Tennessee Bright Futures: Supporting Transition Age Youth and Young Adults in and after Foster Care

Objectives

- Explain the legal role and responsibilities of attorneys and guardians ad litem representing transition-age youth.
- Describe the structure, eligibility requirements, and purpose of Tennessee's Independent Living (IL) and Extension of Foster Care (now Bright Futures) programs.
- Articulate important eligibility changes to the Bright Futures programs.
- Identify required Independent Living and Transition Plan components and timelines for youth ages 14–21
- Recognize essential documents required for youth transitioning from foster care and apply federal and state policy requirements to ensure timely provision, documentation, and appropriate court insight and oversight throughout the process.

Representation Considerations for Older Youth

Guardian Ad Litem (GAL) Appointment

Guardian ad litem (GAL)

Lawyer appointed by the court to advocate for the ***best interests of a child***

Rule: Tenn. Sup. Ct. Rule 40 (D&N)

Best Interests = the child's concerns and preferences

Appointment

GAL appointed in all cases in which D&N is alleged, ahead of preliminary hearing, if possible

Best Interest

"Child's best interests" refers to a determination of the most appropriate course of action based on objective consideration of the child's specific needs and preferences. In determining the best interest of the child the guardian ad litem should consider, in consultation with experts when appropriate, the best interest factors. (Specific factors identified under Supreme Court Rule 40).

- Attorneys, CASA, FCRB: Talk to youth about their plans as they approach adulthood.
- Know what services are required or accessible through DCS and the community.

TCA § 37, Chapter 2, Part 4; DCS Pol. 16.60

Foster Child/Youth Bill of Rights

All children/youth in DCS custody will be afforded the following basic right … to be free from punishment that involves placing restrictions on or supervision of contact with legal representatives, including any appointed Guardian ad Litem or appointed counsel, with whom the foster child/youth has a right to discuss confidential information.

- The Department must provide information regarding the Foster Child/Youth Bill of Rights, including an explanation of the rights and how to report violations of these rights, to children/youth within 30 (thirty) days of entering DCS custody. The information must subsequently be provided annually to children/youth during regular permanency hearings, as per Tenn. Code Ann. § 37-2-409.

- Effective July 1, 2025

DCS Independent Living Structure, Policy and Support for Youth in Foster Care

Independent Living

Goal

Prepare youth in foster care and young adults who age out of foster care for a successful transition to adulthood to become confident and productive individuals in society.

Youth populations

- 14 to 16 custodial youth, Independent Living Plan
- 17+ custodial youth, Transition Plan
- 18 to 21 aged-out youth, Bright Futures

Organization

- DCS Central Office Administration
- Regional Independent Living Coordinators and Specialists

Independent Living and Transition Plans

IL Plan 14-15

1. IL Life Skills
2. IL Social Skills
3. Credit Check

IL Plan 16-17

1. Essential Documents
2. IL Health
3. IL Finances
4. IL Employment
5. IL Transportation
6. IL Education
7. Housing

TL Plan 17 and up

1. IL Life Skills
2. IL Social Skills
3. Essential Documents
4. IL Health
5. IL Finances
6. IL Employment
7. IL Housing
8. IL Transportation
9. IL Education
10. Credit Check
11. Parenting

DCS Independent Living

Eligibility:

- Custodial: All youth in state custody 14 years of age or older.
- Bright Futures: Young adults who age out of foster care at age 18 or older.
- SPG/Adoption: Youth who exited state custody at or after 16 years of age, who are still under a contract for subsidy and need applicable IL Services.

DCS Independent Living Wraparound Services

Independent Living Wraparound services are designed to support a wide range of independent living goals and needs.

Eligibility:

- Custodial: All youth in state custody 14 years of age or older.
- Bright Futures: Young adults receiving Extension of Foster Care Services
- SPG/Adoption: Youth who exited state custody at or after 16 years of age, who are still under a contract for subsidy and need applicable IL Services.

DCS Independent Living Wraparound Services

- Independent Living Wraparound Services include funding for things like driver's education, college, tutoring, job training, graduation expenses, transportation, vehicle repairs, car insurance, and childcare.
- For a full list of available services, check out the IL Services Grid at www.tn.gov/youth/fostercare/il/YouthVersionIndependentLivingWraparoundServicesList.pdf.

TCA § 37-2-409(4)

Judicial Oversight Before 18

- At a hearing for a youth who has reached 16 years old, the court shall review and ratify and independent living plan for the child.
- At the hearing for a child who has reached 17 years, the court shall ensure, and the record shall reflect, that the child has notice of and understands the child's opportunity to receive, if eligible, all available voluntary post-custody services from the department by having the department present evidence regarding services that are available to the child beginning at eighteen (18) years of age.
- Three (3) months prior to the planned release from custody at seventeen (17) years of age or older, a permanency hearing shall be held for the purposes of reviewing the child's transition plan to independent living.

Youth Advocacy Role: How to Access Services

- Youth 14-16: The Independent Living Plan as a component of the Family Permanency Plan, based on the youth independent skills assessment in TFACTS and addressed in the CFTM.
- Attend CFTMs and ask about Independent Living needs and supports for youth older than 14.
- Advocate for necessary services and supports. Discuss necessary and agreed upon services from case manager and IL Specialist.
- Attend Permanency Hearings

Youth Advocacy: How to Access Services

- Youth 17+: The Transition Plan must be developed within the context of a CFTM. The focus of the Transition Plan is to assist youth with planning for their lives after they exit custody, and identifying the services, resources and supports needed to be successful.
- The Transition Plan is revised as needed and reviewed by the court within ninety (90) days of planned exit from custody.
- Attend CFTMs and ask about Independent Living needs and supports for youth older than 14.
- Advocate for necessary services and supports: Talk to your client and request necessary services from case manager and IL Specialist.
- Attend Transition Plan Hearing.

Extension of Foster Care is now Bright Futures in Tennessee

18-23

Bright Futures in Tennessee

What is “Bright Futures”?

Bright Futures is Tennessee’s Extended Foster Care program for young adults aged 18 to 23 who aged out of foster care at 18 or exited foster care via Adoption or Subsidized Permanent Guardianship after the age of 16.

Tennessee Bright Futures (July 1, 2025)

Group	Who is Eligible	Funding	Support After 18	Court Oversight
Bright Futures (IV-E)	Youth aging out of DCS custody at 18+ and meeting work/school criteria	**Federal IV-E + State**	DCS or YV case management, placement or ILA, scholarships, IL services	**YES**
Bright Futures (Non-IV-E)	Youth aging out of custody but not IV-E eligible	**State**	DCS or YV case management, placement or ILA, scholarships, IL services	**YES (TCA)**
Bright Futures – Adoption / SPG (NEW)	Youth adopted or exited to SPG at **16+, after 18,** meeting work/school criteria	**State**	YV case management, ILA, scholarships & IL supports	**NO**
Bright Futures – Ages 21–23 (NEW)	Young adults continuing services up to age **23,** meeting work/school criteria	**State**	YV case management, ILA, scholarships & IL supports	**NO**

Bright Futures in Tennessee

Beginning January 1, 2023, eligible young adults must meet one of the five following EFC criteria:

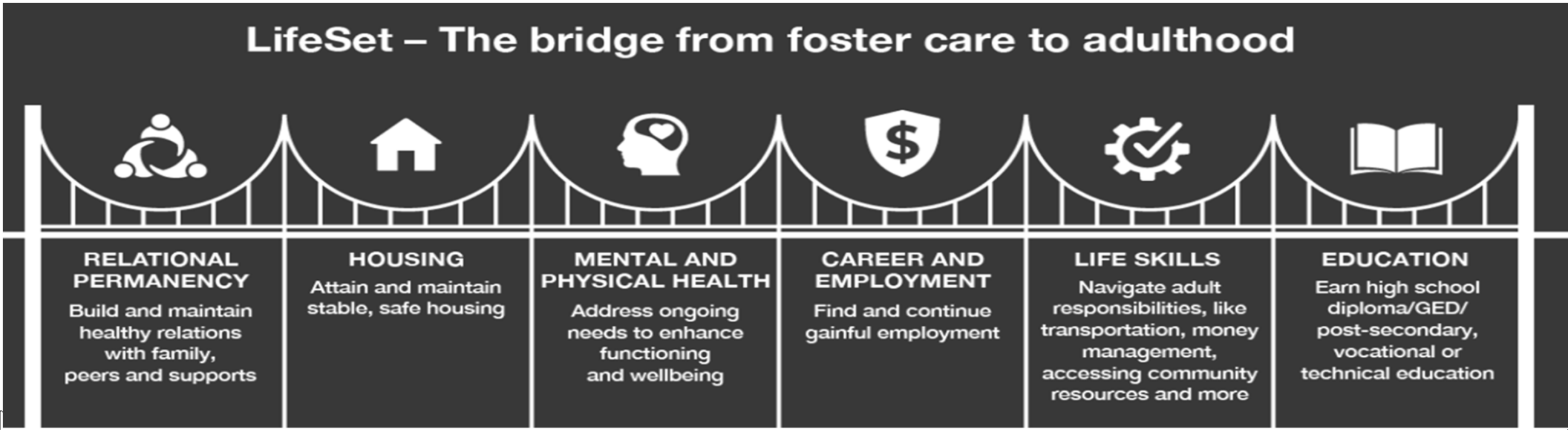
a) the young person is enrolled in secondary education or a program leading to an equivalent credential,
b) the young person is enrolled in an institution which provides post-secondary or vocational education,
c) the young person is employed for at least eighty (80) hours per month,
d) the young person is participating in a program or activity designed to promote or remove barriers to employment; or
e) the young person is incapable of doing any of the above activities due to a medical condition, including a developmental or intellectual condition (incapability is supported by regularly updated information in TP).

Bright Futures in Tennessee

Verification of education and employment
- school letter confirming enrollment
- letter of acceptance to post-secondary or vocational education program
- employment letter on company letterhead
- weekly or monthly check stubs
- letter of acceptance to employment readiness program
- ongoing monthly verification

Independent Living Bright Futures Support: Youth Villages LifeSet

- The Youth Villages LifeSet Program employs weekly case management services and engagement of experts in the areas of finance, education, and access to community resources to teach clients the necessary skills to achieve economic self-sufficiency, develop lasting relationships, and succeed independently.
- DCS expanded the LifeSet contract with the program to include case management for Bright Futures



Bright Futures Housing

- Licensed or approved foster home;
- Supervised Independent Living (This housing option can be an apartment with or without a roommate or a room-and-board living arrangement, such as a dorm. Such a placement will need to be approved, and you may be able to receive an Independent Living Allowance directly if you choose this living arrangement);
- Home of a relative or non-related supportive adult. Additional steps will need to be taken in order to qualify for placement support;
- Certain group home settings.

Bright Futures Responsibilities Under IV-E and § TCA 37-2-604

Remember many young adults who receive Bright Futures support are receiving support under state funds.
Requirements for young people who qualify for federal funding support under IV-E:

- Sign an agreement to participate.
- Work with the Child and Family Team to create and update a Transition Plan.
- Work with the team to reach Transition Plan goals.
- Meet monthly with the Family Service Worker to track the plan, identify any needed supports, and discuss how to achieve the Transition Plan goals.
- Attend a court review hearing or FCRB every six months; Transition Hearing every 12 months.

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Reconnecting a Young Adult to Bright Futures

- Contact the regional DCS Independent Living Specialist
- Contact the Youth Villages LifeSet program
- Young adults may visit any local DCS office to obtain a EFC application
- Call the DCS Independent Living toll-free number 844-887-7277
- Visit the DCS Independent Living website: Youth in Transition (tn.gov).

Attorney Role: How to Access Services

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- Attend Transition Plan Hearing.

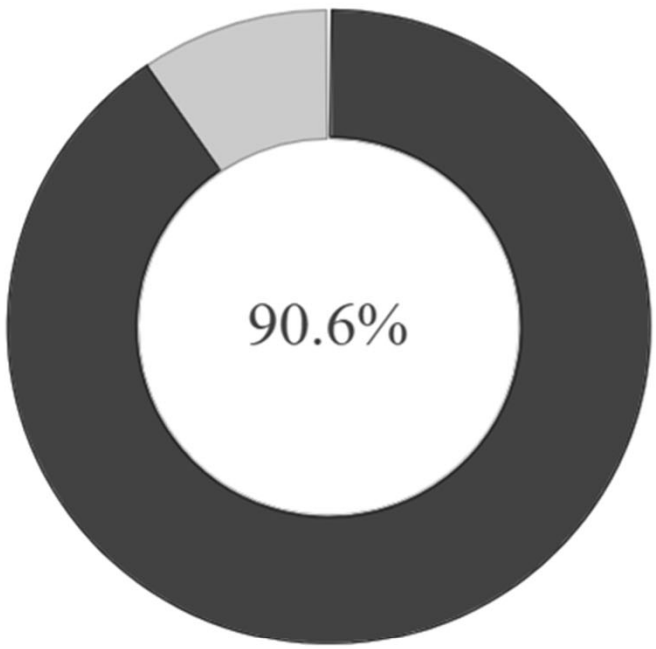
Education after 18

Finishing High School

Keep Track of Youth Goals and Plans Post Custody.

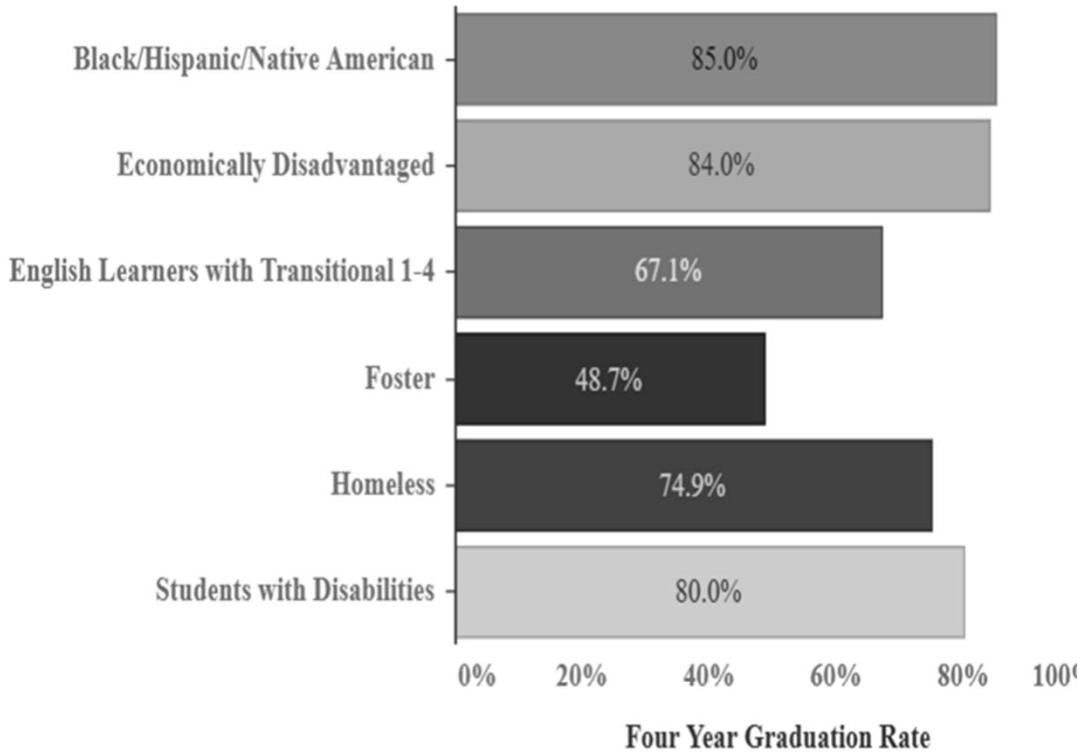
- Investigate living arrangements for youth turning 18 while in high school. This transition can be difficult.

Tennessee Overall Graduation Rate



TELL ME MORE

Graduation Rate



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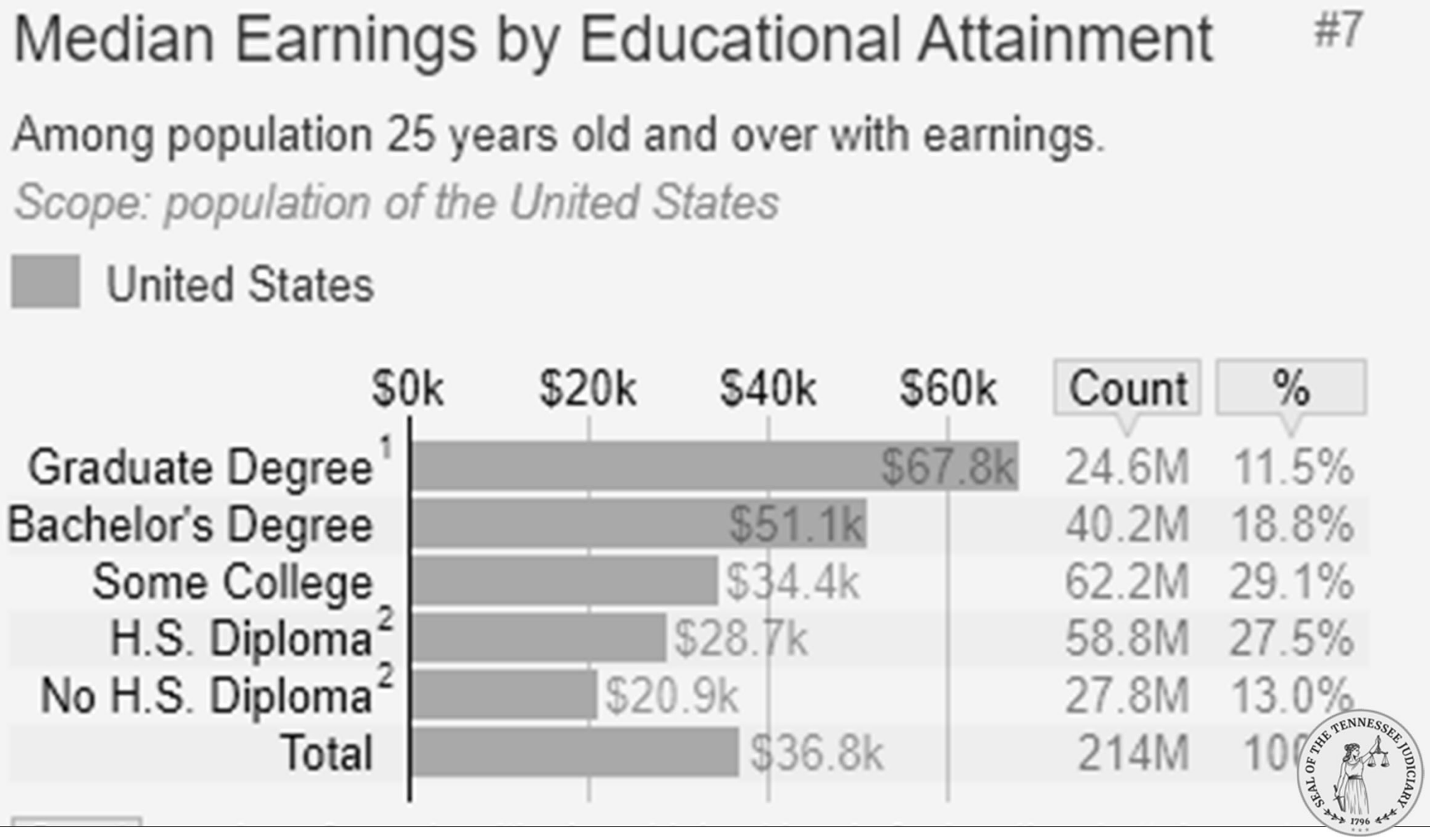
Graduation Rate by Student Group

High School Graduation



Paying for College – Education and Training Voucher (ETV)

ETVs are grants awarded to eligible youth and young adults to fund expenses for eligible post-secondary institutions. Youth and young adults may receive up to $2,500/semester or $5,000/year, available up to age 26.

The ETV Program is intended to serve

- Young adults who emancipate to adulthood directly from state custody at or after 18 years of age.
- Youth 16 years of age or older in DCS custody.
- Youth 16 years of age or older who exit DCS custody through adoption or Subsidized Permanent Guardianship.
- Youth who lose eligibility for Education and Training Vouchers.

Paying for College – Bright Futures

State-funded Bright Futures Scholarship only: (up to $2,500/semester or $5,000/year, available up to age 26)

- **Youth who exit to permanency at age 16 or older.**
- **Youth who have exited state custody from a Youth Development Center or detention after age 16.**
- **Youth who are in a YDC or detention who are attending a post-secondary program.**
- **Youth who lose eligibility for Education and Training Vouchers.**

Tennessee HOPE Foster Child Tuition Grant

A Tennessee HOPE Foster Child Tuition Grant for a student attending an eligible public postsecondary institution shall be the cost of attendance less any gift aid with the total award not exceeding the cost of tuition and mandatory fees at an eligible postsecondary institution. Gift aid means scholarships and grants from any source that do not require repayment, including funds provided through the federal Foster Care Independence Act of 1999 and other similar programs. Student loans and work-study programs shall not be considered gift aid.

- A Tennessee HOPE Foster Child Tuition Grant for a student attending an eligible four-year OR two-year independent postsecondary institution shall not exceed the statewide average tuition and mandatory fees for a public four-year or two-year postsecondary institution.
- Eligibility: Meet minimum HOPE Scholarship eligibility requirements (ACT 21/ GPA 3.0) AND official certification from the Department of Children's Services that
  the student meets the eligibility requirement for the HOPE Foster Child Tuition Grant.

TCA § 49-7-179

Post Secondary Foster Care Liaisons

The Foster Care Youth Outreach Liaison Program on college campuses

- The purpose of the liaison is to serve as:
  - (1) A knowledgeable source of information for youth who are in foster care, participating in extension of foster care, or are former foster youth regarding existing resources at the higher education institution; and
  - A point of contact between the department of children's services and the higher education institution regarding the special needs of these youth in order to increase retention and graduation among this population.

Post Secondary Foster Care Liaisons

Community Colleges

- Chattanooga State
- Cleveland State
- Columbia State
- Dyersburg State
- Jackson State
- Motlow State
- Nashville State
- Northeast State
- Pellissippi State
- Roane State
- Southwest TN
- Volunteer State
- Walters State

Universities

- Belmont
- East TN State
- Middle TN State
- University of Memphis
- University of TN @Knoxville
- University of TN @Martin

Attorney Advocacy: Education

- For youth approaching discharge or age 18, guardians ad litem and other attorney for the child should ask youth about educational goals.

Essential Documents

What are Essential Documents?

- List of adult relatives and other supportive adults (contained in Genogram documents) and emergency contacts, including Team Leader and Team Coordinator;
- Driver's license or State ID; Social Security Card & Birth Certificate (originals to client, copies for the DCS file); TennCare Card; Voter registration card; Selective service number or proof of registration;
- Any legal documents, including the court order indicating the parent/caretaker(s) has custody of the child/youth;
- Updated recent medical health and mental health records and assessments;

What are Essential Documents?

- Needed medical, dental, developmental, mental health, substance use treatment services & list of any appointments already scheduled with pertinent details;
- Needed medication and any prescriptions, including instructions and potential side effects;
- Resume;
- Bank account access information;
- Information regarding Advance Care Plan;
- Religious documents and information;

What are Essential Documents?

- Documentation of Immigration, Naturalization; Documentation of tribal eligibility or membership;
- Death Certificate for deceased parents;
- Life Book/ pictures/ personal items,
- Previous placement information (printed placement page from the current child welfare information system),
- Educational records including copies of report cards and the most current Individualized Education Plan (IEP); list of schools attended and grades;

Essential Documents

- Under the federal Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act, the child welfare agency must provide youth who leave the custody at age 18 or older the original or certified copy of the following documents: birth certificate; Social Security card; state identification card or driver's license; health insurance information, including any cards needed to access care; and medical records. 42 U.S.C. § 675(5)(I).

DCS Policy: Essential Documents

- The FSW must ensure the youth receives all applicable essential documents upon discharge and must complete the Transitional Survey. The FSW/JSW must upload scanned versions of the documents to the youth's person record in TFACTS.
- If the youth is 18 years of age upon case closure items listed in the Independent Living and Transition Planning Guide go directly to the youth. If the youth is under the age of eighteen (18) any applicable documents listed below are given to the parent/caretaker.
- DCS Case Closure Protocol. Effective Date: 12/23

Attorney/ CASA/ FCRB Advocacy: Essential Documents

- For youth approaching discharge or age 18, ask caregivers and/or youth if they have access to essential documents. These documents take time to gather. Ensure that youth is prepared.
- Attorneys: If documents have not been provided at transitional permanency hearing held pursuant to 37-2-409(b)(5), consider asking that the court make findings that the youth be provided these documents before discharge.
- Young adults who do not have essential documents or have lost some of your essential documents can call DCS at 844-887-7277, their local DCS office, or former case manager.

Additional Supports: HUD Foster Youth to Independence Vouchers

- Lurleen Flats (Knoxville, TN)

Extension Of Foster Care

Preparing An Emerging Adult For Life

Questions?

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