

breaking ground

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Growing Opportunities

New higher education and employment ideas are taking root in Tennessee



Council on
Developmental Disabilities

Inclusive Higher Education: *Where We've Been, Where We're Going*

Building a Path of Opportunity

Since 1975, federal law has said students with disabilities must be educated with their peers in our public schools. But what about college? That was the question brought to me more than 15 years ago by two passionate moms. A college education was not accessible to



many students with disabilities – especially those with intellectual disabilities.

So, the Council did what it does best: We brought partners together, learned about the issue, and took steps to innovate. In 2010, we funded our state's first inclusive higher education program,

Next Steps at Vanderbilt. We then led efforts to grow inclusive higher education in Tennessee. Today, there are five more programs for students with intellectual disabilities:

- TigerLIFE at the University of Memphis
- IDEAL at Lipscomb University (Nashville)
- EDGE at Union University (Jackson)
- FUTURE at the University of Tennessee (Knoxville)
- Access ETSU at East Tennessee State University (Johnson City)

The Council continues to be an active member of the statewide Inclusive Higher Education Alliance, where organizations gather to support and promote these programs. Data from the Alliance proves that graduates of these programs have much higher rates of employment and independence than students who do not attend a college program.

The Council is proud to continue the work to grow inclusive higher education in our state. New partners in this work have exciting news about plans for growth. The future for Tennessee students with disabilities has never been brighter.

—Wanda Willis, Executive Director, TN Council on Developmental Disabilities

Tennessee Believes

As Commissioner of the Department of Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities, I've had the opportunity to meet hundreds of people we support across Tennessee and hear their stories. They want the same things we all do: a home of their own, friends, hobbies, and a job with a real paycheck. DIDD is here to provide access and opportunities for people to reach their goals.

As my daughter enters her teenage years, transition

is more and more on my mind. Thanks to the hard work of the past 15 years, inclusive higher education options at colleges across the state give my daughter and her friends more options than ever before. I have seen firsthand how these programs prepare students for the workforce and independent living.

We are excited to launch Tennessee Believes in the coming months. In partnership with the Tennessee Higher Education Commission, we will provide grants to grow inclusive higher education across the state. We hope this funding will help expand and improve current programs and create new ones.

For too long, college seemed out of reach for students with intellectual and developmental disabilities. Now, it's a reality for hundreds across Tennessee. DIDD is excited to be a part of that continued work.

—Brad Turner, Commissioner, TN Dept. of Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities



Growth that Benefits Us All

The Tennessee Higher Education Commission (THEC) is relentlessly focused on increasing the number of Tennesseans who continue their education after high school. We often talk about student subgroups and



the best ways to meet diverse student needs. One critical subgroup is students with disabilities.

I am so proud of the work our schools do to create inclusive campuses and academic and extracurricular activities that welcome all students. Thanks

to the support of the Council and partners, this work is front and center at six campuses with inclusive higher education programs.

I am thrilled that THEC is partnering with Commissioner Brad Turner and the Tennessee Department of Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities to expand inclusive higher education across Tennessee. Higher education is for everyone. Options must exist to meet the needs of all students.

Inclusive higher education is the path to the future we all want, of opportunity and growth for ourselves and our communities.

—Emily House, Executive Director, Tennessee Higher Education Commission

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On the Cover: Courtnie Leach has reason to smile. Her work with Plant for a Change is helping to create a sustainable environment—and sustainable employment for people with disabilities.

Learn more about the Tennessee Council on Developmental Disabilities.

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Tennessee's Inclusive Higher Education Alliance Leads the Charge

By Elise McMillan, Co-Director, Vanderbilt Kennedy Center for Excellence in Developmental Disabilities

The Tennessee Inclusive Higher Education Alliance has worked since 2007 to develop inclusive education for students with intellectual and developmental disabilities (IDD) at Tennessee's two- and four-year colleges and universities.

The Alliance began its work before any inclusive higher education programs existed in Tennessee. Now, our state has six inclusive programs on college campuses!

- Next Steps at Vanderbilt University
- TigerLIFE at the University of Memphis
- University of Tennessee FUTURE
- IDEAL at Lipscomb University
- EDGE at Union University
- Access ETSU at East Tennessee State University

The mission of the Alliance is to keep growing inclusive higher education options for students with intellectual and developmental disabilities across the state. Our meetings, website, and other activities are led by the Vanderbilt Kennedy University



Center for Excellence on Developmental Disabilities (UCEDD).

Tammy Day is the Next Steps Program Director and Chair of the Alliance. "In the early days of the Alliance, we would share information about programs in other parts of the country," she says. "Today, it is so wonderful to be able to share about the six programs in Tennessee. Of course, that's not nearly enough! So, one of our main goals is to continue to grow this movement in Tennessee."

Alliance meetings are all open to the public. The group is made up of:

- Representatives from each of Tennessee's inclusive higher education programs.
- More than 20 state and local agencies.
- Self-advocates and family members.
- Representatives from colleges and universities in Tennessee.

- Members of Tennessee's Developmental Disabilities Network (the Tennessee Council on Developmental Disabilities, the VKC UCEDD, the University of Tennessee UCEDD, and Disability Rights Tennessee).

The Alliance offers technical assistance to help inclusive higher ed programs get started or grow. I am a founding member of the Alliance, and Co-Director of the Vanderbilt University Center for Excellence in Developmental Disabilities. I have seen that the Alliance is a very giving network. Chances are, through our experiences over the past 14 years, there's someone who has faced the same issues another program is facing. We also work closely with national groups who are great sources of expertise.*

In addition to our focus on growth, the Alliance also offers a place to share in several areas, including:





- Spreading awareness of college opportunities, especially to students with disabilities and their families.
- Educating legislators and policymakers about the benefits of inclusive higher education.
- Helping develop funding and scholarships for students and for programs.

- Promoting research across the state to help develop evidence-based best practices. ■

**Tennessee has leadership positions with the Southeastern Postsecondary Education Alliance – SEPSEA – and Think College, the national Coordinating Center for inclusive higher education programs.*



For more information about the Inclusive Higher Education Alliance, visit tnihealliance.org. The website includes:

- Information and links for each of Tennessee's six inclusive higher ed programs.
- Information on Alliance meetings, which are open to the public. The next meeting will be July 16. It will be hosted by our newest program, Access ETSU at East Tennessee State University. Every Alliance meeting offers a choice of attending in person or virtually.

To be added to the Alliance listserv, contact Laurie Fleming at laurie.fleming@vumc.org.

The FUTURE is Now

Independence and Immersion at the University of Tennessee

by Randy Boyd, President, University of Tennessee System

Higher education depends on independence and an immersive learning environment. Some of the greatest learning a person can experience comes through the ebbs and flows, ups and downs, and trials and triumphs that occur in classrooms and living on campus.

The UT FUTURE inclusive higher education program at UT Knoxville places independence at the heart of its mission. Established in 2011, UT FUTURE helps young adults with intellectual and developmental dis-

abilities make a successful transition from high school to adult life.

I've seen the impact personally in Alex, Elise, Coulter, and Mikie as UT FUTURE developed their independence as young adults. Each of these students has served as an intern in the President's Office. They have handled a variety of tasks including filing, making copies, taking notes at some of my meetings, and running various errands on campus. Most of them have had a job coach to help them with anything they may have

problems with and to oversee them during their time here.

Admission into UT FUTURE is highly competitive. Prospective students must graduate from high school and submit an application, along with three recommendations about their vocational, academic, and social skills. Teachers and parents provide information on the student's independence level. Then, applicants have interviews with four different committees, including one made up of current UT FUTURE students.





Randy Boyd with president's office intern Coulter



Ciara Armstrong graduates from UT FUTURE.

There are typically more applicants than available spaces. Twenty-one students were accepted for the 2020-21 academic year. UT Knoxville hopes to grow that pool to 25 for 2021-22. Students can graduate with a vocational certificate after two years or choose to stay up to four years.

I could not be more proud of my university for modeling what it means to be inclusive, not exclusive. Talented UT FUTURE students have the opportunity to experience university life to the fullest. They get the support needed to access and participate in academics and campus life, including a new pilot residency program. They have access to classes like public speaking, sign language, chorus, history, food science, digital literacy, life planning and skills, and so much more. And the program could not be so successful without the roughly 80 UT Knoxville students who serve as mentors for FUTURE students. Mentors help with

learning to clean, cook, and launder clothes. They may also be tutors or lunch and workout partners.

Programs like FUTURE are part of the reason this will be the greatest decade in UT history. For more information on the UT FUTURE program, please visit <https://futureut.utk.edu/>. ■

Randy Boyd is the 26th president of the University of Tennessee System, which includes campuses at Knoxville, Chattanooga, Martin, the Health Science Center in Memphis, and the Space Institute at Tullahoma. It also includes UT's statewide institutes of agriculture and public service.



Internships in a pandemic? CHECK!

Real-world work experience is a key piece of inclusive higher education programs. But what does that look like in a global pandemic? Meet Carter, Garrison, Faith, Otis, and Lauren – students who didn't let COVID keep them from building their work skills.

Access ETSU (East TN State University)- Johnson City **Carter Poland**

Carter Poland is a first-year student in the Access ETSU program. A chief focus of the Access program is getting students ready for real work for real wages in a field of their interest. Campus life and internship opportunities were limited on campus due to the pandemic. So, Carter has had to think and work in new ways to explore his career interests.

Carter studies digital media at ETSU. He did a virtual job shadow experience with the marketing team in ETSU's University Relations department last fall. He learned more about the design and e-marketing work they do. He also worked on a variety of marketing projects and helped manage the social media channels for Access ETSU this semester.

Carter explored some freelance digital media work with the Council for Exceptional Children - Division of Career Development and Transition. He worked to set up a consultation meeting via Zoom and designed a membership recruitment flyer that met their needs. Carter says, "I applied to some jobs, but it's been tough



Garrison Buchanan cleans the fitness equipment.

to find jobs. I'm doing an internship for social media and marketing. I like social media and designing things. We created a flyer for DCDT to help them get new members and emailed to them. We made a logo for Access ETSU with letters, the ETSU badge, and mountains. We made a flyer for Access ETSU with Garrison on it. We've been using Canva and Photoshop."

Garrison Buchanan

Access ETSU student Garrison Buchanan dreams of working in the sports world. He has taken classes through the Sport, Exercise, Recreation, and Kinesiology department. He has also found related work experiences and paid employment with ETSU Campus Recreation at the Basler Center for Physical Activity (CPA) on campus.

Garrison had plans to help lead group fitness classes at the CPA this year. He also wanted to take his talents and interests into the community at local recreation facilities. COVID paused those plans. But Garrison remains a relentlessly positive team member at the CPA and has taken this chance to build new work skills.

"Last year when I worked, other people were working out. I worked at the front desk, swiping IDs and



Carter Poland at work

helping people work out," Garrison says. "Now, it's been mostly cleaning - cleaning machines, windows, sweeping. I keep things clean so people can be safe."

Savanna Moeller is Assistant Director of Operations at the CPA. "Garrison's role as a Facility Assistant with ETSU Campus Recreation has shifted due to the pandemic over the course of the last year," she says. "Previously, Garrison worked during our midday shifts on the weight room floor and at the equipment desk. In this role, Garrison assisted members with locker checkouts and weight room tasks. During the pandemic, Garrison now works during our midday closure, when members are not in the facility, to assist the team in cleaning and maintaining equipment. This change in schedule and duties has provided a healthy and safe environment for all!"

Union University EDGE program - Jackson

Faith Moore

Faith Moore is a go-getter. She loves working with people and serving others. Faith is a part of the optional third year with the Union EDGE Program at Union University. She lives in an apartment off campus with another EDGE graduate. The two are living independently and doing life well.

Faith volunteers with the local church, and she works at Chicken Salad Chick in Jackson. She worked hard to



Faith Moore works at Chicken Salad Chick.

get her driver's license and drives herself to and from work daily.

Faith is determined to reach the goals she has set for herself. She doesn't let others' expectations hold her down. Even in the midst of Covid-19, Faith found a job in a place she loved and has achieved so much!

The Union EDGE Program is proud to work with Chicken Salad Chick in making employment possible for all.

TigerLIFE, University of Memphis - Memphis

Otis White

Otis White is a proud graduate of the TigerLIFE Class of 2020. During the pandemic, staff at the University of Memphis Institute on Disability's Job Placement Unit used Zoom to help Otis learn about his goals and interests. In February of 2021, he was connected to ServiceMaster by Stratos, a company that offers professional cleaning services to many local businesses. His first assignment was to work at the FedEx Forum, the downtown arena that is the home of the NBA's Memphis Grizzlies team and the University of Memphis's men's basketball team.



Otis White

After observing his strong work ethic, his supervisor hired Otis to additional ServiceMaster teams cleaning several local banks. Now, Otis works around 30 hours per pay period. His motivation, self-determination, and TigerLIFE experiences are helping him work toward his goals and build his skills.

Lipscomb IDEAL - Nashville

Lauren Ciangfaglione

Lauren Ciangfaglione is a first-year student in the IDEAL program at Lipscomb University. IDEAL focuses on a college experience that gets students ready for real work for real pay and independent living.

Despite the pandemic, Lauren was able to complete two internships on campus. Her first internship was with the College of Nursing where she learned valuable office skills. She was often given challenging tasks to complete, such as scanning, organizing, and filing

Continued on page 15

Where are they now?

The first Next Steps at Vanderbilt class, 10 years later

By Elizabeth Turner, Vanderbilt Kennedy Center

In the midst of the anxiety and turmoil of last year, we also had cause to celebrate. 2020 was the 10th anniversary of inclusive higher education (IHE) for students with intellectual and developmental disabilities in Tennessee. It was also the 10th anniversary of the first IHE program in the state: Next Steps at Vanderbilt. No one better knows the value of a college experience than the first graduating class of Next Steps students.

MEET THE NEXT STEPS CLASS OF '11

The Next Steps Class of 2011 includes Hallie Bearden, Sean Falkner, Jeanne Gavigan, Edward Nesbitt, Liz Story, and Andrew Van Cleave. In February 2020, five of the six alums met for a reunion at the Nesbitt home in Belle Meade. The graduates got to catch up and talk about how Next Steps impacted their lives. They were joined in the discussion by their parents and several Next Steps faculty and staff.



Edward Nesbitt



Andrew Van Cleave

“The Next Steps at Vanderbilt Class of 2011 and their families were brave pioneers when they became the first to enter a college certificate program for students with intellectual disability in our state,” said Next Steps program director Tammy Day. “We were so fortunate to partner with them as we began this new realm of offering opportunity and high expectations to this deserving population. It is so gratifying to know that they each believe their years at Vanderbilt provided them with increased confidence and lifelong friendships.”

Below are a few responses to questions the graduates and their parents were asked about life after Next Steps.

A decade after graduating college in the Next Steps program, what are you doing now? Are you living on your own? How do you like to spend your time?

Jeanne Gavigan: I currently work at Pope John Paul II High School, where I help in the cafeteria. I like baking cookies and organizing the chips. I live with my dad, and I like to hang out with friends.

Andrew Van Cleave: I volunteer at the Adventure Science Center gift shop stocking merchandise, and I work at Michael's craft store stocking the store and breaking down boxes. I still live at home, and I enjoy walking the dog, talking on the phone, and keeping up with friends on Facebook.

Liz Story: I work for the Susan Gray Preschool. I step in if a teacher needs a break, I help with attendance in the office, and deliver lunch carts to the classrooms. I have my own condo in Green Hills, and I love it. I get to walk to restaurants and the grocery store. I live with my best friend from kindergarten!

How did Next Steps help to shape you and your future? What is your advice to current college students enrolled through Next Steps?

Hallie Bearden: Next Steps gave me confidence in building relationships. It helped me grow and gave me a variety of new skills. Most importantly, my time at Vanderbilt



Jeanne Gavigan

helped me to become independent. My advice to current students is, don't be afraid to ask for help. You'll learn a lot and have a lot of fun.

Sean Falkner: I made so many great friends. I always had people who were looking out for me, and I felt like I belonged to something. My advice to current students is, follow your schedule, make good friends, and get to class on time. If you want something bad enough, you will keep working at it, so you've got to stay motivated.

Edward Nesbitt: Next Steps taught me to be more independent and reliable. I'm grateful for the people who helped keep me accountable. I loved hanging out with my Ambassadors (peer mentors), playing basketball, going out to lunch and dinner with classmates, and feeling like a real college student. Going to college gives you a lot of freedom. It's so worth it. Keep a positive attitude, and soak up every moment of your experience.

Parents, how has going to college impacted your child? How have you seen them grow since beginning their college journey and now after graduating?

Mary Layne Van Cleave, mother to Andrew: Before college, Andrew was very shy and really did not communicate with people that he didn't know. Next Steps taught Andrew to advocate for himself and express his wants and needs. I'm most proud of his dedication to work. He is a dependable, hard worker, able to handle situations by himself and be independent.

Ann Story, mother to Liz: All the courses that she took really expanded her knowledge. Elizabeth was interested in child studies and was able to take classes tailored to her interests. The biggest thing she has gained is confidence. She was always encouraged to think for herself and try new things. Her exposure to a broader world and how to handle herself in that world was all knowledge gained at Next Steps. I'm most proud of her positive nature and her faith.

Bill Gavigan, father to Jeanne: College had an incredibly dramatic impact. Jeanne has matured, and she has so much more confidence. I'm most proud of her confidence with people. She has no problem speaking in front of others or presenting in front of others. She is fearless. ■

Elizabeth Turner is associate director of Communications and Dissemination for the Vanderbilt Kennedy Center.



Plant for a Change

A SustainABLE Business Takes Root

By Nathan Fields, Chief Executive Officer at Plant for a Change

March 2020 brought tornados, a global pandemic, and an economic shutdown to Middle Tennessee. It was a call to action for members of InterVarsity, a Vanderbilt campus faith group that includes people with and without disabilities. The

group had been gathering weekly since spring 2017.

"We were talking about prayer needs one day. We talked about how most business managers don't want to hire people because of a disability," says Diamond Grigsby. Diamond is a 2018 alumna of the Vanderbilt Next Steps inclusive higher education program. (She is also a 2021 graduate of the Council's Partners in Policymaking® Leadership Institute.) "Rather than wait for the right manager to come along and hire us, we began to think about what it would be like to be the managers we hoped for. We could hire people with and without disabilities to work alongside each other."

Charles Feddeman, then a senior in Next Steps, remembers the struggle he and other peers faced in the spring of 2020, right before graduation. "We had been part of a great university experience with Next Steps, and then the pandemic hit. We all struggled looking for jobs."

As the group looked at business ideas, they knew they needed something that could be done outside and would continue during the pandemic. In spring 2020, plant nurseries and outdoor garden stores around Tennessee stayed open and were considered "essential businesses." InterVarsity member Nathan Fields was inspired by The National Wildlife Federation's "Garden for Wildlife"



habitat program. It focuses on growing native plants to meet the needs of local wildlife. Nathan proposed the idea of a native plant business that would promote native habitats and greener neighborhoods. Charles Feddeman proposed the name: "Plant for a Change."

In May 2020, the team of alumni from Vanderbilt's Next Steps and Peabody Education programs officially launched the first native plant business co-managed and co-owned by people with and without disabilities. The team of co-managers chose to create a business rather than a non-profit. They want to show employers at for-profit businesses that fair employment and management alongside people with disabilities can be done.

Co-manager Jack Pipkorn and co-manager Daniel Brawner share family connections that have shaped Plant for a Change. Jack's father has a tree service and Jack and Daniel both bag wood chips for mulch from Nashville native trees. Daniel's sister is getting her PhD in Animal Ecology at the University of Tennessee-Knoxville. "She is so excited and proud of me having this job and being part of starting this up, and that means a lot," Daniel says.

Lathram Berry, a graduate student at Vanderbilt's Peabody School of Education, was hired as Plant for a Change's first employee without disabilities. He had years of previ-

ous experience working with the Nashville Food Project, which brings people together to grow, cook, and share nourishing food. Lathram sees that the work being done by Plant for a Change has grown the way people think about sustainability. Plant for a Change is not just about sustaining the planet, he says. "It's also about sustaining people."

Co-owner Nathan Fields agrees. "We don't want to settle for just finding a job," he says. "We want to flourish, we want to manage, we want to educate city leaders and businesses that are making the choices for Tennessee's future, including the future of its wildlife."

Plant for a Change plans to continue monthly sales at different markets in the city through this summer. It also operates an online store at www.plantforachange.com. The team is also creating a brand of native Tennessee seeds called Sustain-ABLE TennesSEEDS.

Nathan shares his input on the astonishing unemployment numbers of people with intellectual disabilities. "Just like native plants in a local ecosystem, people with disabilities are being undervalued, and under-represented as managers in the



workforce. We are here at Plant for a Change to show we can have a great impact. We may be one of the first businesses co-managed and co-owned by people with disabilities in Tennessee, but we don't want to be the only ones."

Diamond Grigsby agrees: "When we have more diversity in the workforce, we are able to bring in more experiences that grow a stronger team. Just like when butterflies and bees benefit from native plants, managers and businesses benefit when they hire people with disabilities." The team's hope is that more people with and without disabilities enter the workforce together as partners and co-participants, in order to promote a flourishing community around the world. ■

Nathan Fields is a 2018 graduate of Vanderbilt's Peabody College, where he received his Master's in Education. He lives in Nashville, TN with his family and is a special education teacher at Fall Hamilton Elementary.



What now?

Finding my path in a pandemic

By **Fermina Lopez**, Lipscomb University IDEAL program graduate, Class of 2020

COVID-19 placed many new challenges in my life. This made me think of new ways to reach my dreams and career goals.

The first challenge was finishing my post-secondary program, IDEAL at Lipscomb University. I was really looking forward to returning to school after spring break in 2020, but our campus closed, and we had to go to remote learning.

When online classes started, it was challenging getting used to Zoom. I had some embarrassing moments until I learned how to mute myself so people couldn't hear my personal remarks.

I finally got the hang of my classes on Zoom and was really hoping that things would go back to normal before graduation in May 2020. I had planned a graduation party, with friends and family coming from all over Tennessee and other states. COVID-19 put an end to all those plans. The school did the best they could by having a virtual graduation, but it just wasn't the same.

As I realized things were not going back to normal, I started to worry about my career path and employment opportunities. My stress about my future started to turn into depression.

One worry was my access to technology. I had to return my laptop to the IDEAL program after graduation. Then, a miracle happened! I heard about Council's COVID small grant opportunity. The grants could be used for job exploration, schooling, and to help people with disabilities stay active in the community. I rushed to apply for the grant and was so grateful when I heard I would be given a grant to purchase a laptop.

Once I bought my laptop, I made a list of things I wanted to do.

1. Find resources that would help me as an adult with Cornelia de Lange syndrome
2. Stay active with local community agencies
3. Join activities that would help me with my emotional feelings
4. Continue school courses for my career goals in the entertainment industry

With the help of the grant, I was able to do all four.



Fermina uses her laptop bought with a Council grant for online classes and groups to help reach her goals.

I joined the Cornelia de Lange Syndrome (CdLS) Foundation. I started going to monthly meetings with other people with CdLS to talk about issues we face with school, medical needs, housing, transportation, and mental health. I also attended the virtual CdLS National Family Conference, which is a four-day event that brings together the whole CdLS community. It was great to network with families all over the world to discuss and learn about CdLS. I am still actively involved with the foundation and plan to be at the next in-person conference in 2022.

My new laptop also gave me the opportunity to stay involved with local community agencies, like Empower Tennessee. Empower Tennessee helps people with disabilities with independent living skills and support. I was first introduced to Empower TN in 2018, when I attended the Summer Youth Leadership Academy, sponsored by the Council. In the program, young people learn together about self-advocacy, job exploration, and resources in our community. I then became a peer mentor for the

program, which earned me an Empower TN Peer Mentor Award. I thought I would miss the Summer 2020 Youth Leadership Academy, but with the help of my new laptop, I was able to still be a mentor at the virtual camp.

I was also able to participate in Upstream Arts (upstreamarts.org) to help me with emotional support. The program offers free and low-cost classes that use the arts to help people with disabilities of all ages to use their voices and express their feelings. I've learned to use music, dance movement, drawing, and painting to think more positive and happy thoughts. The classes also helped me release stress during this pandemic.

Finally, I was able to find PHAME-Portland (www.phamepdx.org), a school of the arts and performance. PHAME offers all kinds of arts and performance classes, including in musical theatre, songwriting, digital photography, poetry, voice-over, and animation. COVID-19 caused PHAME to close their campus, but they decided to offer online classes to their students. That's how I found the school, through an online search.

I was so happy that the school allowed me to take online courses. It has been a great experience. I have made new friends in Portland, Oregon and have had

some great opportunities. I have done a voice-over radio podcast for XRAY Radio and had a small voice-over role in an animation video for the school's YouTube channel.

I plan to relocate to Portland so I can be more involved with the PHAME program and find opportunities in the entertainment industry. The best thing about PHAME is that it's not just a school for the arts, but also a community where people with and without disabilities come together to share their passion for the arts and entertainment.

Even though I faced many new challenges during the pandemic, I have been able to find solutions to my obstacles. With help from the Council COVID grant opportunity, I have found new opportunities that have created a new path for me in 2021. ■

Fermina Lopez graduated from Lipscomb IDEAL in 2020 and is seeking a career as an event planner or in the entertainment industry. Fermina's most recent accomplishments are serving as a panelist at the Metro Nashville Public Schools Exceptional Education Teacher Conference, serving as a motivational speaker at the 2019 Youth Advisory Conference, and winning an award as a Summer Youth Leadership Academy peer mentor. Fermina has been an intern at Empower TN and at the Frist Museum of Art.

Internships in a pandemic? Check!... *Continued from page 9*



Lauren Ciangfaglione

student documents and putting together School of Nursing marketing materials. Lauren showed a high level of work ethic as she learned new tasks and worked hard to complete them on time. Lauren also worked on self-advocacy skills by telling her supervisor about extra tasks she was interested in doing.

In the Spring 2021 semester, Lauren interned with the College of Education. She worked for many different faculty and staff members to create materials, make copies, laminate, organize student teaching resources, and file. Lauren continued to build on the office skills she learned in her fall internship while getting more efficient. Her supervisor said, "Lauren is wonderful!! EVERY assignment and task I've given her she has completed in record time, and correctly! She's always early to work, always smiling, and always joyful! We are LOVING having her!"

Lauren's career interests include working in an office setting or as a teacher's assistant. She says, "I am hard working, patient, friendly, organized, and kind." ■

TennCare Internship Puts Employment Values to Work

TennCare leaders, intern Wilson Brim, and the team he works with show us what it looks like to walk the employment walk.

TennCare supports people with disabilities to work – and now it hires them through its internship pilot program.

Breaking Ground: Why did TennCare decide to recruit an intern from an inclusive higher education program?

Kelly Kuhns, Employment Specialist, TennCare Long-Term Services and Supports: TennCare's internship pilot program for people with disabilities began this past semester, spring 2021. We worked together with Vanderbilt's Next Steps program and other state agencies to bring this program to life.

TennCare and the State of Tennessee are champions in supporting people with disabilities to lead fulfilling, meaningful lives. We are a driver of the state's goal to make Tennessee state government a model employer of people with disabilities. In 2016, TennCare's division of Long-Term Services and Supports (LTSS) launched Employment and Community First (ECF) CHOICES. ECF CHOICES provides greater access to employment and community supports for people with intellectual and developmental disabilities. Offering an internship program is the natural next step.

THE INTERN PERSPECTIVE: Q&A with Wilson Brim

Breaking Ground: What made you decide to apply to be an intern at TennCare?

Wilson Brim: The reason I applied at TennCare was that most of the job requirements sparked my interest. And some of them are things I want to improve on. One of them is writing because at Vanderbilt my advisor always says my writing is improving. So, I want to take [it] to the next level.

BG: What have you liked the most so far about working at TennCare?

WB: The task I like the most is creating social media posts because on my personal social media I do want to expand my accounts to be more interactive. Since I first got Instagram, I'd only post 3 to 2 times a year and I am the same way today, but I want to flip it to 3-2 times a month. What I do know it helps my creativity on another level to do more posts for jobs and my own as well.



Wilson Brim is an inclusive higher education student and the first intern with TennCare's pilot program.

BG: What have you learned about yourself through this internship?

WB: I have learned how to interact with others online more professionally in a home work environment. Because it is something I had not done before. I have learned to start checking my emails more often.

BG: Do you like working from home? Do you have any advice for other young adults with disabilities learning to work from home?

WB: I am not a fan of working from home because there are so many distractions and it makes it even harder to focus sometimes. To avoid distractions, I would listen to music during my work, so my mind is focused on one thing. I make sure it is calm or chill music like Mozart or classical.

BG: What kind of job do you want to get in the future, after you graduate?

WB: The kind of job I want is to be a film critic because my writing is improving like I said in the first question. The other reason is I love watching movies because I know what the film is and that it makes me feel happy.

THE TEAM PERSPECTIVE:
Q&A with TennCare’s Long-Term Services and Supports (LTSS) Communications Team

Don Smith, LTSS Executive Supports Director
Tommy Wood, LTSS Director of Communications
Lynsey Auell, LTSS Assistant Director of Training and Communication

Breaking Ground: How does TennCare staff support Wilson in this internship?

TennCare: Wilson is given a monthly calendar that includes his assigned tasks. It shows due dates and who the point of contact will be for the day. Task guidance

sheets give more detail to help him complete his tasks. An IPP (individual performance plan) gives him clear objectives to achieve throughout his internship.

We follow up with scheduled weekly touchpoints with Wilson every Monday morning. We use that time to answer questions, address concerns, and give Wilson a chance to offer any feedback he may have.

BG: What are some of Wilson’s strengths and skills?

TC: Wilson is thoughtful, diligent in his work, and attentive to detail. Wilson is always willing to take on a new project without hesitation.

BG: How do Wilson’s job duties help your team?

TC: Wilson’s strength in written communication has been a great asset in the development of both internal and external newsletters.

BG: What have you all learned from this experience with Wilson on your team?

TC: Wilson has been a team player and participated in many communication projects.

LTSS learned how to effectively engage an intern to ensure that the individual has a beneficial and meaningful experience. We also learned how to leverage the strengths of the individual to benefit the team.

BG: What should another employer or state agency know about hosting interns with intellectual and developmental disabilities?

TC: It is important to identify effective supports and establish a solid structure prior to the onboarding of the intern. Throughout the internship, it is essential to maintain the established supports, such as a schedule to effectively communicate expectations. Overall, hosting an intern is a mutually valuable experience for the intern as well as the state agency. We highly recommend that state agencies consider hosting an intern in the future. ■

The task I like the most is **creating social media posts** because on my personal social media I do want to **expand my accounts to be more interactive.**

TDOT's Office of Mobility and Accessible Transportation

By Emily Duchac, Mobility and Accessible Transportation Supervisor, TN Department of Transportation



The Office of Mobility and Accessible Transportation is a new office in the Tennessee Department of Transportation (TDOT), created in March 2020 by the Tennessee Accessible Transportation and Mobility Act. The Council was consulted as this bill was developed, and Council members testified about their transportation needs during hearings. The law created the first state office of accessible transportation in the nation. It required TDOT to develop a mission, five-year plan, and annual reports on mobility and accessible transportation in Tennessee. Our new office has now finished the first of those annual reports.

Mission

The mission of the Office of Mobility and Accessible Transportation is to provide resources and expertise

for expanding and improving accessible transportation and mobility across the state. This mission has three key priorities:

1. Shrinking Gaps in Access to Appropriate Transportation
2. Establishing a Pathway to Integrated Policies and Cooperative Actions (in other words, helping all parts of the transportation system work together)
3. Strengthening Transportation Independence for Tennesseans

The mission and priorities are centered around making accessible transportation more widely available and easier to use. That will mean more Tennesseans – especially seniors and people with disabilities – can get where they need to go.

Mobility and Accessible Transportation Needs

First, TDOT needed to learn from Tennesseans with disabilities and seniors about their transportation needs. What challenges did they experience? TDOT engaged many kinds of groups that are interested in accessible transportation. Those included:

- Experts in aging, disability, and transportation.
- Tennesseans who use accessible transportation themselves or have family members who do.

A lot of people spoke up: 889 people answered our public survey, and 228 people came to focus groups to talk about transportation. During this process, we learned about transportation needs, and we saw that many Tennesseans want to improve accessible transportation across the state.

Tennessee has public transportation in all 95 counties, which helps many people get where they need to go. However, not everyone has access to transportation when and where they need it. Our research showed that barriers include issues of:

- **Independence:** Sometimes people need to reserve trips weeks in advance. They may need to use multiple transportation providers to get to their destination.
- **Limited Weekend or Nighttime Options:** People who need to travel at night or over the weekend may not be able to find a ride.
- **Affordable Fares:** Transportation costs are not always affordable, especially for on-demand transportation options such as taxis.
- **First Mile/Last Mile:** It can be difficult to get to and from a bus stop, especially in the outer parts of an urban area, where bus routes may be far away and options for transportation are limited.
- **Infrastructure:** Sidewalks, curb cuts, and even roadside shoulders are often missing or in poor condition. This keeps people from safely walking or using a wheelchair, or even from getting to a bus stop.

Even when affordable public transportation is available at the right time and place, it may not meet every traveler's needs. For example:

- **Personal Assistance:** Some people need personal assistance to travel, such as help getting in and out of their house or help at their destination. This is not always available.
- **Specialized Services:** There aren't always specialized services available for the full range of travel needs, such as fully accessible vehicles or safe transportation for individuals with cognitive or behavioral disabilities.

When these transportation needs are not met, an otherwise independent person may not be able to get medical care, go to work, or do daily errands.

Other important issues we learned during the planning process include:

- **Lack of information:** People don't always understand what transportation options are available, or how to schedule a ride.
- **Limited Funding:** The costs of providing transportation service, especially on-demand transportation service, keeps transportation providers from expanding services.
- **Volunteer Transportation:** Volunteer transportation services are available for older adults in many counties, but volunteer transportation services for people with disabilities are not widely available.

Strategic Plan and Next Steps

Our five-year Mobility and Accessible Transportation Strategic Plan will guide improvements across the state. This plan has five key goals:

1. Expanded Access: Help local providers grow transportation services
2. Service Solutions: Fix overlapping barriers to transportation
3. Collaboration: Help groups who fund transportation to work together
4. Technology Solutions: Use technology to make transportation easier to use
5. Communication: Help travelers know and access their transportation options

As we work to expand and improve transportation services, it's important to keep the needs of seniors and people with disabilities in mind from the very beginning. The strategic plan goals will help us do that. The goals will guide transportation decisions across the state.

From here, we will continue to update the strategic plan. We will work with everyone involved to find the best solutions and improvements for mobility and accessible transportation in Tennessee.

Get Involved

The full strategic plan and report are available online at www.tn.gov/tdot/multimodal-transportation-resources/omat. For more information, please visit our website or contact Emily.Duchac@tn.gov. ■

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