



# STEP AHEAD NEWSLETTER

## WINTER 2021

### From the Executive Director

Hello STEP Friends:

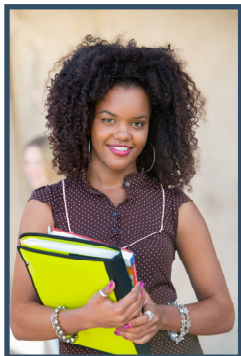
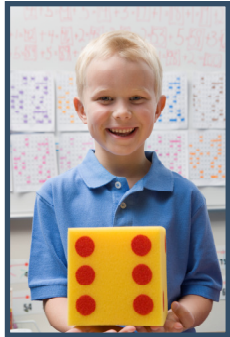
Now that we have the seemingly longest year we've ever lived in our rearview mirrors, it's time to move forward. Our STEP team and Board of Directors are grateful for the opportunity to continue to positively impact the lives of families and youth in Tennessee. We are fortunate—because of grant funding and contributions from our STEP supporters out there—to be able to continue providing high quality and meaningful information and resources that will lead to successful educational outcomes for Tennessee students with disabilities, while supporting their families any way we can.

We're excited about the materials we're developing on "hot topic" education issues, and will be seeking your input on what you need to ensure great outcomes for your family or the families you work with. You can expect to "see" more of us (virtually) through new YouTube videos; Facebook Live Coffee Chats; and topical ZOOM meetings. And, hopefully in-person events at some point this year! Please remember that we are just a phone call or email away, and love to respond to important questions from the people we serve.

We are also very excited about new grant opportunities that will allow us to launch a STEP University on-line course, and an extensive Youth Portal on our website. Behind the scenes, we'll be conducting workshops for other Parent Training and Information centers across the country, sharing our expertise on transition to adulthood and family engagement. Although the pandemic curtailed our ability to meet with and train youth and families "close up," 2020 was an eventful, productive, and fruitful year for us, and 2021 promises to be even busier.

We thank you all for hanging in there with us as we've all adapted to new and challenging realities. Our STEP Team remains "at your service."

**Karen Harrison**  
*Executive Director, STEP, Inc.*

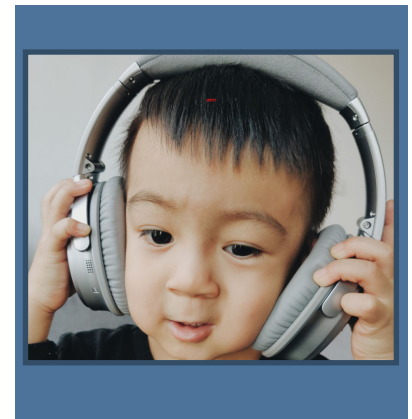


L to R: Jimmie, Pixie Grace, Sarah, and Karen Harrison

### STEP FUNDS NEEDED TECHNOLOGY THROUGH AMERIGROUP GRANT

STEP has acquired funding to help individuals get "connected." Through an Amerigroup grant, we will be providing technology devices and/or internet access support to family members of or individuals with disabilities who are experiencing challenges connecting effectively and safely to virtual learning or online resources.

Although our application deadline was at the end of January, it is our sincere hope that the success of this grant will point towards more funding in the near future. We know the need is out there—and we believe strongly in closing the "digital divide" that stands in the way of people and families in rural, urban, and other under-served communities having the technology and internet access they need to pursue their education and employment goals.



# COMPASSION FATIGUE

by Shuntea Price, STEP West TN Regional Director

*Helping doesn't have to hurt ,and empathy doesn't have to be exhausting.*

Compassion fatigue. If you're like me, this may be the first time you've heard this term. I attended a session hosted by the Compassion Fatigue Awareness Project (CFAP), and this article is a compilation of some of the content that informed me.

According to CFAP, compassion fatigue is a broadly defined concept that can include emotional, physical, mental and/or spiritual distress in those providing care to another. It is a condition associated with caregiving that leads to a diminished ability to empathize or feel compassion for others. It is often described as the negative cost of caring, and is sometimes referred to as secondary traumatic stress. It was interesting to note that it is most often found where the work of helping others requires people to open their hearts and minds to their clients and patients daily. Compassion fatigue is common among professionals who regularly work in a helping or healing capacity. But parents of children with disabilities may experience compassion fatigue too, as they are constantly operating in the mode of putting the needs of others before their own.

## Some Common Symptoms of Compassion Fatigue

Compassion fatigue can take a significant toll on people who experience it. Although symptoms may vary, the following red flags are some common symptoms of compassion fatigue:

- Physical and emotional exhaustion
- Feeling burdened by the suffering of others
- Bottling up your emotions
- Feelings of inequity in the caregiver relationship
- Irritability
- Feelings of self-contempt
- Emotional outbursts
- Apathy
- Sadness

## How to Address Compassion Fatigue

Through awareness and healthy self-care, those who experience compassion fatigue can start to understand the complexity of the emotions they have been experiencing and, most likely, suppressing. I have found the pocket guide shown here, developed by Dr. Beth Hudnall Stamm, to be extremely useful. It gives some great tips on caring for yourself in the face of difficult work.

We hope you will use this tool and others found at [compassionfatigue.org](http://compassionfatigue.org) to support your own well-being and that of those you know who may be struggling at this time. By acknowledging your own needs, you may be able to support others in a more effective and healthy way.



## CARING FOR YOURSELF IN THE FACE OF DIFFICULT WORK

Our work can be overwhelming. Our challenge is to maintain our resilience so that we can keep doing the work with care, energy, and compassion.

10 things to do each day:

1. Get enough sleep.
2. Get enough to eat.
3. Vary the work that you do
4. Do some light exercise.
5. Do something pleasurable.
6. Focus on what you did well.
7. Learn from your mistakes.
8. Share a private joke.
9. Pray, meditate or relax.
10. Support a colleague.

## FOCUSING YOUR EMPATHY

Your empathy for others helps you do your job. It is important to take good care of your feelings and thoughts by monitoring how you use them. The most resilient workers are those that know how to turn their feelings to work mode when they go on duty, but off-work mode when they go off duty. This is not denial; it is a coping strategy. It is a way they get maximum protection while working (feelings switched to work mode) and maximum support while resting (feelings switched off-work mode).

© Eastwoods, LLC, 2020. Authors: Beth Hudnall Stamm, Craig Higson-Smith, Amy C Hudnall and Henry E Stamm, IV 2004-2020.

## How to Become Better at Switching Between Work and Off-Work Modes

- Make this a conscious process. Talk to yourself as you switch.
- Use images that make you feel safe and protected (work-mode) or connected and cared for (non-work mode) to help you switch.
- Develop rituals that help you switch as you start and stop work.
- Breathe slowly and deeply to calm yourself when starting a tough job.

## The Building Blocks of Independent Living

by April Meredith, Independent Living Specialist - Empower Tennessee



Every loving parent wants to care for their child and keep them safe. Sometimes their good-hearted concerns and protective instincts can hold their children back. Here are some tips for helping your child work on important life skills, even from a very early age.

### **Advocacy**

Learning how to speak up for one's self is a foundational skill towards independence. Whenever possible, children should be encouraged to communicate their opinions, which can help them develop problem-solving skills and confidence.

### **Choices**

"Nothing about me without me," is a famous disability community quote. Your child should be included in as many decisions that impact their lives as possible. Mistakes should be expected, and allowed as part of the learning process.

### **Daily Living Skills**

Mastering daily life skills such as brushing teeth, eating, setting alarms, and feeding pets is vital. Developing these skills takes practice. The sooner you get started in working on these skills, the sooner they'll be able to do everyday tasks with confidence, possibly taking away tasks from your own busy list!

### **Financial Management**

Budgeting skills should be taught from an early age, and can include counting, money recognition, and simple math problems encountered in the course of one's daily activities. Basic understanding of income versus expenses, how to earn money, methods for saving, wise spending practices, and the results of under- or overspending can give your child the foundation they need to be financially secure in the future.

### **Health and Hygiene**

Your child should be involved in understanding and making decisions about their health and well-being. Together with proper professional medical advice and your guidance, your child will grow up more aware of their own physical, intellectual, and spiritual needs.

### **IEP Participation**

An Individualized Education Plan is your child's unique record of accomplishments, areas of improvement, and needs for support. The student should be present at every meeting and actively engaged in the goal-setting process. In some cases, youth can learn to either facilitate or co-facilitate these vital meetings.

### **Cooking and Shopping**

We all have to eat! Take advantage of this basic need by allowing your child to explore meal planning. Eventually, they might work their way up to planning a dinner once a week. Creating a shopping list, helping them analyze estimated costs, and comparing that to their budget can build strong self-confidence skills.

### **Laundry**

Instead of doing your child's laundry, expect them to do it themselves, with instruction and guidance from you.

### **Transportation**

Help your child research the transportation options in your community. If your child can use public or paratransit services, teach your child how those systems work. If your child is able to drive, help them create reasonable timelines for mastering driving skills, road rules, and car maintenance.

### **Voting**

Every person who qualifies to register to vote has the right to do so, and the right to cast their ballot on their own. Even if they choose to have assistance at the polls, the vote is still theirs to cast.

### **Work**

Whether it be volunteer activities or gainful employment, presume your child's ability to work. Encourage them to dream big and help them create a path to reach their career goals.

In closing, try not to underestimate your child's current and potential abilities. Many people with disabilities report their greatest barrier to achieving independence is the low expectations of others. Think positive!

## Partner Agency Spotlight: Empower Tennessee by Brandon Brown, Executive Director, Empower Tennessee



Empower Tennessee is a Center for Independent Living (CIL) with a mission to empower people with disabilities with opportunities for inclusion, choice, and independence. CILs are led and staffed by people with disabilities who understand what it means to want a more independent life, and are dedicated to empowering others to achieve those goals for themselves.

Independent living is not about a place – it’s about a mindset and actions. We believe that every person with a disability has the right to determine their own path and should be given every opportunity to develop and achieve their own goals. People with disabilities are the best advocates for their own needs and desires. So, we give a lot of attention to promoting self-advocacy and self-determination. We also want to empower individuals with the skills that are vital for every person to live the life they choose – regardless of ability.

Different from other human service organizations, Empower Tennessee does not focus on doing work for an individual. Rather, our work is supporting the individual to do the work themselves. This can be through providing relevant resource information and referrals, connecting people through peer support opportunities, teaching valuable and practical problem-solving skills, supporting transitions to community-based settings, and collectively advocating for policies that positively impact independent living for people with disabilities.

Empower Tennessee and other CILs are tasked with empowering young people for life after high school. We believe that these transitions are not from one system to the next, but a pathway to life opportunities on par with those who don’t have disabilities. We want every young person to feel equipped with the skills, resources, and support needed to move into education, employment, and community-based settings.

Experience tells us that transition is a process and not an event, and we seek to honor every person’s transition journey. Transitions to greater independence can be challenging for all involved. While our primary focus is on the individual, we recognize that families play an important role in supporting a person's independence. Empowered families are vital to the success of individuals.

How can we empower you, today? If you are interested in learning more about Empower Tennessee and our work, please visit [www.empowertn.org](http://www.empowertn.org). You can contact us through our online forms or by emailing us at [info@empowertn.org](mailto:info@empowertn.org), or calling us at 615-200-6028.

### STEP Family Profile: The Martinez Family

When I started using STEP services back in 2009, my son was in elementary school. My biggest problem was understanding my rights and responsibilities with my son in his school goals. At the time I didn't speak English and my understanding of this language was very limited. STEP provided me with all the tools and education I needed in Spanish, which was a blessing for us.

When people reach out to me my answer is simple: “The education is provided by STEP and your will, desire, and action will help you to be the voice of your child”. STEP offers tools, resources, education, and support to exceptional families. I encourage you to be willing to learn and apply what you will learn through STEP’s educational conferences and workshops. Be open to the opportunity to be trained by professionals who not only live the exceptional world day by day, but learn to be a better voice for your child and exceptional families like us.

Through STEP education I have been able to ensure that my rights and responsibilities are fulfilled as outlined in each IEP for my child. We have been able to accomplish a lot with my son. This is his senior year; he has exemplary and dedicated teachers, therapists, and health professionals. We are all a team working for his benefit and growth. Thank you STEP for helping me learn how to connect with these individuals for the benefit of my son.—*Belinda Martinez*



## Charting a Path Forward in Challenging Times

by Derek Flake, Juvenile Justice & Civil Rights Consultant, STEP

A quote by James Baldwin comes to my mind when I think of equity as the lens of the future by which individuals and organizations should strategically ensure—through its programs, practices, policies, and procedures—a fair society. “Not everything that is faced can be changed, but nothing can be changed until it is faced.” Several decades later, Baldwin’s message is more evident than ever before. At STEP, it is essential to fulfill our mission of identifying and building upon the value and benefit of seeing our work through an equity lens.

On January 6, 2021, many of us watched in horror as the violence and loss of life occurred in DC, unfortunately, at the hands of Americans. We cannot ignore the vile images of hatred and the attack on our Citadel of Democracy, the US Capitol Building. As a child and family services organization, it pained us to know our most vulnerable children also witnessed these acts of domestic duress.

As we chart our path forward in these challenging times, STEP’s staff and leadership team will focus on championing equity and inclusion in education. We’ll continue to do this by partnering with families to improve the lives of students with disabilities. The trauma our children witnessed should prompt us to find ways to make room for discussions in public school settings. Those discussions will allow students' questions, feelings, anxieties, and concerns to be expressed in a safe space.

STEP has launched a new initiative—the Family Equity Advisory Team (FEAT) - to ensure equity in all aspects of our work. The FEAT comprises several direct-service staff, some members of our Board of Directors, and other community stakeholders.

Over the past 30 years, STEP has been a leader in our state. We believe that our children, educators, parents, and other supportive adults can be a model to our nation on how to face challenges, discuss issues, and implement change. We can do this by respecting the diversity, views, and beliefs of all students, families, and education professionals.

### CONTACT YOUR STEP REGIONAL DIRECTORS:

WEST: SHUNTEA PRICE | (901) 726-4334 | [shuntea.price@tnstep.org](mailto:shuntea.price@tnstep.org)

EAST: BETH SMITH | (423) 638-5819 | [beth.smith@tnstep.org](mailto:beth.smith@tnstep.org)

MIDDLE: PATRICIA VALLADARES | (615) 463-2310 | [patricia.valladares@tnstep.org](mailto:patricia.valladares@tnstep.org)

---

ESPAÑOL: (800) 975-2919

BUSINESS OFFICE: (423) 639-0125 (phone); TOLL-FREE: (800) 280-7837

---

KAREN HARRISON | EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

JOEY ELLIS | FAMILY & YOUTH EDUCATOR AND MENTOR/ POST-SECONDARY TRANSITION SPECIALIST

DORCA ROSE GUAYURPA | BILINGUAL COMMUNITY OUTREACH AND EDUCATION SPECIALIST

LISA GOSNELL | RESEARCH, DATA & INFORMATION COORDINATOR

DONNA JENNINGS | STEP BUSINESS/PERSONNEL MANAGER

DEREK FLAKE | JUVENILE JUSTICE AND CIVIL RIGHTS LIAISON

NED ANDREW SOLOMON | COMMUNICATIONS SUPPORT

If you are mailing an item to our business office, please send to STEP, Inc., 1113 Tusculum Blvd. #393, Greeneville, TN 37745.

If you are coming by for an appointment, the physical address is 113 Austin Street, Greeneville, TN 37745.



The PTI is funded through OSEP. STEP, Inc. produced this website under the U.S. Department of Education, Office of Special Education Programs Grant No. # H328M200054. Kristen Rhoads serves as the project officer. The views expressed herein do not necessarily represent the positions or policies of the Department of Education. No official endorsement by the U.S. Department of Education of any product, commodity, service or enterprise mentioned on this site is intended or should be inferred.

