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EMPOWER UPPER CUMBERLAND

# 2025 ANNUAL REPORT

Grantee's Name: Upper Cumberland Human Resource Agency

Edison ID: 2551

Term: November 2024 - October 2025

Total Amount: \$25,000,000.00

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# IMPACT & OUTCOMES

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## GOAL

The primary objective for Empower Upper Cumberland this program year was to work with families to increase their employment opportunities and subsequently, increase their incomes as much as possible.

## SETBACKS

While local employers were eager to support Empower UC participants, we learned that building consistent employer partnerships required more structure, clearer pathways for engagement, and stronger alignment between workforce training and real hiring needs.

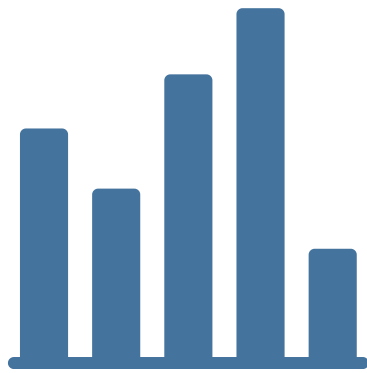
In response, Empower UC developed a more intentional employer partnership strategy through Empower Works, our wage reimbursement program designed to reduce labor costs for employers while creating meaningful work experience for participants. Empower Works now reimburses employers for 100% of participant wages (excluding overtime) for up to 320 hours, helping businesses offset training and onboarding costs while strengthening the local talent pipeline. By defining employer roles, improving communication, and offering direct financial support, Empower Works has created stronger connections between participants and real job opportunities, turning an early challenge into a sustainable workforce solution.

## SUCCESSSES

Since launching Empower UC, we have built a strong foundation of support and opportunity for families across the Upper Cumberland region. Through a whole-family approach, Empower UC has helped participants overcome barriers to employment, increase income, and move toward long-term stability. Our work has strengthened partnerships with employers, service providers, and community leaders to create clearer pathways to workforce success and economic mobility. By investing in both individual progress and broader community systems, Empower UC continues to demonstrate meaningful impact, generating new income for the region, expanding access to career opportunities, and helping families build brighter, more secure futures throughout the region.

## OUTCOMES

Since the beginning of the Empower UC initiative, we have worked alongside families across the Upper Cumberland region to create pathways toward lasting stability and opportunity. To date, Empower UC has served 940 families, impacting the lives of 2,040 children. Over the course of the program, 46% of participating families have increased their income while enrolled, demonstrating measurable progress toward economic mobility. In addition, 79 families have reached or exceeded 225% of the Federal Poverty Level, generating nearly \$7 million in new income coming into the region. These long-term outcomes highlight Empower UC's continued commitment to strengthening families, supporting workforce success, and investing in flourishing communities throughout the Upper Cumberland.



# GENERATIONAL CHANGE

*Here is a highlight of 68 Upper Cumberland success stories*

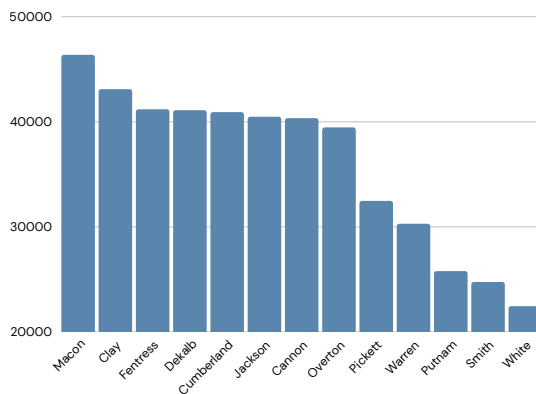
## Number of Families



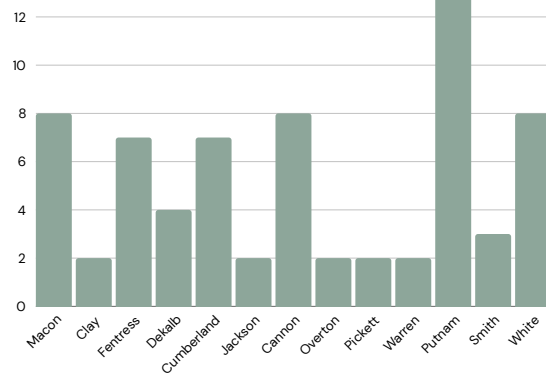
## Number of Children



## Average Increase Income



## Number of Families



## Top Earners



\$100,000

Above most benefit cliff thresholds



\$75,000

135% of UC median



\$67,000

Tennessee median household income



\$55,000

UC median household income

**\$2.4**  
MILLION

New income in the UC is an economic anchor resulting in more tax revenue, local spending, and community stability.

Families can manage housing, savings, retirement, and education expenses.

This represents movement toward long-term stability and independence from public benefits.



# PARTNER SPOTLIGHT

*Cookeville Regional Medical Center  
Charitable Foundation*



Throughout the year, Cookeville Regional Charitable Foundation remained a committed partner to Empower Upper Cumberland, working to support individuals and families striving for stability and self-sufficiency. The Foundation plays a vital role connecting donors across the region with the immediate charitable and healthcare-related needs of Empower participants, while also supporting county-level Empowerment meetings that strengthen engagement and community.

In the past year, CRMC Foundation assisted Empower clients with critical needs including medical care, specialized health services, emergency transportation, medical equipment, and essential home support. Since the program's inception, the Foundation has directly supported 212 Empower families and enhanced Empowerment Nights in counties across the region by fulfilling 94 requests for meals, supplies, and services that improve the experience for participating families.

In 2025, the Foundation completed fifteen grant applications in support of Empower Upper Cumberland and hosted two successful fundraising lunches in Warren and White counties to engage community leaders and share the impact of the program. Connecting local generosity with regional need remains central to our mission. We are proud of this strong collaboration and look forward to continued growth and shared impact in 2026.

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# PARTNER SPOTLIGHT

## *Highlands Training Center*

The first session of the Healthcare Bootcamp launched as a 7-week pilot to prepare participants for careers in the healthcare field, supported by dedicated navigators throughout the program. Of the 21 participants who enrolled, 10 completed all seven weeks, while an additional 10 participants completed at least 80% of the bootcamp—demonstrating strong engagement and persistence in a rigorous workforce pathway. This early success highlights the effectiveness of the program's structure and support model. Overall, the Healthcare Bootcamp has reached 247 participants and delivered 544 units of service, underscoring its growing impact and potential for expansion.



# PARTNER SPOTLIGHT

*Upper Cumberland Development District*

The Upper Cumberland Development District (UCDD) plays a pivotal role in the Empower UC Program, addressing critical regional challenges in childcare, housing, healthcare, and workforce development. The UCDD team works to identify these challenges, secure resources to bridge gaps, and remove barriers for Empower Families.

## **Program Updates:**

### **Childcare Availability and Job Creation**

UCDD continues to address barriers to childcare while working to expand childcare capacity across the Upper Cumberland region. Early childhood education not only provides a pathway for children to break the cycle of generational poverty but also supports kindergarten readiness and improved third-grade math and reading proficiency. This enables parents to rejoin the workforce while ensuring their children receive high-quality care from trained staff. Through partnerships with the Small Business Development Center (SBDC), UCDD has helped create 237 new childcare slots and facilitated 51 new jobs.

### **2025 was a landmark year for childcare advocacy:**

- House Bill 1175 / Senate Bill 1379 – This legislation allows childcare agencies to lease or purchase underutilized school buildings to expand their facilities. Public school districts are now required to provide a list of vacant or underused properties to the state, making them available to childcare providers.
- Rule Change 23-49 – In April 2025, the Tennessee State Fire Marshal's Office implemented updated fire safety and building code standards for daycare facilities. These changes simplify requirements and make compliance easier for providers statewide.

### **Success Story: Bright Start TN Upper Cumberland Three-Year Strategy Completion**

On September 9, 2025, UCDD celebrated the three-year implementation of the Upper Cumberland Bright Start Strategic Action Plan, a community-driven blueprint designed to improve early childhood outcomes across the 14-county region. Grounded in research, regional data, and local stakeholder input, the plan prioritizes children from birth through age eight, with a focus on improving third-grade proficiency in reading and math.

The vision of Bright Start Upper Cumberland is to provide access to early learning instruction, supportive services, and family resources beyond traditional school hours. By the end of the 2029 school year, the initiative aims to enhance test scores and increase Early Childhood Education slots for children ages 0–3.

During the celebration, Representative Ryan Williams received the Childcare Champion Award, presented by Blair Taylor, Founder, President, and CEO of Tennesseans for Quality Early Education. Taylor highlighted the importance of early childhood education and the critical role of being a “Loud Voice for Little Kids.”



# PARTNER SPOTLIGHT

## *Workforce Connections*

In its third year, Empower Upper Cumberland (UC) focused on strengthening employer partnerships and increasing access to employment opportunities across the region. Workforce Connections worked with **over 90 employers**, supporting recruitment and maintaining active engagement with certified partners.

During the reporting period, the program served **over 60 participants**, connecting them with job opportunities aligned with Empower UC standards for wages, benefits, and career advancement. Job openings were consistently shared through Navigator networks and established communication platforms, enabling participants to make informed employment decisions.

In 2025, **Empower Works**, a wage reimbursement initiative designed to reduce hiring barriers for employers while supporting participant placement, was launched. Through this program, **four participants were directly placed into employment** with Empower Certified Employers, demonstrating the effectiveness of targeted incentives in supporting workforce participation.

Overall, Empower UC demonstrated measurable impact by expanding employer engagement, serving participants, and implementing new workforce strategies. Going forward, Workforce Connections will prioritize collaboration, placement, and initiatives that support long-term economic stability in the region.

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# PARTNER SPOTLIGHT

*Tennessee Technological University*

TN Tech successfully has received and serviced over 193 referrals so far in 2025. These referrals have paved the way for participants to access an array of services, including higher education pathway planning, enrollment in individual learning pods, and connections to essential resources like tutoring and resilience coaching.

In 2025, TN Tech expanded our Individual Learning Pod library, doubling its size to encompass 20 courses. These courses are designed to enhance participants' self-efficacy, practical skills, confidence, and knowledge base. Feedback has been overwhelmingly positive, highlighting the library's low barrier to entry and immediate applicability. Participants can quickly integrate the knowledge gained from the Individual Learning Pod into their daily lives.

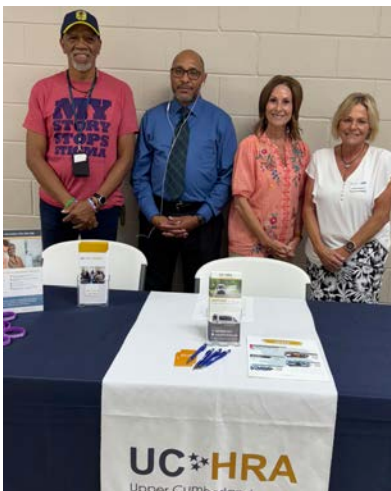
Over the past year, the TN Tech team has developed a web-based app to support the executive functioning skills of Empower UC participants pursuing educational pathways. The app is currently in beta testing, with plans to launch in late 2026. This innovative tool is designed with the specific needs of the rural Upper Cumberland population in mind, ensuring they feel successful in any academic setting. It incorporates a trauma-aware perspective to enhance users' executive functioning skills.



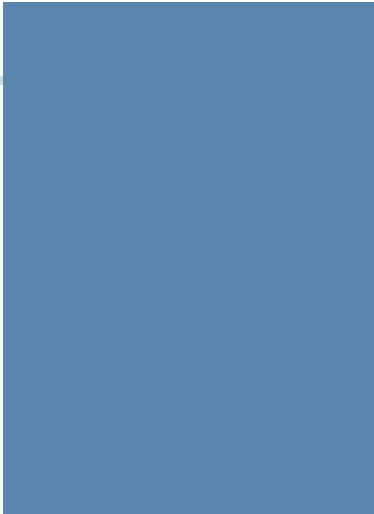


# PARTNER SPOTLIGHT

*WCTE PBS*



Through the 2025 Empower UC Initiative, WCTE PBS has seen firsthand how access to high-quality, evidence-based educational resources can spark curiosity, confidence, and joy in young learners across the Upper Cumberland region. Hiram Davidson, one of the children participating in WCTE PBS’s Family Community Learning workshops, shared how PBS KIDS content has become a meaningful part of his learning experience. When asked what he enjoys most, Hiram immediately described the PBS KIDS games that allow him to “create something,” build ideas, and stay calm while learning. One of his favorites, *Scribbles and Ink*, encourages creativity and problem-solving as children design and experiment in a playful, low-pressure environment. Hiram also spoke enthusiastically about PBS KIDS shows that emphasize discovery and teamwork. He described enjoying programs where characters use “gadgets” to fix problems and work together to solve big challenges—stories that mirror the collaborative, hands-on learning approach used in WCTE PBS’s Ready to Learn workshops. Shows like *The Cat in the Hat* stood out to him because they combine fun storytelling with learning about how things work and how people help one another. These reflections underscore the core goals of WCTE PBS’s Empower UC contribution: to provide immersive, experiential learning opportunities that strengthen early literacy and science skills while engaging the whole family. By delivering Ready to Learn curricula through trained facilitators across 14 counties, WCTE PBS helped create consistent, welcoming learning spaces for children like Hiram—spaces where curiosity is encouraged, and learning feels accessible and enjoyable. Hiram’s excitement and engagement reflect the broader impact of the Empower UC Initiative. By connecting families to trusted educational media and community-based workshops, WCTE PBS is not only supporting school readiness for children ages 2–8, but also fostering confidence, creativity, and a lifelong love of learning—key building blocks in the collective effort to lift families out of poverty and expand opportunity throughout the Upper Cumberland.



# PARTICIPANT SPOTLIGHT

## *Meet Kelcy*

My journey with Empower began when my son's preschool teacher gave me a brochure from Empower as a possible resource to help my family. We were going through a tumultuous time, impacted by many of the stressors rural families in the Upper Cumberland face: lack of childcare, few family resources, low-paying jobs and long commute times. I was a few semesters away from finishing my Bachelor's degree, and Empower inspired me to re-enroll, helping with funding a laptop and finding a part time job locally that would work with my children's school hours. I had no idea how much Empower would become a part of my story until a violent separation and divorce rocked my family. Suddenly, I was a single mom to two boys under the age of 5, without a full-time job or childcare, all the household bills to pay, and I was in my final semester of college. I was facing an insurmountable, life-altering event, and I really thought my life was over. All my dreams and hopes for the future were gone, and I considered dropping out of my final semester.

That's where my Empower navigators stepped in. With the support of Empower and their milestone payments, I was able to not only finish my final semester and graduate Summa Cum Laude from ETSU, but I found another job working with foster children, which is a lifelong love of mine. Unfortunately, the commute was an hour from home and when one of my boys was sick, I was often stranded with no way to meet my job requirements. I had no idea what to do, and what little dream of a better life I had, was beginning to fade again. I was working two jobs as a single mom, and I was burning out, trying to connect the dots to better our future financially, but it was getting to be too much. Then, we were assigned Jeannie Tinnon as our Empower navigator.

From the moment I met Jeannie I knew we had a shot. Jeannie understood what I was going through, the pain and self-doubt of creating a new future, the crushing fear of if a shut-off notice would be in the mailbox when I came home. Jeannie didn't see me as someone looking for a hand-out, she listened when I explained the struggles we were facing and told me it was not shameful to need a 'hand-up'. She helped connect me to resources that took terror away from bills in the mail, helped me find and pay for childcare as I went back to just one full-time job, and above all, never let me forget I had dignity and value as a human being. Realizing I was becoming stuck in the poverty cycle mindset, Jeannie referred me to a new program through Empower's partnership at Tennessee Tech, connecting me to their Resilience Coach, Stefanie Byrd.

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Stefanie is incredible. She heard me, challenged me, and pushed me to envision a life outside of poverty. She even inspired my career change into early childhood education! After one of my sessions with Stefanie, she assigned a 'dream board' project on Pinterest, where I would go through and pin my thoughts on what I would want a future to look like, from jobs to our home, from possessions to vacations. I found myself pinning post after post of being a teacher. I went to Tech's website, and from there began researching how to become a teacher in Tennessee. Seeing that I would need to be enrolled in an educator preparation program, I applied for the Master's program at Tech. Then, I applied for an opening in our local school system. The school system offered me a position teaching if I would meet all the requirements of a job- embedded teacher, including passing the Praxis teaching exams.

I only had a few weeks to study for the exams, and that is where Deborah Roddy, Education Manager for TN Tech/Empower UC, came in. She connected me to test resources and study guides, and helped me prepare for the exams. I passed the exams at the Testing Center at Tech on my first try, was admitted to the Master's program at Tennessee Tech, and was able to accept a position teaching. Of course, that's when my car's transmission went out. This could have been the end of a beautiful dream, and without a way to get to work it could have been a horrific ending for my family or any other family in my situation. But we were in Empower, and Jeannie was able to help get funds to cover some of the repair. This boost, this emergency safety net of Empower, helped us get over the finish line into financial safety. Graduating the program was saddening, after being able to rely on the encouragement of people who believed in my family, but I know the skills I gathered in the program will help us continue to thrive in the Upper Cumberland and make a difference for other families like mine, to grow from poverty into prosperity.



# 2025 RECAP

*Bits from our Newsletters*

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## In January WCTE Ready to Learn Event

Everyone enjoyed a delicious meal from KFC. We welcomed a great crowd—4 households with 5 adults and 9 kids!

The evening was filled with fun and learning:

- We read a book
- Watched a themed video
- Played sorting games on iPads
- Did hands-on sorting activities—including trail mix sorting with Ms. Vanestia and Ms. Megan!

Each child took home their sorted snacks, sorting objects, and a book for their household.



## A Birthday to Remember in August

On May 20th, we hosted our very first Circles EmpowerMENT Night in Overton County. That evening, I had the privilege of meeting Chelsea, a beautiful mother of two young boys.

After sharing a meal, our group gathered for a discussion on the Stone Soup curriculum, a lesson centered on the power of community and supporting one another. During the conversation, Chelsea opened up and shared something deeply personal: she hadn't had her birthday celebrated in two years.

After hearing this, our team knew we had to do something. With the help of our Navigator and generous donors, we quickly planned a surprise. Gifts, balloons, and cupcakes were waiting for Chelsea at the next gathering—and her reaction was priceless. Fighting back tears of joy, she smiled as the room filled with love, laughter, and celebration.

Moments like this remind us why EmpowerMENT Nights matter. Chelsea's story shows that sometimes the simplest acts of kindness create the most unforgettable memories. We are so grateful to walk alongside her and so many others on this journey.



## Poverty Solution Summit

The 2025 Poverty Solution Summit brought together leaders, changemakers, and community advocates from across the state to focus on one shared goal: building lasting solutions to end poverty. Empower UC was proud to take part in this impactful event, showcasing how collaboration, innovation, and personalized support can change the trajectory for families in our region.

During the summit, Empower UC shared powerful stories of transformation—real families finding hope, growth, and opportunity through our network of support. From job training and education pathways to wraparound services and mentorship, Empower UC is helping break the cycle of poverty one family at a time.



## SmartDollar Random Drawing

Our participant Jordan randomly won \$500 from Dave Ramsey SmartDollar. Lets keep encouraging our participants to use this free resource available to them!

## Empowerment Nights

In May, we welcomed 54 participants and 97 children across our events.

In June, families will be painting rocks and learning about kindness — a fun and meaningful activity for all ages. Empowerment Nights are held once a month in 12 counties.

