

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE  
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## DDA to Award Five Universities with TN Believes Grant Funding

\$1 million in grants will be allocated to colleges and universities to create new or support existing programs for students with intellectual and developmental disabilities.

NASHVILLE – The Department of Disability and Aging (DDA) announced today that it will award Tennessee Believes grants to five state higher education institutions for the 2026-2027 school year.

Marking the TN Believes program's 5<sup>th</sup> year, \$1 million will be allocated in 2026 to these institutions to support students with intellectual and developmental disabilities through inclusive higher education programs. Since 2021, the program has provided over \$4 million in funding to ten Tennessee colleges and universities.

"The opportunities and growth we've seen from the graduates of the TN Believes program are remarkable", said DDA Commissioner Brad Turner. "This program is a response to our communities needing access to post-secondary education, providing students with intellectual and developmental disabilities the chance to experience college life, learn new skills, and gain independence."

Lee University, a first-time awardee of the TN Believes grant, will receive funding to support the creation of a new inclusive program. Funding will also be awarded to Lipscomb University, East Tennessee State University, Union University, and Chattanooga State Community College.

The awards are as follows:

- **Lipscomb University:** \$129,737 in FY26-27 as part of a 3-year, \$389k grant to fund student transportation to and from internships and job sites. Additionally, as a response to the expansion of the IDEAL program from 2 years to 4 years, the funds will also be utilized to hire staff to support 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4th-year students and assist IDEAL's employment network.
- **East Tennessee State University:** \$130,488 in FY26-27 as part of a 3-year, \$398k grant to support 7 student participants with living stipends, which may include a meal plan. ETSU also plans to utilize part of the grant to train all Access ETSU team members in the Self-Determined Learning Model of Instruction (SDLMI) to improve transition planning, academic success, community participation, and positive employment outcomes.
- **Union University:** \$100,000 in FY26-27 as part of a \$300k grant to fund a dedicated transition services professional and direct transition supports to increase capacity and produce measurable improvements for students in the EDGE program.
- **Chattanooga State Community College:** \$124,016 in FY26-27 as part of a 3-year, \$381k grant to support expansion of the program in response to increasing interest

in Tiger Access. The school will utilize the funds for operational expenses and to support staff providing curriculum oversight, mentor training, and disability coordination.

- **Lee University:** \$53,276 in FY26-27 as a 1-year grant to support the implementation of a post-secondary higher education program in the Cleveland/Bradley County region. Lee University will utilize the funds primarily for employment readiness activities and community-based learning opportunities, assistive technology and other program resources, and program personnel essential to operations and direct student support.

DDA received a total of 8 applications from higher education programs across the state. The funding will be awarded to the five schools at the start of FY27.

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### **About the Department of Disability and Aging**

The Department of Disability and Aging is the state agency responsible for 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.