



November 15, 2019: In the weeds.

Dear friends,

I love weeding—not gardening, but weeding.

When my husband and I bought our first house 24 years ago, it came with an overwhelmingly gorgeous English garden. Every day I would come home and something else was blooming. Neighbors and friends would ask me, “Isn’t the garden the most wonderful part of your 100-year-old fixer-upper house?” I would always say, “The best part is the weeding.”

I love getting in the dirt and going to war with the weeds. Digging for the root cause, and then ridding it from not just that one flower, but all the flowers that are yet to be. With three baby boys and rascally politicians, the garden was criminally neglected, but I loved—and still love—weeding. It feels so satisfying to free the strong and ancient iris from the vine that sneakily twists around it, threatening to weaken it.

It’s like what we have done at TJC for 24 years: We plant seeds and bulbs, then we water and fret over rain, or heat, or nutrients in the soil. But most importantly, we weed. We go to the root and we fiercely eliminate the things that crowd and strangle the beauty and power of our neighbors’ futures. We work with and alongside them to remove the myths that weaken them, to clear away policies that threaten their ability to grow, and to cut out implementation failures that keep them from standing tall.

We are privileged to pull the metaphorical weeds holding back clients like Courtney Stanley, who fought for 6 months to get health coverage so she and her husband David could bring a healthy baby into this world. Suffering with pre-eclampsia but unable to get care, Courtney lived in terror for herself and, most of all, for her baby. “Struggling on my own to regain my health coverage was just awful and miserable. I was already having complications with my pregnancy, and I was trying to contact every person that I could and getting no answers.” When she found her way to TJC, our team got her coverage within days. “All I was worried about was getting my baby help. TJC being there was a stress reliever.” Sadie, her gorgeous baby girl, is healthy and delightful and already spreading so much sunshine from Bristol that we can feel it in Nashville.

Courtney got caught in the weeds of a faulty application system that was keeping pregnant women all over the state from the timely coverage they need to keep themselves and their babies healthy. We didn’t stop at just helping Courtney. We identified best practices for dealing with these challenges and shared them with our partners statewide, and eventually TJC and our partners’ relentless advocacy led the state to improve its systems. **This is TJC’s unique and life-changing work—to identify the weeds and clear them away not just for those we serve individually, but for vulnerable Tennesseans across the state.**

This year, the weeds that threaten Tennessee families seem to have been fed Miracle-Gro. We have been working hard to correct the administrative failures that resulted in 220,000 children losing health coverage, often unbeknownst to their parents. This red tape kudzu has resulted in Tennessee climbing to #1 in the growth of uninsured children in the nation for two

straight years. We know that children with comprehensive coverage are more likely to finish college, are paid more as adults, and are less likely to die of preventable illnesses. That's why we formed the [Insure Our Kids Coalition](#) to work for a day when every child who is eligible actually gets and keeps their coverage. We have successfully engaged news media around the country and asked the state to reinstate these children, and we have engaged a team of nationally respected co-counsel to file suit if the errors are not corrected.

The state's proposed Medicaid block grant is confusing and the very definition of weedy. At heart, it is a radical and reoccurring cut to TennCare which puts the wellbeing of our most vulnerable neighbors and our state's vital healthcare infrastructure at risk. We have organized and educated friends and partners statewide about the impact of this proposal and given them details and tools to use their voices to push back against this politically inspired experiment. Despite being out-resourced on the PR front, we have changed the tide of media coverage, by just coming out every day with our gardening gloves and a stubborn determination to ensure that the Tennesseans most likely to be impacted speak out.

We are excited to have sprouted a couple of innovative projects to help our neighbors bloom. We are working with national nutrition partners to address the reality that our state is 49th in the nation in WIC participation. WIC is a simple, vital program providing nutritious food and other supports to pregnant women and young children. It has proven to be dramatically cost-effective in changing the arc of poor children's lives. We are interviewing moms about why WIC isn't reaching them, educating partners to get the word out, and working with state agencies to make sure the program achieves full participation.

We are also working to clear a path through the legal underbrush that overwhelms hundreds of thousands of Tennesseans each year when they are sued in General Sessions Court. These are the courts where most ordinary Tennesseans encounter the justice system. The bulk of these courts' dockets are debt collection and tenant evictions, brought against mostly unrepresented defendants living in or near poverty. The courts' forms use baffling, intimidating 19th Century language. Judges and bar leaders have long identified the need to modernize those forms and give those who must represent themselves a fighting chance to make themselves heard. With a generous grant from the Tennessee Bar Foundation, the courts' collaboration and enthusiastic volunteer support, we are thrilled to help meet that need.

People accuse us of being "too in the weeds." But I say: I love being in the weeds because it is here in the weedy, complex policies like a block grant proposal or a General Sessions pleading where we can best touch lives. **Of course, we will always work to make the weedy details more intelligible, to focus on the real people impacted, to build simple and innovative ways to help more people clear back the weeds in their own personal lives.**

But the weeds are where we live. Join TJC and you can have as much fun as we do in nurturing a better future for our state.

Warm regards,



Michele Johnson

Executive Director

P.S. [Your support](#) has never been more vital as we work to ensure that our policies give every Tennessean a chance to thrive.