

breaking ground

ISSUE 114



Creating Belonging at Girl Scouts of Middle Tennessee



Council on
Developmental Disabilities

SUMMER 2023

breaking ground



COVER: *SYC Lumber Janes*: Cadette campers at Camp Sycamore Hills pose with backpacks as they head out on their overnight camping adventure under the stars.



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Dear Readers,

This summer marks an exciting anniversary: 30 years of our biggest leadership program, Partners in Policymaking®. Each year, approximately 25 people from all corners of Tennessee have learned about disability best practices and leadership skills. After graduating, these leaders bring their knowledge and passion back to their communities across Tennessee. As they do, they increase the impact of the program many times over. This is one of the most important ways our small agency makes a big impact throughout Tennessee: by investing in community leaders.

For most of the program's history, Partners in Policymaking was held in person on weekends. This design worked well for the pre-pandemic era. In 2020, we (like everyone else!) suddenly shifted to virtual so that we could keep the program going. Now, at our 30th anniversary, we are going to step back and regroup. We will reflect this year on the program's accomplishments, on celebrating our graduates, and on designing what's next in the post-pandemic era. Watch our newsletters for updates and ways to get involved!

In the meantime, I want to share a photo of our most recent graduating class and their names/hometowns. These are your state's newest leaders. Congratulations, Partners class of 2022-23!

Sincerely,

Lauren Pearcy
Executive Director

2023 Partners in Policymaking graduates

- Heather Bensch - Ripley
- Becca Brnik - Cleveland
- Colleen Campbell - Madison
- Sarah Clinton - Nashville
- Olivia Crossman - Nashville
- Swathi Dasari - Brentwood
- Monica Everett - Cordova
- Barbara Goodrum - Paris
- Jennifer Hout - Franklin
- Gregory Hutchins - Murfreesboro
- Kevin Krieb - Christiana
- Nidhi Mali - Memphis
- Alexis May - Milan
- Katie Moore - Jackson
- Lia Nichol - Powell
- Edel Pace - Lebanon
- Justin Ralls - Greenfield
- Lindy Register - Bells
- Sidney Roark - Oak Ridge
- Dr. Sharon Webb - Memphis
- Fleur Whitehead - Clarksville



Partners scholars with their graduation certificates, April 2023. Graduates not pictured: Heather Bensch, Olivia Crossman, Edel Pace, Colleen Campbell, and Justin Ralls.



Creating Belonging at Girl Scouts of Middle Tennessee

By Lauren Reichstein

Lauren is the Manager of Camp and Adventure Programs with Girl Scouts of Middle TN and has been an active member in the camping industry for over 15 years.

SYC Painting Horses: Campers at Camp Sycamore Hills paint the ponies as a fun non-riding activity.

As a camp director hired to work at a camp that I had never seen, I walked into the Camp Holloway lodge and was impressed. “We have accessible entrances,” I thought, “and our buildings are made for wheelchairs!” Indeed, Camp Holloway and Camp Sycamore Hills have a lot to offer.

- Both have accessible shower houses and buildings and a zero entry pool.
- Camp Holloway has a sidewalk and paved road system leading to cabins and an accessible platform tent unit.

But we have come to realize that accessibility is not just a “ramp.” It’s a mindset. More than that, it directly connects to the core values of Girl Scouts of Middle Tennessee. We build “girls of courage, confidence, and character, who make the world a better place.” We want our campers to feel empowered, so that they can pursue their goals and interests. What better way to support them in this pursuit than by supporting each camper’s needs?

On a personal level, I have seen the difference it makes when campers who are singled out in other situations (for example, having to bring special food or being pulled to a different class in school, etc.) can come and have a similar experience as everyone else. Belonging is important, and being inclusive shows our campers they belong, and are wanted.

At summer camp, we make our dining hall experience a seamless one. Campers with allergies eat the same or similar meals as everyone else. Alternate options are available without question for campers who don’t like a meal or have sensory issues.

Outside of the dining hall, our staff are trained to understand different disabilities and how to best support these campers. That includes how to assist campers who:

- might become dysregulated easily,
- have sensory challenges, or
- need more explicit instructions and re-direction.

Though we are not a medical facility, campers with medical or physical needs can usually work their treatments into our camp day. We have had campers living with a variety of diagnoses, including:

- Type 1 diabetes,
- epilepsy,
- and cystic fibrosis.

Our health staff checks in with parents who indicate that their camper may need extra help or an accommodation before they come to camp. In general, we ask families to partner with us if their camper needs help accessing camp independently so that we can help them have the best possible camp experience.

Despite these steps, some families have shared experiences that have shown us that we could be doing more. We consulted with leaders in the camping industry (particularly those which specialize in camping for people with physical or intellectual disabilities), the Tennessee Council on Developmental Disabilities, and occupational therapists on summer staff to help guide our trajectory.



SYC Splatter Paint: A camper at Camp Sycamore Hills gets messy with paint.

Some of the things we've done include:

- Updating our materials to better explain what support needs we can accommodate.
- Changing our pre-camp questions to invite information and strategies that will make campers successful.
- Asking families for relevant information from school IEPs and 504 plans.

These changes allow our camp staff to ask knowledgeable questions and to know how to help campers be successful from the moment they arrive.

We are also partnering with the Tennessee Council on Developmental Disabilities to provide feedback on our forms and processes, the language we use to describe our accommodations, and training for our staff. We're especially excited to have training sessions that will teach staff how to adapt activities to accommodate campers with varying needs in a way that benefits the entire group. We want campers to feel like they're all

having the same experiences whenever possible. We want to celebrate ways that campers and staff can support each other. We look forward to continuing to develop programming and facilities that are accessible to all and to build partnerships with organizations that can help in ways that we cannot.

Campers interested in coming to Camp Holloway or Camp Sycamore Hills with a troop or for summer camp (not required to be a Girl Scout) can visit our summer camp website at gsmidtn.org/summer-camp or can contact Lauren Reichstein, the Manager of Camp and Adventure Programs, at lreichstein@gsmidtn.org. More information on how we work with campers who have differing abilities and what accommodations we can offer can be found under the title, "Who Comes to Camp?" If families believe their camper may need accommodations to have an independent experience, we invite them to connect with us prior to registering. Though we can't accommodate all needs, we have many plans in place and many options to consider. We look forward to welcoming all our campers this summer!



HOL Mischief: Junior campers at Camp Holloway prepare balloons and streamers for impending mischief.

The How-Tos of Belonging: Training for Camp Staff

By Ashley Edwards Hill, Assistant to the Executive Director, TN Council on Developmental Disabilities

This spring, Council staff were asked to provide an overview of disability and potential accommodations to nearly 70 camp staff for Girl Scouts of Middle Tennessee. Leaning into the Council's work with behavioral health and the principles of the Developmental Disabilities Act, the training focused on 5 foundations.

1. All humans need to feel like they belong.
2. Disability is a natural part of the human experience.
3. Disability does not mean *inability*.
4. Behavior is communication of a need met or unmet.
5. The expert about the child in front of you is the child in front of you.

Staff from both Camp Holloway (Millersville) and Camp Sycamore Hills (Ashland City) shared their own personal connection to disability, and asked important questions about how best to support campers of all abilities while at camp. Nearly half of camp staff identified as an immediate family member of someone with a disability, and a third identified as a person with a disability themselves.

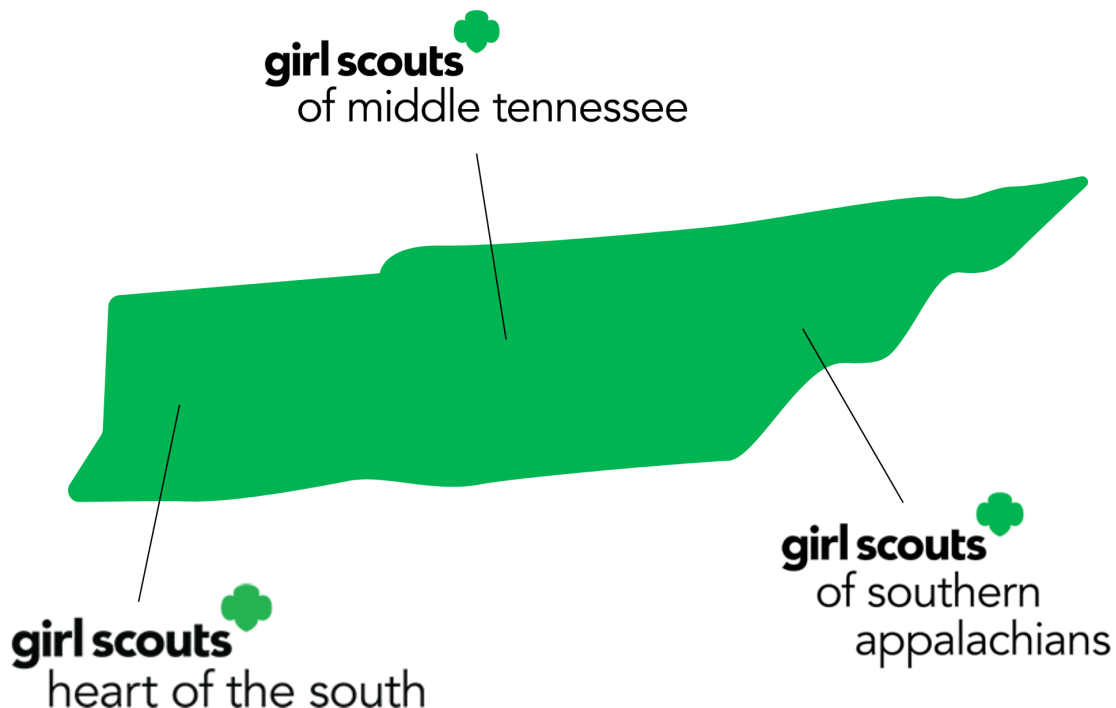
"When a camper is seen only as their inability or are regularly reminded of their perceived capacity, they take on that identity for better or for worse. It doesn't matter whether a child has a disability or not – that's too heavy for any human to carry," said Ashley Edwards Hill, who led the trainings this summer. "If our ultimate goal is for every girl to feel as though she belongs at camp, that's our starting place – that's our default when thinking about potential accommodations or group interactions."

Camp staff began receiving campers on June 4. Campers will enjoy both day and overnight camp opportunities, with Camp Sycamore Hills hosting a calendar of equestrian camps. For campers who want to try out camp with an adult family member, Girl Scouts of Middle TN also hosts a *Camp Y'all* opportunity. To learn more about camp opportunities each summer, visit <https://gsmidtn.org/summer-camp/>

About this organization

Girl Scouting builds girls of courage, confidence, and character, who make the world a better place. As Girl Scouts, girls discover the fun, friendship, and power of girls together. Girls grow courageous and strong through a wide variety of enriching experiences, such as field trips, skill-building sports clinics, community service projects, cultural exchanges, and environmental stewardships. Girl Scouts helps girls develop their full individual potential; relate to others with increasing understanding, skill, and respect; develop values to guide their actions and provide the foundation for sound decision making; and contribute to the improvement of society through their abilities, leadership skills, and cooperation with others. To learn more about Girl Scouting or to connect with a troop in your area, visit girlscouts.org.

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Ashley Hill joined the Council in 2018. She previously worked in the education field, where teaching students with disabilities became a passion for her. Her main responsibilities include supporting the Executive Director and Council members, meeting planning and coordination, and special projects. Ashley began as a Girl Scout as 2nd grader in New York and has served as a Girl Scout troop leader in Middle TN for 3 years. She currently helps to lead the area's largest multi-level troop.



30 Years of Partners in Policymaking® in TN: Share Your Stories with Us

Our first TN Partners in Policymaking class started in 1993 and graduated in 1994. Ever since, graduates of this Council program (first created by the Minnesota Council on Developmental Disabilities) have been leading the work for change for people with disabilities in our state.

If you're one of our 600+ graduates, we want to hear from you at TNDDC@tn.gov, no matter when you went through the program.

What have you been up to since graduation?

Send us your stories about:

- Policy issues you're working on now or worked on in the past.
- Leadership roles you've had recently. (They don't have to be disability-specific!)
- Other ways you've worked for change in your community.
- How your advocacy and leadership growth helped you or your loved ones speak up more.
- How you've connected with others in your class or in the Partners network to support one another.

We'll be sharing your success stories throughout 2023-2024. Follow us and share the stories with your own networks. (We're on Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, and LinkedIn).

Join the conversation by posting your own stories and photos using the hashtag #PartnersTN30!



Calling for YOUR story!

You read this magazine for information and stories about the disability experience in Tennessee. Now you could be featured! The TN Council on Developmental Disabilities is looking for stories on the following topics:

- **Behavior supports that work** – Stories of people with disabilities of all ages getting support when their behavior is communicating unmet needs.
- **Real inclusion** – Stories of creative approaches to true inclusion in your community, such as at church, in community activities (like regular dance, sports, art classes) and more. Where in your community are you experiencing inclusion? (See page 10 for a great explanation of how to define true inclusion!)
- **What happens after I apply?** – A new series in this magazine will use your stories to explain the enrollment process for our state's major disability programs, such as:
 - Katie Beckett,
 - Employment and Community First (ECF) CHOICES,
 - Vocational rehabilitation (VR),
 - TN Early Intervention System (TEIS),
 - and more.

If you applied for a disability service program within the past 2 years, we'd love to hear your experience. Let us know you're interested, and we will send some guiding questions for you to answer.

How to share your story

Email your experience on one or more of the topics above to: TNDDC@tn.gov. Your response could appear here in *Breaking Ground* or in our monthly Council News (email newsletter).

A New Focus on Behavioral Health

Our Council is working to support the mental health and wellbeing of Tennesseans with developmental disabilities and their supporters.

By Council staff

Behavior is communication.

- A child with Down syndrome was running out of the classroom before her team learned how to give her more flexibility in class.
- A doctor realizes an adult with autism is lashing out because of a urinary tract infection.
- A mother learns that medication interactions were causing increased agitation for her daughter with multiple disabilities.
- A family struggles to balance safety with independence for a loved one with Alzheimer's.
- An adult with an intellectual disability and a mental health diagnosis is in crisis because of a lack of mental healthcare providers to meet his needs.
- Family members are worried about the risky relationship choices of a young woman with an intellectual disability.

We at the Council on Developmental Disabilities hear stories like this nearly every day. The stories cross all age groups and demographics. They tell the bigger story of our disability community's struggles with behavioral health.

Many programs within our disability system are testing solutions. This gives us hope that we will find answers. But struggling people need solutions now. Finding those solutions can feel nearly impossible.

We hope our new webpage about behavior supports on our website will help. We have created one place for clear, reliable information and resources about behavioral health for Tennesseans with intellectual and developmental disabilities.

Visit our new webpage to explore:

- A checklist for healthy behavior created by and for Tennesseans with disabilities and their families (You might remember that an earlier version of this checklist first published here in *Breaking Ground*.)
- Plain language information about state programs that support behavioral health for Tennesseans with developmental disabilities
- Resources for healthcare providers about behavioral health for people with developmental disabilities, including a protocol for emergency room staff
- Links to Tennessee and national organizations who provide education and training about behavioral health best practices

Our Council will also keep close track of ongoing work on this topic. We will be at the table to help connect dots and build bridges so everyone is working together on real solutions. We will be thinking about a vision for what we want the system to provide. That vision will be rooted in our [Developmental Disabilities Act](#) values of self-determination, inclusion, and independence for all people with disabilities.

What do we mean by “behavioral health”?

The American Medical Association says behavioral health means the same thing as mental health. We think of behavioral health as related but a little different from mental health. Here is the definition we use. It talks about the unmet needs that a person's behavior is communicating:

- Behavioral health is related to behavior, or the decisions that people make and the actions they take.
- It's about how someone's behaviors impact their mental and physical health AND how their mental and physical health impacts their behaviors.
- Improving behavioral health may include mental health care in order to address the underlying causes of the unhealthy behaviors, since they are often a result of some other issue.
- Improving behavioral health may also include other kinds of support that help the person build a routine of healthy self-care, both mental and physical.
- Our webpage focuses on resources for people with disabilities, but we ALL need support for our behavioral health at times. If you are a caregiver, managing stress and practicing self-care has a significant impact on your ability to care for others, including those with disabilities. Supporting behavioral health for people with disabilities can include finding the right help for their caregivers and family members, too.

**LINK TO
BEHAVIORAL
SUPPORTS**



**LINK TO
E-NEWS**



Healthy Behavior Check-In

Available to download and print full-size from the Council's new web page

Autonomy & Independence

- Does the person have as much say as possible over their own life? Are they given meaningful choice whenever possible? Are they getting support to understand and make decisions?
- Are supporters and caregivers speaking directly TO the person? Are they paying attention to the person's responses (verbal or non-verbal) and wishes?
- Does the person have space to take reasonable risks and make mistakes?
- Does the person have time to be alone/do their own thing without direct supervision (as developmentally appropriate)?

Need help in this area?

Visit the **TN Center for Decision-Making Support** for information and tools.

Mental health

- Does the person have professional support for mental health? Do other family members/supporters?
- Are there mindfulness or other mental wellness tools that could be helpful?
 - Are there signs that a more complete mental health evaluation is needed?

Physical health

- Is it possible the person is not feeling well?
- Are they experiencing pain they can't explain (for example, a urinary tract infection or dental pain)?
- Are they getting recommended preventive, medical, and dental care?

Medication

- Is medication being taken as prescribed?
- Have medication dosages been checked recently?
- Has a doctor checked for possible interactions between different medications the person is taking?
- Do any of the person's medications have possible negative side effects? Are there other alternatives to try?

Food/water

- Is the person hungry/dehydrated? Do they have access to good nutrition?

Rest

- Does the person need a physical or mental break? Is there a sensory-friendly space for a break?
- Are they sleeping well? Do they go to bed on time and seem rested in the mornings? Have they been checked for a medical issue affecting sleep?

Sensory input

- Is the person sensitive to noise, bright or flickering lights, textures, smells, etc.?)
- Is the person seeking greater sensory input (pressure, repetitive motion, etc.)?
- How can the environment be made more comfortable for the person?

Communication

- Does the person have support to communicate their thoughts, feelings, and desires? What tools could make this easier (for example, an assistive communication device)?
- Is information presented to the person in accessible ways – with familiar terms, and with plenty of time to process and respond?
- Are supporters trained in the person's preferred communication methods?
- Is the person getting help to grow their communication skills (for example, speech therapy)?

Physical activity/outdoor time

- Does the person get regular physical activity that is accessible and enjoyable for them?
- Do they have regular access to fresh air, sunshine, and the outdoors?

Routine/structure/predictability

- Does the person have an easy way to see plans for the moment/day/week?
- Are the person's preferences for routine honored as much as possible?
- Are changes to the schedule/routine discussed in advance with the person?
- Does the person have access to concrete information about what to expect for new/out of the routine experiences (e.g. visiting or looking at photos of a new place ahead of time, talking through what will happen at an event, etc.)?
- What other tools might help the person's schedule and routines feel predictable?

Stress management

- Is there a particular place or time behavior is happening?
- Have there been any significant changes in the person's life (for example, changes to aids/support staff, home environment, or schedule/routine)?
- Have there been any losses the person might be grieving?
- Are there stressors in the person's family or close social circles (e.g. tense/turbulent relationships, divorce, arguments, job loss, financial strain)?
- Is the person being included in discussions about family events or potentially stressful situations? Are changes being explained in accessible ways?

Recreation/social engagement/connection

- Is the person participating in a range of activities they enjoy?
- Do they choose how they spend their free time?
- Do they have opportunities to learn new hobbies/skills? Do they have a regular creative outlet?
- Do they have regular, meaningful social opportunities? Do they have support to develop healthy relationships? (If local opportunities are limited, have they explored virtual groups or activities?)
- Does the person have a friend or peer group with whom they can share their thoughts and feelings?

Purpose

- Is the person getting support for meaningful education or employment?
- Does the person have opportunities to volunteer/contribute to causes that are meaningful to them (church, nonprofit organizations, etc.)?
- Does the person have daily responsibilities to the full extent of their ability in the family or home?

Safety

- Have there been any sudden changes in behavior or physical markers that could be signs of abuse? (Please seek immediate professional advice if you have any concerns on this point.)
- Are the person's boundaries about their own body or physical space being respected? Are they being taught how to respect others' boundaries?
- Are there technologies or other tools to help the person stay safe while maximizing independence?

We want your feedback about your experiences while we work on this issue. Email us at Tnddc@tn.gov to share what is working well for your family or community around behavioral health supports, and where you see the biggest challenges. Subscribe to our email updates and follow us on social media as we continue to share more resources and stories about behavioral health in the future.



Congratulations to Tennessee's Fourth Leadership Academy for Excellence in Disability Services (LAEDS) Graduating Class!

In addition to our Partners class, we celebrated another graduation this spring - the fourth class of the state Leadership Academy for Excellence in Disability Services. The Council developed LAEDS in partnership with the TN Dept. of Human Resources back in 2015-16.

LAEDS is a year-long program for state employees whose work has a direct impact on Tennesseans with disabilities and their families. The goal: ensure that leaders in state government work together from a shared set of values, goals, and principles. The academy builds relationships across state agency partners.

Participants from this year's class represented:

- TennCare
- TN Department of Transportation
- TN Department of Human Services
- TN Department of Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities
- TN Department of Safety
- TN Department of Veterans Services
- TN Department of Corrections



Shannon Townsend and Javaun Verge participate in graduation day activities.

They learned about:

- a variety of leadership skills
- disability history
- communicating in plain language
- navigating the service system and TN Disability Pathfinder
- future planning, self-determination, the Charting the LifeCourse framework and tools, and the TN Center for Decision Making Support
- and more!



LAEDS graduates Selekia Shaw, Robin Beamon, Jena Eubanks, and Emily Duchac

Congratulations and a big thank you to these state leaders for your dedication to serving your customers and clients who are a part of TN's disability community. And thanks to our partners at the Dept. of Human Resources for making all 4 classes of the academy a big success.

2023 LAEDS Graduates

- Robin R. Beamon
- Amanda Board
- Krista Costello
- Emily Duchac
- Suzanna Ellis
- Jena V. Eubanks
- Paul Gow
- Sarah Green
- Trey King
- Wacovia Lantez King
- Tylesha McCray
- Breanna Pendilton
- Benjamin Powers
- Amy Scherer
- Selekia M. Shaw
- Rebecca Simon
- Melissa Simpson
- Shannon B. Townsend
- Javaun Verge



CHECK OUT THIS BRIEF YOUTUBE VIDEO FOR STORIES ABOUT HOW THIS PROGRAM HAS IMPACTED TN LEADERS IN THE DISABILITY FIELD!



What IS inclusion – and why does defining it matter?

Inclusion can mean different things to different people. Are sensory-friendly events inclusive? What about hiring practices that seek to accommodate workers with disabilities?

Emelyne Bingham is current chair of the TN Council on Autism Spectrum Disorder. She joined other researchers with Vanderbilt Kennedy Center and Vanderbilt's All Access Inclusion Network to help define inclusion. Their work was published in *Autism*, an international, peer-reviewed journal.



By Emelyne Bingham

Many of us with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) have difficulty navigating new situations. For each new situation I encounter, I know there will be new behavioral expectations I will be unable to read and conform to. That could be a work meeting, a party, a religious service, or even an encounter with law enforcement. Because the expectations for each of these situations vary from time to time, it is nearly impossible for me to predict how I will need to respond in any given setting. From the moment I walk into the room, I know I'm doomed to failure. The first time I speak, I find myself already thinking in damage control mode. And regardless of well-intentioned folks trying to

help me navigate those expectations in the spirit of "access and inclusion," I know that I am still doomed to failure.

In the mid-1980s, Ron Mace, an architect and wheelchair user, developed a new philosophical approach to access and inclusion. Mace proposed the idea to eliminate barriers in architectural design. Mace's basic tenet is both simple and powerful. Instead of building multiple entrances to a building, each tailored to a specific need, the principles of Universal Design achieve access and inclusion. They can do this with a single entrance that many different people can use. For instance, a well-constructed ramp not only accommodates someone in a wheelchair, it can also be used by someone with a walker, someone pushing a baby stroller, or even a skateboarder. Extra-wide doors at a building's entrance can accommodate any number of mobility devices, a delivery person with a cart, or even a group of people walking together. In these scenarios, driven by the principles of Universal Design, each person is accommodated without the need for special circumstances or devices that can spotlight a person's disability.

I often wonder what it would be like if everyone included the principles of Universal Design in all the aspects of the autism world. Instead of applying them solely to physical spaces, what if they were applied to social spaces, as well? What if volume levels of concerts and sporting events were lowered consistently so that every event was "sensory friendly"? What if no child required a special sensory bag with ear protection? What if codes of decorum for

Share your thoughts, and you could be published in this magazine!

- Why does true inclusion matter to you?
- What does that look like in your life?

We want to hear from you. Email your response to TNDDC@tn.gov. Your letter could be published in a future issue of *Breaking Ground!*



Scan the QR Code for the full article in *Autism on Inclusion*.

work meetings were expanded to include different social norms? What if law enforcement officers approached every individual as if they had a cognitive difference, knowing that a lack of eye-contact is not a reliable indicator of threat?

Applying Universal Design principles to social spaces requires a fluid and dynamic process. It requires ongoing dialogue with all involved, including service organizations, educators, self-advocates, and caregivers. Through this process, we may rise above the boundaries of traditional training programs that offer multiple “fixes” for access and inclusion and instead become real forces for social change. We don’t need branded fidget spinners for our children. We need open dialogue about what it’s like to care for a child with autism. We don’t need one-off “autism-friendly certifications” with logo stickers. We need deep conversations about what it means to be autistic. Too often, those certifications stifle critical autism dialogue with community organizations.

Achieving true social change can happen, but not without re-envisioning all of our social spaces as barrier-free spaces. Being barrier-free means that everyone can enter them in the way they desire. My hope is that we look well beyond the boundaries of our expectations and consider the realm of possibilities that lay outside them. Our survival depends on it.

Emelyne Bingham is an American conductor, speaker, and autism self-advocate. She has lead concerts of the Nashville Symphony as its assistant conductor and the Columbus Women’s Orchestra as its music director, as well as performances of the Toledo Symphony, Buffalo Philharmonic, Nashville Opera, Nashville Ballet, and Ars Nova Huntsville. Currently, she serves as the Artistic Director of the Young Texas Artists Music Competition and teaches at the Blair School of Music at Vanderbilt University. In 2011, she was named a research member at the esteemed Vanderbilt Kennedy Center, where she assists with research on music and autism.

Directory of Services, Community Events Calendar, and Trainings for the Disability Community



TENNESSEE
DISABILITY PATHFINDER

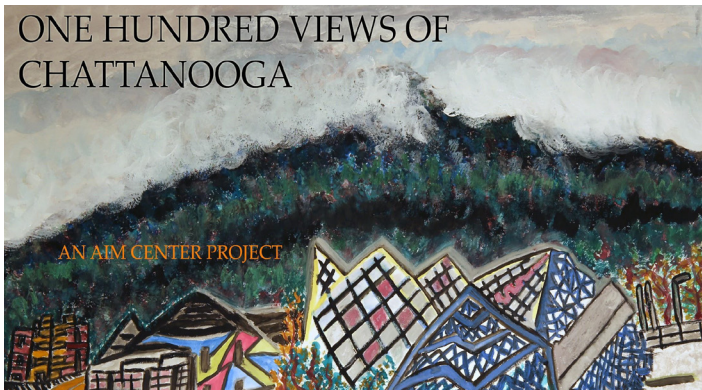


TNPathfinder.org

Chattanooga's AIM Center: A Visual Feature

The works pictured here were created by participants of the Applied Arts program at the AIM Center. The AIM Center (Achievement, Independence, and Motivation) is a nonprofit organization that helps adults in the Chattanooga region live productive lives while managing serious mental illness. The AIM Center offers employment, education, housing, and social opportunities, as well as a community of hope.

The Applied Arts program provides participants the chance for self-expression in a safe, supportive environment. While their lives provide context and inform their artwork, the challenges often imposed on them due to their diagnosis evaporate in the art studio.



"One Hundred Views of Chattanooga" is a coffee table book featuring original artwork by 21 AIM Center attendees. These personal interpretations of sights around Chattanooga were painted from plein air sketches created over a two-year period during numerous field trips.

Over the course of 20 months, participating members visited the locations illustrated in this edition and sketched "plein air" to capture the sights, sounds, and first-hand experiences they encountered. This undertaking offered members accessibility to places that they may not have had the opportunity to see otherwise. Furthermore, they gained an overview of their city's history and realized an interconnectedness between the landscape and the social and historical events that transpired. Often described as the "Scenic City," Chattanooga, like many other Southern cities, witnessed eras of social unrest, industrial growth, civil war, and natural disasters. Many of the locations participants visited had been influenced by events and decisions made in previous eras.

Developing community partners, encouraging integration, and recognizing AIM Center members as talented and productive members of our city, was an important outcome of this work. It is AIM Center's goal now to preserve these images and reflections in a fine art book, with essays and a foreword by distinguished leaders in our community.

The AIM Center especially thanks Unum, the George R. Johnson Family Foundation, and First Tennessee Foundation for their generous support of this project and the AIM Center's 30th anniversary celebration.



DeMichael - *Flight Towards the Light*



David - *The Sun Still Shines*



Mark - *Fresh Growth*

"Positive Space" is a 12-foot-tall concrete and mosaic tile sculpture outside of the AIM Center offices. Incorporating tile work from 45 AIM Center artists and 15 individuals from partnering organizations, this public art sculpture was created in dedication to Bonnie Currey-Stamps, the co-founder and first CEO of the agency. This monumental work stands as a reminder of the power of art to animate the urban environment, as well as the vitality existing in those whose abilities and insights simply need an opportunity for expression.



Positive Space

For more information, visit AIMCenterInc.org, call 423.624.4800, or email info@AIMCenterInc.org. The AIM Center serves Hamilton County and the surrounding area.

Follow on social media:

FB: AIMCenterInc

IG: aim.center

LinkedIn: The AIM Center, Inc.



Positive Space Detail



Plain Language = Access for All

By Jolene Sharp, Chief Public Information Officer, TN Council on Developmental Disabilities

If you've spent much time with the Council on Developmental Disabilities in the past couple years, you've probably heard us mention "plain language." Maybe you've wondered: What exactly is plain language? And what does it have to do with disability?

What is plain language?

First, a definition: [PlainLanguage.gov](https://www.plainlanguage.gov) defines plain language as "communication your audience can understand the first time they read or hear it."

Let's expand on that.

- Plain language makes sure people can **find** and **act on information**.
- Plain language is about both **the words you use** and **how you organize information**.
- Plain language considers context and makes ideas concrete. It makes sure **your meaning is clear**.
- Plain language meets the audience where they are. It helps them know **why information matters to them**.

Why does plain language matter?

The disability services system is big and complex. How big and how complex? I'll give you a little context.

You may remember that every U.S. state and territory has a council on developmental disabilities like ours. Every 5 years, all councils do what's called a "comprehensive review and analysis of needs." We did this last in 2021.

Here's what we learned in Tennessee:

- There are **154 different disability services** across **23 different state agencies**.
- People with disabilities and families name **lack of information** as the **second biggest barrier to accessing services**. (The first was lack of services – meaning needed services don't exist. But we often find services may exist and families don't know about them – which brings us back to lack of information.)

It's no wonder people find it confusing to learn about and access disability services! The Council works on solutions to help families find and access services. (That's why we started and recently helped update TN Disability Pathfinder – our state's one-stop center for finding disability services.) But we know it's easy for people to get overwhelmed in a system this complex.

Information can be a barrier or a bridge. There are many extra challenges people may face to getting information.

- English as a second language – which may include members of the Deaf community who use American Sign Language
- Cultural differences
- Reading difficulty
- Intellectual disability
- Current or past trauma

Those of us working inside systems don't always think about what our audience is experiencing. The information we're sending is one piece of a bigger picture for each person we're communicating with. In the disability community, most people are navigating more than one system. Each system has different processes and requirements. Some people are in crisis.

Plain language means taking the time to ask: **Are we making this as easy as possible for the people we serve?**

Making information as easy as possible is important well beyond state services. Plain language can be the difference in all kinds of access – to everything from fun and recreation to life-saving help.

Who is plain language for?

Plain language is not a special format for a specific group of people. **Plain language is for EVERYONE.**

We are all bombarded by information. No one has time to go digging for what they need. In fact, a modern media company has developed an entire business model around this idea. They call their formula “Smart Brevity.” It’s based on brain science that says **people need to know right away what information is about and why it matters to them.**

Think of the last time you used information that was clear, easy to follow, and told you exactly what you needed to know. How did you feel?

When I ask that question at plain language trainings, I hear answers like:

- relieved
- smart
- respected
- informed
- empowered

Everyone wants to get information that’s easy to understand and act on. That’s true for people who are highly educated and those with less education. It’s true across all identities and communities.

Who should use plain language?

You guessed it: **EVERYONE should use plain language!** You may not think of yourself as a communicator. It might not be your job to post to social media or write articles. But we all communicate every day. Plain language can help you with:

- Emails
- Important conversations with a boss or coworker
- Research reports
- Legal contracts
- Policy white papers
- Event invitations
- Trainings
- Signs and directions
- Any time you have information to share!

I recently drove a family member to the hospital for a medical appointment. It was a big hospital, and I hadn’t been there before. I was worried about finding the right building. I was so relieved when I pulled into the main entrance and saw easy-to-read signs showing me exactly where to go. It made a hard experience less stressful.

Another example: My son is autistic. He likes to know what to expect when we’re going to a new place. We recently got tickets to see a musical at our local performing arts center. It was a lot easier for him to be excited after he looked at a map of the venue and saw exactly where our seats were. Having clear information on the center’s website helped him enjoy an amazing experience in our community.

Poet Elspeth Murray recited this work, “This is Bad Enough,” at the 2006 International Initiative in Mental Health Leadership Conference in Edinburgh.



Tips for using plain language

- Keep sentences short. Give each fact or idea its own sentence.
- Use bullet points/lists whenever possible.
- Use clear, consistent headings.
- Use an active, conversational tone. (For example, say “you” instead of “the person.”)
- Understand your audience. (If you are communicating to more than one group, you might need different versions of your information.)
- Avoid jargon and acronyms. Explain key terms.
- Use visuals to support your meaning. (But remember alt tags/image descriptions for people with vision disabilities!)
- Choose the simplest word.
- If possible: Have members of your intended audience review your content and give feedback.
- Ask framing questions:
 - Who is my audience?
 - What will they need to know **in order to act**?
 - What will their questions be?
 - Would this information make sense to someone who knew nothing about the subject before?

Plain language is inclusion.

The federal Developmental Disabilities Act lists inclusion as a key value for councils like ours. Too often, a lack of clear, easy to understand information is the first barrier to true inclusion. That’s why we made plain language a part of our 5-year state plan.

We’d love your help. See confusing information about disability services? Tell us about it! Are there disability programs or topics you want to know more about? We’d like to hear about that, too. We can be an information bridge for the disability community.

We hope you’ll join us in making Tennessee a leader in communicating so everyone can understand and access the supports they need.

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Jolene Sharp has led communications for the Council since 2019. She loves good stories, good coffee, good food, traveling, and the outdoors. She is a proud wife to her high school sweetheart and a proud mom to two school-age children with disabilities.

HAIDEN PARTIN: HELPING PEOPLE THROUGH THE HARDEST TIMES

Pre-employment transition services (or Pre-ETS) help students with disabilities prepare for life after high school. Pre-ETS are offered to students between ages 14-22. This program is a partnership between high schools and the Vocational Rehabilitation (VR) program under the TN Department of Human Services (DHS). Pre-ETS services can help young adults with disabilities:

- Learn about jobs
- Learn about college or training programs
- Get jobs or internships
- Practice skills needed for jobs and/or living on their own
- Learn how to speak up for themselves

Kristi Fruechtl is the transition case manager for Tullahoma High School and leads the Transition School to Work program for the district. She connected us to former student Haiden Partin, who graduated last year. Pre-ETS and other transition supports through VR and the school helped Haiden find an internship that matched his interests. It quickly turned into a career he loves. Haiden shared with us why he's passionate about working in funeral homes.



Haiden Partin

What is a funeral director, or what some may call a mortician? A funeral director is a person who handles the care of the deceased from the time of death until burial. You will have to attend college and receive a degree in mortuary science. Funeral directing is beneficial and rewarding. A two-year program that is called an

apprenticeship is offered locally. Duties include handling of remains, embalming, and working funeral services.

A funeral director provides the space and resources for families to come together and celebrate a life that has been lived. The director arranges for the necessary permits, such as death certificates and cremation authorizations/permits, while they are preparing the deceased for their final resting place. In this article I will be discussing what I have done to become an apprentice funeral director, also called a mortician or undertaker, and what you can do to become one as well!

When you think of the word "mortician," what images come to mind? I would argue that the images that come to mind are surprisingly different from reality. Being an apprentice funeral director and embalmer, I have seen the ins and outs of being a "mortician." I can attest to the fact that it is not for the faint of heart. Though this career is rewarding, I have found out that you must have a sturdy mind to do this. Being on call, then coming in to work a full day is hard both on your body and mind. Caring for someone that is close to your age is hard, but it is part of the job. Like every other career, there is a good side and a bad side. One of the rewarding sides of the job is when a family walks up to you and says, "thank you." Those two words have a lot of meaning behind them when you have spent hours preparing for the service of their loved one.

A lot goes into putting on a funeral service - much more than you might think. A typical service consists of getting the first call; this is when the funeral home receives the call that someone's loved one has passed away. Then we call the family to set up a time for them to come in to make arrangements for the service. During that time, we will get information for the death certificate and obituary. Next, we pick out a casket and an outer burial container. After this, our team starts the paperwork for the death certificate, obituary, casket order, and completing many other necessary things for the service.

So, may I ask the question again: when you think of a mortician, what do you think about? Hopefully it is not death, but instead, you think of a person who helps people through a hard time.

Before you start a career in the funeral industry, I recommend reaching out to someone that could help you get a job in a funeral home as a part-time employee, just so you could see firsthand what it consists of. I was very lucky to have Ms. Fruechtl and her team at Tullahoma High School help me get a job in the funeral home that I work at now. She reached out to the funeral home and helped me get the job; she helped me in any way that I needed help in.

If you are thinking about becoming a funeral director, you can find out more about the job on the TN.gov website under the board of Funeral Director and Embalmer.

Haiden Partin is a lifelong resident of Tullahoma, TN, and a 2022 graduate of Tullahoma High School. Haiden is now working for Manchester Funeral Home, Coffee County Funeral Chapel, and Tullahoma Funeral Home as a funeral director and an embalmer apprentice. His goal, after his apprenticeship is complete, is to attend John A. Gupton Mortuary College in Nashville.

PRE-ETS INTRO ADAPTED FROM TRANSITION TENNESSEE (TRANSITIONTN.ORG). SCAN TO FIND OUT MORE INFORMATION ABOUT PRE-ETS.





Looking for Housing?

Affordable, accessible housing can be hard to find for many people with disabilities. If you're looking for options for independent living, you're not alone! There is a resource that can help: TNHousingSearch.org.

The Tennessee Housing Development Agency (THDA) offers the site, which is a database of affordable rental properties across Tennessee. Interested renters can search by:

- city,
- county,
- rent price range,
- number of bedrooms,
- accessibility features,
- and many other items.

Search results will show the property on a map and include pictures of the property. It will describe the property's access to transportation and other nearby services. The listing will give you direct contact information for property managers and describe the application requirements.

If you don't have computer access, you can call 1-877-428-8844 for bilingual, one-on-one help finding the right rental home for your needs and budget.

TNHousingSearch.org Info & Links Affordability Calculator Training [Add Listing](#)

Find Your New Home

Search Rentals by City, County, or ZIP Code

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Welcome to TNHousingSearch.org

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..... **TNDecisionMaking.org**



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