



# Tennessee Commission on Children & Youth's Budget Recommendations FY2026-27



## YOUTH JUSTICE

Create a state-supported grant program to help communities implement evidence-based practices that address anger, aggression, and domestic violence education, targeting the growing trend of assault charges among adolescent girls.

## CHILD WELFARE

Reduce time in custody by strengthening services that help caregivers fulfill permanency plan requirements.

Recognize TEN-4 Day statewide and support regional awareness through state-funded educational events aimed at preventing child abuse.

## CHILD WELFARE & YOUTH JUSTICE

Create a publicly accessible database containing licensure information for all child care agencies defined under TCA § 37-5-501, to enhance transparency and accountability in placements.

## HEALTH

Provide state-supported swim instruction for TennCare-enrolled children ages 1-4 as a preventive health and safety measure aimed at reducing the risk of drowning and promoting early childhood water safety.

Create a comprehensive approach to absorb additional SNAP financial obligations at the state level while implementing measures to reduce administrative error rates.

## MENTAL HEALTH

Establish a grant program to offset the cost of licensure supervision hours for mental health professionals, helping to grow and sustain Tennessee's behavioral health workforce.

## CHILD CARE

Establish a statewide paid family leave program to support early parent-child bonding, reduce financial hardship for working families, and ease pressure on Tennessee's limited infant care system.

## FAMILY ECONOMICS

Build an easy-to-use, centralized website where families can explore all publicly funded children's programs in Tennessee, complete a common eligibility screener, apply for services, and connect with benefits navigators



# Youth Justice

**Create a state-supported grant program to help communities implement evidence-based practices that address anger, aggression, and domestic violence education, targeting the growing trend of assault charges among adolescent girls.**

## WHY

Communities across Tennessee are seeing a troubling rise in assault charges among adolescent girls—often rooted in unresolved trauma, lack of conflict resolution skills, and exposure to violence. These behaviors frequently reflect deeper struggles rather than criminal intent. A state-supported grant program would empower local communities to implement evidence-based interventions that reduce aggression, promote accountability, and teach emotional regulation.

This approach reinforces core values of personal responsibility, family stability, and community safety. By equipping young people with the tools to manage anger and build healthier relationships, we can prevent future involvement in the justice system, reduce recidivism, and create safer, more resilient communities across the state.

### Examples of ODDJP model programs communities could implement:

[Resilience, Opportunity, Safety, Education, Strength \(ROSES\)](#)

[Juvenile Justice Anger Management \(JJAM\) Treatment for Girls](#)

[Risk Detection/Executive Function Intervention](#)

[SNAP® Girls](#)

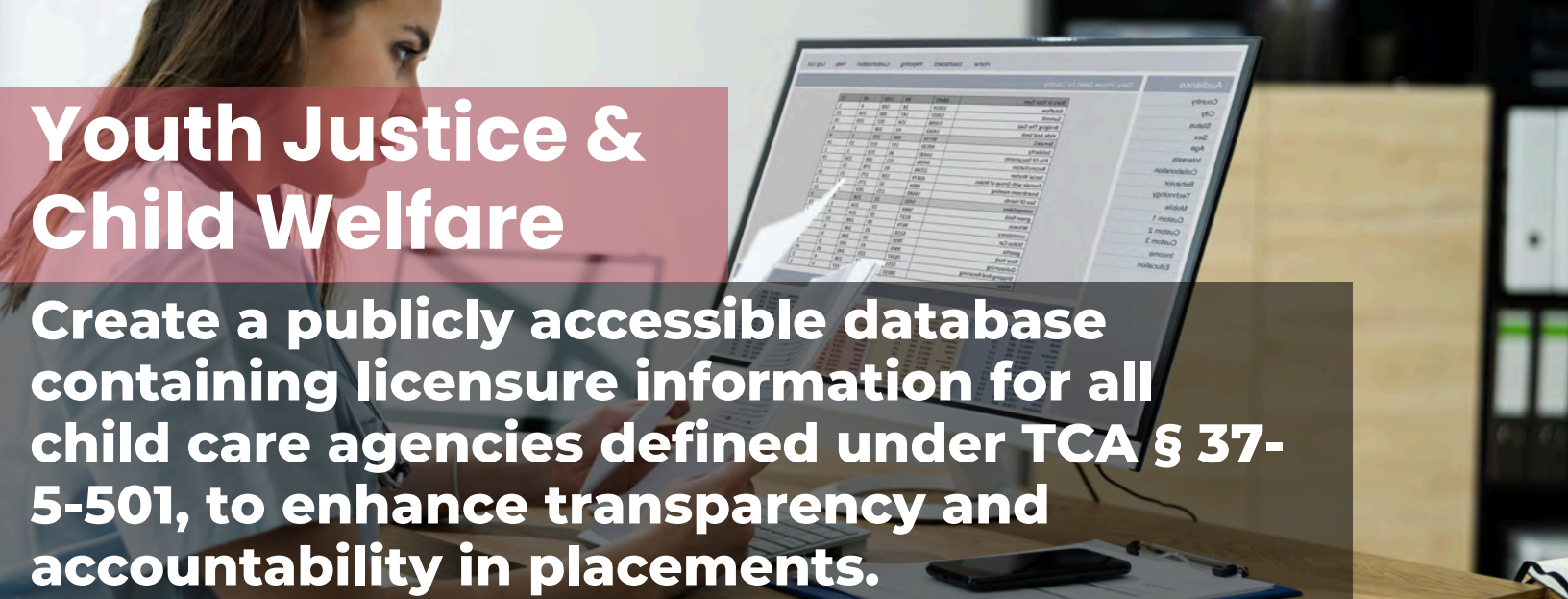
**While adolescent boys are still the majority of those under 18 committing simple assault, the number of simple assaults by adolescent girls is growing at a faster pace than their male counterparts. <sup>1</sup>**

**Between 2019 and 2024, the number of simple assaults by girls under 18 increased by 17.5 percent. Among boys, it increased by 9.6 percent. <sup>1</sup>**

**Of simple assaults by girls under 18 in 2024, 44 percent occurred at a residence or home. <sup>1</sup>**

**In 32 percent of simple assaults by girls under 18 in 2024, the victim was a family member. <sup>1</sup>**

**Since 2019, the number of simple assaults by girls where they were both the victim and offender in the situation has increased by 41 percent. <sup>1</sup>**



# Youth Justice & Child Welfare

## Create a publicly accessible database containing licensure information for all child care agencies defined under TCA § 37-5-501, to enhance transparency and accountability in placements.

### WHY

Families, caseworkers, and advocates need access to clear, up-to-date information about the facilities where children are placed. A publicly accessible database would increase transparency, promote accountability, and support informed decision-making across the child welfare and youth justice systems.

Providing clear, accessible information on which agency is responsible for licensing or approving a facility, along with the type of license it holds, helps families, caseworkers, and advocates understand the specific standards and expectations governing each placement. This clarity reduces confusion, ensures accountability, and makes it easier to identify whether facilities are meeting the requirements intended to protect children and support their well-being.

This tool empowers communities to advocate for safe, high-quality care environments. It also reinforces the state's commitment to oversight and continuous improvement in child-serving systems. When information is accessible and trust is built through transparency, children are safer and outcomes improve.

### The database should include:

- The entity responsible for licensing or approving the facility
- The type of license held
- Current status of the license or approval
- Date and type of any adverse licensing action
- Date of most recent inspection
- The results of the inspection and any requested corrective action

**In August 2025, there were approximately 195 Congregate Care facilities with an active placement of a DCS custodial youth. <sup>1</sup>**

**Michigan and Wisconsin both have online and publicly available information about the licensure status of their child welfare placements. <sup>2,3</sup>**

### Child Care Agency (TCA 37-5-501) <sup>4</sup>

- includes:
- Child Abuse Agency
  - Child Caring Institution
  - Child Placing Agency
  - Detention Center
  - Family Boarding Home or Foster Home
  - Group Care Home
  - Maternity Home
  - Temporary Holding Resource

"Child care" means the provision of supervision, protection and the basic needs of a child for twenty-four (24) hours a day including the provision of such temporary services to a child awaiting placement in permanent care. Care for a child of less than twenty-four (24) hours duration is licensed by the Department of Human Services pursuant to TCA 71-3-5.



# Child Welfare

## Reduce time in custody by strengthening services that help caregivers fulfill permanency plan requirements

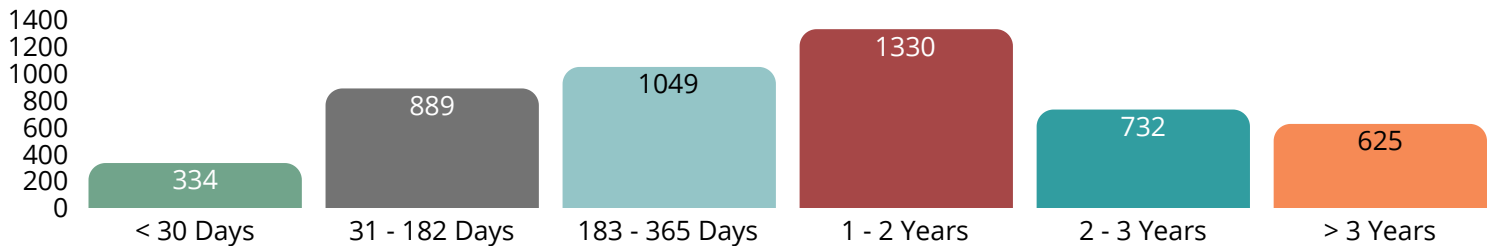
### WHY

Children thrive in stable, permanent homes, yet many remain in custody longer than necessary due to gaps in support for caregivers working to meet permanency plan goals. By building out a range of responsive supports, including local community resources, DCS liaisons, and in-home services, Tennessee can better address families' needs in real time and help them move more quickly toward reunification.

For parents who are already struggling, completing a permanency plan can be especially challenging. Many are unfamiliar with child welfare processes and face barriers such as complex paperwork, strict timelines, limited transportation, or the need to coordinate across multiple service providers. Without consistent guidance, even highly motivated caregivers can become overwhelmed or inadvertently fall behind on requirements, prolonging their child's time in custody. Yet often, even a small amount of targeted support, such as clear instructions, help connecting to services, or regular check-ins, can make the difference between families stalling in the process and getting on the right track toward reunification.

These supports acknowledge that families frequently navigate overlapping challenges, including housing instability, mental health needs, substance use, and limited access to services. Meeting families where they are with the right tools and guidance not only reduces time in custody but also strengthens long-term outcomes for both children and caregivers.

Children Exiting Custody in FY2023 by Days in Care <sup>1</sup>



Of the 5,004 children who exited custody in FY2023, 45 percent were reunified. <sup>2</sup>

### What could expanded services for caregivers look like?

- A one-stop-shop for resources, assessments and service connections modeled after Family Justice Centers
- A DCS position that serves as a Permanency Plan Liaison to connect parents to resources and facilitate the completion of the Permanency Plan.
- Expansion of the HomeBuilders program.

# Child Welfare

## Recognize TEN-4 Day statewide and support regional awareness through state-funded educational events aimed at preventing child abuse.

### WHY

The TEN-4 rule is a critical tool for identifying signs of potential physical abuse in young children—specifically, bruising on the torso, ears, or neck in children under four. Pediatricians, emergency room staff, and other frontline healthcare providers are often the first to encounter these warning signs.

By officially recognizing October 4<sup>th</sup> as TEN-4 Day and funding educational events across Tennessee's regions, the state can raise awareness not only among caregivers, educators, and community members, but also among medical professionals who play a vital role in early detection and intervention.

Educating healthcare providers is essential to ensuring that no warning sign goes unnoticed. When medical professionals are trained to recognize patterns of abuse and understand reporting protocols, they become powerful allies in protecting children. Hosting community events and regional trainings that highlight the TEN-4 rule can help raise awareness among healthcare providers, giving them the tools and confidence to recognize early signs of abuse and respond appropriately.

By hosting regional events that bring together medical professionals, educators, local leaders, and families, the state is investing in a proactive, prevention-first approach. These efforts strengthen public safety, reduce long-term harm, and protect our most vulnerable citizens through early, informed action.

### What is TEN-4-FACESp?

TEN-4-FACESp is an acronym and validated clinical decision rule to help screen children under 4 years of age with bruising to identify when a bruise is more likely to be caused by abuse than accidental injury. <sup>3</sup>

TEN-4-FACESp stands for bruising to the: <sup>4</sup>

**T**orso

**E**ars

**N**eck

**"4"** represents infants 4 months and younger with any bruise, anywhere

**F**renulum

**A**ngle of the jaw

**C**heeks

**E**yelids or

**S**ubconjunctivae

**"p"** represents the presence of patterned bruising

"Bruising is the most common injury from physical child abuse and the most common injury to be overlooked or misdiagnosed as nonabusive before an abuse-related fatality or near-fatality in a young child. Several studies identified bruises as the preceding injury to abusive head trauma." -

Validation of a Clinical Decision Rule to Predict Abuse in Young Children Based on Bruising Characteristics <sup>3</sup>



# HEALTH

## Provide state-supported swim instruction for TennCare-enrolled children ages 1–4 as a preventive health and safety measure aimed at reducing the risk of drowning and promoting early childhood water safety.

### WHY

Drowning is the leading cause of death for children age 1 to 4 in Tennessee, and access to swim lessons is often limited for low-income families. By offering state-supported swim instruction to TennCare-enrolled children, Tennessee can take a proactive, evidence-based approach to preventing tragedy and promoting lifelong water safety skills.

Providing swim instruction is a life-saving investment that ensures all children, regardless of income, can learn the skills they need to stay safe around water. Early swim education empowers families, builds confidence in children, and reflects Tennessee's commitment to protecting its youngest residents through smart, preventive public health strategies.

Nationally and in Tennessee, drowning is the leading cause of death for children age 1 to 4. <sup>1,2</sup>

From 2018-2023, half of drowning deaths in Tennessee among those under 18 were children age 1 to 4. <sup>3,4</sup>

For every fatal childhood drowning, another 7 to 8 receive emergency department care for non-fatal drowning. <sup>5</sup>

Injuries and deaths from drownings cost the United States \$53 billion in 2020. <sup>6</sup>

### Modeling Drowning Prevention Initiatives in Florida

In 2023, Florida had the highest rate of drowning deaths in the United States. Just behind that with the second highest rate was Tennessee. <sup>7</sup> In 2024, Florida unanimously passed CS/SB544 - Swimming Lesson Voucher Program. <sup>8</sup>

“The bill establishes the Swimming Lesson Voucher Program within the Department of Health (DOH) to increase water safety by offering vouchers for swimming lessons to families with an income of up to 200 percent of the federal poverty level that have one or more children four years of age or younger. The bill requires the DOH to establish eligibility criteria for the vouchers; contract with a network of swimming lesson vendors, either directly or through specified non-profit entities, to ensure availability; and to establish methods for members of the public to apply for vouchers. The bill appropriates \$500,000 in nonrecurring general revenue to the DOH to fund the program.” - The Florida Senate 2024 Summary of Legislation Passed Committee on Health Policy <sup>8</sup>

In FY2026, Florida expanded the program by allocating one million dollars and establishing priority for children with autism or in military families. <sup>9</sup>

# HEALTH

## Create a comprehensive approach to absorb additional SNAP financial obligations at the state level while implementing measures to reduce administrative error rates.

### WHY

As Tennessee assumes greater financial responsibility for the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), it is essential to implement a strategic plan that ensures fiscal accountability and program integrity.

Reducing administrative error rates will help the state avoid federal penalties and ensure that benefits are distributed efficiently and accurately. Careful planning for these new costs is critical to maintaining uninterrupted access to services for families who rely on SNAP to meet their basic needs.

SNAP is a critical tool for helping working families meet basic needs, and its effective administration is essential to protecting taxpayer dollars. By reducing error rates and improving oversight, Tennessee can avoid costly federal penalties and ensure that benefits are delivered efficiently. With the state assuming greater financial responsibility for the program, a strategic approach is necessary to prevent service disruptions and maintain confidence in its operations. Developing a comprehensive plan for this shift in financial responsibility will prepare the state for the upcoming changes, support responsible budgeting, strengthen program integrity, and reinforce the state's commitment to accountable, results-driven governance.

State financial obligations for SNAP <sup>10</sup>

	Previous	Upcoming
SNAP Administration	50%	75%
SNAP Benefits	0%	0 - 15% based upon error rate

**Percent of matching funds requirements based on error rate <sup>10</sup>**  
 6% - 8% error: 5% of benefits  
 8% - 10% error: 10% of benefits  
 ≥ 10% error: 15% of benefits

### FY2024 Tennessee SNAP Expenditures on Children & Youth <sup>11</sup>

**SNAP Administration**  
 Total: \$123.2 million  
 Federal: \$66.6 million  
 State: \$56.7 million

**SNAP Benefits**  
 Total: \$728.4 million  
 Federal: \$728.4 million  
 State: \$0.

**Total State: \$56.7 million**

### Estimated Potential Tennessee SNAP Expenditures on Children & Youth Using FY2024 Figures & New Funding Formula

**SNAP Administration**  
 Total: \$123.2 million  
 Federal: \$30.8 million  
 State: \$92.5 million

**SNAP Benefits**  
 Total: \$728.4 million  
 Federal: \$655.5 million  
 State: \$72.8 million

**Total State: \$165.3 million**

(75% state obligation & 10% state obligation based off FY2024 error rate)



# Mental Health

**Establish a grant program to offset the cost of licensure supervision hours for mental health professionals, helping to grow and sustain Tennessee's behavioral health workforce.**

## WHY

Tennessee continues to face a shortage of licensed mental health professionals, particularly in rural and underserved areas or among children and adolescents with acute needs.

A significant barrier to licensure is the cost of required supervision hours, which can be financially prohibitive for early-career professionals. A state-funded grant program would reduce this burden, accelerate licensure, and help build a more robust behavioral health workforce across the state.

Investing in the next generation of mental health providers is an investment in the well-being of Tennessee's children and families. By removing financial barriers to licensure, we can ensure that more qualified professionals are available to meet the growing demand for mental health services—especially for youth experiencing trauma, anxiety, or behavioral challenges.

Unlike scholarships or loan repayment programs, which support individuals still in school or repaying debt, this initiative targets professionals who have already completed their education and are ready to enter the field. By covering the cost of required supervision hours, the state can accelerate their entry into the workforce and more quickly address the behavioral health provider shortage.

**In 2024, there was one mental health professional for every 500 people in Tennessee, an improvement from one per 842 in 2014. The ratio of providers varies significantly by county from 1:26,790 to 1:230.<sup>1</sup>**

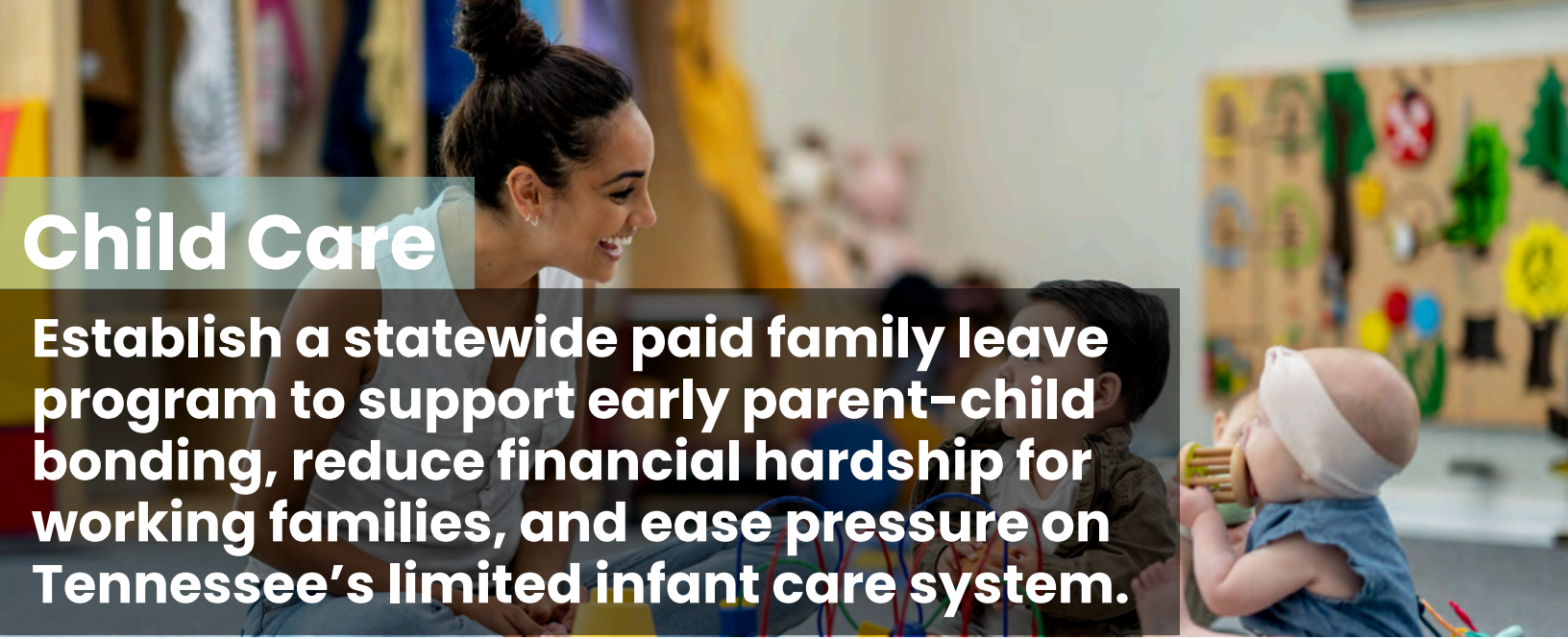
**In 2021-22, 62% of Tennessee youth with major depressive episodes did not receive any treatment, representing 69,000 youth.<sup>2</sup>**

Supervision hours necessary for advanced licensure:<sup>3</sup>

**Clinical Social Worker:** 100 hours  
**Professional Counselor:** 100 hours  
**Professional Counselor/Mental Health Services Provider:** 150 hours  
**Marital/Family Therapist:** 200 hours  
**Clinical Pastoral Therapist:** 270 Hours

**Supervision sessions often range from \$80-\$100 per hour, meaning the cost of supervision can range from \$8,000 - \$27,000.<sup>4</sup>**

**In Tennessee, many mental health positions requiring masters level education but not licensure pay between \$39,000 - \$61,000 annually.<sup>5</sup>**



# Child Care

**Establish a statewide paid family leave program to support early parent-child bonding, reduce financial hardship for working families, and ease pressure on Tennessee's limited infant care system.**

## WHY

Infant care presents one of the greatest challenges within Tennessee's child care system. Providers face high operating costs, strict staff-to-child ratios, and ongoing workforce shortages that make it difficult to offer enough infant slots to meet demand. At the same time, families often struggle to find affordable and reliable care for their youngest children. A statewide paid family leave policy would help address both of these challenges by allowing parents to care for their infants at home during the earliest and most developmentally important months.

Reducing the immediate demand for infant care would give providers the space to stabilize their operations. This could lead to lower staff turnover, improved retention, and more focused efforts to expand care for older children where the need is also significant. Over time, this approach would help build a stronger and more sustainable child care system that better serves both families and providers.

While paid family leave is a benefit for working parents, it is also a strategic investment in the long-term health of Tennessee's child care infrastructure. By easing pressure on providers and giving families more flexibility, the state can create a more resilient and responsive system that supports early development and strengthens the workforce.

**According to DHS licensure rules for child care agencies, enrollment of children under six weeks is prohibited. <sup>1</sup>**

**In August 2025, 41 percent of DHS licensed child care providers accepted 6 week old babies. <sup>2</sup>**

**In August 2025, 8 counties in Tennessee did not have a DHS licensed child care providers who accepted 6 week old babies. <sup>2</sup>**

**“Our study finds that, with controls for demographic and job-related characteristics, as well as for pre-birth levels of public assistance receipt, women who take paid leave are 39% less likely than those who take no leave to report public assistance receipt in the year following the child's birth. Moreover, women who take paid leave report \$413 less in public assistance on average in the year following the child's birth, than women who take no leave.” -**

Pay Matters: The Positive Economic Impacts of Paid Family leave for Families, Businesses and the Public <sup>3</sup>



# Family Economics

**Build an easy-to-use, centralized website where families can explore all publicly funded children's programs in Tennessee, complete a common eligibility screener, apply for services, and connect with benefits navigators.**

## WHY

Families often struggle to navigate the complex web of public programs available to support their children's health, education, and well-being. A centralized website with a common eligibility screener and application process would streamline access to services, reduce administrative burdens, and improve coordination across agencies.

While Tennessee has made progress in aligning certain public programs under a shared application, families often still need to complete multiple forms to access the full range of services they may be eligible to access. For busy parents, this creates avoidable stress and delays. Broadening the scope of the unified application would make it easier for families to get timely support.

This digital tool would empower families to find the help they need at the moment they need it, without unnecessary confusion or delay. By making public programs more accessible and transparent, Tennessee can ensure that no child misses out on critical supports due to bureaucratic barriers or lack of information.

## Programs for Children & Youth in Tennessee

**24** agencies, boards or commissions have a publicly-funded program serving children in Tennessee. <sup>1</sup>

### **First Five SC**

#### **A One-Stop Portal, Eligibility Screener and Application in South Carolina**

[first5sc.org](http://first5sc.org)

- First Five SC is an online portal that includes information about sixty publicly-funded programs and services across 10 state agencies in South Carolina.
- Of those programs, 44 are included in a common eligibility screener that allows families to enter information about their household and circumstances to determine which programs they may be eligible to access.
- First Five SC will only show families programs that they may be eligible for in their communities, so this is separated by county, school district, or zip code where appropriate.
- Caregivers can decide which programs they would like to apply for and apply for multiple programs through a single application.

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5. Based upon job postings meeting identified criteria in August 2025.

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# TENNESSEE COMMISSION ON **CHILDREN & YOUTH**

TCA 37-3-103(a)(1)

The commission shall perform each of the following duties:

**(A) Make recommendations concerning establishment of priorities and needed improvements with respect to programs and services for children and youth;**

**(B) On or before September 1 of each year, make recommendations for the state budget for the following fiscal year regarding services for children and youth and submit the recommendations to the governor, the finance, ways and means committee of the senate, the finance, ways and means committee of the house of representatives, the legislative office of budget analysis, and the affected state departments;**



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