First Steps Inc.

ANNUAL REPORT

2025-26



FirstStepsNashville.org

WHO WE ARE

MESSAGE FROM HEATHER HIGGINS, CHIEF EXECUTIVE OFFICER

Because of your generosity, families navigating the overwhelming world of developmental delays are never left to walk alone. Early intervention doesn't just provide vital services for a child; it builds a network of support around their entire family. Your gift replaces isolation and uncertainty with practical strategies, professional guidance, and hope. First Steps empowers parents, therapists and teachers to turn everyday routines like shared meals and playtime into powerful opportunities for growth. The transformation we see every day is profound: children reach milestones, inclusive friendships are formed, families are supported. Thank you for investing in these early years, strengthening family bonds, and altering the trajectory of a child's life forever.





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MISSION DRIVEN

The **mission** of First Steps is to educate and care for children with special needs and medical conditions alongside their typically developing peers in inclusive environments and support their families.

Our **vision** is to:

-Enhance the quality of life for children and their families

-Eliminate barriers to services for children with special needs

-Empower families as they seek to meet the needs of their children

-Improve the community as a whole child by child, family by family

-Celebrate each child's unique potential



HOW WE SERVE THE COMMUNITY - INTEGRATED SERVICES

First Steps stands out as one of very few providers where therapists and classroom teachers are a team in the same facility, creating an inclusive, seamless way to learn. Some families choose to access First Steps' therapy services outside the classroom. Others may need therapy to come to their home or another facility. *We offer all of these options!*

CHILD DEVELOPMENT CENTER

First Steps' inclusive McWhorter Family Children's Center offers full-time care and education for children with special needs alongside their typically developing peers *(ages six weeks to six years)*.

PEDIATRIC THERAPY

Pediatric Therapy at First Steps provides occupational, speech-language, physical and feeding therapies for children with special needs *(ages birth to twelve)* in the McWhorter Family Children's Center.

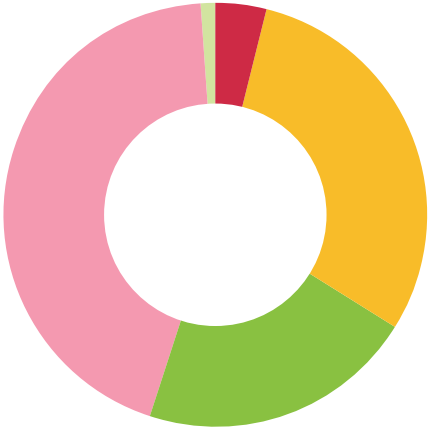
COMMUNITY OUTREACH PROGRAM

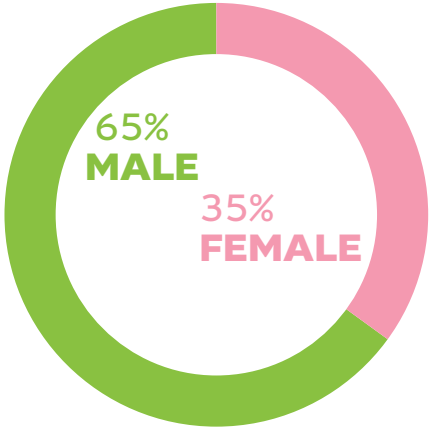
The First Steps Community Outreach Program partners with parents and caregivers of children with disabilities or delays *(ages birth to five)*. Developmental Therapy and support are given in home-based or community settings, as well as via telehealth.

IMPACT SNAPSHOT OF YOUR INVESTMENT
IN FIRST STEPS' MISSION

In FY 2025-26, **900 children** received the education and care they needed to achieve their developmental success. Many children participated in more than one program throughout the year and **14,197 therapy sessions** were completed. Parents and caregivers were encouraged to share their experiences as each program strives to evolve and meet the needs of each family.

DEMOGRAPHICS





- **ASIAN** 4%
- **BLACK OR AFRICAN AMERICAN** 30%
- **HISPANIC OR LATINO** 21%
- **CAUCASIAN OR WHITE** 44%
- **OTHER** 1%

100%
AGREE

I believe my child is making progress as a result of First Steps' services

PEDIATRIC THERAPY served 214 children with 5,155 therapy sessions that improved their overall health.

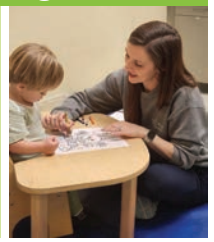
- Occupational - *achieving a high percentage of their individual goals after 12 sessions*
- Feeding - *increased chewing skills and/or acceptance of a variety of foods/textures*
- Physical - *demonstrating increased functional mobility after 18 sessions*
- Speech-language - *increased in comprehension, number of words, pictures/signs to communicate their need*

100% of parents/caregivers agreed or strongly agreed that

My child's therapist respects my opinions, culture, and family traditions.

My child's therapist is professional, knowledgeable, and helpful.

The treatment activities provided are relevant to my child's individual needs.



90% of parents/caregivers agreed or strongly agreed that



My child's therapist gives me clear information that helps me perform exercises and activities in the home with my child.

My child's therapist listens to my concerns and answers my questions.

I believe my child is making progress as a result of therapy services at First Steps.

COMMUNITY OUTREACH PROGRAM served 651 children/families with 9,042 therapy sessions/12,133 hours of service. **99%** of parents/ caregivers report satisfaction with the knowledge they have gained through their participation in sessions with their Developmental Therapist, and **96%** are satisfied with their child's progress.



"I love First Steps. Growing up in the 90's, my family was a part of the First Steps program. My grandparents raised me along with several other children. One of the children had/has special needs and was a part of First Steps in the mid-90s. I always knew if I had a child with special needs, I wanted my child to be involved with First Steps. I always look forward to our weekly sessions with our therapist. Not only has she helped me and my child, but she also has given me a lot of emotional support."

CHILD DEVELOPMENT CENTER served 93 children through the FY25-26. 81% met their benchmarks in social-emotional, language, and literacy, while 83% demonstrated progress in cognitive skills. Even more inspiring, 85% achieved milestones in mathematics and social studies, and an outstanding 97% met their goals in physical development, showcasing the power of early learning and inclusive care in action.

100%AGREE

All learning activities at First Steps are designed with my child's individual needs in mind across all major learning areas

100%AGREE

The atmosphere and environment at First Steps is comfortable, warm, welcoming and appropriate for my child



"What I like about First Steps is how much the socio-emotional regulation elements are taught and emphasized. You are teaching our children how to be kind, empathetic, decent humans who happen to know what an onomatopoeia is."



ELIMINATING BARRIERS

Your investment immediately bridges the financial gap for families with limited assets who are unable to access early intervention services and reduces the need for special education and support services in the future.





QUALITY PERSONNEL

Your gift attracts and retains the best early intervention teachers and therapists, forming a consistent and dedicated team committed to each child's full and unique potential.









FUTURE SUSTAINABILITY

Your support ensures that First Steps has the capacity to navigate the changing landscape of funding necessary to maintain and expand its work.





For every child who receives early intervention, an entire family benefits. Parents gain confidence, hope and practical tools - thanks to programs made possible by generous donors like you.

Donna & Joy's Story

Many of you know me as one of the Physical Therapists at First Steps. Some of you know I have a special needs child, but you may not know that my connection to First Steps goes back about fifteen and a half years ago. It started when I decided in my early 40's to adopt from the foster care system to complete my family. The traditional way to a family had never presented itself for me and I so longed to be a mommy. With my medical background I felt I could provide a child with different needs a loving and safe home. That is when I began to ask a foster parent of a special needs patient at the clinic where I was working about her journey. She explained the process was long and complicated. Long story short, everything seemed to fall into place rather quickly for me to take custody of a precious little girl named Joy, who had been left in a hot car by her biological mom and now had significant medical needs and a bleak outlook.



As the Department of Children's Services pressured me to welcome this sweet baby girl into my home I reminded them that I was a single mom working full time. I couldn't provide a home for her until I had safe childcare. Within a few days, they let me know that First Steps had a place for her. That meant I could bring Joy home as soon as my training was complete and I could continue working without interruption.

So, I became her foster-to-adopt placement. When Joy started at First Steps, she was blind, tube-fed, she didn't interact with others or her environment, she couldn't roll over or even sit up on her own. I was told by medical professionals not to expect much progress due to how long she had been without oxygen from the incident.

I knew a bit about First Steps because at the time, my colleagues at Vanderbilt Children's Hospital provided therapy services there. Even though I knew those providers, leaving my child who had complex needs with teachers who were strangers to me, was very difficult.

My fears were soon set aside as Joy was able to receive PT, OT, Speech and Feeding therapies all while I was at work. She made huge improvements. The classroom teachers carried over the recommendations of the therapists and provided a warm loving environment for all the children. I loved the idea that children like Joy were exposed to typically developing children and that those typical peers played alongside children with different needs. It was and continues to be amazing to watch the typical peers develop empathy for others.

When she graduated from First Steps, with all her little friends, she was beginning to speak, walk independently, interact with her peers, and learning to use a communication device. And she was eating everything in sight. Now a senior in high school, Joy is thriving and doing much more than any doctor ever expected. I am forever grateful for the love, care and support we received from First Steps and how they gave my girl the best start in life. A few years later, when I was provided the opportunity to work for First Steps, I jumped at the chance. I am honored to be part of bringing hope for families like mine and being able to support our families while helping every child thrive and become the best they can be, just as First Steps did for my Joybug. Although my journey to being a family has been the most difficult thing I have ever willingly taken on, First Steps was like a beacon guiding us both as we navigated this path together.



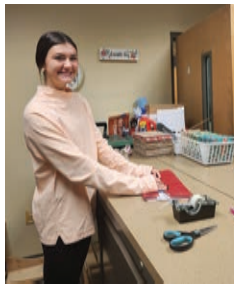
I want to thank you for supporting this amazing organization. My girl is absolutely living proof of the huge impact First Steps can have on children and families.



VOLUNTEERS & INTERNS

Thank you to the volunteers and interns who generously gave their time and talents to First Steps in 2025-26.

COMMUNITY OUTREACH
Kristina Buttler
Bertha Gunter
Emma Martin
Jessica Utter



PEDIATRIC THERAPY
Callie Cummings
Taylor Glascoe
Maddier Herrera
Alexis Ignatin
Lizzie Parker
Jezer Michelle Riji
Sophia Schrader
Jazzmin Sims
Anna Stongna
Fenna Vann Wilgen
John Young

CHILD DEVELOPMENT CENTER
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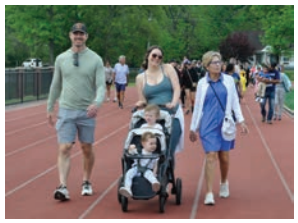
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Event Chair
Matt Cooper
Alexis Hughes
Anne Marie Turan
Kat Weaver

Nwubah Family,
Grand Marshals
Griffin Dunham
Isabella Davis
Erika Barbosa











We are grateful to **HCA Healthcare** and their employees who volunteered their time and efforts on HCA Community Day to assist with facility projects.



Casino VINO

EVENT CO-CHAIRS
Megan Kelly
Maggie Johnson

COMMITTEE
Anne Louise Branstetter, Molly Brooks, Claire Francis, Mary Winston Reames, Mollie Reed, Andrea Robinson, Liz Tardio, Molly Terrell, Anne Marie Turan

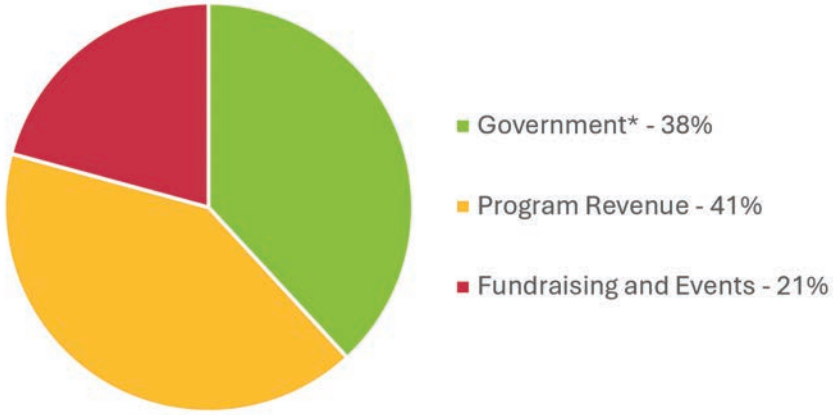
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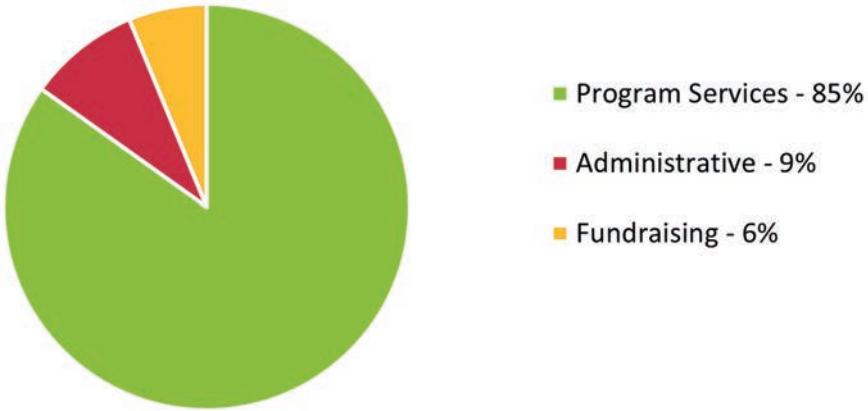
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First Steps partners with the Tennessee Department Disability and Aging and United Way of Greater Nashville

TN Department of Disability & Aging

United Way of Greater Nashville



Have a **Donor Advised Fund (DAF)?** Donor Advised Funds are an excellent tool for unrestricted or designated giving. If you already have a DAF, simply request a grant distribution using First Steps' Tax ID #62-0674974.



CONSIDER A LEGACY GIFT

We invite you to sit down with your financial planner to explore unique ways to extend your philanthropic legacy. Make a significant impact while taking advantage of tax-saving strategies and income-production assets. Wills and living trusts, IRA charitable rollovers, stocks and insurance beneficiaries are just some of the many options you can consider.

Contact hhiggins@firststepsnashville.org if you have any questions about the agency's gift acceptance policy.



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