Progress into Practice

The Tennessee Council on Developmental Disabilities in fiscal year 2021

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# Introduction by Wanda Willis, Executive Director

Few of us would have guessed that the Council would be working through a pandemic for a second year. But COVID-19 continued to be with us through fiscal year 2021.

What did that mean for the Council’s work?

* Focusing on both our core goals AND on pandemic-related needs
* Becoming experts at staying connected and working together virtually
* Strengthening relationships as we worked with other organizations on vaccine access
* Working harder than ever to make sure the disability perspective is at the table where policy decisions are made

I am so proud of the progress the Council made in this past year. The following pages will show the impact of our work has had on lives across our state. These highlights can’t tell the full story of the progress we see growing with every year. But they can give you a window into how the Council brings positive change to Tennessee’s disability services system. The end goal: more Tennesseans with disabilities are living the kinds of lives they want for themselves. I have never been prouder of our Council members from across the state, and the staff who bring the expertise and labor to put progress into practice.

# Goal 1: Developing Leaders

## Prepare Tennesseans to be leaders who influence policy and practice through stipends, information, internships, and training

### Partners in Policymaking

* 17 Partners graduates
	+ 8 persons with a disability
	+ 9 family members of people with disabilities
* 11 virtual sessions
* 13 Partners graduates have been appointed to the Board of Directors for a local Disability Advocacy Agency

Here’s what Partners participants report getting out of their experience:

* 80% reported an increased knowledge of state services and supports
* 82% reported an increased knowledge of disability issues
* 97% reported an increased sense of being connected to others with a similar life experience
* 100% reported an increased comfort level with sharing personal stories on important disability issues with policymakers
* 93% reported increased advocacy
* 80% reported increased leadership skills
* 93% reported they have an increased ability to influence policymakers or public policy

**Why this matters: Tennesseans impacted by disability have more knowledge of the disability services system so they can lead and share their experiences in their community and across the state.**

### Spotlight on Self-Advocacy

#### Advocates in Motion (AiM)

#### Support to Grassroots Self-Advocacy Organizations

#### Support Self-Advocates to Serve on Boards and Coalitions

* 222 people supported:
	+ 140 Tennesseans with disabilities
	+ 40 family members of people with disabilities
	+ 42 professionals
* 3 self-advocacy initiatives supported
	+ Center for Adult Autism - statewide conference
	+ People First of TN – mentoring to local chapter and support of statewide e-newsletter
	+ Advocacy Through the Arts – support to a series of arts activities that support participants to discover their voice, tell their story, and connect with others through a shared experience.

Participants said:

* Increased sense of choice and control in my life (100%)
* Increased ability to advocate (90%)
* Increased ability to say what I want and what is important to me (94%)
* I believe my life is better thanks to participating in these self-advocacy activities (100%)
* I am more involved in my community (90%)
* AiM helped me to participate in my ISP meeting (100%)
* After participating in AiM, I now know my rights (100%)

**Why this matters: The Council invests in projects and partnerships that prepare Tennesseans with disabilities and family members to be advocates and leaders.**

### Scholarship Fund

#### Individuals/Family

#### Organizations & Priorities

* 967 people supported:
	+ 168 Tennesseans with disabilities
	+ 294 family members of people with disabilities
	+ 505 professionals
* 10 organizations
* 13 events
	+ Events the Fund supported included:
		- AbleVoices photography classes
		- TN Adult Brothers and Sisters (TABS) webinars for siblings of people with disabilities
		- Special Olympics Tennessee sporting events
		- Borderless Arts TN dance training and festival
* 100% of participants reported:
	+ Increased sense of being connected to others with a similar life experience
	+ Increased ability to exercise choice and control in my life
	+ Increased knowledge of and ability to access available resources
	+ Increased knowledge of disability topics
	+ Increased ability to advocate
	+ Increased ability to better say what I want and what is important to me
	+ My life is better because of this activity

**Why this matters: The Council invests in scholarships that prepare self-advocates and family members to make their own decisions and better access resources.**

# Goal 2: Improving Policy and Practice

## Improve Tennessee policy and practice through tracking legislation, developing, and nurturing collaborations, and providing resources for grant projects.

### Tracking Public Policy Proposals

* Tracked 100+ policy proposals (Goal = 30)
* Consulted with 53 policymakers (Goal = 50)
* Gave input on 48 policy decisions (Goal = 20)

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* **Recommendation Adopted: TennCare proposes to reduce waiting list for Home & Community Based Services**
* **Legislation Introduced: Changing Spaces**: Council members presented testimony to the state legislature; met with local mayors across Tennessee; launched a public awareness campaign.
* **Legislation Passed: Precious Cargo Act**. Council member recognized at bill signing.
	+ *"I love the Council on Developmental Disabilities for giving me a voice to be heard. WOW." - Martez Williams, Council member.*
* **Legislation Passed: State as a Model Employer (SAME)**. Council staff provided testimony, research, and a framework for Tennessee's initiative.
	+ *"This will mean worlds to the disability community in our state." - Parent whose son already applied with SAME.*
* **Action started: The Office of Mobility & Accessible Transportation**. Council staff leads the advisory group guiding implementation of the new office after law passed in 2020.

**Why this matters: Insights from Tennessee's disability community influence policy decisions.**

### Sharing Public Policy Information

* 52 public policy newsletters (Goal = 52)
	+ *"Just a quick note to say thank you for your policy updates. Your messages are clear, professional and relevant." - Executive Director, Oregon Council on Developmental Disabilities*
* 53 citizen questions addressed
	+ *"I so appreciate all the work the Council does to help families. And most of it is behind the scenes that no one ever knows about!" - Council member who helped a family in their community address an issue with services*
* 38 public policy trainings (Goal = 20)
	+ *"Thank you for the thoughtful approach you take to educating stakeholders about policy changes without using fear." - State agency leader*

**Why this matters: The Council is a trusted source for policy information in Tennessee and across the country.**

### Collaborating with Public Policy Groups

#### 23 group collaborations

#### 10 products created

### Researching Best & Promising Practices

#### Supported Decision-Making

* Collaboration with Disability Rights Tennessee & The Arc of Tennessee
* Launched Center for Decision-Making Support website, the first of its kind in the country

#### Changing Spaces Strategy Group

* Collaboration with more than a dozen organizations and citizens
* Council's effort to expand access to adult-sized changing tables in Tennessee

#### "Everyone Can Work" Person-Centered Training

* Collaboration with Department of Human Services: Vocational Rehabilitation (DHS/VR)
* All DHS VR Staff trained in Person-centered planning for employment

**Why this matters: Best practices in line with Developmental Disabilities Act principles move forward in Tennessee with the Council's strategic partnerships and investments.**

# Goal 3: Informing & Educating

## Implement public information activities that increase Tennesseans’ awareness of disability policies and practices.

### Lead Communication Activities

* Breaking Ground subscribers grew 4% over the year, to nearly 6,000
* Facebook followers grew 12% over the year, to nearly 4,000
* E-news subscribers grew 8% over the year, to 2,350
* Twitter followers grew 12% over the year, to 1150

### Publications

* First interactive digital annual report
* Expanded our rural newspaper insert project, “Stronger Together”, to be mailed out in 50+ more TN counties. Created 2 new storytelling videos about Tennesseans with disabilities impacted by Council programs.
* Produced 4 issues of Council magazine *Breaking Ground* which is sent to 5,955 Breaking Ground subscribers. Special issues shared stories on how Tennesseans were impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic, TN’s inclusive higher education movement and programs, and artwork by or about Tennesseans with disabilities.

*"Thanks so much for sharing these rich and empowering stories!! The Council has done such an amazing job cultivating hope and opportunity in TN. I’d love to share this resource on our social media and website!” – Staff from Think College about our special Breaking Ground issue on Tennessee’s inclusive higher education movement*

### Social media highlights:

* Campaigns with selfies of Tennesseans in the disability community voting and getting the COVID-19 vaccine
* Storytelling campaigns (#DisabilityMeans, N&R videos, Developmental Disabilities Awareness Month, and Autism Acceptance Month)
* Continuing Q&A series about COVID-19, pandemic policy, and vaccines
* Center for Decision-Making Support social media launch
* 11,667 Facebook engagements (goal: 10K)
* 1,093 Twitter engagements (goal 1K)

**Why this matters: Tennesseans have access to information that equips them to make more informed decisions about their own lives.**

### TN Disability Pathfinder

* Preparing during FY21 for launch of new & improved Pathfinder website
* Helped nearly 1,800 people connect to disability resources through their main phone helpline and email
* Multicultural program staff helped 850+ people from other countries of origin
* Strengthening partnerships with funding agencies
* Dr. Erik Carter (Vanderbilt) and his team completed the "TN Disability Services Study" about how the TN disability community gets information. More than 3,000 people responded. This work will improve Pathfinder and other disability programs.

**Why this matters: Collaboration and accountability between state agencies ensures Tennesseans are referred to the right service for their current needs.**

# What can you expect from the Council in 2022?

Fiscal year 2022 brings a new five-year state plan for the Council. The state plan guides our work for change. It was shaped by input from hundreds of members of the disability community across the state. The plan outlines how we will act on the role and values given to us in the Developmental Disabilities Act – our guiding federal law.

Under the new plan, our goals are:

1. Developing Engaged Leaders
2. Improving Policy and Practice
3. Informing the Public

The broad goals are similar to the previous plan. Under them, areas of focus will include:

* Reaching more people with leadership trainings like Partners in Policymaking ®
* Moving policy toward greater inclusion, self-determination, and independence for people with disabilities
* Connecting with people who have disabilities and are also marginalized in other ways – for example, Black, Latinx, LGBTQ, immigrant/refugee and rural Tennesseans
* Growing the use of simple, easy-to-understand language so everyone can access disability information.

We’ll be sharing more about our work under the new plan in coming months. Follow us on social media and subscribe to our email newsletters and Breaking Ground magazine to stay updated.