



**ANNUAL REPORT**

**2025**

# A MESSAGE FROM OUR EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

Dear Friends,

Feels like yesterday that a 26-year-old version of me was sobbing over a fax machine, wondering how we could possibly keep faith with the clients who were relying on us.

The Tennessee Justice Center was me and Gordon in an unfinished attic, surrounded by boxes of files transferred to TJC in the wake of cuts to federal funding for Legal Aid. TJC had no budget. I had a \$17,000 annual stipend and a cracked laptop that showed only half a screen at a time. We paid bills out of pocket. We had no idea how to run a business, let alone raise enough money to keep the lights on another month—much less thirty years.

And yet, despite how illogical it felt, it also felt like the only choice: to continue representing our clients through what we naively hoped would be only a temporary betrayal of our nation's commitment to Equal Justice Under Law. Thirty years later, as I write this surrounded by ice in every direction, Winter Storm Fern feels like an almost too-perfect metaphor for 2025 and for the last three decades of TJC's work. Over and over again, we have felt powerless, hemmed in by forces far beyond our control. Yet the power of community has sustained us. Storms sometimes devastate the very lives of the poor. More often, their suffering is driven by leaders who pursue political gain at the expense of human dignity; by bureaucracies so careless or incompetent that harm becomes routine; by corporations whose greed eclipses their duty to the people they are paid to serve.

These storms bring fear, loss, pain, and despair. Despair is always at the door.

But we never let it in.

Because thirty years have shown us again and again, that destruction calls forth extraordinary love. Thousands of people—clients, staff, partners, donors, volunteers—step forward and light the way. They remind us of Mother Teresa's simple truth: we belong to each other. That is what Winter Storm Fern revealed so starkly. We all need each other. And the good news is we have each other.

Our clients show us the miracles that inspire us the most. In 2025, clients summoned extraordinary courage to speak out about a broken system that was leaving hundreds of thousands of Tennessee children, seniors, and families hungry. They told their stories despite personal attacks and real risk. Because of that bravery, a federal court ordered the state to begin fixing the food assistance system that is meant to protect more than 700,000 vulnerable Tennesseans from hunger and malnutrition.

System change is slow. There is still much work ahead. But it is humbling to witness the strength it takes for clients simply to survive each day and then to see them go further, speaking up for justice in courtrooms, in the media, in the legislature, and in Congress.

You cannot hear their stories and forget that we belong to each other. You cannot witness their courage without being awestruck by their radical hospitality—showing up not just for their families, but for their neighbors and their state. Some people may need a once-in-a-generation ice storm to learn that lesson. Our clients remind us every day.

We can, and we must, take care of one another. And when we do, the results are lasting and transformative.

As you read about the work TJC and our community accomplished in 2025, you will see a year marked by chaos, loss, and disruption unlike any we have faced before. You will also see unprecedented innovation, generosity, and solidarity.

Thank you for everything you do to ensure this justice work has real power. Here's to thirty years of standing together and building systems strong enough to weather any storm.



*Michelle M. Johnson*

## MISSION

To relentlessly protect and improve the laws, policies, and programs that secure dignity and opportunity for all Tennesseans.

## VISION

We envision a state where Tennesseans across the lines of race, class, age, ability, and gender have their voices heard and their most basic needs met.

## CORE VALUES

The ideals that guide our work and drive our daily efforts towards justice for all Tennesseans: Compassion | Excellence | Knowledge | Courage | Joy

## OUR HISTORY

We have been in this work since 1996, standing alongside Tennessee families and helping them gain access to the programs and benefits necessary for them to live. After Congress placed restrictions on legal services programs, effectively creating a two-tier justice system, community and bar leaders from all parts of the state and across the political spectrum established TJC to provide legal representation to Tennesseans who fall in the gap.

## WHAT WE DO

TJC helps families from Memphis to Mountain City cut through the red tape and legal barriers that often deny them vital services like healthcare and nutrition. Using what we learn from individual cases, TJC pursues systemic reforms that benefit all Tennesseans. We advocate for public policies that will make Tennessee a more just, compassionate, and inclusive state for all.

## OUR COMMITMENT TO EQUITY

TJC believes that diversity, equity, and inclusion are vital to our mission of ensuring justice for all. We recognize that racism is foundational to the social and economic disparities that plague our nation. We work to achieve opportunity, security, and dignity for all Tennesseans. We tackle barriers to inclusion by humbly focusing on what's broken both inside and outside of TJC.

# SYSTEM CHANGES

## DEFENDING MEDICAID AND SNAP

2025 was dominated by devastating federal cuts to the health and nutrition programs that are a lifeline for poor families, including 1.5 million Tennessee children and adults. TJC conducted over 30 virtual briefings attended by 1,100 representatives from the media, community agencies, and government officials. We explained how various proposals would impact Tennessee. Since Congress enacted the cuts in July, TJC has advocated for state policies to mitigate the worst of the harms to Tennesseans. We and our allies helped avert the worst of the Medicaid cuts, but we will be dealing with the effects of the 2025 budget bill for years—perhaps decades—to come.

## STEADY PROGRESS FOR NUTRITION ACCESS

In January 2025, TJC, Hogan Lovells (US), LLP, MAZON, Inc., and others, brought a class action lawsuit against the Department of Human Services (DHS) to address systemic failures in its administration of the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP). As a result of the lawsuit, which is brought on behalf of SNAP recipients and the Contributor, Inc., a non-profit that serves the unhoused, DHS has agreed to a remedial plan that will help address delays in application and appeals decisions and to institute a program in which individuals can seek restoration of lost benefits up to a year after their benefits are reduced or terminated.

- **SNAP Improvements:** Tennessee ranks third in the nation for food insecurity among seniors, with about 1 in 10 seniors facing hunger. Federal attacks to SNAP created changes to the program that will keep many vulnerable Tennesseans from accessing SNAP, including houseless individuals, seniors, and veterans. Despite these changes, TJC is continuing to work to keep these eligible populations connected to the program. Tennessee finally adopted the Elderly Simplified Application Project (ESAP) to help seniors better access SNAP.
- **Child Nutrition:** TJC built momentum to bring free school meals to more Tennessee children. In 2025, the school meals bill HB1153/SB740 passed all committees and garnered over 20 bi-partisan co-sponsors. The bill now awaits funding approval from Tennessee General Assembly finance leaders. TJC also continued the push to bring back Summer EBT, mobilizing 50 county mayors, 308 faith leaders, and 200 Tennesseans to urge Governor Lee and DHS to bring Summer EBT back to 700,000 Tennessee children.
- **WIC Advocacy:** WIC funding and the healthy food benefits it provides were under attack in 2025. Thanks to TJC's advocacy and the action from partners and families across the state, WIC was fully funded at \$8.2 billion, and the fruit and vegetable benefits were protected, allowing families with young children and pregnant and postpartum parents the ability to afford healthy food during a time when affordability is a challenge for low-income families.

# ADVOCACY FOR TENNESSEANS

When systemic problems impact lots of people, TJC steps in to find out why they are happening and what can be done to correct them. We address these issues through the court system.

## AT A GLANCE

**1.18M** individuals across the state of Tennessee impacted by TJC's class action litigation



**4,650** new social media followers in 2025— which is more than 2023 and 2024 combined

**22,800** people who attended an in-person outreach event, including our quarterly resource fairs



**91** news media features, including in *Reuters*, *Politico*, *State Affairs*, and *Wall Street Journal*

**14,400** volunteer and intern hours leveraged



# CHAMPIONS FOR FAMILIES

Twelve-year-old Ryan Schoonover is known for his humor and positivity that lights up every room. He was diagnosed with Duchenne Muscular Dystrophy (DMD), a progressive disease that gradually causes loss of muscular and pulmonary function, at four years old. Even so, Ryan loves playing baseball and soccer in his power chair.

Six months after his diagnosis, Ryan was prescribed Viltepso, one of the first available treatments that slows the progression of DMD. The medication costs an astounding \$15,000 per week— a financial burden that is impossible for any family to shoulder without health insurance assistance.

In 2024, TennCare unexpectedly denied this medication. When the appeal escalated to an emergency hearing, TJC sprang into action to build a compelling case to challenge the denial. TennCare still denied the prescription.

Thanks to TJC's legal expertise and advocacy, the family later won their third appeal with their private insurance, which is now legally obligated to cover the cost of Ryan's medication. The family shares that "having TJC's assistance and knowing there are people who dedicate their lives to helping those facing tough circumstances is something you can't put into words."

**5,256**  
TOTAL INDIVIDUALS  
ASSISTED



**\$9.7M**

TOTAL CLIENT  
BENEFITS SECURED

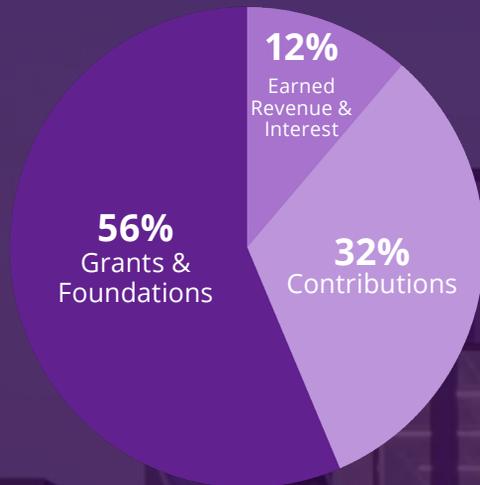
**90**

COUNTIES  
REACHED



# 2025 FINANCIAL INFORMATION

TJC relies on the generosity of foundations and donors to make our work possible and sustainable. In 2025, TJC was granted \$2.07 million by 26 private foundations and government agencies. Additionally, approximately 1,011 donors contributed \$1.18 million to our programmatic work.



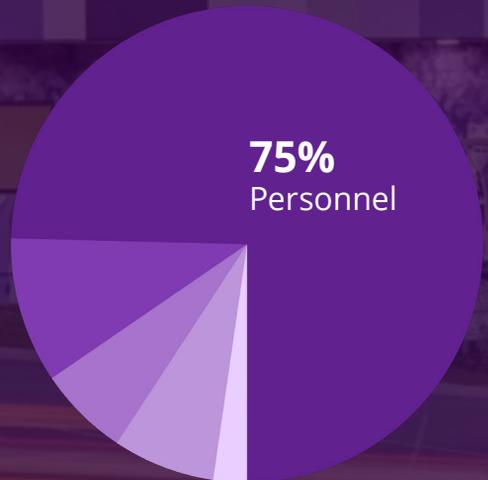
**TOTAL INCOME**

\$3,721,403

**TOTAL EXPENSES**

\$3,625,214

- 10%** Contracts & Subgrants
- 7%** Occupancy
- 6%** Office & Operating
- 2%** Fundraising  
(Non-Personnel)



*Based on unaudited financial statements.*

# IRIS SOCIETY MEMBERS

The Iris Society honors donors who contribute \$1,000 or more within the calendar year or include TJC in their estate plans. Like irises, we are known for our resilience. Like so many of our partners and community members, we are faced with seemingly insurmountable obstacles every day. We could not continue our work without our supporters. Their generosity and compassion allow us the opportunity to fight for the dignity, independence, and opportunity for all Tennesseans.

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# DISASTER OF THE DECADE

When the US government shut down in the fall, SNAP benefits were delayed for millions of Americans, including those in our community. While this shutdown marked one of the most challenging seasons in TJC's three decades of service, we refused to give up.

Whether it was sharing food-resource information across the state, connecting our clients to national or local media, or participating in interviews, TJC moved quickly to make sure that our neighbors were helped and had the resources needed to survive.

During this difficult time, we reached out to our trusted partners— including Dozen Bakery, One Gen Away, Chef Sterling Wright, Napier Kitchen Table, Second Harvest Food Bank of Middle Tennessee, and The Nashville Food Project— recognizing that families in the Napier-Sudekum neighborhood would be among the hardest hit. When food could not reach neighbors quickly enough, staff stepped in directly by organizing, purchasing supplies, and preparing meals on site.

On the first day without SNAP benefits, the smell of food being cooked in front of our office brought 50 neighbors to our parking lot. That number grew every single day, with over 860 hot dogs served, 600 shelf-stable food boxes distributed, 275 hot meals shared, and \$1,500 in gift cards given to families so they could purchase diapers, baby formula, and other household essentials.

Our ability to respond swiftly would not have been possible without the support of generous volunteers and partners— from community members at Brentwood United Methodist Church, to our interns from Vanderbilt University and Belmont University, to our own families and friends stepping forward to help.

This work reflects who the Tennessee Justice Center is at its core. When families are hungry, when systems fail, and when the consequences of policy decisions land hardest on those with the fewest resources, TJC will never look away. We will continue to step forward in these moments, not only because it is the right thing to do, but because it is the just thing to do.

For more than 30 years, TJC has stood alongside Tennesseans in their most vulnerable moments, listening to their stories, responding with urgency and care, and refusing to accept that hardship is inevitable or deserved. That commitment to people, to dignity, and to justice is what makes the Tennessee Justice Center essential, and it is what continues to guide every step forward, even when the path is difficult.



# TJC LEADS WITH LOVE



**600** shelf-stable food boxes given to families and unhoused individuals

hot dogs grilled and distributed at TJC throughout the shutdown and SNAP benefit delays

**864**



**275**

hot meals shared, thanks to the support from trusted partners

total amount of gift cards distributed so that families could purchase household essentials with dignity

**\$1.5K**



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## FOUNDATION AND PARTNER SUPPORTERS



# CORPORATE SUPPORT



## THANK YOU, EXPERIAN!

Massive thanks to our corporate partner, Experian, for supporting our work and mission in all aspects! In 2025, TJC received a generous \$50,000 in program support and over \$1,750 in employee and volunteer matches. Additionally, the Experian team generously contributed hours of service, keeping our campus beautiful year-round and assembling toys and activities for beneficiaries of our winter resource fair. Experian plays a pivotal role in making our work sustainable—we are so grateful for their generous support and continued partnership!

## RAISING THE BAR

Raising the Bar is a three-year pledge program for law firms. Support from law firms enables TJC to take on exclusively non-paying cases. These cases ensure that families across Tennessee, regardless of their financial means, have access to vital services.

### PLATINUM



BASS BERRY + SIMS

### GOLD

Holland & Knight

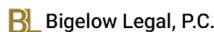
### SILVER



BUTLER | SNOW



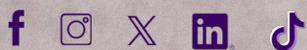
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