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DDA Awards Tennessee Believes Grants to Five Higher Education Institutions

Grant allocates more than \$500,000 to colleges and universities to create higher education programs for students with intellectual disabilities

NASHVILLE – The Department of Disability and Aging (DDA) announced it will award Tennessee Believes grant funding to five colleges and universities to develop and expand inclusive higher education programs.

A total of \$509,105 will be distributed to these five institutions to create opportunities for students with intellectual and developmental disabilities.

University of Tennessee Martin will receive funding to create a new inclusive program on campus. Funding was also awarded to existing programs at Vanderbilt University, University of Tennessee Knoxville, Dyersburg State Community College, and Union University.

“We are thrilled to continue empowering inclusive higher education through Tennessee Believes,” said DDA Commissioner Brad Turner. “These grants play a crucial role in promoting opportunity, excellence, and success for students of all abilities across the state.”

This year’s grant total of \$509,105 is a portion of the annual \$1 million commitment provided through Tennessee Believes.

The awards are as follows:

- **University of Tennessee Martin:** \$126,252.20 to create the Skyhawks Achieving in Life (SAIL) program for students with intellectual and developmental disabilities. The two-year program will focus on vocational skills, hands-on experience, and workforce readiness for 5 students in its first year.
- **Dyersburg State Community College:** \$171,200 to expand Eagle Access into Tipton County and create a Culinary Arts Program located on the Dyersburg main campus.
- **University of Tennessee Knoxville:** \$124,384 to hire additional staff members to meet the increasing demand for the FUTURE Program and provide specialized skill-based vocational training.
- **Vanderbilt University:** \$56,216 to provide access to career centers for current Next Steps students and alumni and providing more access to the university’s supports and resources as they transition to employment and life after college.
- **Union University:** \$31,052.80 to add an additional certificate program for graduates of the EDGE program, called the Advanced Certificate Program. This two-year program will focus on education, employment experience, and independent living skills.



The remainder of the grant funding, \$490,850, will fund existing multi-year contracts with previous grantees. Those schools are Chattanooga State Community College, East Tennessee State University, Lipscomb University, and the University of Memphis.

DDA received a total of six applications from state institutions for the Tennessee Believes program. The funding will be awarded to the five schools in the coming weeks.

Learn more about Tennessee Believes here: <https://www.tn.gov/content/tn/disability-and-aging/resource-directory/grants.html>

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About the Department of Disability and Aging

The Department of Disability and Aging is the state agency responsible for the oversight of services and support to 1.5 million older adults and Tennesseans with disabilities. The department is the result of a merger between the Department of Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities and the Tennessee Commission on Aging and Disabilities, effective July 1, 2024. Every day, the department strives to support people to live rewarding and fulfilling lives through Medicaid waiver Home and Community Based Services (HCBS), and a wide range of services and supports for older adults and adults with disabilities. DDA also provides services to infants and toddlers with disabilities or developmental delays through the Tennessee Early Intervention System (TEIS), and children under the age of 18 with disabilities or complex medical needs through the Katie Beckett Program. The department supports people to live the lives they envision for themselves by ensuring people are free to exercise rights, engage with their broader communities and experience optimal health. DDA is the first state service delivery system in the nation to receive Person-Centered Excellence Accreditation from the Council on Quality and Leadership. It has also been recognized as a national leader in its efforts to increase competitive, community-based employment outcomes for people with disabilities and its commitment to enhancing independence through Enabling Technology.