



STEP AHEAD NEWSLETTER

Winter 2022

From the Executive Director

Hello STEP Community:

We hope all our friends out there enjoyed the 2021 holiday season, and were able to spend time with your loved ones, making new and wonderful memories. We enjoyed sharing our staff members' unique holiday traditions on Facebook and hosted our individual celebrations to the best of our ability as the ongoing pandemic continued to impact get togethers, travel, and even gift exchanging. As this New Year gets underway, we at STEP are hoping to be able to resume in-person training events soon. Until then, we're committed to providing timely, accurate, and relevant information that families, youth, and educators can use now, through virtual trainings, meeting attendance, email, Newsletter distribution, our information-packed website, and our social media platforms.

We are proud of our STEP Newsletter, and appreciate the opportunity to share content, four times a year, to keep the individuals and families we serve informed about topics and developments in the special education field. In this first issue of 2022, we offer you a review of the Department of Education's Roadmap for supporting students with mental health issues and challenging behaviors; an overview of Tennessee's Katie Beckett program; STEP's efforts around Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion within our own staff; our STEP 2021 Advocate of the Year Winners; and reports from our STEP Up to the Plate Youth Council members, Lily Bennett and Eric Massey.

As always, we appreciate your feedback about this publication, or about any of STEP's efforts to promote successful outcomes for Tennessee's children and youth with disabilities. Our staff in our main office in Greeneville and our Regional Directors around the state are at the ready to help you with any of your special education questions or needs. Please feel free to reach out to us!

Gratefully,

Karen Harrison

Executive Director, STEP



Family Equity Advisory Team (FEAT)

STEP's Family Equity Advisory Team (FEAT) was formed last year to help ensure equity in all aspects of our work. The FEAT is comprised of several staff and members of our Board of Directors. For over 30 years, STEP's staff and leadership team have embraced cultural inclusion and diversity initiatives to engage the families, caregivers, and professionals we serve. Our team values all students' educational paths, and strives to ensure a brighter future for children, youth, and young adults with disabilities. FEAT is currently working on:

- a unique DEI (Diversity, Equity and Inclusion) statement
- infographics for social media that promote diversity
- a disability awareness/DEI calendar
- a DEI section for our website
- producing a "Better Together" video featuring our STEP Team and Board members
- engaging staff and Board in building skills to be culturally responsive and to implement best DEI practices
- reviewing organizational policies, programs, and practices to ensure alignment with DEI principles

Our group is consulting with Adriene Wright, founder, president, and CEO of Abelita, LLC, a communications and management consulting company that provides strategic approaches to organizational equity and engagement. STEP is working toward a future that is more diverse, equitable, and inclusive for all children, youth, and young adults with disabilities, special health care, and mental health needs.



An Overview of Tennessee’s Katie Beckett Program **by Cara Kumari, Assistant Commissioner** **Communications and External Affairs,** **Department of Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities**

On a nice day in Alcoa, you might find Asa and her mother on the greenway. Her mother likes to jog, and Asa has no problems keeping up in her adaptive tricycle. In fact, if you ask Asa what she likes about her bike, she’ll tell you, “it goes fast!”

Asa’s bike is doing more than just connecting her to a fun family activity, it’s helping her work on her physical therapy goals. Her family was able to use their Katie Beckett Part B funds to buy the bike, just one of many ways the Katie Beckett Program is helping more than a thousand families across Tennessee.

The Katie Beckett Program started in November 2020 and provides support to children with disabilities or complex medical needs under the age 18. These children would qualify for Medicaid, but their parents make too much money or have too much in assets. This Program provides a pathway for these families to receive this much-needed support in a variety of ways.

There are two main parts of the Katie Beckett Program: Part A and Part B. Part A is for children with the most significant disabilities or complex medical needs. Here are a few things to know about Part A:

Children must meet an “institutional” level of care. That means they would qualify to receive services in a hospital or nursing home but want to receive that care in their homes. Children in Part A receive full Medicaid benefits, which can include things that private insurance doesn’t pay for. Part A also provides children with \$15,000 a year in home- and community-based services. These are non-medical services that support families caring for their children at home. A child must have private insurance, and a premium may be required based on the family’s insurance policy.

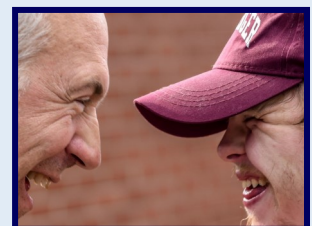
Part B is also for children with intellectual and developmental disabilities and complex medical needs. More children are enrolled in Part B than Part A. Here are a few things to know about Part B:

Children enrolled in Part B must meet an “at-risk” level of care. That means they do not qualify for care in a medical institution. Part B is called a Medicaid Diversion Program. That means children are not enrolled in Medicaid. Part B provides for up to \$10,000 a year to help families offset the costs that private insurance does not pay for—including premium assistance, co-pays, prescription drugs, therapies, and home- and community-based services. Families can choose how they want to spend their funds based on their child’s individual needs. The most popular feature in Part B is called the Healthcare Reimbursement Account, and it lets families pay for medical items like co-pays, prescription drugs, and other medical expenses.

More than 1000 children are already enrolled in the Katie Beckett Program. Currently, neither Part A nor Part B of the Program have a waiting list for services, and families are encouraged to apply. The application can be found online at TennCare Connect at: <https://tenncareconnect.tn.gov/services/homepage>.

In order to apply for the Katie Beckett Program, you must first apply for Medicaid. Once you complete the Medicaid portion of the application, there will be a prompt to ask if you want to apply for the Katie Beckett Program. If you are confused or don’t have a computer, the DIDD regional Katie Beckett Office can assist by calling the following numbers or emailing DIDD.KBAssist@tn.gov. West Tennessee Regional Office: (866) 372-5709/Middle Tennessee Regional Office (800) 654-4839/East Tennessee Regional Office (888) 531-9876. Once you complete the application, a Katie Beckett case manager will contact you to begin the assessment process. We are excited to offer this program to families across Tennessee and create more opportunities for children like Asa.

More details about the program can be found on the DIDD Katie Beckett website at:
<https://www.tn.gov/didd/katie-beckett-waiver.html>.



SUTP Youth Council Member Reports: Stay Healthy by Eric L. Massey



It's important to stay active because we want to live long and enjoy life. Being active includes activities for endurance and strength. Endurance is for our heart and strength is for our muscles. Endurance activities to keep our hearts healthy are exercises such as doing burpees (squats), walking, running, bike riding, and even mountain climbing.

In my experience, sometimes people with intellectual disabilities are not included in fitness activities. I founded a fitness group called iRev to help. iRev is short for Inclusion Revolution and is part of my work as a Health Messenger for Special Olympics. It's for people with and without intellectual disabilities. We check all the boxes to include everyone in activities to stay healthy. We do all kinds of workouts including push-ups, kickboxing, and yoga.

It is also important to get our emotions healthy. Some emotions are joy, sadness, anger, excitement, disappointment, and stress. I learned to use positive thoughts to help control my emotions. I teach people how to use things like a stress ball, deep breathing, and mindful meditating to manage stress. We can also talk to family, friends, and counselors for more in-depth emotional support.

Nutrition and hydration are also important to being healthy. I encourage people to eat healthy and drink lots of water. For example, I drink five bottles of water per day and I teach people to drink water during workouts. I teach people how to eat healthy by including fruits and vegetables. I always remember to eat five fruits and vegetables a day. Here are examples of fruits and vegetables: apples, bananas, oranges, berries, grapes, carrots, celery, greens, green beans, broccoli, and lettuces. Eating from a healthy plate is a good idea. Half of your plate should be fruits and vegetables, a quarter of your plate should be grains, and the other quarter should be protein. Eating right and drinking the right amount of water is important for your health, and can also help your athletic performance.

I enjoy living a healthy lifestyle and sharing health ideas with others. That way we can stay healthy together!

Early Advocacy by Lily Bennett

When I was asked to tell my story and what I did to spread my story to others, I really didn't know how to say what I had done. After some thought I turned to my mom for advice. She reminded me of all the memories I have of doing things with the University of Tennessee, making a video in third grade that would be posted on YouTube, and talking to my own grandfather about ways to improve your muscles after a stroke he had when I was just three years old.

Starting in 2015, I talked to Professor Deb Chyka's class of nursing students as my mom was a student at the time, becoming one of the "youngest professors" at any college. I talked about my experiences going through physical therapy, and just being an overall student and a person with a disability. Not only that, but I talked about the way siblings can feel less important when they have a brother or sister getting more attention because of a disability.

As a third grader I was learning to become a young girl, not knowing all that I would achieve in the years that followed, like making a video that told my story and gave information to those that didn't know much about cerebral palsy. Thinking that I was just making a video for close friends and family, I eventually turned to posting on YouTube and getting thousands of views.

Having someone that you can relate to when you have a disability is more important than I think people realize. As I grew up I saw the importance in telling people about my stroke and my experiences with it. One of the major reasons that I started really spreading awareness was when my pappaw had a stroke. He asked me what he could do to improve his muscles and things he could do to make himself better. I told him that he had to use his right arm and since then he's grown a lot and has improved those muscles. I am very proud of him right now as he is battling cancer, and it's truly inspiring to me. He's one of the most inspiring people in my life.



To find out more about STEP Up to the Plate, including participating as a SUTP Youth Council Member, please contact Ned Andrew Solomon at nedandrew.solomon@tnstep.org.

Department of Education Roadmap: Supporting Child and Student Social, Emotional, Behavioral, and Mental Health Needs

by Ned Andrew Solomon, Communications Support, STEP

Like the physical health that STEP's Youth Council member promoted on the previous page, positive mental health contributes to success. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), mental health includes "our emotional, psychological, and social well-being. It affects how we think, feel, and act. It also helps determine how we handle stress, relate to others, and make healthy choices." Because our youth spend a large part of their lives in a school setting, it's vital that we take into consideration these components, and work towards supporting students' social, emotional, behavioral, and mental health needs.

Mental health challenges have a significant impact on how students participate in learning. We cannot read or watch the news and not be alarmed and saddened by the seemingly endless number of stories about school violence, students taking the lives of their peers, or doing harm to themselves. The global pandemic exacerbated these challenges and has highlighted the need for school-based mental health support and more nurturing educational environments.

The Department of Education recently released a Roadmap designed to address these frequently misunderstood issues, while supplementing information previously provided in its ED COVID Handbooks. These documents offered strategies for safely reopening schools, addressing student and staff needs, and minimizing the impact of COVID-19 on the learning experience. The Roadmap identifies seven key challenges to providing school- or program-based mental health support from early childhood through higher education settings, and then presents seven corresponding recommendations.

As schools and other educational programs strive to return to in-person learning, additional dollars in the American Rescue Plan's Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief Fund (ARP ESSER) provide an opportunity to focus on the provision of school- and program-based mental health supports and establishing safe and healthy educational environments for students, families, educators, administrators, and related staff. These efforts include expanding the availability of social workers, school counselors, nurses, and psychologists to support students.

Families are a needed voice in determining how ARP ESSER funds are spent. Consider contacting your school's leadership to discuss the actions being taken in your district to address the challenges listed in the Roadmap:

Challenge #1: Rising mental health needs and disparities among children and student groups

Recommendation: Prioritize wellness for each and every child, student, educator, and provider

Challenge #2: Perceived stigma is a barrier to access

Recommendation: Enhance mental health literacy and reduce stigma and other barriers to access

Challenge #3: Ineffective implementation of practices

Recommendation: Implement continuum of evidence-based prevention practices

Challenge #4: Fragmented delivery systems

Recommendation: Establish an integrated framework of educational, social, emotional, and behavioral-health support for all

Challenge #5: Policy and funding gaps

Recommendations: Leverage policy and funding

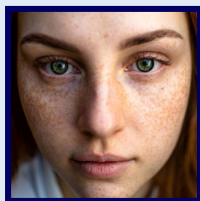
Challenge #6: Gaps in professional development and support

Recommendation: Enhance workforce capacity

Challenge #7: Lack of access to usable data to guide implementation decisions

Recommendation: Use data for decision making to promote equitable implementation and outcomes

In future Newsletters we will address other components of the DOE Roadmap, including ESY (Extended School Year) policies and opportunities and how the concept of FAPE (Free and Appropriate Education) influences the entire IEP process.



STEP'S 2021 ADVOCATE OF THE YEAR AWARD RECIPIENTS

Jennifer Carpenter - Winner of the 2021 Wayne Parker Advocate of the Year Award



The Wayne Parker STEP Advocate of the Year Award is presented each year to a person who has exemplified seeking and using the information provided by STEP to promote a brighter future for children or youth with disabilities. The award is in memory of Wayne Parker, a former STEP team member who was a zealous advocate for the rights of children and families. He worked tirelessly to ensure that families had the information they needed to speak up and advocate for the needs of their children. In true Wayne Parker style, the recipient must also demonstrate teamwork, collaboration, and the desire to share the information they have learned with others.

This year's STEP Advocate of the Year Award is presented to Jennifer Carpenter.

Jennifer works for Blount County Schools in Maryville as the Transition Case Manager for Heritage High School and William Blount High School. She is also the parent of a child with a disability who graduated from high school last year. Jennifer is always willing to share her knowledge and resources with families of students with disabilities. As the leader of a team of four Transition Specialists, Jennifer and her colleagues host an annual Disability Resource Fair for Blount County. This fair shares information on employment opportunities, post-secondary institutions, medical and legal resources, and summer camp opportunities for students and young adults with disabilities. In addition, high school students in the Comprehensive Developmental Classroom are involved in workplace readiness activities that Jennifer and her team lead. The Transition Team also assists special education students with college and job applications, creating resumes, and interview skills. Jennifer has made a difference in the lives of numerous students with disabilities in Blount County, and for that, she is deserving of this special recognition.

Eric Massey - Winner of the 2021 Wesley Rice Youth Advocate of the Year Award



The STEP Wesley Rice Youth Advocate of the Year Award is designed to honor a young person who has embodied the positive character traits of being an effective self-advocate by demonstrating leadership and accepting responsibility in speaking up for themselves and others.

This year's STEP Wesley Rice Youth Advocate of the Year Award recipient is Eric Massey.

Eric Massey is a 17-year-old senior from Memphis who is on the autism spectrum. He has championed his abilities by not allowing any disabilities to limit his quality of life.

Eric competes in three different swimming programs: the Memphis-area Home Education Association high school team, the Memphis Tigers YMCA Swim Club, and the Special Olympics. In June 2020, he received a USA Today All-Star Preps Award for Special Olympics Athlete of the Year in Memphis. Recently, Eric was selected as a member of Team Tennessee to compete as a swimmer at the Special Olympics USA Games in Orlando, scheduled for June 2022. He has also served as a guest panelist with the Stars from the World Wrestling Entertainment program.

Eric is the first Special Olympics International Health Messenger from the state of Tennessee. As a Health Messenger he teaches inclusive health practices to fellow athletes, corporate partners, and community members. He also started a fitness club called iRev, which is short for Inclusion Revolution. The iRev mission is, "Checking all the boxes to include everyone in activities to stay healthy." So far, Eric's iRev YouTube channel has fitness workouts for cardio, strength training, kickboxing, and yoga. Finally, Eric is one of the first members of STEP's Step Up to the Plate (SUTP) Youth Council. We look forward to learning more about Eric's efforts and accomplishments in the future.

If you become aware of an individual who exemplifies the traits and qualities of our past Wayne Parker Advocate of the Year or Wesley Rice Youth Advocate of the Year recipients, please let us know by sending the person's name and a description of their accomplishments to info@tnstep.org. We accept nominations all year long.

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