

ANNUAL REPORT

FY

A YEAR OF
GROWTH & INSPIRATION

24



Council on
Developmental Disabilities

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Disability is a natural part of the human experience.

- Developmental Disabilities Act



Council on
Developmental Disabilities

Introduction

The Tennessee Council on Developmental Disabilities made remarkable strides this past year, advancing our mission through three state plan goals:

- **developing engaged leaders**
- **impacting policy and practice**
- **informing the public**

Through these three goals, we've advanced our mission of creating **meaningful change for Tennesseans with disabilities** and their families.

From **celebrating milestone anniversaries** to **driving policy reforms** and **fostering new generations of advocates**, our work has strengthened communities across the state.

This report showcases how our work has **created lasting impact** while laying the groundwork for continued progress in making Tennessee a more inclusive place for all.

Council Staff

Leading with Vision, Inspiring Success

Key Achievements



- **Celebrated 30 years of Partners in Policymaking®** at our reunion event, where graduates shared powerful stories of how the program has transformed disability rights in Tennessee over three decades.
- **Supported more than 100 young people with disabilities** through PowerUp Tech Camp and Youth Leadership Academy, to help them gain technology skills and learn to advocate for themselves.
- **Fostered community connection and empowerment by providing 184 conference scholarships**, connecting people with disabilities and families with experts, peers, and resources that help create more independent lives for themselves and their communities.

Partners in Polycymaking®

The Partners in Polycymaking® reunion, held in April 2024, brought together **more than 40 alumni to celebrate 30 years of advocacy**. Alumni honored past program leaders while strengthening their leadership skills and planning how to engage in future advocacy.

The reunion featured stories of the impact Partners graduates are having, including:

- **Heather Bensch**, who successfully lobbied for "Caroline's Carts" in her local Walmart and then expanded to several other stores.
- **Racheal Smith**, honored as the "2023 Mother of the Year" by the TN Justice Center for her tireless advocacy.

Alumni shared how the program helped them grow and spoke of gaining confidence in public speaking, becoming better advocates for their families, and the value of information, resources, and connections provided by Partners. They emphasized **growth in self-confidence, organizational skills, and understanding of disability issues**.

- **93% of attendees reported satisfaction** with the event.
- **90% reported often or always using the skills or knowledge gained** in Partners since they graduated.

Participants **shared their ongoing advocacy activities**—from joining disability boards to establishing new non-profits—proving that **the leadership cultivated through Partners is a catalyst for change**.

Empowering Youth Through Leadership Development

The Council was a sponsor for **Empower TN's Youth Leadership Academy (YLA)** and supported the **West Tennessee PowerUp Tech Camp** in May 2024.

These programs helped young people with intellectual and developmental disabilities **develop leadership and advocacy skills.**

Participants for the PowerUp Tech Camp reported **significant improvements in leadership skills**, decision-making, and sense of connection. Feedback from 40 participants highlighted high satisfaction with the camp (**average rating of 4.73 out of 5**).

Additionally, **EmpowerTN's Youth Leadership Academy (YLA)** saw nine young participants learn to **embrace their authentic voices and envision independent futures**. Evaluations showed increased confidence and knowledge in key areas such as independent living, advocacy, and emergency preparedness.

One participant from the PowerUp Tech Camp noted, **"The camp helped me better say what I want and what is important to me."** Another from YLA shared, **"I feel empowered to find my authentic voice,"** reflecting the transformative impact of these programs.

Expanding Opportunities through Scholarships

Our scholarship fund program **continued to provide crucial support** for people with disabilities and their families attending key events.



48

people with disabilities
received scholarship
funds



136

family members received
scholarship funds

This year alone, 136 family members and 48 individuals with disabilities benefited from scholarships to attend conferences like the National Federation of the Blind National Convention and the Southeast Adult Autism Symposium.

The responses from participants highlighted the **transformative nature of these experiences**, giving families hope, knowledge, and a renewed sense of connection.

Eugene Anderson, who attended the Dup15q Conference, expressed how **engaging directly with experts led to more informed decisions** about his son's healthcare and future. Natasha Wells shared that attending the National Federation of the Blind National Convention with her daughter **provided valuable resources and a sense of community** that was deeply impactful for them both.

Supporting Self-Determination

This year, we **supported self-advocacy organizations by serving as advisors and providing funding for learning activities.**

For example, we helped fund the 7th Annual Adult Autism Symposium in July 2023, which was attended by **25 people with disabilities, 12 family members, and 8 others.**

Attendees shared positive feedback, with comments like, **"I loved being around so many other people who are autistic and seeing the beauty of our diverse community!"** and **"The conference was great for community building. Connecting with other autistic adults is helpful."**

Advocates in Motion (AiM) is funded by the Council and offered by the Department of Disability and Aging (formerly DIDD). This program **helps people with developmental disabilities** take a more active role in their own disability services.

The AiM program **expanded this year with new training videos and the hiring of trainers across Tennessee.** Participants expressed enthusiasm for the program, emphasizing **the positive impact of making new friends** and the excitement for future trainings. Multiple workshops were held this year, broadening our network of trainers and extending the reach of grassroots advocacy initiatives.

Participants shared their experiences:

- Tammy O. said, **"I learned about resources to help me find a job."**
- Donna F. enjoyed **"making my dream board,"**
- Haley L. appreciated **"hearing from the trainers about speaking up and speaking out."**

Shaping Policy, Empowering Change

Key Achievements



- **Tracked and analyzed 20 policy proposals** throughout the year, as well as created plain language summaries and facilitated community understanding of complex legislation. This included bills creating the new TN Department of Disability and Aging and **expanding funding for adult-size changing tables**.
- **We hosted multiple listening sessions** with families and those with IDD, leading to significant policy changes including improved coordination between behavioral health and long-term support services.
- **Our Council members used their lived experiences** to educate policymakers. This resulted in passage of a bill that created a Medicaid Buy-In program in Tennessee, which allows people with disabilities who work to access Medicaid, even as they earn higher incomes.

Empowering Voices for Change

Throughout the year, the Council **led conversations and partnerships** that elevated the voices of people with disabilities and their families on critical issues such as crisis prevention, community living, and family supports.

This work ensured that **those directly affected by policies had a meaningful role in shaping them.**

One of the **most impactful outcomes** was the passage of Tennessee's Medicaid Buy-In program. This policy allows people with disabilities to access Medicaid while earning higher incomes, **safeguarding both their healthcare needs and financial independence.**

The Medicaid buy-in program is anticipated to **bring life-changing benefits to more than 2,000 Tennesseans**, providing them with essential healthcare services while **safeguarding their financial independence.**

Council Member Bliss Welch **was a key part of making this program a reality.** She shared her personal story in meetings with lawmakers, showing them how the program could change lives. Her efforts **inspired others to support the cause** and helped get the program approved.

Informing Policymakers

We **tracked and analyzed policy proposals** ranging from the establishment of the new TN Department of Disability and Aging to expanding funding for adult-size changing tables. To make these complex issues accessible, **the Council created plain language summaries**, ensuring that community members could engage with and understand the proposed legislation.



24

newsletters shared in
FY24



20

policy proposals
tracked



135

inquiries answered from
people facing challenges

Over the past year, the Council **responded to 135 inquiries from people facing challenges** in accessing disability supports, serving as a trusted resource for Tennesseans with disabilities and their families navigating complex state and community services.

Engagement with legislators **extended beyond tracking proposals**. The Council actively participated in hearings and meetings, **providing critical insights into how various policies could impact individuals with disabilities**. Topics included housing accessibility, education, and behavioral health supports. Our team also published newsletters which **served as a vital resource for sharing updates on disability policies** and community resources.

- **92% of people** we surveyed said our information **increased their knowledge of disability policies** that affect them/the disability community.

Strategic Partnerships and National Leadership

Collaboration was a cornerstone of our work this year. The Council's partnerships amplified its impact, driving improvements across a range of areas.

We were **a key contributor** to the new **Rural Disability Resource Network (RDRN)**, connecting it with the TN Disability Pathfinder program to **provide vital rural disability insights**.

We also **celebrated a decade of leadership** in Employment First, continuing active roles in the **Employment First Task Force** and **Employment Roundtable subgroup**. This contributed to systemic changes **that promote workplace inclusion**.

Our work has also been recognized at **both the state and national levels**. Council member **Chrissy Hood's advocacy for adult-size changing tables** earned her the title of **"Advocate of the Year."** Her efforts not only improved accessibility in Tennessee but also **positioned her as a national resource on this issue, and** drew consultation requests from other state DD Councils.

Beyond individual recognitions, the **our expertise was sought nationwide on topics such as disaster preparedness, decision-making supports**, and other pressing disability issues. These achievements underscore the our role as a leader and innovator in the field of disability advocacy.

Lived Experience Driving Policy

At the heart of the Council's approach is the belief that **lived experience is a powerful driver of change**. This philosophy was evident throughout 2024 as the Council exceeded its goals for engagement.

We **exceeded our original target by 380%**, enabling 24 Council members and Partners graduates to participate in policy efforts each year—**far surpassing our goal of 5**.

This increased engagement led to meaningful policy achievements. Advocates' personal stories and perspectives **directly inspired improvements** in Tennessee's disability services.

The Council **continues to be a trusted resource** for Tennesseans with disabilities and their families as they navigate state and community services.

The Council strengthens advocacy by **supporting people with disabilities** in sharing their experiences with policymakers.

Our Council is made up of a diverse group of citizens with **lived disability experience**. Leaders of state disability programs also serve on our Council, **forming a direct link** between people with developmental disabilities and the programs and services that affect their lives.

Connecting People, Sharing Knowledge

Key Achievements



Coleman Family Story



7.8K views • 1 year ago

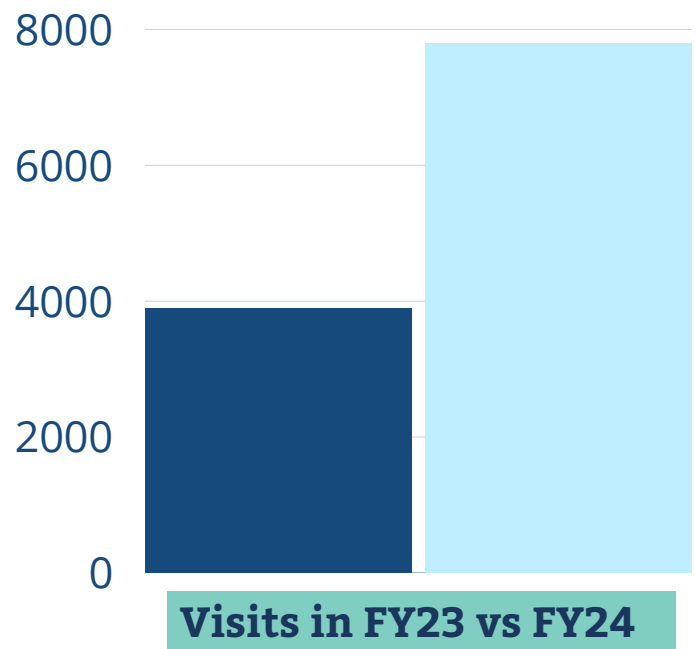
- **Increased access to critical information** through innovative communication strategies, leading to soaring social media engagement, industry-leading newsletter open rates, and impactful stories in *Breaking Ground* magazine.
- **Transformed complex information into clear, actionable resources** by working with other state agencies, improving outcomes for those navigating disability services.
- **Inspired action and advocacy for a more inclusive future** by celebrating 30 years of Partners in Policymaking® and sharing transformative success stories, reaching more than 20,000 YouTube viewers and countless others.

Social Media: Expanding Our Reach

Our Facebook presence was well established with **115 impactful posts**, featuring highlights like the **Employment First anniversary celebration**, Alison Bynum’s story on adult-size changing tables, and the **launch of a new LAEDS class**. A standout post on the Fall 2023 issue of *Breaking Ground* magazine reached 5,334 people—demonstrating the wide resonance of our content.

Through targeted posts, community-focused stories, and engaging visuals, the Council **effectively uses Facebook to connect, inform, and inspire Tennesseans about disability issues**, encouraging them to take action and stay informed

Our Facebook content reached 41,445 people, marking a **6.1% increase over the previous year**. Visits **surged by 50.7% to 7.8K**, and we welcomed 241 new followers, expanding our community to 5,376.



YouTube: Lasting Impact, Enduring Success

Our YouTube channel demonstrated **significant reach and engagement over the past year**, achieving key metrics of 20.3K total views and 234.8 hours of watch time. Our subscriber base also grew by 50 new followers, **confirming its value as a platform for sharing compelling narratives** and educational content.



Coleman Family Story



7.8K views • 1 year ago



What is developmental disability?



2.4K views • 1 year ago

Legacy content from prior to FY24, particularly videos focused on **adult-size changing tables** and **developmental disability awareness work**, maintained strong viewership numbers and continued relevance throughout the year, **proving the lasting impact and ongoing utility of our video content**.

Future Plans

Building on Success in FY25

As we look to the future, the Council will **build on the successes of 2024**, setting the stage for even greater progress in the years to come. **Our commitment to Tennesseans with developmental disabilities and their families remains steadfast**, and our goals are clear.

- We will continue to provide clear information to help people with developmental disabilities and their families understand and help improve the policies and practices that affect their lives.
- Through our leadership development programs, we will help Tennessee's developmental disabilities community build skills to become leaders in their communities and beyond.
- Across the entire system of government programs in Tennessee, we will work to fill gaps and make change toward greater inclusion, independence, and self-determination for people with disabilities.