Dear Friends,

2021 was a year of opportunities. Opportunities born of heartbreaking circumstances for the families we serve. Opportunities made possible by our long history of finding a way to make a difference even amid loss and heartbreak. Year Two of the pandemic made us more grateful than ever for the gifts of meaningful work, righteous partners, and courageous clients who served as an antidote to the darkness. Oh, and we found a permanent home!

I was certain that a crisis of this scale would bring about a new understanding of our dependence on each other and highlight our nation’s need to treasure every soul living here. Turns out that didn’t quite happen, but the pandemic did contribute to a wider public understanding of challenges, like the caregiver crisis, that have long affected our most vulnerable neighbors. As always, Team TJC rushed to transform that new understanding into stronger policies and clearer pathways to prosperity for the families we serve.

Never has the shortage of in-home long-term care been clearer and more acute than in a year when hospital beds were often unavailable, and nursing home placement meant unbearable isolation and exposure to a lethal virus. We used this new clarity to advocate for the use of federal COVID funds to pay living wages to caregivers who often made the difference between life and death. And we sued the state for devaluing people with intellectual disabilities, and their caregivers, by paying less for their care than for the care of others.

As millions of Americans enrolled in Medicaid for the first time after losing their jobs and health insurance, we were all reminded of the vital role Medicaid plays as a national safety net. Last January, when the Trump Administration approved Tennessee’s Medicaid Block Grant, it posed an existential threat not just to that safety net in our state, but to the safety net on which 75 million Americans rely. Our lawsuit prompted federal officials to reconsider and ask for public comment on the block grant. Our team then did what TJC was created to do: amplify the voices of regular folks who are usually ignored when policy decisions are made. Our outreach ultimately engaged nearly 3,000 people who submitted comments opposing the block grant and defending Medicaid. We are so proud to stand with such inspiring folks.

As families struggled through another difficult school year, our team worked with an army of righteous parents to ensure that, whether attending virtually or in the classroom, kids got the nutritional benefits needed to thrive. TJC engaged a new network of moms who were radicalized by the bureaucratic barriers state leaders put in place, at a time when COVID had already inflicted enough chaos on their families. And just when I thought I couldn’t be more impressed by our nutrition team, they used their Red Tape Ninja skills to enable Afghan refugees to receive food assistance that a balky state computer would not release.

The stubborn flowers that recently appeared in my snowy front yard reminded me of TJC’s work in the last year. It was too cold to be out, but they pushed their way up anyway to remind us spring is coming, and that beauty and resilience are more than a match for exhaustion and despair. Thank you for your grace and generosity and enabling us to tackle the challenges of a new year with certainly that you have our clients’ backs, come what may. Thanks for making all the good things in this report possible!

Michelle M. Johnson
OUR HISTORY
For more than 25 years, the Tennessee Justice Center has been standing with Tennessee families and helping them gain access to the necessities of life. Community and bar leaders from all parts of the state and across the political spectrum established TJC to provide legal representation to Tennesseans in need. We have been doing that work since 1996.

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. TJC uses the lessons learned from our clients’ experiences to push for systemic reforms that will benefit all Tennesseans. TJC advocates for public policies that will make Tennessee a more just, compassionate, and inclusive home for our friends and neighbors across the state.

VICTORIES
TJC uses legal tools to improve the lives of millions of Tennesseans and hold government accountable. Some of our successes include:

• When a managed care organization refused to pay for a medically necessary prescription drug, TJC stepped in to assist and the drug was covered, resulting in a total case value of $750,000.
• 7-year-old Elliott Schmucker was born with a rare brain condition that would have caused severe disability and premature death without surgery. The insurance company balked at covering it until TJC stepped in. The surgery was a success, and Elliott is thriving.
• TJC served 1,796 individual clients, securing $3.2 million in healthcare and nutrition benefits for the family.
• Our nutrition team’s savvy policy advocacy played a vital role in ensuring that food programs reached over a million Tennesseans.
• TJC trained more than 5,000 clients and professionals, enabling them to help others.
• In conjunction with the Black Clergy Collaborative of Memphis and the African American Clergy Collective, we added more than 200 churches in West Tennessee to TJC’s network of over 500 partners advocating with us for social justice.
• TJC’s clients benefited from over 5,000 hours of service from TJC’s compassionate, creative volunteers.

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 and to improve TJC’s own performance.

POLICY ADVOCACY

CAREGIVER SHORTAGE
TJC took on the caregiver shortage that the pandemic drove to crisis dimensions in 2021. We worked with a coalition to get the state to use federal funds to better support both paid and family caregivers, and we sued the state for paying lower rates to caregivers who serve people with intellectual disabilities. The selfless dedication of family caregivers and underpaid health care workers has been a source of constant inspiration driving our efforts.

AFGHAN REFUGEE RESETTLEMENT
2021 brought the arrival of hundreds of Afghan families, who had fled their homes with only the clothes on their backs. They were supposed to receive SNAP nutrition assistance, but their desperate evacuation from Kabul Airport left them without the paperwork required by the state’s computer system. Drawing on its experience battling such red tape, TJC worked with refugee resettlement partners and public officials to protect these new Americans from hunger.

BLOCK GRANT WAIVER
Just two days after the January 6th insurrection, the Trump Administration illegally approved Tennessee’s Medicaid block grant. The deal, which incentivizes the state and its HMO contractors to cut care and divert federal health care funding, threatens the healthcare safety net in Tennessee and across the country. Working with generous partners, TJC filed suit, prompting the federal government to reconsider and ask for public comment. Nearly 3,000 individuals and organizations submitted comments, almost all of which urged revocation of the approval. We await the federal decision and are prepared, if need be, to continue the fight.

HEALTH EQUITY
In collaboration with Meharry Medical College researchers, we have pressed for the addition of a patient’s race and ethnicity to the electronic billing data that documents almost all health care in America. That small addition to two electronic forms would reveal disparities in health care access, and it would improve the ability of medical researchers to better understand differences in health status and treatment outcomes. Several prominent health policy experts are now promoting the idea within the Biden Administration.
Miracle is a precious 3-year-old in Caryville who more than lives up to her name. She was born with a rare condition that required a kidney transplant. Tim and Amanda Smith adopted Miracle into their loving home that already included their other four children and where they regularly foster children with special health care needs.

At the time of her adoption in 2020, Miracle’s medical condition was critical. The state promised Tim and Amanda that the adoption would not affect her health coverage, and that TennCare would be there to meet her needs. As soon as the adoption went through, the TennCare HMO announced that it was eliminating Miracle’s nursing care and no longer covering her $800 monthly medications. TJC threatened legal action, and TennCare restored Miracle’s care.

Miracle’s experience illustrated the dangers the TennCare block grant poses to many of Tennessee’s most vulnerable children, by increasing the pressure to cut costs at the expense of patient safety. Miracle joined TJC, other patients and a dedicated pediatrician in our lawsuit challenging the block grant.
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. We partner with other community organizations to educate and inform lawmakers and members of the public, and we equip Tennesseans with the tools needed to make their voices heard.

53,629 Social Media Engagements
22,448 Social Media Followers
186,116 Website Visitors
137 Earned Media Hits

Health Equity
In 2021, TJC continued to champion the importance of health equity to improve public policy in Tennessee and engage key communities on longstanding inequities. We launched a #BlackHealthMatters campaign to explain how systemic change is needed to improve the lives of the state’s most marginalized citizens in a way that will benefit everyone. The campaign includes getting advocates to sign a pledge in support of health equity. Through a separate survey we have already compiled the stories of nearly 100 people of color who have shared their experiences of health disparities or health inequities.

TJC hosted a virtual event called “Networking for Justice” that brought together the leaders of organizations across the state that are led by people of color or work with communities of color. The event was an enormous success and several of the invited organizations, particularly the Black Clergy Collaborative of Memphis, became partners in our coalitions to expand access to health coverage. We focused on supporting Black leaders to speak out about how health policy decisions, such as Tennessee’s refusal to expand Medicaid, have a disparate impact on people of color. The event produced powerful op-eds that ran in several publications across the state and one national media outlet.

TJC staff are viewed as experts and are frequently invited to speak on issues concerning health equity. In the past year, we presented to approximately 750 individuals and provided information on how they can help ensure every Tennessean has the opportunity to be healthy and thrive.

TJC relies on private foundations and generous donors to make our work possible. Donors and corporations contributed $976,927 to the work in 2021. Gifts came from 1,105 households, of which 366 are new donors. The Iris Society honors donors who contribute $1,000 or more during a calendar year or include TJC in their estate plans.
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 clients, partners, and community members, we are faced with seemingly insurmountable obstacles every day. We just keep working, and we could not do so 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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