



# The Advocate

Vol. 20 No. 1

A newsletter on children's issues

January 2010

## Tennessee Gains When Children are Protected

By Linda O'Neal  
TCCY Executive Director



The future prosperity of Tennessee depends on our ability to foster the health and well-being of the next generation.

Innovative states and communities have designed high-quality programs to reduce and prevent child abuse and neglect and improve educational and other outcomes for children over the long-term. Tennessee has made great strides with innovative programs, but all too frequently, all its children have not had the opportunity to benefit.

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The basic architecture of the human brain is constructed through an ongoing process, beginning before birth and continuing into adulthood. The building process begins, just as with a physical building, with laying the foundation, framing the rooms and wiring the electrical system in a predictable sequence. Early experiences literally shape how the brain gets built, cell by cell, link by linkage.

### Calendar of Events

Events relating to helping children are available at:  
[www.tennessee.gov/tccy/webcalen.pdf](http://www.tennessee.gov/tccy/webcalen.pdf).

A strong foundation in the early years increases the probability of positive outcomes.

A weak foundation increases the odds of later difficulties.

### TCCY

For more information on the Tennessee Commission on Children and Youth and its programs, check out the website at: [www.tn.gov/tccy](http://www.tn.gov/tccy).

The interactive influences of genes and experience shape the developing brain. The active ingredient is the “serve and return” relationship between children and their parents and other caregivers in their family and community.

As in the process of serve and return in games such as tennis and volleyball, young children naturally reach out for interaction through babbling and facial expressions. If adults do not respond by getting in sync and doing the same kind of vocalizing and gesturing back at them, the child’s learning process is incomplete. This creates negative implications for later learning.

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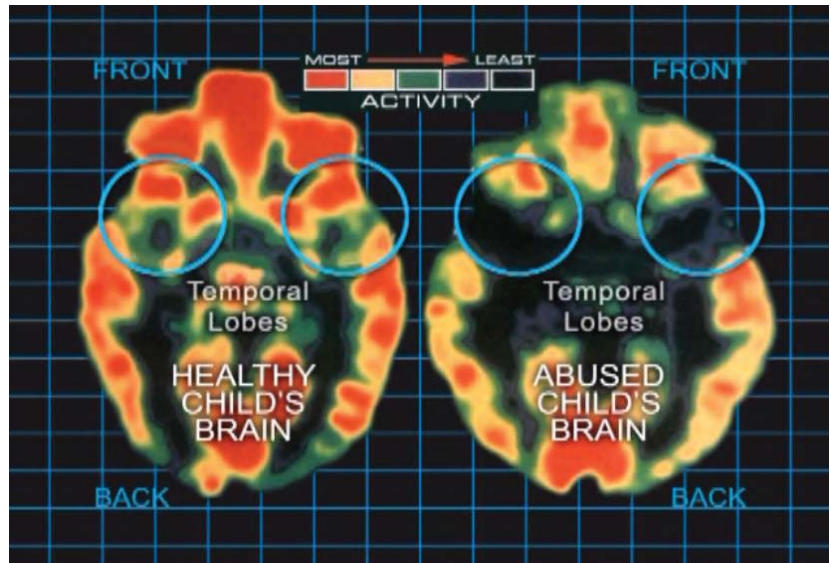
## Gains

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Chronic stressful conditions, such as extreme poverty, abuse or severe maternal depression – what scientists now call “toxic stress” – can also disrupt the architecture of the developing brain. However, when this stress is buffered through an environment of supportive relationships, this stress becomes tolerable and less damaging to children’s development.

Experiencing chronic stressful conditions can disrupt developing brain architecture. This can lead to lifelong difficulties in learning, memory and self-regulation. Children who are exposed to serious early stress develop an exaggerated stress response that, over time, weakens their

## Negative Consequences of Maltreatment



Source: Helping Babies from the Bench, DVD, ZERO O THREE, 2007  
Secondary Source: Doris Duke Foundation and CDC

The Tennessee Commission on Children and Youth Cindy Durham, Chair Nashville	
Natasha Blackshear Nashville	Trudy Hughes Maryville
Sidney Bynum Nashville	Carlton Lewis Nashville
Leon Caldwell Collierville	Scott W. Meltzer Franklin
Joshua Conner Nashville	Diane Neighbors Nashville
Beverly Cosley Chattanooga	Timothy A. Perry Kingsport
Adam Grant Dickson Jonesborough	Mary Anne Poe Jackson
James B. Ford Franklin	James Roland Reid Brownsville
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defense system against diseases, from heart disease to diabetes and depression.

When these important aspects of development are not attended to promptly, later serious consequences result. Trying to change behavior or build new skills on a foundation of improperly wired brain circuits requires more work and is less effective.

Tennessee’s low ranking indicators in the 2009 KIDS COUNT National Data book are among those contributing to great stress, even toxic stress, in young children. More than one in five of all Tennessee children and more than one four children younger than age 6 live in poverty, ranking the state 40th on both measures. The current poverty standard is \$22,050 per year for a family of four.

Closely related to poverty is Tennessee’s 41st ranking with more than one in three children in the state living in single parent families, almost one in three Tennessee families with a female householder, and more than half of these with children under five years old.

Almost one in four children under age six lives in a low-income working family and more than one in three children lives in a family where no parent has full-time, year-round employment, a ranking of 41<sup>st</sup> nationally. Almost two in three children under age six have all available parents in the workforce. This makes the opportunity to attend high quality childcare extremely important.

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## Gains

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Providing public supports to help parents succeed is important. All parents need help and support, and many parents, especially those who are very young, or have limited financial, family or other community supports, need more assistance.

Quality Home Visitation programs using an evidence-based curriculum can improve outcomes for pregnant women and young children. These programs are particularly important because they focus on infants and very young children during a time of rapid brain development and a time when children are less likely to be served in childcare and Pre-K programs. Home visitation programs can contribute to better parental understanding of child development and of the importance of talking and reading to their children and encouraging that serve and return interaction. They can also help improve immunization rates and lead to better spacing of subsequent births, important for reducing the incidence of low-birth-weight babies and infant mortality.


One of the greatest benefits of home visiting programs is in reducing child abuse and neglect, clearly toxic stress for young children.

Child maltreatment is not only traumatic in itself and can result in state custody, it also increases the risk of adverse consequences among maltreated children, including early pregnancy, substance abuse, school failure and mental illness. Children who have been physically abused are also more likely to exhibit aggressive behavior and violence later in their lives.

Providing financial support for very young children who live in poverty is also an important way to reduce the levels of toxic stress they experience. The Families First public assistance program provides important support for children in a total of 62,088 cases in Tennessee. Each case has an average of about two children, many of them young children, but the maximum payment for a mother and two children is \$185 per month, clearly not enough to make a substantial difference in reducing the stress of poverty experienced by these families.

Tennessee does an incredibly good job with relatively little. It is exciting to consider how outcomes for children would be improved if these proven programs were fully funded.

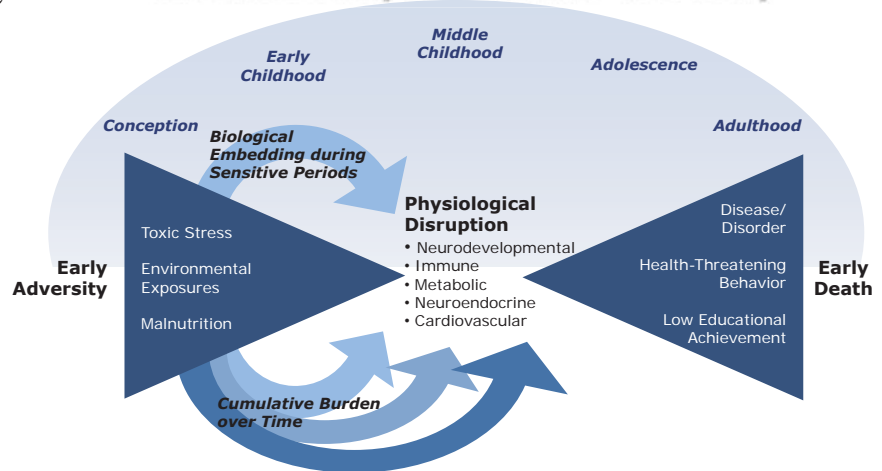
Today's children are the economic engine for the state's future prosperity. Their needs are many, and they cannot wait. We must find a way to ensure all Tennessee children, especially very young children, have the public services and supports necessary for them to develop into productive citizens and ensure the state's future prosperity.

*With grateful acknowledgements to the staff of FrameWorks Institute for research, training, technical assistance and guidance in effective messaging to promote good public policies for children ([www.frameworksinstitute.org](http://www.frameworksinstitute.org)).* 



Center on the Developing Child  
HARVARD UNIVERSITY

### The Childhood Roots of Health Disparities: How Adversity is Built Into the Body



# Reports Look at Violence and Its Effects on Children and Youth

We are a nation, most everyone agrees, that values children and protects its children. However, some children in this country still suffer. The cycle of pain begins for them in the first years of life and has lasting impacts on individuals and communities. In addition to the suffering and loss children exposed to early trauma experience, long-term effects ripple through our health care, justice, social service and child welfare systems and our economy.

More than 60 percent of American children or their caretakers reported being exposed to violence within the year preceding the survey, according to a federal report. But, according to another report, 1,760 U.S. children actually died from child maltreatment in a 2007.

This fact is one of many in recent reports that expanded understanding of how violence affects children. The Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention and the Centers for Disease Control detailed the results of the National Survey of Children's Exposure to Violence, the most comprehensive survey to date, and Every Child Matters, a national child advocacy organization, released, *We Can Do Better: Child Abuse and Neglect Deaths in the U.S.*

According to Every Child Matters, Tennessee has allocated its resources well and ranks 16<sup>th</sup> in per capita spending to protect children from maltreatment. However, it reported 170 child abuse fatalities in Tennessee during a seven year period. The report also lists recommendations for better protecting children.

Among the solutions recommended by Every Child Matters were reducing workload size and equipping child welfare workers with the resources and training they need. This includes adequate access to mental health, substance abuse treatment, emergency shelters, etc.

Other recommendations in the report are:

- Collaboration between child welfare and law enforcement;
- Equipping families with the resources they need to survive.

**Children's Exposure to Violence**

Type of Exposure	Within the Past Year	Lifetime
<b>Children exposed to direct or indirect violence within the past year</b>	<b>60.0%</b>	*
<b>Children assaulted</b>	<b>46.3%</b>	<b>56.7%</b>
<b>No weapon</b>	<b>36.7%</b>	*
<b>Weapon</b>	<b>14.9%</b>	*
<b>Injured from assault</b>	<b>10.2%</b>	*
<b>Experienced 2 or more direct victimizations</b>	<b>38.7%</b>	*
<b>Sexual victimization</b>	<b>6.1%</b>	<b>9.8%</b>
<b>Child maltreatment</b>	<b>10.2%</b>	<b>18.6%</b>
<b>Dating violence</b>	<b>1.4%</b>	*
<b>Children injured in assault</b>	<b>10.2%</b>	*
<b>Children witnessing a violent act</b>	<b>25.3%</b>	<b>37.8%</b>
<b>Witnessing family assault</b>	<b>9.8%</b>	*
<b>Witnessing community assault</b>	<b>19.2%</b>	*
<b>Bullying: Physically bullied</b>	<b>13.2%</b>	<b>21.6%</b>
<b>Emotionally bullied</b>	<b>19.7%</b>	<b>32%</b>

\*The *Juvenile Justice Bulletin* summary did not list this information.

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## Violence Prevention

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### TCCY

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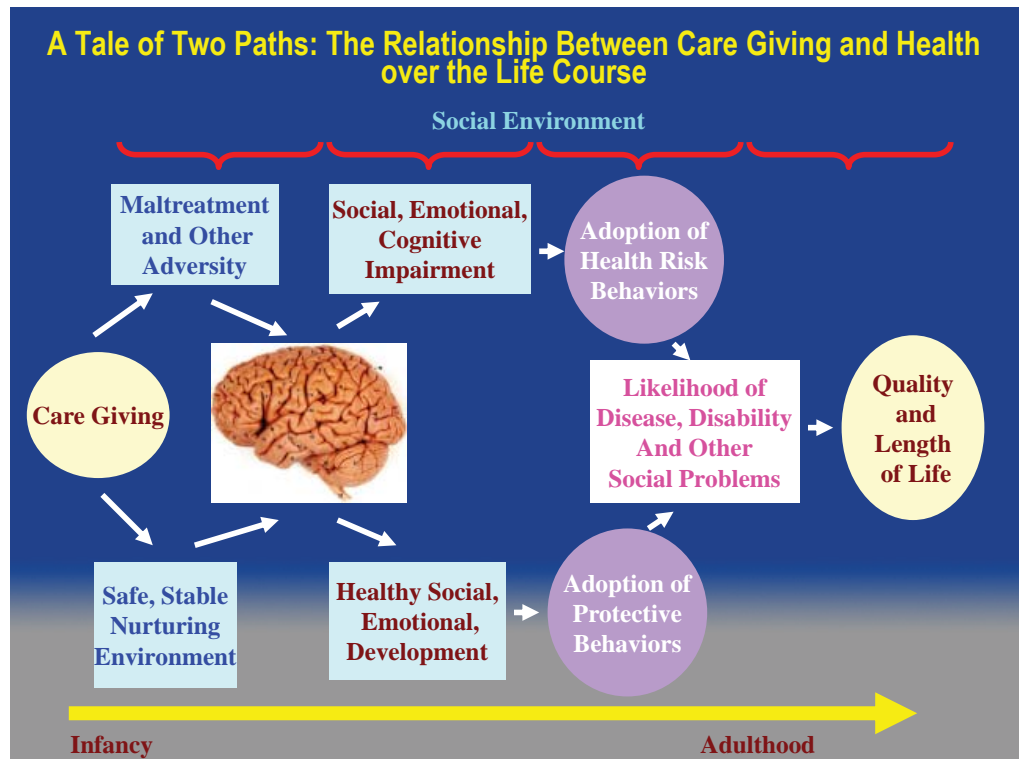
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Source: CDC National Center for Injury Prevention and Control, 2009

It also found successful youth violence prevention programs:

- Focused on early childhood;
- Had coordinated responses;
- Focused on families.

The Every Child Matters report reminds readers no violence against youth is “acceptable.” The current high rate of exposure to violence, research tells us, is related to a myriad of problems faced in this country. The National Survey of Children’s Exposure to Violence found U.S. children were more likely than adults to be exposed to violence and crime; violence against children was twice as likely than against the general population. The growing brain is, however, especially vulnerable to the effects of trauma, research tells us. Childhood trauma affects the organization and functional status of the adult brain.

As pointed out in the survey report, the Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACE) study identified the childhood traumas associated with increased rates of physical, mental and emotional health and social problems. Trauma included physical, emotional and sexual abuse and witnessing violence against one’s mother.

These experiences are all too common. In October 2009, the Office of Juvenile Justice’s Safe Start Initiative reported on a survey of over 4,000 children ages 10 to 14 and caregivers of children under age 10. This survey was larger and

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## Violence Prevention

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more comprehensive than earlier research on childhood violence incidence. The survey found nearly two thirds of children were exposed both directly or indirectly to violence, one-half reported being assaulted at least once, and more than one in 10 were injured in an assault.

Indirect victimization was divided into community violence and family violence.

◆ Community indirect violence included:

- Seeing someone attacked with or without an object or weapon;
- Having something stolen from the household;
- Having had a friend, neighbor or family member murdered;
- Witnessing or hearing a shooting, bombing or riot;
- Being in a war zone;
- Knowing a family member or close friend who was sexually abused or raped;
- Knowing a family member or close friend who was robbed or mugged; and
- Knowing a family member or close friend who was threatened with a gun or knife.

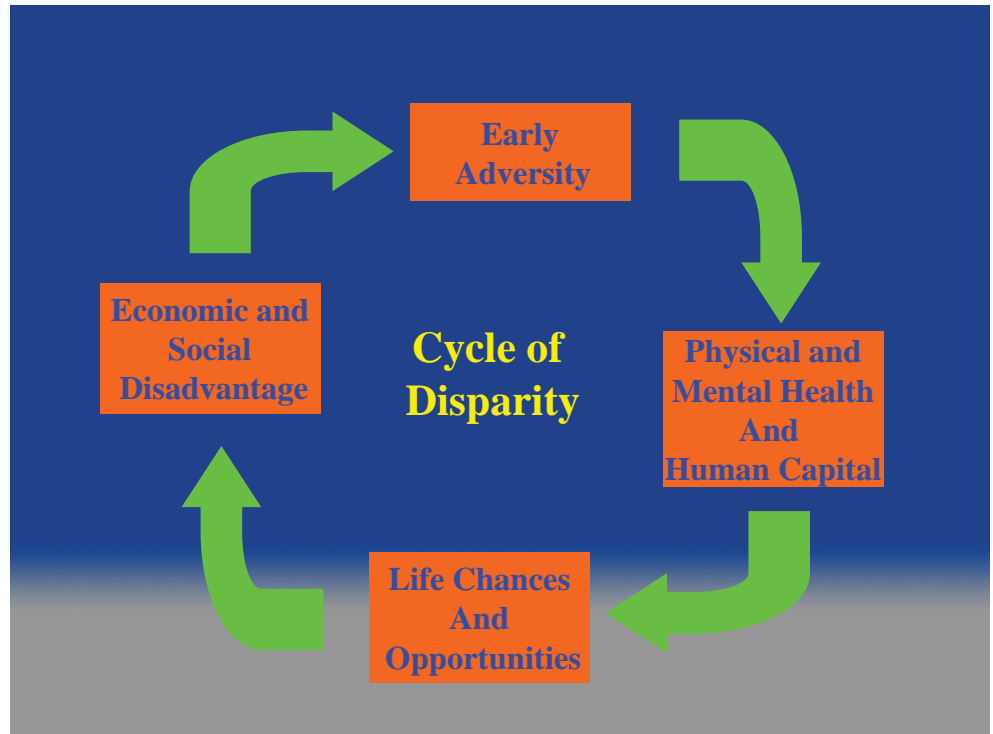
◆ Family indirect violence included:

- Seeing a parent assaulted by a spouse, domestic partner or boy or girl friend;
- Seeing a sibling assaulted by a parent;
- Threat by one parent to assault the other or to damage the other's property;
- One parent pushing, hitting, slapping, kicking, choking or beating up the other;
- Assault by another family member against a child or adult in the household.

Too many children live in what, a researcher has called the fallout zone of domestic and community violence (Perry et al). Exposure to one type of violence puts children in at more risk to be exposed to other types of violence. More than a one in three (38.7 percent) children reported more than one direct victimization. Ten percent of the children and youth were exposed to five or more different types of violence.

Eighty-six percent of children who reported being exposed to violence in the preceding year also had been exposed to violence earlier within their lifetimes.

A child who has been physically assaulted during his or her lifetime is more than six times as likely to have also been sexually victimized and more than five times as likely to have been maltreated during his or her lifetime.



Source: CDC National Center for Injury Prevention and Control, 2009


## Violence Prevention

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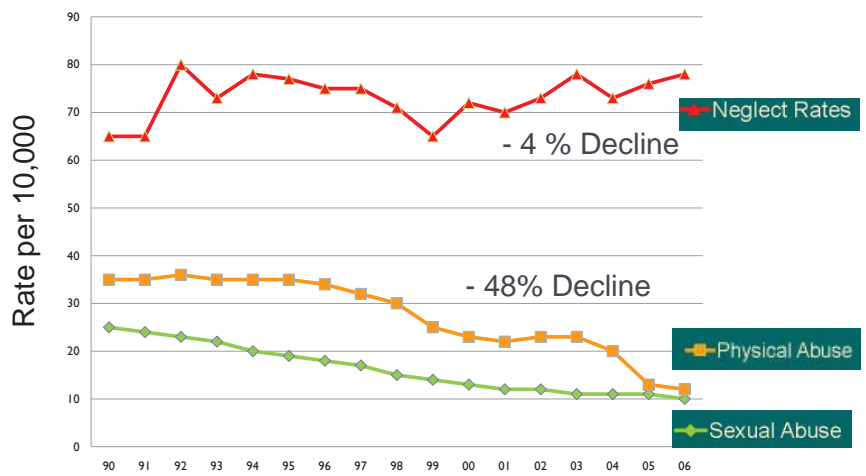
Among the striking facts from the report was the rise of exposure to violence as children aged. Adolescent brains continue to be vulnerable to trauma. The reward centers of the brain are active during this period.

Organizational refining of the brain's gray matter begins at puberty as cognitive abilities grow. Areas of the brain associated with planning and decision making and controlling impulses and emotions continue to develop into the early 20s.

The direct and indirect effects of this trauma affects all citizens. The United


States has among the highest rates of violence against both adults and children in the developed world. These high rates will continue unless all people work to eliminate childhood trauma and break the cycle of violence. The Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention in July 2004 published *Blueprints for Violence Prevention* (<http://www.ncjrs.gov/pdffiles1/ojjdp/204274.pdf>), identifying evidence-based prevention programs. It also included recommendations for successful implementation of the model programs. More information about the *Blueprints* programs is available at <http://www.colorado.edu/cspv/blueprints/>. 

### U.S. Maltreatment Trends



Data Source: NCANDS; Graphic Source Doris Duke Foundation and CDC

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# Domestic Violence Harms Children and Families

Increasingly social service organizations have become willing to understand problems are rarely individual. Coupled with increased understanding of the effects of exposure to violence on children, this understanding has focused more attention on domestic violence and its effect on children in the home.

The Family Violence Prevention Fund ([www.endabuse.org](http://www.endabuse.org)) is participating in/promoting efforts to prevent violence. One such program, Coaching Boys into Men, calls on coaches to use their power as role models to encourage respect for women and prevent violence against them.

As noted by the Every Child Matters Report on child fatalities, improved collaboration and communication between law enforcement is needed to address domestic violence and child maltreatment. Domestic violence and child abuse have similar risk factors: poverty, young parents, etc. (Volpe). One survey estimated over half of males who battered their wives also abused their children. Forty-eight percent of a sample of Connecticut child welfare cases also included mention of domestic violence. One study found 59 percent of mothers who had been abused also abused their children.

Unfortunately, domestic violence is not a crime of adults only. Youth can be both victims and perpetrators of relationship violence. The organization, Break the Cycle, an agency concerned about youth relationship violence, rated states on policies protecting young people from relationship violence. In 2009 Tennessee earned a "C" for limits on the ability of youth under age 18 to get an order of protection against an abuser. The state did get credit for expanding protection to those in many types of romantic relationships.

The state has made efforts to deal with violence. Nationally, Break the Cycle operates a website ([www.thesafespace.org](http://www.thesafespace.org)) as an information resource for young people. ¶

## ***2010 Children's Advocacy Days, March 9-10***

### **Jim Pryor Award and Youth Excellence Awards: Help TCCY Honor those Who Have Made a Difference**

Tennessee is full of people who have improved the lives of its children and have turned their lives around. Tennessee's children and communities are made better daily by the efforts of professional and volunteer advocates. And, the majority of children who run afoul of rules and laws and end up in juvenile court do not reoffend as adults.

Each year at Children's Advocacy Days (March 9-10, 2010) TCCY presents the Jim Pryor Child Advocacy award and the Youth Excellence Award. Child advocates are asked to nominate others who have made a difference in the lives and outcomes of Tennessee's children and youth whose bad choices brought them in contact with juvenile court but whose good choices enabled them to succeed and to help others.

More details about the awards and nomination forms are available at <http://www.tennessee.gov/tccy/awards.shtml>. Nominations are due on February 5, 2010. ¶