

Second Chance Funding Provides Tennessee Youth a Path Into Technology Careers

More than 25,000 youth are detained in the United States on any given day, according to the Department of Justice’s Youth and the Juvenile Justice System [2022 National Report](#). According to a [2018 Juvenile Law Center analysis](#), youth with criminal records have a harder time getting hired: 50% of employers are less likely to call or extend a job offer to an applicant with a record.



Pictured: (back row) Cassy Blakely, Stacey Lofton, Dana Jetter, Gary Jones, Michael Flanery-Gray, and Robert Flores; (front row) L’Tannia Williams, Audrey Barnes, Administrator Liz Ryan, Judge Shelia Calloway, Jennifer Wade, and Kayse Gann.

Committed to breaking the cycle of intergenerational incarceration, unemployment, and poverty through evidence-based practices and a strengths-based approach, [Persevere](#), the Tennessee Department of Children’s Services, the Juvenile Court of Metropolitan Nashville and Davidson County (JCDC), and an active collection of service providers and employers are implementing the [EPIC Youth TN](#) (Empowerment, Perseverance, Innovation, and Community in Tennessee), a collaborative initiative designed to change the nature of reentry and outcomes for Nashville and Davidson County youth who are reentering their communities after confinement in a juvenile facility. EPIC Youth TN will provide coding courses and coordinated support to 180 youth (between 13-17 years of age) leaving secure youth justice facilities in Davidson County, Tennessee. Programming is set to begin at the Davidson County Juvenile Detention Center in April 2024, which is, fittingly, Second Chance Month.

On March 22, 2024, the administrator of the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (OJJDP), Liz Ryan, visited the program. EPIC Youth TN received a Youth Reentry grant. Ryan voiced excitement about the program, describing it as “a potential model for how technology can enhance youth’s opportunity for second chances” and celebrated the project team for their diligence in overcoming barriers to bringing technology into facilities safely.

During the visit, Ryan visited with the EPIC Youth TN team, toured the JCDC, and met a current participant of the Persevere program.

This multitiered program begins at least 90 days prior to a youth’s release from detention with a 6-week coding bootcamp, followed by ongoing training after return to the community. Youths are assigned a youth support specialist who will facilitate wraparound case management services from enrollment throughout reentry and continuing through 1 year after release. This

I thought it'd be boring, but it's fun and I'm learning a lot. I want to have a shoe business with an app, so it can be global.
—Participant

specialist helps the youth and their family connect to essential resources in their community.

Ensuring that every youth has a positive influence cheering them on, each participant has a mentor. The trained mentors will support the youth as they navigate reentry, also collaborating with EPIC Youth TN case managers and parents as part of a coordinated team-based approach to support.

After in-facility coding classes, youth will return to their Nashville neighborhoods with practical skills and the start of a computer coding portfolio. Once they complete the EPIC Youth TN coding classes, participants are eligible for [Persevere’s on-the-job training programs](#). In addition, all participants, regardless of age, earn pre-apprenticeship hours. If they choose Persevere’s tech apprenticeship route when they reach adulthood, those hours will apply toward their apprenticeship. Youth who turn 18 years old while participating in the program,

EPIC YOUTH SERVICES

Participants will receive the following:

- Computer coding classes prior to release and connection to community-based stacked coding certifications
- Life skills instruction and connection to prosocial activities
- Mentoring by trained mentors in their community
- Employment and on-the-job support
- Coordinated and integrated wraparound case management
- Connection to local community-based resources
- Parent outreach and support

and youth who are 17 years old and not enrolled in school, will be invited to join Persevere’s adult program, which provides advanced training that leads to industry-recognized certification in several job-specific pathways, including front-end and back-end development. To scaffold their career education, Persevere partners with multiple community colleges to connect youth to various tech-related postsecondary pathways to encourage students to complete high school and provide motivation for postsecondary studies for youth who are already interested in technology careers.

EPIC Youth TN recognizes the importance of family. Parents who choose to participate in the tech training

program will be enrolled in Persevere’s Families First Program, providing family members with identical services as those that all EPIC youth receive.

Persevere was incorporated in 2014 as a nonprofit organization dedicated to reducing recidivism and empowering justice-involved individuals through education in computer coding and programming, along with employment support provided through career readiness instruction, individualized job-based mentoring and support, and job placement services. Founded by and for people with lived experience with criminal justice, corrections, and poverty, Persevere understands the needs of the justice-impacted population as few organizations can. This experience translates to a high success rate: 93% job placement, 94% job retention, and a developer recidivism rate of only 1.8%.

Persevere has received additional funding from the Tennessee Legislature to expand the program to additional facilities and youth ages 18 and 19 to ensure that all young people are equipped with essential skills to find success within their families and communities, making our communities safer. Judge Shelia Calloway has been a core supporter of the project. The director of Persevere, Stacey Books, shares the impact of this support:

Persevere reports a recidivism rate of less than 0% and a 93% success rate in job placements in Tennessee for those engaged in their employment programs, as of the most recent 2023 data.

It’s been a dynamic road since we began discussions with the Tennessee Department of Children’s Services and Judge Shelia Calloway’s office to extend our services to the youth. Thanks to their support, the OJJDP grant and that of Governor Lee’s office, we are now equipped to disrupt the cycle of mass incarceration by reducing recidivism and offering meaningful job training, thereby enhancing community safety and ensuring sustainable wages for our graduates.

Learn more about Second Chance Month by visiting [OJJDP’s Second Chance Month website](#) and the OJJDP-supported [Youth Reentry Technical Assistance Center](#), housed at the American Institutes for Research.

