



Council on  
Developmental Disabilities

# Stronger Together



**The Tennessee Council on Developmental Disabilities brings people together to grow opportunities and communities**

## RESOURCES FOR RURAL COMMUNITIES



The work of the Tennessee Council on Developmental Disabilities is shaped by members from all across the state, including residents from rural communities.

One such member is Jennifer Coleman, who was recently reappointed to a second three-year term by Gov. Bill Lee. Coleman lives in Paris, in Henry County, where she is a family nurse practitioner at the Rural Health Primary Clinic in Camden. In her TCDD role, she meets with the full Council four times a year in Nashville and serves as a representative to her region. She also organized a successful and well-attended “Disability 101” resource event in her area.

“I have been honored to be a part of the Council these past three years,” Coleman said. “I am thrilled to continue that work for another term. So many good things are happening, especially as the Council focuses on reaching rural areas like ours with disability resources and information. I will be working hard to continue opening more doors for people with disabilities right here in our community.”

BY THEA MARIE ROOD

Wanda Willis has been TCDD executive director for almost three decades.  
PHOTO COURTESY OF TCDD

# For the People, By the People

The Council educates and connects citizens and government for change that matters.

**T**he Tennessee Council on Developmental Disabilities exists to improve the lives of people with disabilities and their families. With its mix of experts and citizens, it has successfully filled that mission for nearly 50 years.

The Developmental Disabilities Act of 1970 paved the way for state councils; the Tennessee council was established by executive order from the governor’s office in 1975.

“The interesting thing about the Council is it’s a state agency, but it includes both policymakers and private citizens—it brings together educators, policymakers, legislators and private citizens to address disability issues,” said Wanda Willis, the Council’s executive director for 28 years. “The membership of the Council is just electrifying — and that’s intentional.”

By law, the diverse group must include representatives from state departments of education, health, labor, vocational rehabilitation, mental health and Medicaid, as well as from both of Tennessee’s Centers of Excellence (the Kennedy Center at Vanderbilt and the Boling Center at The University of Tennessee). “We also have a representative from our state protection

and advocacy system, Disability Rights Tennessee,” Willis added.

But the most important contribution comes from the 21 citizen members who have direct experience with intellectual and physical disabilities. “Council members reflect our state’s diversity, and they come from every area of the state,

**“The membership of the Council is electrifying — and that’s intentional.”**

**WANDA WILLIS**  
*Executive Director of TCDD*

both urban and rural,” Willis said.

The Council’s chair is one of those citizen members. Tecia Puckett Pryor is an attorney and mediator whose 16-year-old son Harrison is on the autism spectrum. “He is a very friendly and loving kid and he really brightens people’s days by being with him,” Pryor said. “I take delight in knowing that others find joy in him.” She knows she has come a long way since

she first learned of his disability. “I feel like the main transformation for me has been becoming aware of what’s really important for him.”

Education and employment quickly topped that list, which led to her work with the Council. “Our mission is to give people tools so they can be active and knowledgeable and promote change,” Pryor said. “We are educating people so they can be leaders in their communities and across the state.”

The Council’s direct connection to both citizens’ needs and state government allows it to bring the right people together to work on big issues. One example is the Employment Roundtable, which the Council hosts to share information and build partnerships across state programs working on employment for people with disabilities. Businesses are seeing the benefits of hiring employees who have a disability.

Willis remembers a recent Roundtable guest speaker who employs people with disabilities. “He said, ‘I wish I’d known all this years ago. These are the best employees I’ve ever had, and it completely changed the culture of the workplace.’ That’s the kind of change we’re working for.”



Partners in Policymaking has helped the family of David Frizzell become better advocates.  
PHOTO COURTESY OF FAITH HENSHAW

# Partners in Policymaking

Free training gives individuals and families the tools to live their best lives



Faith Henshaw and David Frizzell are more than just siblings; they're friends. They like to sing in the car, exercise at the YMCA and go to movies and concerts together. Like most big sisters, Faith always has been very involved in her brother's life. Unlike most siblings, she will need to continue some level of care-giving into the future: David was born with Down syndrome.

The Tennessee Council on Developmental Disabilities' Partners in Policymaking® program is helping her prepare for that future. The free training teaches adults with disabilities and their families advocacy strategies like how to talk to lawmakers, how to exercise educational rights and how to find employment opportunities. It also provides ongoing support through friendships and networking.

"A sibling, that's your longest-lasting relationship; you're going to have it for life," Faith said. "I know one day when my parents are gone, he will be my sole responsibility. And while that's something I willingly choose, it's terrifying. ... I'm not alone, there are other individuals who have the same fears as me."

Their mother, Virginia Frizzell, is also a graduate of the Partners in Policymaking program. She said the training has made her more aware of what she can do to advocate on her son's behalf and how to

**"I feel confident that if something comes up in the future, I know where to go to find help."**

**VIRGINIA FRIZZELL**  
*Partners in Policymaking graduate*

find resources that enable him to live as independently as possible.

"Being a teacher of 23 years, I felt I knew it all," Virginia said. "But I was so surprised when I got there and went through the class at how much I didn't know and how much more there was out there to learn."

Both Virginia and Faith note that in their rural town, finding programs and

resources can be harder than in more populated areas. But through Partners training and networking with other families, they feel they have the tools to give David a rich life.

"It gave me a new hope and a new direction to look [towards] for David. Some of my future plans for him totally evolved and changed after I went to Partners," Virginia said. "If I had not had the opportunity, I don't think I would have known that he could do those different things. ... I feel confident that if something comes up in the future, I know where to go to find help."

While finding resources and programs is important, Faith says the friendships and networking she's gained through Partners training is just as invaluable.

"The world is hard and scary as is. When you add a special need or disability, it makes it harder and more scary," she said. "This just gives you the aid and comfort you need. It makes it manageable."

*For more information and to apply for the Partners in Policymaking program, visit [www.tn.gov/cdd/training-and-news](http://www.tn.gov/cdd/training-and-news) or call 615-532-6556.*

## ATTEND PARTNERS IN POLICYMAKING TRAINING!

Want to learn about state and federal legislative processes? Inclusive communities, classrooms, housing and employment? Assistive technology and how to advocate for yourself or loved ones? Attend a Partners in Policymaking training!

### How much does the training program cost?

The training is **free** for adults with disabilities and their family members. The Council covers participants' hotel and meal costs and reimburses round-trip mileage.

### When and where is it held?

Classes are held over seven weekends in Middle Tennessee from **September through November** and **January through April**.

### How to apply

Adults with disabilities and family members of individuals with a disability are eligible to attend training. If you're eligible but not selected, you are guaranteed a spot in a future session.

- Apply online at [www.tn.gov/cdd](http://www.tn.gov/cdd) (click on "Partners in Policymaking" link).
- Mail an application to the Tennessee Council on Developmental Disabilities at: 500 James Robertson Parkway, Davy Crockett Tower, First Floor Nashville, TN 37243.
- Call **615-532-6615** to request an application via mail.

# Raising an Inclusive Generation

Kids who grow and learn together build a society where everyone is valued



Charlotte Bynum enjoys learning with her peers.

PHOTO BY ALISON BYNUM

**A**lison and Brad Bynum believe inclusive education is essential for their 11-year-old daughter, Charlotte. But they also believe it is the way the world will become a better place.

“I feel strongly societal change starts with kids, so they can grow into a generation of inclusivity,” said Alison, who is also newly appointed to the Council. “If they grow up together, when a person is in a position of offering employment, they will have grown up with people with disabilities and view them as employable. We have to start young with the people who will be hiring someday, living in the community, providing health care, if we want to change the culture.”

This commitment to inclusion started almost immediately after the Bynums began receiving multiple diagnoses for Charlotte, whom they adopted as an infant. They enrolled Charlotte – who has complex medical needs, uses a wheelchair and doesn’t speak – in an early intervention program when she was 6 months old. From ages 15 months to 6 years, she attended an early learning center and preschool that included both children with and without disabilities. Students without disabilities served as “peer models” in the same classroom.

But things changed in elementary school. Although Charlotte was on the rolls of a kindergarten general education classroom, she spent most of her time at school in a comprehensive development

classroom with only students with disabilities.

“Because of our daughter’s disabilities and medical needs, it is challenging to assess what she is learning. She is still working to master an eye gaze communication device, though she does communicate using facial expressions, her body and her head. We cannot prove that she doesn’t understand, so we presume competence,” Alison said.

The Bynums worked together with school administrators and almost a dozen

professionals, including teachers, therapists and nurses to develop an Individualized Education Plan. The team agreed that Charlotte could benefit from more time in her general education classroom, giving

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**ALISON BYNUM**  
*Mother and TCDD member*

her the opportunity to hear grade level content alongside her peers. The social and emotional growth that has followed has been as important to Charlotte as the academic goals.

Charlotte is now a fifth grader. Her mother describes her as loving horses – she rides every week – as well as reading and spending time with her friends at church. “She’s a great listener,” Alison said with a laugh. “She knows all our secrets – if she learns to talk, we’ll all be toast!”

Charlotte is also loved by her classmates. Alison spends a few minutes with them at the beginning of each school year, explaining Charlotte’s disabilities. She tells them, “Asking respectful questions to learn is always okay.” Their understanding and relationships with Charlotte have flourished.

In fact, a classmate wrote a letter to the principal requesting playground equipment Charlotte could access with her wheelchair. Said Alison, “This type of outcome isn’t measured, but it’s priceless.”

## INCLUSIVE EDUCATION RESOURCES

### **Advocacy Agencies**

#### **Disability Rights Tennessee:**

A statewide organization that advocates for the rights of people with disabilities; **800-342-1660**; **disabilityrightstn.org**.

**The ARC of Tennessee:** A statewide organization founded by parents of children with intellectual and developmental disabilities; **800-835-7077**; **thearctn.org**.

**Support and Training for Exceptional Parents (STEP):** A statewide family-to-family program that provides information, advocacy training and support to parents; **423-639-0125**; **tnstep.org**.

### **Tennessee Voices for Children:**

Advocacy for students with challenging behaviors; **800-670-9882**; **tnvoices.org**.

### **Governing Organizations**

**The Tennessee Department of Education:** A state agency that oversees K-12 public education; **615-741-5158**; **tn.gov/education**.

### **Informational Websites**

**Wrightslaw:** A user-friendly website for parents, teachers, advocates and attorneys that provides information about special education law and advocacy for children with disabilities; **wrightslaw.com**.

# Setting the Bar

In a small, rural town, a determined local is changing hiring practices — to everyone’s benefit



**D**anny Dee Simmons not only landed a good job for himself — at a tractor company he has revered since he was a boy — but he has paved the way for others to follow in his footsteps, earning real money for real work.

Simmons’ journey began in 2012, when St. John’s Community Services began converting from sheltered to fully integrated employment. “Danny had worked in a workshop environment for many years,” recalled Dwayne Webb, the program director for day and employment

services. “But he started seeing some of his friends go out in the community and get jobs...so he stopped me in the breezeway one day and said, ‘I want a job — I want to work at John Deere.’ It was all his own initiative.”

Webb quickly reached out to Mitch Hobby, the finance and incentive manager for Tennessee Tractor LLC, which is the John Deere dealer in town. “We met with Mitch, and I introduced them...but then I pushed back from the table and let them have their interview,” said Webb.

Simmons was immediately hired to

do janitorial work — cleaning, sweeping, mopping, dusting the showroom — and it has been nothing short of a win-win. “I work there three days a week,” Simmons said proudly. “I like John Deere tractors, I like the customers, I like having friends and I like making money.”

But his seven-year presence at Tennessee Tractor also has been important for everyone. “We love having him here,” Hobby said. “He’s a morale booster — he’s always coming in with a good attitude. And he comes from this rural area, so he knows everyone — staff and customers.”

The town, which is home for Simmons, was actually overjoyed to see him. “People didn’t know what happened to Danny when his parents passed,” said Wendy Bratton, the residential program coordinator. “So he’s been able to reunite with a lot of people he grew up with.”

Simmons’ work ethic impressed Hobby so much, he now has St. John’s participants employed at five of the 10 Tennessee Tractor locations. “I firmly believe this: Everyone can do something, you can contribute,” Hobby said. “It makes people see us in a different light, but also ‘helping’ in a different light... These employees obviously provide a

service that we need.”

Webb hopes other businesses will see similar advantages to inclusive hiring practices. “When customers come in, they might have someone in their family with developmental disabilities — or know someone who has a family member — and it helps them all think outside the box,” he said. “Danny set the bar for his peers but is also setting the path for people coming up.”

## INCLUSIVE EMPLOYMENT RESOURCES

**TennesseeWorks:** The state’s most comprehensive information resource about disability employment for self-advocates, families, employers, educators and policymakers; [tennesseeworks.org](http://tennesseeworks.org).

**Tennessee Vocational Rehabilitation:** Offers free help with employment to people who qualify, including job search and on-the-job support; [tn.gov/humanservices](http://tn.gov/humanservices).

**Transition Tennessee:** The state’s hub of information about preparing for life after high school, including guidance for students and parents about finding employment services and supports; [transitiontn.org](http://transitiontn.org).

**Tennessee Disability Pathfinder:** The state’s comprehensive disability services resource and part of Vanderbilt Kennedy Center, which can link people by specific need to public and private disability services where they live; [familypathfinder.org](http://familypathfinder.org).

**“Danny set the bar for his peers but is also setting the path for people coming up.”**

**DWAYNE WEBB**  
Program Director, St. John’s Community Services  
COURTESY PHOTO

# Making Service Inclusive

Church brings out Terrell Brown's volunteer spirit

**A**t New Vision Baptist Church in Murfreesboro, Tenn., 24-year old Terrell Brown frequently stands at the front door, greeting congregants as they enter the building.

"I like to say, 'Good morning,'" he said. "I like to help."

Brown's mother, Linda Brown, said Terrell, who has autism, took it upon himself recently to welcome his fellow church members as they arrived for small group meetings.

"He likes to be the door greeter," said Linda. "He loves that."

Linda said that even before joining New Vision, she and her husband, Jeff, sought out congregations that would not only minister to Terrell's special needs, but also allow him, as he grew older, to become an active church volunteer.

"It was hard for Terrell to sit in the sanctuary," she said. "It was a sensory thing. But he always liked children and preschoolers."

So at their previous church, Linda brainstormed with a church leader about possible activities Terrell could do during church services. At first, a church leader suggested a special needs group that taught Bible stories.

"But Terrell was past that," she said. "He was slowly becoming more independent."

So the church arranged for Terrell to volunteer in the preschool children's church department, she says. There, Terrell helped with Bible lessons, passed out snacks and took youngsters outside to play.

"And if they were crying," Linda said, "Terrell would sit and hold them. He just

had that spirit of comfort.

"He got the opportunity to learn and become more independent and responsible by working with the children," she added.

Meanwhile, to become a better advocate for Terrell, Linda in 2010 enrolled in the Partners in Policymaking® Leadership Institute, a national program hosted by the Tennessee Council on Developmental Disabilities that teaches people with disabilities and their families how to advocate for themselves to affect changes in local, state and federal policies.

"It made all the difference in the world," she said. "The biggest thing that happened was that I got over the fear of speaking up for Terrell. I used to be so concerned about hurting someone else's feelings or offending them. But then, I thought, that's not good. We have to do what's best for Terrell."

**"He got the opportunity to learn and become more independent and responsible by working with the children."**

**LINDA BROWN**  
*Mother and advocate*

At New Vision Baptist where the Browns joined in 2018, Terrell participates in a small group for adults with special needs. But, Linda said she plans to inquire about Terrell officially joining the church greeters and serving with fellow congregants at a local food bank or charity.

She adds churches can take steps to help those with disabilities find ways to serve.

"Talk with the person with the disability," she said. "Talk to the parents, and be willing to think outside the box."



Church is an important part of life for the Brown family.  
PHOTO BY ALISON BYNUM

## RESOURCES, HELPFUL HINTS FOR FAITH COMMUNITIES

### **Collaborative on Faith and Disability:**

A central resource with research and information on disability, religion and inclusive supports.

Visit <https://faithanddisability.org/>.

**Joni and Friends Tennessee:** Helps families find local churches with disability ministries and works with churches and organizations to develop outreach programs that minister to people with disabilities.

Visit [www.joniandfriends.org/tennessee/](http://www.joniandfriends.org/tennessee/) or call **818-707-5664**.

**Faith Ability:** Offers lists of disability resources for a range of faith communities, including Christian, Jewish, Muslim, Buddhist, Hindu and others. Visit [www.faithability.org](http://www.faithability.org).

**Talk to other families.** "Often the best way to connect with welcoming faith communities is to ask other local families who are affected by disability," said Jolene Sharp, the Tennessee Council on Developmental Disabilities' chief public information officer. "Where do you worship? What has your experience been like? Do you know of other congregations that support people with disabilities?"

**Call houses of worship.** Call and ask what types of supports the house of worship offers for people with disabilities, Sharp said.

**Advocate for yourself.** Talk to leaders about your or your family member's needs. "Hearing from you," said Sharp, "may be all they need to take action."

# College Life

Inclusive higher education programs open doors for students with developmental disabilities

**L**ike any freshman, Morgan Thompson was excited about starting college, moving into the dorms and being on her own for the first time. It was a dream that was far from certain for Morgan, who has language delays. In the past, higher education was out of reach for many people with intellectual and developmental disabilities. But in Tennessee, several universities now offer inclusive programs designed for such students.

With funding from the Tennessee Council on Developmental Disabilities, Lipscomb University in Nashville developed its Igniting the Dream of Education and Access at Lipscomb (IDEAL) certificate program. The two-year program supports students through peer mentorship, career training, classwork accommodations, independent living skills and professional internships.

“They help you be independent, learn new skills and it gives us job opportunities and college opportunities,” Morgan said. “[They had] small classes and ... if I didn’t understand something in the classroom, I could get help with it.”

Morgan graduated from the IDEAL program in 2019 with a certificate in career exploration. She took college classes in biology and communications, and completed internships with the university’s Office of Alumni Relations and College of Education. She also worked at off-campus internships with



Through Lipscomb University’s IDEAL program, Morgan Thompson enjoyed her college experience, including hands-on internship opportunities, living in the dorms and joining a sorority.

PHOTO COURTESY OF MORGAN THOMPSON

the Department of Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities and the state’s Department of Education. Through that hands-on experience, she discovered a love for working in an office.

“I like doing clerical work,” she said. “For the Department of Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities, I did lots of video editing, taking pictures with a camera and going to conferences. I enjoyed doing that as well.”

Social opportunities are also a big part of the college experience, something Morgan enjoyed during her time at Lipscomb.

“I was one of the first IDEAL female students to live in the dorms. [I liked] going to events on campus like sporting

“They help you be independent, learn new skills and it gives us job opportunities and college opportunities.”

MORGAN THOMPSON  
Lipscomb University IDEAL graduate

## MORE ABOUT INCLUSIVE HIGHER EDUCATION

Tennessee currently has inclusive higher education programs on six college campuses:

- Lipscomb University IDEAL
- University of Memphis TigerLife
- University of Tennessee FUTURE
- Union University EDGE
- Vanderbilt University Next Steps
- East Tennessee State University ACCESS – pilot program

88% of 2017 and 2018 Tennessee inclusive higher education graduates were employed by 90 days after graduation.

For more information, including links to each of the inclusive higher education programs:

**TN Inclusive Higher Education Alliance:**

[www.TNIHEAlliance.org](http://www.TNIHEAlliance.org).

**Think College:**

[www.thinkcollege.net](http://www.thinkcollege.net).

**Free Application for Financial Student Aid:** Explains

financial help for students with an intellectual disability, <https://studentaid.ed.gov/sa/eligibility/intellectual-disabilities>.



## Council on Developmental Disabilities

**Davy Crockett Tower, 1st Floor  
500 James Robertson Parkway  
Nashville, TN 37243**

 **615-532-6615**

 **[www.tn.gov/cdd](http://www.tn.gov/cdd)**

### Contact your legislator

The Tennessee Council on Developmental Disabilities exists to bring lasting, positive change to the disabilities services system. You can help make change happen!

**Share with your legislators the disability issues that matter to you:**

#### **Hawkins County**

##### **Sen. Frank S. Niceley**

*(R-Strawberry Plains)  
District 8 (Claiborne, Grainger,  
Hancock, Hawkins, Jefferson and  
Union counties)*

District address:  
1023 Creek Road  
Strawberry Plains, TN 37871  
Phone: 615-741-2061

**Rep. Gary Hicks** *(R-Rogersville)  
District 9 (Hancock and Hawkins  
counties)*

District address:  
733 Cloud Creek Road  
Rogersville, TN 37857  
Phone: 615-741-7480

#### **Henry County**

**Sen. John Stevens** *(R-Huntingdon)  
District 24 (Benton, Carroll, Gibson,  
Henry, Obion and Weakley counties)*

District address:  
161 Court Square  
Huntington, TN 38344  
Phone: 615-741-4576

**Rep. Bruce Griffey** *(R-Paris)  
District 75 (Henry, Benton and  
Stewart counties)*

Nashville address:  
425 5th Ave. North  
Suite 578 Cordell Hull Building  
Nashville, TN 37243  
Phone: 615-741-6804

#### **Lake County**

**Sen. Ed Jackson** *(R-Jackson)  
District 27 (Madison, Crockett,  
Dyer, Lake and Lauderdale counties)*

District address:  
25 Wyndhurst Dr.  
Jackson, TN 38305  
Phone: 615-741-1810

Pending special election  
District 77 *(Dyer, Lake and part of  
Obion County)*  
Phone: 615-741-0718

#### **Hardeman County**

**Sen. Dolores R. Gresham**  
*(R-Somerville)  
District 26 (Chester, Decatur,  
Fayette, Hardeman, Hardin,  
Haywood, McNairy and Henderson  
Counties)*

District address:  
16980 Highway 64  
Somerville, TN 38068  
Phone: 615-741-2368

**Rep. Johnny Shaw** *(D-Bolivar)  
District 80 (part of Hardeman and  
Madison counties)*

District address:  
P.O. Box 191  
123 West Market St.  
Bolivar, TN 38008  
Phone: 615-741-4538

**Rep. Ron M. Gant** *(R-Rossville)  
District 94 (Fayette, McNairy and  
part of Hardeman counties)*

District address:  
P.O. Box 491  
Rossville, TN 38066  
Phone: 615-741-6890

#### **DeKalb County**

**Sen. Mark Pody** *(R-Lebanon)  
District 17 (Cannon, Clay, DeKalb,  
Macon, Smith and Wilson counties)*

District address:  
113 South Cumberland St.  
Lebanon, TN 37087  
Phone: 615-741-2421

**Rep. Clark Boyd** *(R-Lebanon)  
District 46 (Cannon and part of  
Wilson and DeKalb counties)*

District address:  
P.O. Box 2177  
Lebanon, TN 37088  
Phone: 615-741-7086

**Rep. Terri Lynn Weaver**  
*(R-Lancaster)  
District 40 (Smith, Trousdale  
and part of DeKalb and Sumner  
counties)*

District address:  
100 Seabowisha Lane  
Lancaster, TN 38569  
Phone: 615-741-2192

#### **Bledsoe County**

**Sen. Paul Bailey** *(R-Sparta)  
District 15 (Cumberland, Jackson,  
Overton, Bledsoe, Putnam and  
White counties)*

District address:  
252 Lowery Road  
Sparta, TN 38583  
Phone: 615-741-3978

**Rep. Ron Travis** *(R-Dayton)  
District 31 (Bledsoe, Sequatchie,  
Rhea and part of Roane County)*

District address:  
1318 Armstrong Ferry Road  
Dayton, TN 37321  
Phone: 615-741-1450



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