes a utility company. Any service delivery confusion could generate 2-5 calls per payment (we issued 71k payments). Our systems were intuitive for the user and designed around the assumption they use a smartphone. We tried to answer every question we thought they'd ask through the online system.

At any time, applicants, utility providers and landlords could see their status, all payments made to them (or on their behalf) and download the information to share with others if they wanted to.

Real-Time Data Access: Seeing patterns as they transpired was the game changer
Data connected in real-time makes several things possible. Applicants, processing teams, the Service Center, AHFC and partner organizations all used the same system. The result is we could all see (subject to assigned permissions) real-time status and dashboards as they changed.

There were multiple systems and data repositories supporting our operations (see visual aids). But they were all linked through a uniform programmatic framework that functioned liked a star's gravity shaping the orbit of everything in proximity.

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Replicable

The operational framework created for the rent relief program has already been replicated twice.

1) To implement the $40M+ Housing Stabilization program created with the remaining rent relief funding that has already helped 584 Alaskans leave homelessness for rental housing

2) To implement the $50M Homeowner Assistance Program for thousands of Alaskans

Our operational model demonstrated that assembling multiple systems (like building blocks) can deliver a cost-effective, safe (we have had zero data breaches), and highly efficient operating platform for agency staff, service partners and the clients served.

Achieve Measurable Improvements in Agency Operations

All of Public Housing in Alaska, with a team of 150, serves 10,000 people a year via Section 8 vouchers and physical units. The statewide 2-1-1 system handled 39,580 calls last year.

Across AHFC and its processing partners, 136 staff were project-based staff were hired to implement the relief program that served 66k Alaskans. They processed 30k+ applications, paid 8,000+ landlords and utility companies on behalf of 26k+ households, fielded over 102,700 calls and reviewed nearly 5k statewide programmatic appeals and / or reports of waste, fraud and abuse.

The program flexibility and adopted resources allowed us to be nimble and pull together new systems that took us to a previously unfathomable realm of productivity. It enabled us to interact with our partners via real-time data systems and broke us out of the “one-system” framework that has historically defined our program operations and support platforms.

Demonstrate Effective Use of Resources

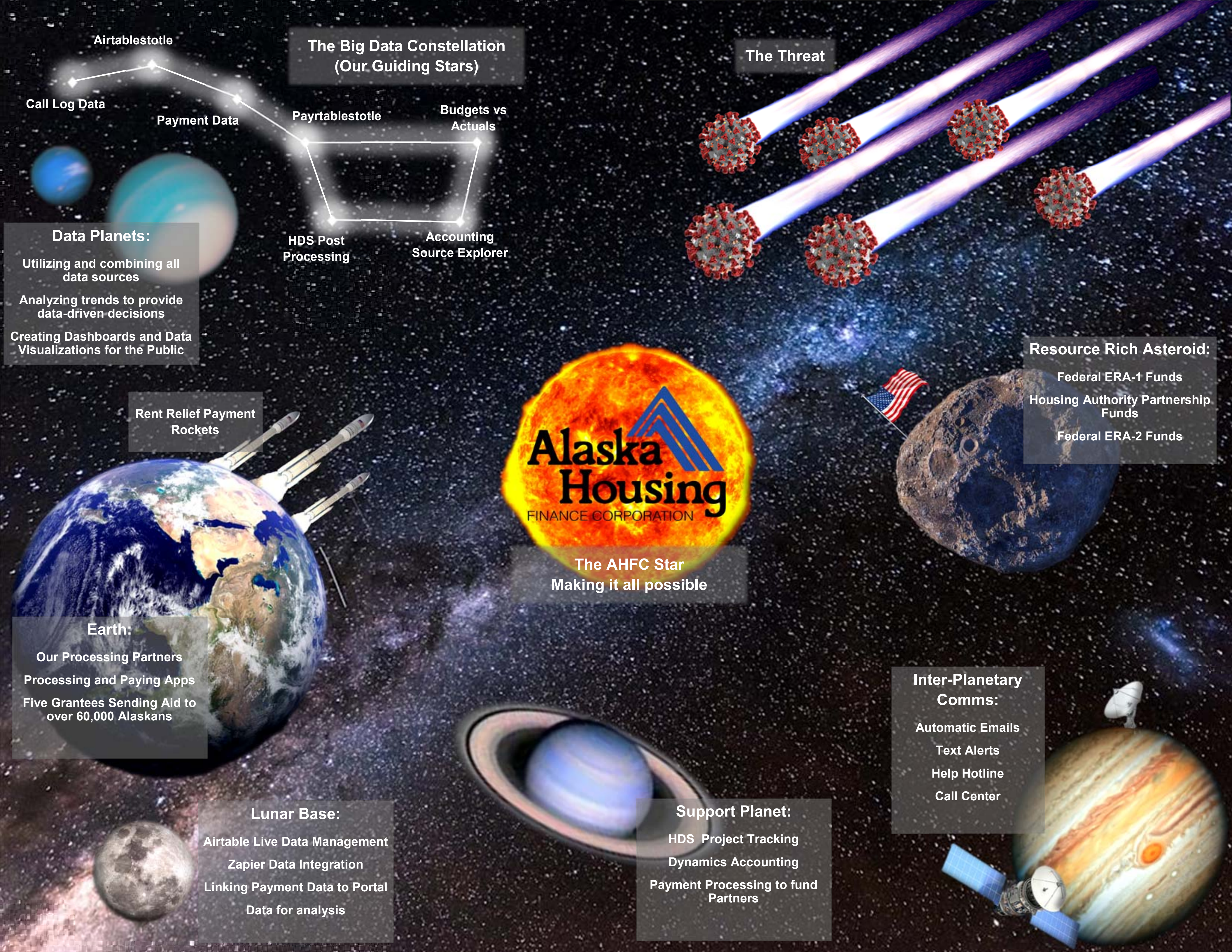
From a service delivery standpoint, we had no other choice. We had to build something new.

None of the off the shelf systems or existing models fit the program we were designing or could be implemented by the staff available for us to hire. We had zero desire to be one of many states begging a vendor for updates and systems modifications. We needed a platform designed around our program and partners needs, not something that limited how we could deploy the resources.

Provide Benefits that Outweigh Costs

Since 1/1/2021, we’ve paid $7.8M for everything. That is less than 3% of the $291M allocated to AHFC! It covers our contractors, all systems, call center staff we hired and all of the administrative expenses for our processing partners. Our 15 funding partners were not charged a dime.

We saved money, prevented headaches and customer frustration, and created a framework that partner agencies could use to deploy their resources. If we had not done this, a lot of unspent Alaskan money would have been recaptured for California and other states to use. These funds stayed put and are now helping homeless Alaskans become renters through a new program.


Airtablestotle
Call Log Data
Payment Data
Payrtablestotle
Budgets vs Actuals
HDS Post Processing
Accounting Source Explorer
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The Big Data Constellation (Our Guiding Stars)

The Threat

Data Planets:

Utilizing and combining all data sources

Analyzing trends to provide data-driven decisions

Creating Dashboards and Data Visualizations for the Public

Rent Relief Payment Rockets

Resource Rich Asteroid:

Federal ERA-1 Funds

Housing Authority Partnership Funds

Federal ERA-2 Funds

The AHFC Star Making it all possible

Earth:

Our Processing Partners

Processing and Paying Apps

Five Grantees Sending Aid to over 60,000 Alaskans

Inter-Planetary Comms:

Automatic Emails

Text Alerts

Help Hotline

Call Center

Lunar Base:

Airtable Live Data Management

Zapier Data Integration

Linking Payment Data to Portal

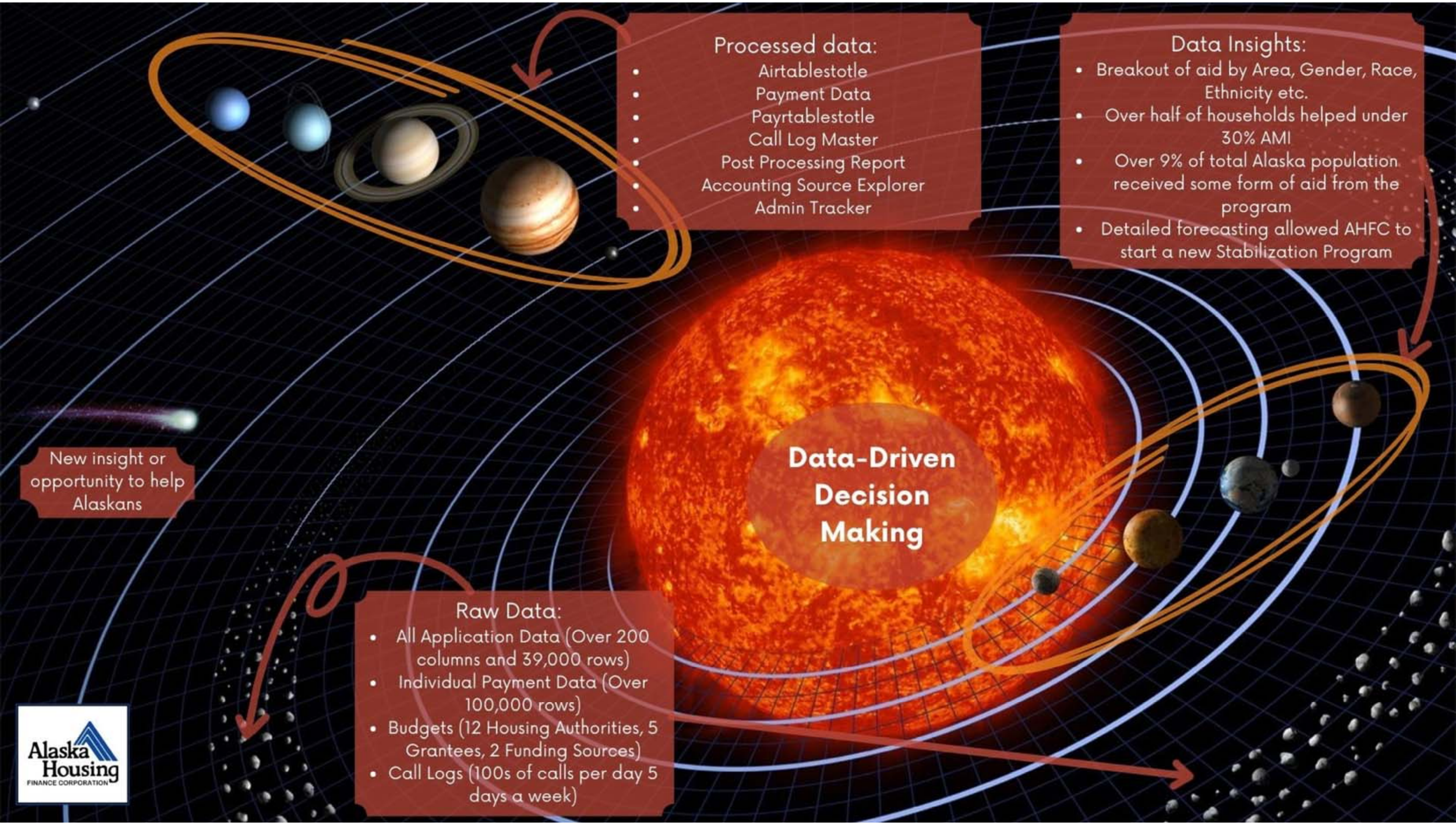
Data for analysis

Support Planet:

HDS Project Tracking

Dynamics Accounting

Payment Processing to fund Partners



Processed data:

- Airtablestotle
- Payment Data
- Payrtablestotle
- Call Log Master
- Post Processing Report
- Accounting Source Explorer
- Admin Tracker

Data Insights:

- Breakout of aid by Area, Gender, Race, Ethnicity etc.
- Over half of households helped under 30% AMI
- Over 9% of total Alaska population received some form of aid from the program
- Detailed forecasting allowed AHFC to start a new Stabilization Program

Data-Driven Decision Making

New insight or opportunity to help Alaskans

Raw Data:

- All Application Data (Over 200 columns and 39,000 rows)
- Individual Payment Data (Over 100,000 rows)
- Budgets (12 Housing Authorities, 5 Grantees, 2 Funding Sources)
- Call Logs (100s of calls per day 5 days a week)

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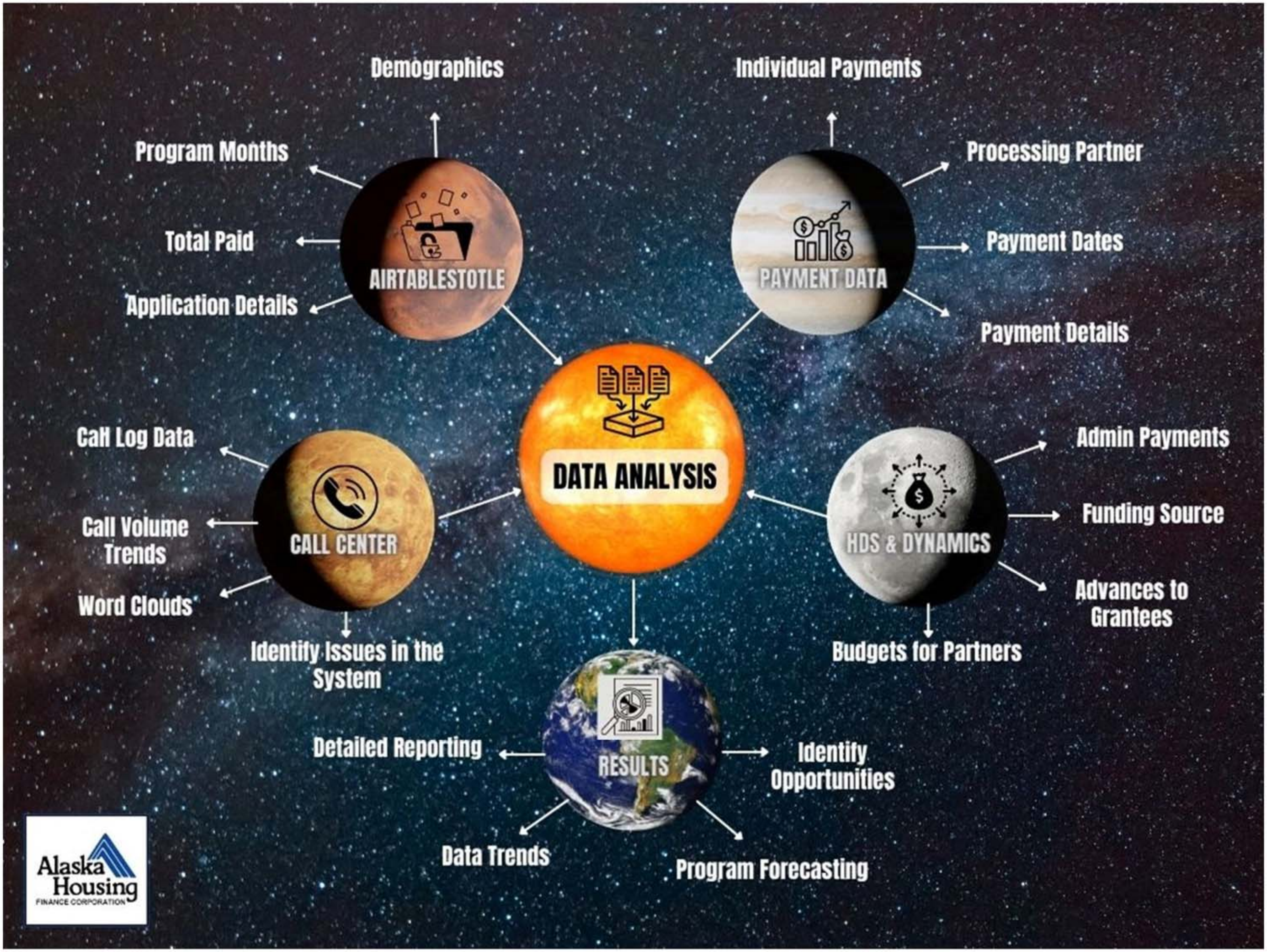

DATA ANALYSIS

AIRTABLESTOTLE
- Demographics
- Program Months
- Total Paid
- Application Details

PAYMENT DATA
- Individual Payments
- Processing Partner
- Payment Dates
- Payment Details

CALL CENTER
- Call Log Data
- Call Volume Trends
- Word Clouds
- Identify Issues in the System

HDS & DYNAMICS
- Admin Payments
- Funding Source
- Advances to Grantees
- Budgets for Partners

RESULTS
- Detailed Reporting
- Identify Opportunities
- Data Trends
- Program Forecasting

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Service Center Engagement: landlords, tenants, utility providers, and escalations

5260

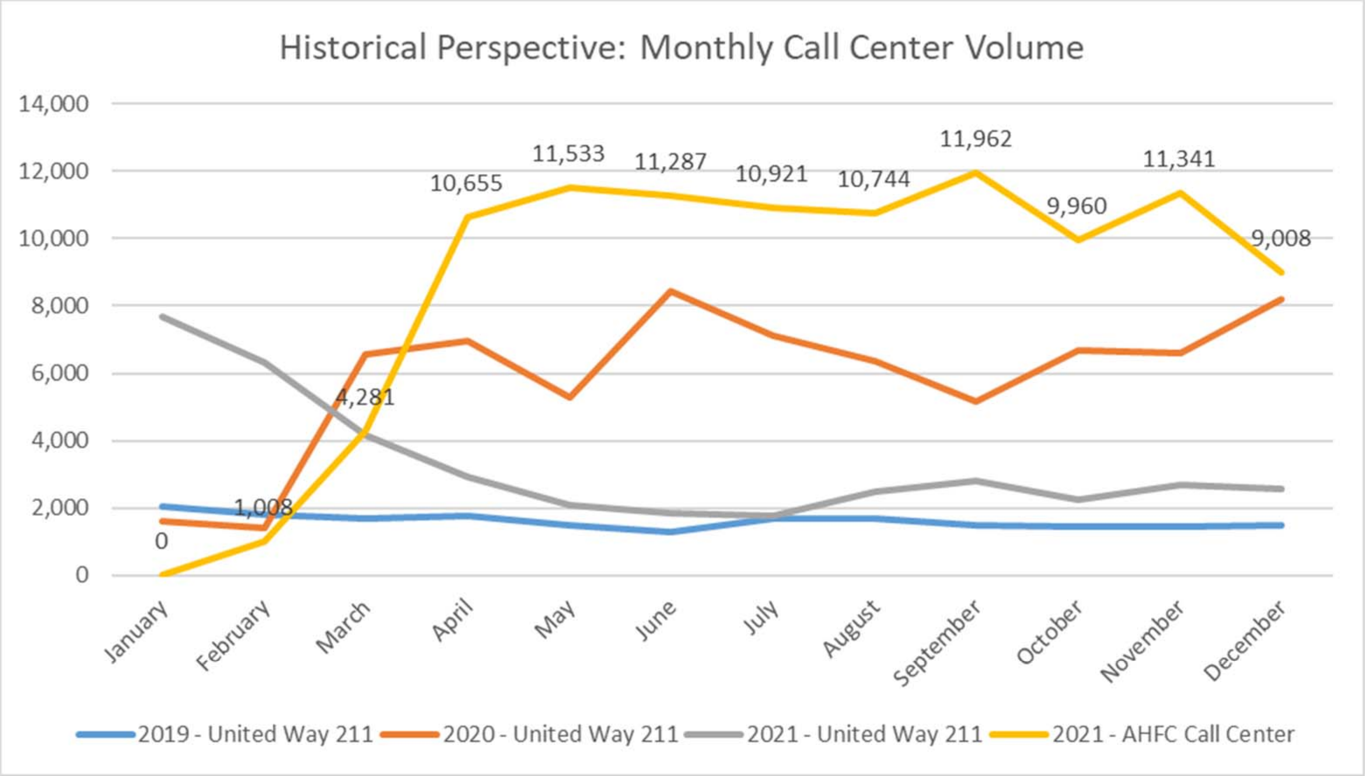
Total Appeals Received

2177

Total Approved Appeals

1990

Total Denied Appeals



By way of comparison, in 2021 the statewide 2-1-1 system fielded 39k calls. The service center formed by AHFC in February of 2021 fielded 101k calls that year.