2023 TDC Tennessee Disability Scorecard

**Executive Summary**

In TDC’s 2023 Tennessee Disability Scorecard, we evaluate the progress that Tennessee has made over the past year in building a state in which people with disabilities are able to thrive in lives of their choosing. In 2022, the state received a cumulative D+ grade in our inaugural scorecard, with a focus on working-age adults. This year, we’ve expanded the scope of our Scorecard to better reflect the experiences ALL Tennesseans with disabilities across the age and disability spectrum. This is the experience of nearly one third of the state’s adult population, and over 125,000 children. It is vital that the Tennessee take a hard look at the quality of life it offers to its residents with disabilities and move toward better access to opportunity and success.

Ultimately, we again give the state of Tennessee a poor grade, with the state cumulatively earning a D for their policies, practices, opportunities and outcomes for residents with disabilities.

However, this grade is not inevitable, and it is not permanent. In this year’s Scorecard, we introduce “Homework” to help guide the state is moving toward a fairer and more inclusive environment for people with disabilities. Our Homework, consisting of suggested policy changes, opportunities for investment and priority legislation, would both improve the state’s grade, and improve the lives of Tennesseans with disabilities. The purpose of the Scorecard, as well as the homework, is to lay out a path by which Tennessee can become the number one state for people with disabilities to live in the country.

It is our hope that Tennessee lawmakers, decision-makers and economy-drivers refuse to be content with their poor grade, accept their homework, and make tangible changes to improve the lives of Tennesseans with disabilities in the coming year.

**Employment – D+**

As a proud “employment-first” state, it is clear that our Tennessee leadership prioritizes putting Tennesseans with disabilities to work. While the state has taken small steps toward improving access to good, well-paying jobs for people with disabilities, there is still a lot of progress to be made in the area of employment.

* **Access and quality:** Tennessee has the 8th worst employment rate for people with disabilities, while working adults with disabilities earn the 12th lowest average wage
* **Effort:** In 2022, the state chose to return over $28 million to the federal government for Vocational Rehabilitation (VR) services meant to provide job training and placement for Tennesseans with disabilities
* **Model Employer:** In 2022, the General Assembly passed legislation establishing the Tennessee “State as a Model Employer” (SAME) program, which enacts hiring and retention reforms meant to increase the number of state employees with disabilities.

Homework:

* **Increase effort:** Ensure that the state won’t return federal funding for VR by appropriating adequate funds to meet its Maintenance of Effort (MOE) obligation.
* **Build opportunity:** Establish a pathway to TennCare for working adults with disabilities that allows working-age adults with disabilities to obtain and keep well-paying jobs without jeopardizing their access to care.
* **Prepare workers:** Fund the reopening of a Training Center for the Blind to ensure that Tennesseans with vision-related disabilities have access to gainful employment.

**Aging – C**

Tennessee is projected to be home to 1.65 million residents aged 65+ by 2040 – a whopping 40% increase from 2020. It is imperative that the state prepare itself to provide a high standard of living for this growing population, with easy access to care, housing and financial security.

* **Financial peril:** 52.5% of Tennesseans aged 65+ live below the ALICE (Asset-Limited, Income-Constrained, Employed) threshold, meaning they cannot afford household basics in the place where they live.
* **Supported Housing:** Tennessee ranks 34th in the number of assisted living and residential care units per 1,000 adults aged 75+.
* **Home Health Care Quality:** Tennessee ranks 50th in the percentage of home health care patients who require a hospital admission, indicating a low quality of care

Homework:

* **Increase Housing Access:** Establish an alternative “Supported Housing” licensure category to increase the number and quality of community-based housing options available to aging Tennesseans.
* **Commit Resources:** Establish a Department of Aging and Disability to ensure that the needs of aging Tennesseans and Tennesseans with disabilities are well-understood, taken seriously and adequately resourced.
* **Expand HCBS:** Invest state funds in AAAD’s to expand capacity to deliver direct client services including intake, eligibility screening and case management

**Family Caregiving Support – F-**

The role of a caregiver is fundamentally different for parents, spouses and family members of individuals with disabilities. Facing endless barriers and obstacles to securing support for their loved ones, this has long been the experience of family caregivers. However, the state of Tennessee has repeatedly failed to acknowledge or support this important work. The effect of this indifference from the state on the health, well-being and financial stability of family caregivers in this Tennessee is enormous.

* **System failure:** in 2023, AARP ranked Tennessee 51st out of 51 in the degree of support it provides to its family caregivers, citing the absence of nearly all of the caregiver-friendly policies that it uses to score this metric.
* **Protect spouses:** the state fails to exceed the minimum federal requirements for protecting spousal caregivers from forced impoverishment necessary to order to secure health care for their loved one.
* **DSP Wage:** despite several consecutive years of increases, the average wage for a Direct Support Professional remains below average, ranking 33rd in the United States

Homework:

* **Compensation:** establish a statewide Paid Family Caregiving policy that ensures caregivers receive compensation for providing services that the state fails to provide themselves
* **Invest:** increase reimbursement to providers, including those for DSP wages, to ensure an adequate and stable network of agencies providing supports and services to Tennesseans with disabilities
* **Transparency:** implement policies requiring TennCare to report on service utilization percentage, rather than exclusively time and distance standards, to demonstrate network adequacy and density

**Education – incomplete\***

The education of children with disabilities has long been the primary vehicle toward inclusion, opportunity and equal rights for the disability community. The provision of special education over the last 50 years has manifested in unprecedented leaps forward for the disability community, but the promise of equality for over 125,000 Tennessee children with disabilities remains thus far unfulfilled.

* **Graduation:** Tennessee children with disabilities graduate at a rate 13.7 percentage points lower than their non-disabled peers
* **Quality:** A 2022 survey of Tennessee teachers found that 46% of licensed General Education teachers say they have difficulty differentiating instruction for students with disabilities.
* **Post-secondary access:** Tennessee maintains dedicated funding streams for disability-specific post-secondary programs that increase the population of students with disabilities at the state’s colleges and universities.

Homework:

* **Transparency:** establish metrics to document and report on the use of informal exclusionary discipline practices and policies against children with disabilities in Tennessee schools
* **Address shortages:** invest in occupational pipelines for Special Education teachers and related services professionals and dedicate recurring funding and resources for retention policies
* **Common sense:** accept federal funding for special education and recommit to providing the rights and protections of IDEA to Tennessee students with disabilities

\*Tennessee’s “incomplete” grade is due to the state’s lack of data transparency and its ongoing attempt to refuse federal special education funding.

As it stands, Tennessee’s D grade is an unacceptable mark. Tennesseans with disabilities have long stood up for their rights and demanded a better world for our community, and thus far, the state of Tennessee has failed to deliver. However, as the progress of the last 50 years shows, the world can and should be a better place for people with disabilities. While our community will continue to advocate on our own behalf, the onus is on the state to choose to help improve the lives of Tennesseans with disabilities. This begins with honest self-reflection, genuine engagement with the disability community and ongoing commitment to building a more inclusive Tennessee. It is our sincere hope the state of Tennessee takes its homework assignments seriously and earns a higher mark in 2024.