

EVERY CHILD TENNESSEE

# Transitioning to Adulthood

*Foster Youth in Tennessee*  
2024 Landscape Study





The findings presented in this report are intended for initial guidance and not to be interpreted as definitive conclusions. Readers are encouraged to consider these findings as preliminary and subject to further validation through additional research. The initial findings point towards promising opportunities to explore further together.

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The following report was produced by Belmont Innovation Labs in coordination with Relativ Impact and other collaborators who provided research, writing, and design expertise.

*One of many collaborative sessions.*



### Local Collaborators

At Belmont University in Nashville, Belmont Innovation Labs pulls together multi-year, multi-stakeholder working groups funded by corporate or philanthropic partners. These tenacious teams seek to address the grand challenges of our day by developing innovative concepts, generating actionable research, brokering new partnerships, identifying and scaling promising approaches and launching marketplace solutions.

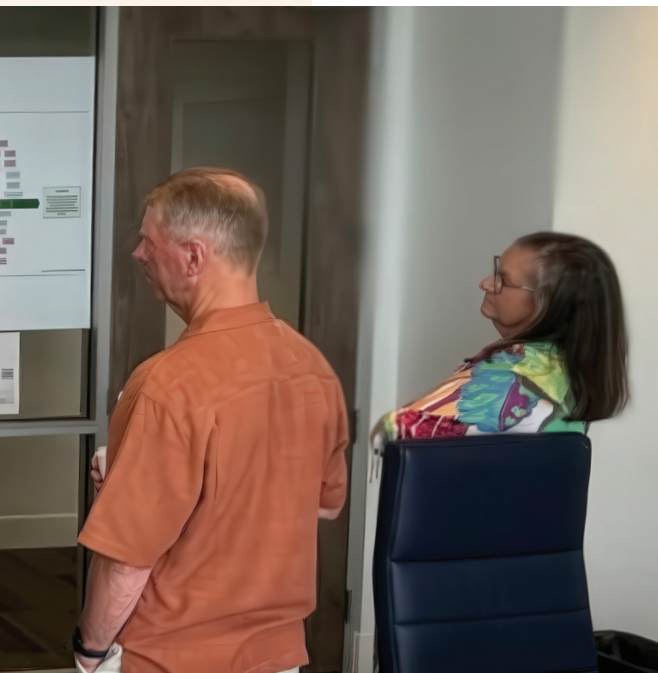
### Global Collaborators

Based in Cape Town, South Africa, Relativ Impact is a global firm serving purpose-driven organizations on their journeys to achieve significant environmental and social impact.

### Government Collaborators

The Governor's Faith-Based and Community Initiative (GFBCI) mobilizes Tennessee's Community-Based Organizations and Faith-Based Organizations to unite with state government in serving vulnerable Tennesseans. Belmont Innovation Labs appreciates their partnership and sponsorship in helping find innovative solutions to foster care.

This report is in support of Every Child TN, a statewide initiative architected by GFBCI in partnership with the Department of Children's Service (DCS) and dozens of state partners to discover meaningful public-private solutions to support vulnerable children, youth, and families before, during, and after foster care.





## SECTION NO. 2

# A connected, independent adulthood for foster youth.

### THE CHALLENGE

In Tennessee, young people aging out of foster care need healthy adult relationships. And Tennessee has a massive number of young people entering foster care. With 1,814 new foster care youth (ages 14–21) in 2021, Tennessee had the third highest intake of youth in the nation.

The size of the need in Tennessee is significant. Only California and Ohio had more teens entering foster care, and Tennessee had more young people entering foster care than Pennsylvania and Texas despite having just over half the state population of Ohio and less than 25 percent of the state population of Texas.

In 2021, 5,229 (36 percent) of foster youth in Tennessee were 14 or older.



### Defining a Healthy Adulthood

A stable, healthy adulthood includes the ability to manage time, activities, and money on your own (independence), but healthy adulthood always happens in the context of community support from others (connection).



For every single young person who leaves foster care and doesn't find their way to connected, independent adulthood—this outcome is tragic.

#### THE FACTS

As a population group, young people aging out of foster care make an outsized contribution to many of Tennessee's most thorny (and most expensive) social challenges—from homelessness and substance abuse to imprisonment and mental illness.

Overall, 70-80 percent of youth transitioning out of foster care without a supporting relationship experience one of these adverse outcomes within 3 years.

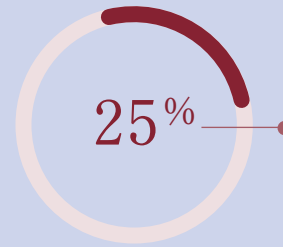
These outcomes are not the story of every young person who transitions out of foster care in Tennessee. And state agencies and partner organizations have made significant reforms in recent years that are making a difference. But the challenges are big, the resources are scant, and the system is overwhelmed.

As a result, the reality today is that for too many young people making the transition out of foster care, there is no stable adulthood, supported by extended family and community, awaiting them.

*Together, we can do more.*

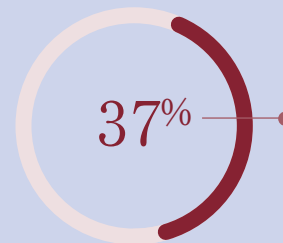
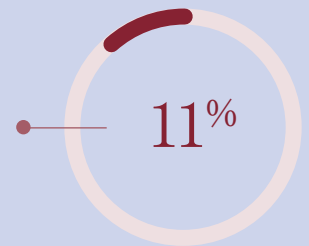
## At a Glance

*Survey data show that in 2021, among foster youth at the age of 21<sup>01</sup>*



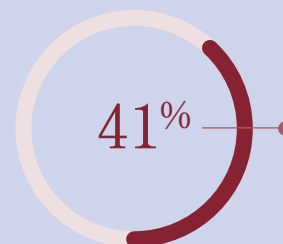
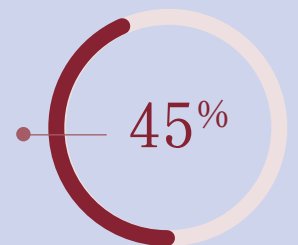
More than 25 percent had no high school diploma or GED.

Only 11 percent were enrolled in college or vocational school.



37 percent did not have stable housing.

45 percent were unemployed.



41 percent were young parents by the age of 21.

54 percent had been incarcerated.





## Their Stories

A look at what young people are facing in the foster care system.

The following stories are composites—they're not real young people. But *every* detail of their stories is *real*. The stories you'll read are based in research, data from Tennessee, and conversations with young adults and workers who are currently or were recently part of the foster care system in Tennessee.



STORY NO. 1

# Emily's Story

## Early Years

Emily was born in rural Claiborne County, outside of Tazewell.

When she is 10 years old, Emily's third grade teacher becomes concerned about signs of abuse and neglect, and she contacts the Department of Children's Services. After three months of investigation, DCS concludes that her parents are struggling with substance abuse and secures a court order to remove Emily from her home for her safety.



## Turning Thirteen

Emily lives with three different foster families during her first year in the system. At 13, Emily lands in a foster home in Knoxville that finally offers her stability, and she forms a bond with her foster mother. Her school work and friendships benefit from this stability. Unfortunately, it doesn't last. At 15, Emily is moved out of the house due to conflict with other youth in the home.

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Confused and hurt, Emily moves to the closest group home with available space in Nashville. As she approaches 18, Emily works with her DCS case manager to develop an independent living plan.

### Approaching Adulthood

Determined to leave the system as soon as possible, she declines extension of foster care (EFC) services when she turns 18. She works minimum wage jobs and struggles to find affordable housing, relying on temporary shelters. Without a car, she spends up to four hours per day waiting for and riding public transit buses. Her work and commute schedule makes it hard for her to access mental health services.

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STORY NO. 2

## Derek's Story



### Moving from Home

Derek was born in northeast Murfreesboro in Rutherford County.

When Derek is nine years old, his mother is involved in a fatal car accident. Derek's father is unknown, and no viable extended family could be reached to care for him. Therefore, Derek was placed in the care of DCS. After two temporary placements in foster homes, Derek is placed with a permanent foster family in Nashville.

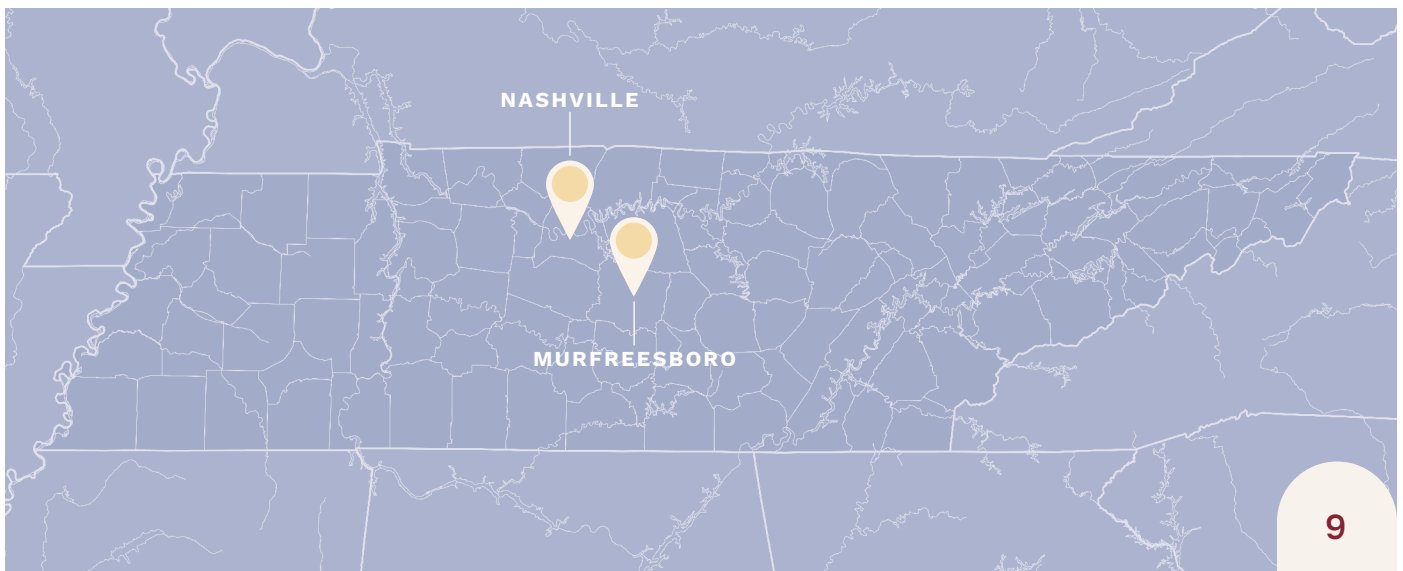


### Difficulty Settling

Despite receiving training in trauma-informed care, the family struggles with Derek's behavior. At ten years old, he rarely sleeps through the night, and he is frequently irritable. He wakes up screaming in the night multiple times every week. Derek refuses to eat and begins to show weight loss, prompting the family to seek medical attention. After several months of visits to doctors and mental health professionals, the family makes the hard decision that they are not equipped to give Derek the care he needs. Derek spends a few weeks in the hospital, then to three more temporary homes before a new permanent foster home placement is found.

### Finding a Good Fit

Derek's new foster family in Nashville is a better match. His eating and sleeping stabilize, and he begins a new school year. He does not excel academically, but his attendance is regular and he benefits from the assistance of a learning specialist and an individualized learning plan. In ninth grade, Derek also makes a connection with a young adult named Alex who volunteers through a peer to peer youth group of youth and young adults with lived experience in foster care.





# Our Approach

We set out to get to know foster care and its stakeholders in Tennessee and identify clear steps that could help address some of the biggest challenges transitioning foster youth face.

01

## Conversations

Held 10 hours of small group conversations and supplemental research with foster care focused stakeholders in Tennessee, including Department of Children’s Services staff, service providers, and foster youth in transition.

02

## Research

Over 250 hours of supplemental research and digital tool creation to better understand the current state of the foster youth system in Tennessee.

03

## Resources

Engaged more than 75 of the best available state and national data and resources on foster care systems in Tennessee and the United States.

### PHASE 1

## Discover

Research and Recommendations  
May–August



### PHASE 2

## Design

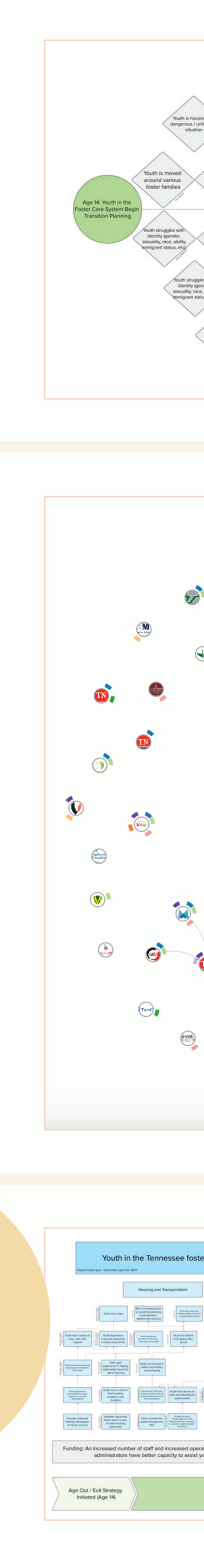
Impact and Investment Options  
October–January



### PHASE 3

## Deploy

Launch and Monitor Investments  
Starting February



## NO. 1

### Foster Youth Discovery

An overview of the journey of a child within the system.

## NO. 2

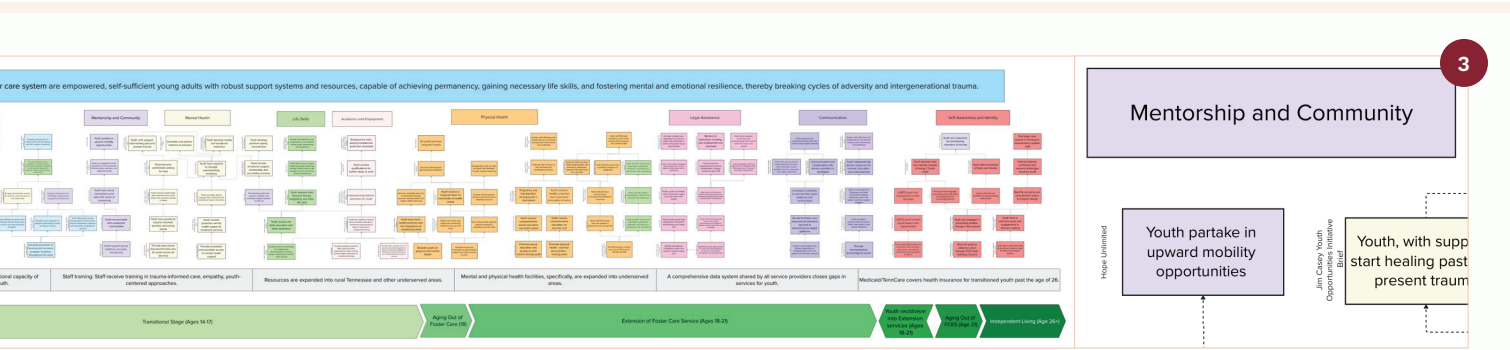
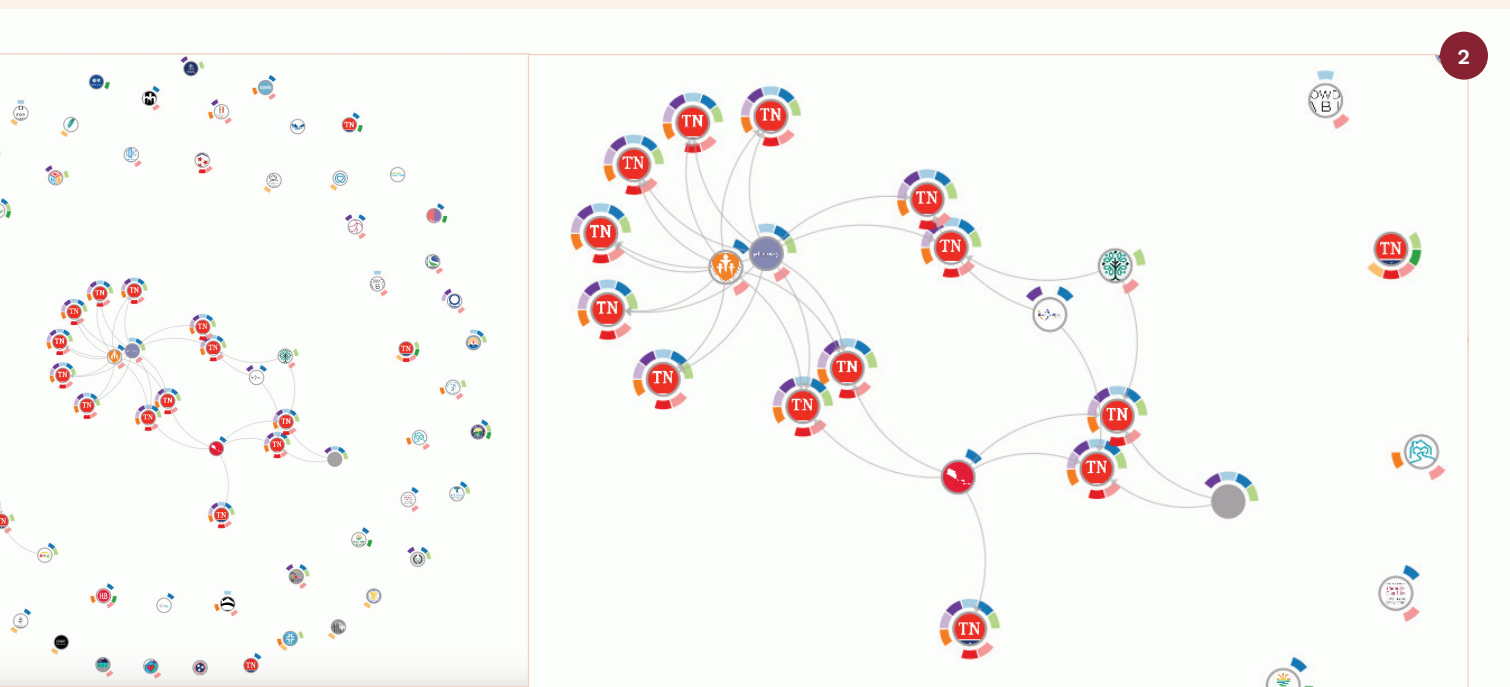
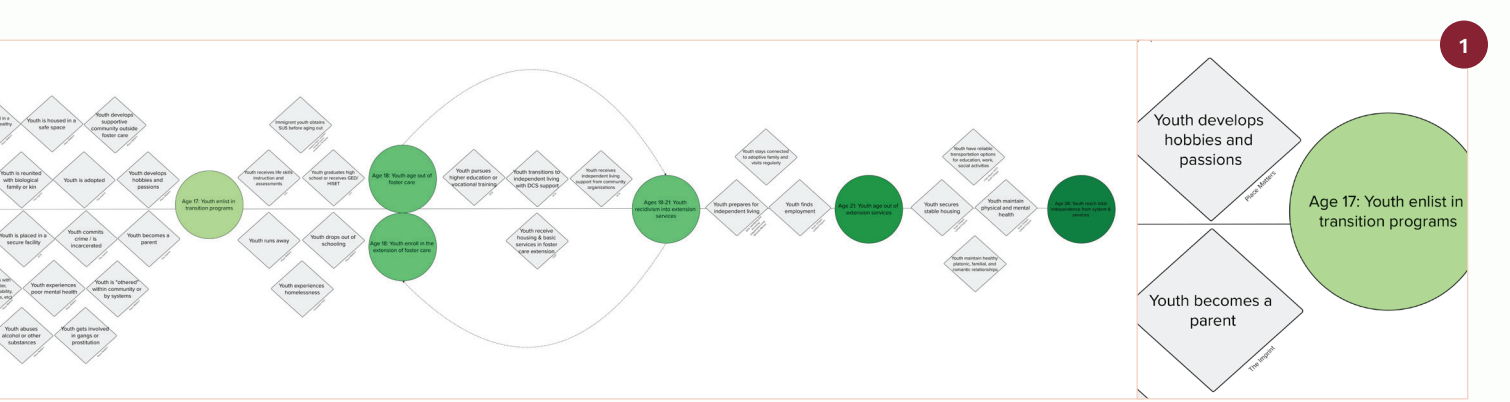
### Service Ecosystem

A map of various organizations focused on this specific issue.

## NO. 3

### Service Inventory

The big picture with plans of intervention and investments.





# Lessons from their stories.

**01****CYCLICAL COMPLEXITY**

Foster youth face challenges on multiple fronts as they prepare to transition out of the system and into adulthood.

**02****LONG-TERM CHALLENGES**

Some of these challenges are rooted in consistent experiences from the earliest experiences of their lives that also continue through the transition period—trauma, lack of stability, difficulty building a deep network of support, trouble accessing effective mental health care.

**03****TRANSITION-SPECIFIC CHALLENGES**

Other challenges are unique to the transition period. These represent knowledge, skills, and practices that successful adulthood will require foster youth to develop—financial management, academic and career coaching, self-awareness.

Two major themes that encompass all of these challenges are **connection** and **independence**. In order to achieve stable adulthood, foster youth need the personal skills and resources to be truly independent. And like all adults, they need ongoing support from family, community, and professional service providers.

## *Pillars of a Connected, Independent Adulthood*

### CONNECTION

#### Family

Who are your people? Who can you rely on? Not necessarily biological family, but one meaningful adult with more life experience counts.

#### Community

Who are you doing life with? Includes peers who are going through similar life experiences.

#### Medical Providers

Reliable, affordable care.

#### Mental Health Care

Accessible, affordable care. • Flexibility to find a provider who is a good match.

### INDEPENDENCE

#### Life Skills

Decision making. • Budgeting, saving, building credit. • Paying rent and bills on time. • Setting goals.

#### Education & Career Coaching

High school education and access to post-secondary education. • Work skills training. • Help identifying career goals and necessary training and credentials.

#### Housing & Transportation

Safety • Affordability

#### Physical Health

Nutrition • Exercise

#### Self-Awareness

Knowing your story. • Spiritual health  
Gender, ethnic identity. • Sexuality





## 01 *The opportunity is healthy relationships.*

- > The single biggest difference maker for young people transitioning out of foster care is the presence of one meaningful adult relationship.
- > Foster youth, DCS staff, and nonprofit partners in Tennessee agree that young people who have “their one person”—someone they can rely on as they go through challenges—greatly increases the chance of positive outcomes through the transition to adulthood.
- > Decades of research on resilience in childhood development—social, behavioral, and biological scientists—demonstrate the same conclusion: The most significant factor in helping children achieve “positive out-comes in the face of significant adversity” is “the availability of at least one stable, caring, and supportive relationship between a child and the important adults in his or her life.”
- > While the ideal is to have a stable forever family, this person does not have to be a parent: “These relationships begin in the family, but they can also include neighbors, providers of early care and education, teachers, social workers, or coaches, among many others.”<sup>03</sup>



## 02 *Foster youth need an influx of resources.*

- Government agencies cannot—and are not intended—to fulfill the role of parents.
- The Tennessee Department of Children’s Services employs 16 independent living specialists who are responsible for assisting over 2,000 foster youth aged 16-18 as they transition to adulthood: That’s one staff member for every 125 youth.
- There is a significant imbalance of resources in some geographical areas of the state, including low-income, rural counties.
- Foster youth in Tennessee need an influx of community-based resources—including both funding and people power—to make a significant difference in their outcomes.

## 03 *The focus must be on modeling stable relationships with young people, not focusing on their problems.*

- Research and conversations show that a focus on healing, building up, and training young people for a successful adulthood is urgently needed.
- Trauma is the earliest and most common experience of young people in the foster care system. From top to bottom, everyone involved in foster care in Tennessee—case workers, foster parents, partner organization staff, volunteer mentors—needs a strong foundation in trauma informed care.





## Opportunities

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# Three Big Things

With more than 250 hours of research and 10 hours of stakeholder conversations, Belmont Innovation Labs and partners evaluated the challenges and opportunities in foster youth transition in Tennessee.

We found support all over the literature and conversations for three major opportunities. If *only* three things could be done to improve the transition of foster youth to adulthood, they would be these.

01

**Consistent and Supportive Adult Relationships**

Revitalize and expand programs to help ensure that every foster youth preparing to transition to adulthood has at least one supportive adult relationship.

02

**Safe and Affordable Housing**

Establish safe, affordable, permanent placements for youth before, during, and after transition. Encourage youth to share input on their housing preferences.

03

**Accessible Mental Health Services**

Increase access to mental health resources and require training in trauma-informed care for all new volunteers who engage foster youth.



Strong implementation is required for good ideas, programs, policies, and legislation to fulfill their promise. That's why after our top three major targets, our next opportunities focus on the need for coordinated advocacy efforts that would be focused like a laser on securing and implementing these top three reforms.



“

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## Future Opportunities

**Physical Health.** Extend TennCare coverage for youth past the age of 26.

**Legal Assistance.** Expand access to free legal assistance for youth. Services should focus on expunging juvenile youth's records before they turn 18.

**Transportation.** Expand access to transportation for youth. Consider standardizing the use of and providing free bikes or e-bikes as alternatives to cars and bus passes.

**Mental Health.** Expand diagnostic services, support, and tailored care for high-functioning individuals with trauma or those struggling with behavioral or mental health issues that don't reach psychosis level.

**Life Skills and Education.** Implement policy changes to increase waivers and financial support for tertiary education tuition fees, alleviating financial stress on youth for necessities and schooling costs.

**Digital Platforms.** Leverage digital platforms to provide valuable resources and support networks for youth aging out of the foster care system, as they are currently an untapped resource.

**Youth-Centered Design.** Shift from a symptomatic service-centered approach, which segregates individuals by behavior and is likely to encourage intergenerational trauma and adversity, to a causal approach in the foster care system. Youth need to participate in the development and selection of metrics that are used to measure the success of outcomes that directly impact them.

**Geographic Expansion.** Expand physical and mental health-care, professional services, and life skills training in rural and underserved areas of Tennessee, including through additional Resource Centers to ensure full state coverage and support for youth in all regions.





# What comes next?



Support Every Child Tennessee, a collaborative effort led by the state's Department of Children's Services and The Governor's Faith-Based and Community Initiative whose goal is to fill the biggest gaps for children, youth, and families before, during, and after foster care.

Learn more and take action at [EVERYCHILDTN.ORG](http://EVERYCHILDTN.ORG).

The findings presented in this report are intended for initial guidance and not to be interpreted as definitive conclusions. Readers are encouraged to consider these findings as preliminary and subject to further validation through additional research. The initial findings point towards promising opportunities to explore further together.



Invest in **Belmont Innovation Labs**, in support of this work with vulnerable children in Tennessee, or work with us on another complex challenge that meets your particular passion.

Learn more and take action at [BELMONT.EDU/INNOVATION-LABS](http://BELMONT.EDU/INNOVATION-LABS).

## Endnotes

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