TENNESSEE DEVELOPMENTAL DISABILITIES NETWORK

2025

INQUIRY ANALYSIS REPORT

Understanding How Tennesseans Seek Help and Access Support

DISABILITY RIGHTS TN
VANDERBILT KENNEDY CENTER
TN Council on Developmental Disabilities
UTHSC CENTER ON DEVELOPMENTAL DISABILITIES

Report Information

This report was developed by the Vanderbilt Kennedy Center UCEDD as part of the Tennessee Developmental Disabilities (DD) Network statewide community input project. It serves as a companion to the Tennessee DD Network's 2025 Statewide Needs Assessment Report, examining disability-related inquiries received during the same period to better understand how people sought help, the barriers they encountered, and the support they received.

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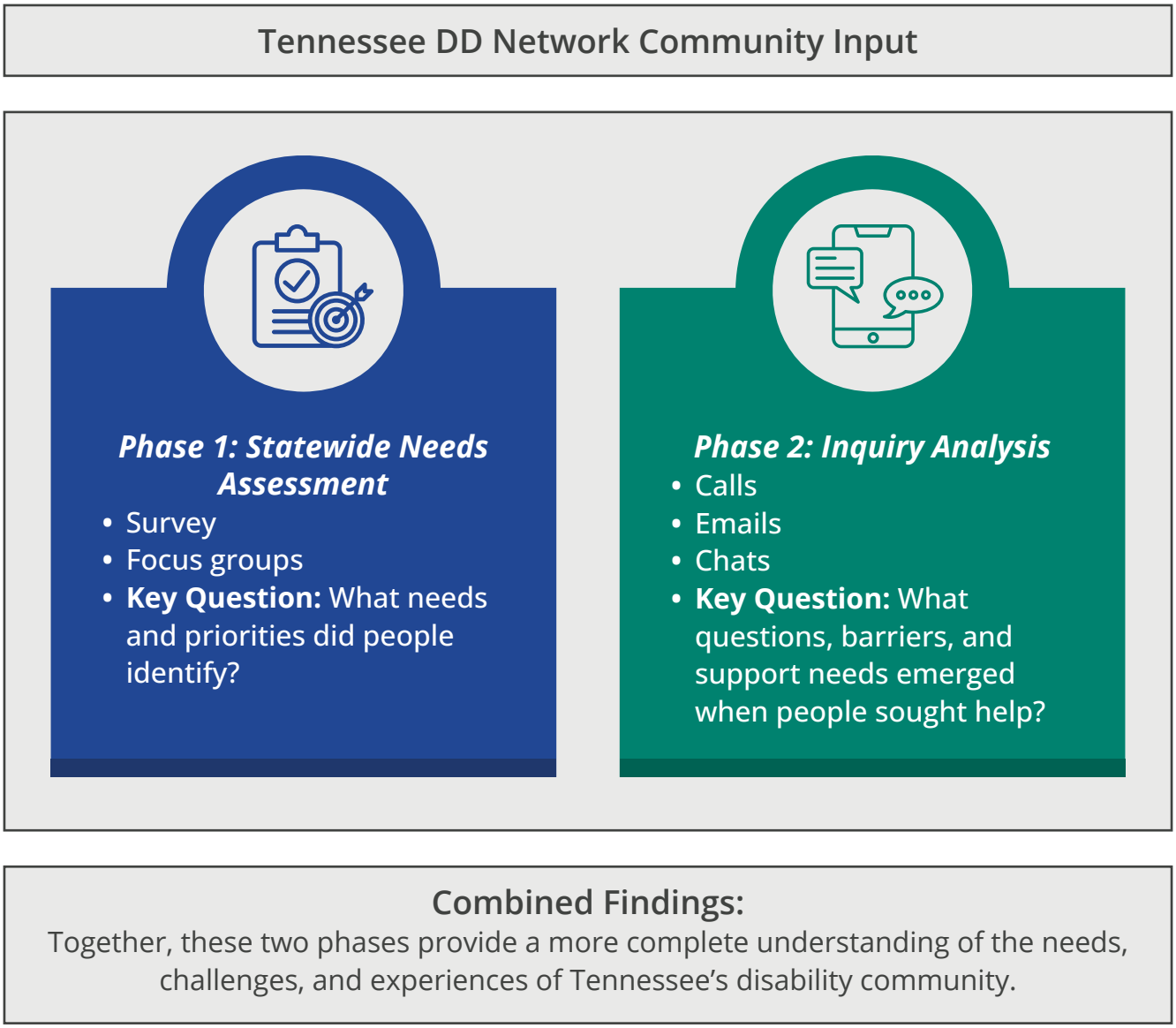
Project Overview

The Tennessee Developmental Disabilities (DD) Network recently completed its first coordinated statewide needs assessment. The project brought together four DD Network partners to better understand the needs and priorities of Tennessee's disability community. Nearly 1,500 people participated, including adults with disabilities, family members, and professionals from across the state. Through surveys and follow-up focus groups, participants shared their perspectives on disability services, barriers to support, community inclusion, and priorities for the future. The findings identified the issues that matter most to Tennesseans with disabilities and provided a foundation for future advocacy, programs, services, and system change efforts.

During the same period, DD Network partners also received more than 1,400 inquiries from individuals seeking information, resources, and support. These inquiries provided a different perspective on community needs. While the statewide assessment provided broad insight into disability-related needs and experiences across the state, inquiry data provided a closer look at the specific questions people were asking and the challenges they encountered while trying to access services and supports.

This report presents findings from an analysis of disability-related inquiries received by DD Network partners during the same period. The findings describe what people contacted the DD Network about, the barriers they encountered while seeking support, and how DD Network partners responded to those needs. Together with the statewide needs assessment, these findings provide a more complete understanding of the experiences of Tennessee's disability community.

FIGURE 1. UNDERSTANDING NEEDS IN TENNESSEE



This report may be useful to DD Network partners, policymakers, service providers, advocates, and community members. Regardless of role, the findings offer insight into the needs, barriers, and experiences shaping everyday life for Tennesseans.

By bringing together community perspectives and real-world inquiry experiences, the DD Network hopes to support informed decision-making and strengthen collaboration across the disability community. Ultimately, the goal is to improve access to services and supports for Tennesseans with disabilities and their families.

Understanding Tennessee's DD Network

The Developmental Disabilities Assistance and Bill of Rights Act (DD Act) established a nationwide network of organizations dedicated to improving the lives of people with developmental disabilities and their families. Every state has a DD Network composed of three core partners: a State Council on Developmental Disabilities, a Protection and Advocacy (P&A) agency, and a University Center for Excellence in Developmental Disabilities (UCEDD).

In Tennessee, the DD Network includes the Tennessee Council on Developmental Disabilities, Disability Rights Tennessee, and two UCEDDs: the University of Tennessee Center on Developmental Disabilities and the Vanderbilt Kennedy Center UCEDD. While each organization shares a commitment to supporting people with disabilities and promoting community inclusion, they serve different roles within Tennessee's disability service system. Table 1 provides a brief overview of each partner's role.

TABLE 1. HOW TENNESSEE'S DD NETWORK PARTNERS SUPPORT THE DISABILITY COMMUNITY

DD Network Partner	Primary Role
Tennessee Council on Developmental Disabilities	Leads statewide efforts to improve disability services and supports by gathering public input, identifying barriers, and promoting systems change
Disability Rights Tennessee	Protects legal and human rights through advocacy, investigation, and legal assistance
UCEDDs	Provide education, training, research, technical assistance, and community engagement to strengthen disability services and supports

Because each DD Network partner serves a distinct role, inquiry patterns may reflect both community needs and the unique functions of the organizations receiving those inquiries. Understanding these differences is important when interpreting the inquiry findings presented in this report.

About the Inquiry Data

DD Network partners regularly receive requests for information, assistance, and resources from Tennesseans. Throughout this report, these requests are referred to as inquiries. Inquiries may be received through phone calls, emails, online forms, or other communication channels and can range from simple questions to complex situations requiring ongoing support and follow-up. Many inquiries are addressed through information and referral (I&R) services, which help connect people with programs and supports that may meet their needs. To better understand the questions and challenges people brought to DD Network partners, we conducted an analysis of inquiry records.

FIGURE 2. SOURCES OF INQUIRY DATA

DD Network Partner	Calls	Emails	Forms	Live Chat
Tennessee Council on Developmental Disabilities	✓	✓		
Disability Rights Tennessee	✓		✓	
Vanderbilt Kennedy Center UCEDD	✓	✓	✓	✓

Together, these organizations received 1,471 inquiries during the five-month project period. For the Vanderbilt Kennedy Center UCEDD, this analysis focused on inquiries received through Tennessee Disability Pathfinder, the center's statewide information and referral program. Because the UT Center on Developmental Disabilities does not maintain a comparable inquiry tracking system, data from that partner are not included in this analysis.

SAMPLING APPROACH

Given the large volume of inquiry records, a stratified proportional sampling approach was used to create a manageable dataset while ensuring representation across DD Network partners. The sampling process involved the following steps. Inquiry records were first organized by partner organization and month. Each month was then divided into beginning, middle, and end periods to help ensure representation throughout the full collection period. Within those groups, inquiries were selected using a structured randomization process.

This approach resulted in a dataset representing approximately 20% of all inquiries received by participating DD Network partners. By intentionally balancing representation across organizations and time, the sampling approach allowed for detailed review of inquiry records while maintaining confidence that findings reflected broader inquiry patterns.

REVIEW PROCESS

A structured review framework was developed to guide the analysis of inquiry records. The framework was designed to capture information about the topics people contacted DD Network partners about, barriers they encountered, and the ways staff responded to those concerns. Whenever possible, categories were aligned with domains used in the statewide needs assessment. This allowed inquiry findings to be compared directly with survey and focus group findings from Phase 1.

As inquiry records were reviewed, the framework was refined to improve consistency and better reflect the issues appearing across organizations. Additional categories were added to capture themes unique to inquiry data, including case complexity, service system involvement, and actions taken to address barriers.

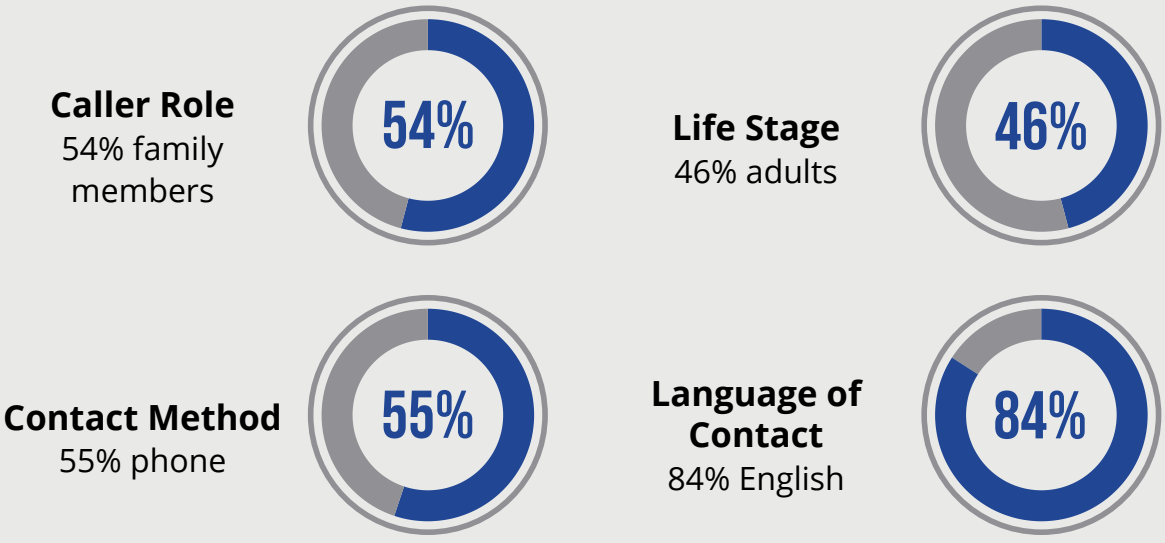
FIGURE 3. KEY COMPONENTS OF THE REVIEW FRAMEWORK

CHARACTERISTICS OF INQUIRY RECORDS

Inquiry records represented a diverse group of Tennesseans seeking disability-related information and support. More than half of contacts came from family members (54%), while 39% came directly from individuals with disabilities and 5% came from professionals. Nearly half of all inquiries concerned adults ages 26-64 (46%), though contacts spanned every stage of life from early childhood through older adulthood. Records represented 53 Tennessee counties, with the largest share coming from Middle Tennessee.

Most inquiries were received by phone (55%), highlighting the continued importance of direct, person-to-person support. The majority of contacts were conducted in English (84%), though inquiries were also received in Spanish.

FIGURE 4. CHARACTERISTICS OF INQUIRY RECORDS



Findings

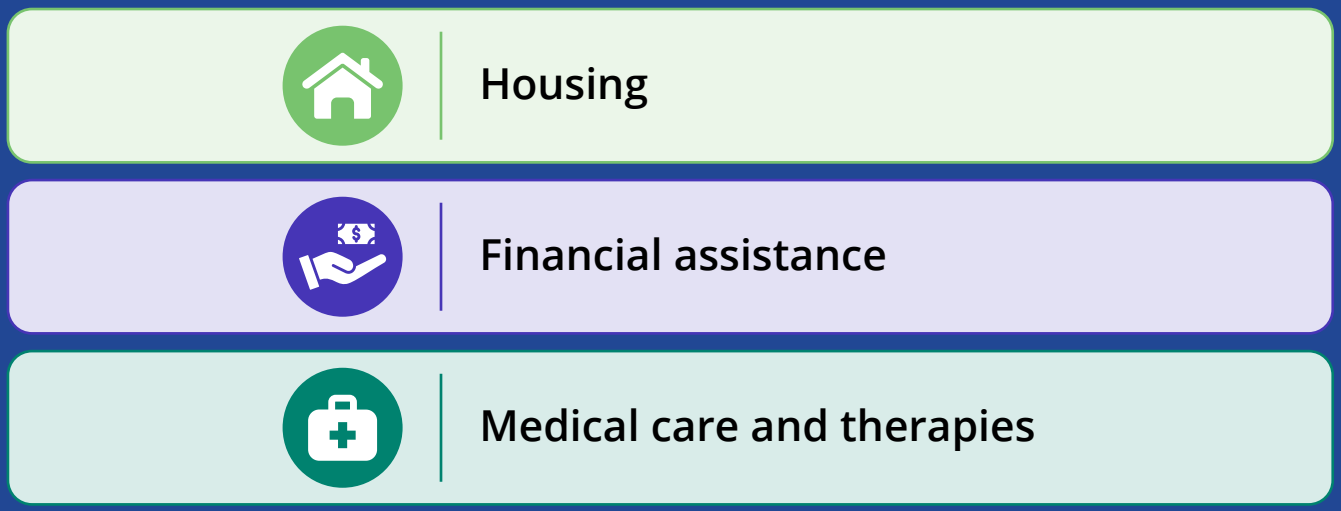
WHAT WERE PEOPLE CONTACTING THE DD NETWORK ABOUT?

One goal of the inquiry analysis was to explore whether the issues people contacted DD Network partners about aligned with findings from the statewide needs assessment. Survey respondents were asked whether their needs were being met across a range of life domains. Inquiry records provided an additional source of information about the types of support people were actively seeking.

Many of the issues raised in inquiry records closely matched areas where survey respondents reported unmet needs. Medical care and therapies, housing, and K-12 education appeared among both the most common inquiry topics and the areas with the highest levels of unmet needs. Together, these findings suggest that several challenges identified through the statewide needs assessment were also reflected in the issues people brought to DD Network partners.

SIMILAR THEMES EMERGED ACROSS BOTH DATA SOURCES

Three of the five highest statewide priorities identified in the needs assessment also emerged among the most common inquiry topics.



Although priorities and inquiry topics measure different concepts, the overlap between these areas suggests they remain important concerns for Tennessee's disability community.

TABLE 2. MOST COMMON INQUIRY TOPICS

Inquiry Topics	Example of Questions and Concerns Raised
Financial assistance	Questions about Supplemental Security Income (SSI), Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), Family Support Program applications, utility assistance, and paying for basic needs.
Medical care and therapies	Requests for evaluations, insurance coverage assistance, therapy services, healthcare providers, and TennCare (i.e., TN Medicaid) navigation.
Housing	Concerns related to eviction, homelessness, accessibility, group homes, housing discrimination, and affordable housing options.
K-12 education	Questions about Individualized Education Program (IEP) implementation, evaluations, school accommodations, interpreter access, advocacy, and due process concerns.
Employment	Requests for employment supports, workplace accommodations, vocational rehabilitation, and job search assistance, as well as concerns related to discrimination.

Inquiry records provided additional insight into how broad areas of need appeared in everyday life. While categories such as housing, financial assistance, and K–12 education may seem straightforward, the underlying inquiries often involved multiple interconnected issues. For example, in one housing-related inquiry, a family sought alternative supported living options for their son while he remained on the Employment and Community First (ECF) CHOICES waitlist. Similarly, education inquiries often extended beyond school services. One parent contacted the DD Network after being denied participation in her daughter's IEP meetings and access to a sign language interpreter, seeking guidance on her rights and available advocacy options. These examples illustrate how inquiry records captured the real-world situations individuals and families were navigating as they sought support.

WHAT DID PEOPLE NEED HELP WITH?

While inquiry topics describe what people were seeking help with, they do not explain the challenges people encountered along the way. To better understand these experiences, inquiry records were reviewed for barriers encountered during the help-seeking process. Barriers describe the obstacles that made it difficult to access services, understand available options, or achieve a desired goal.

TABLE 3. TOP BARRIERS IDENTIFIED IN INQUIRY RECORDS

Barrier	% of Inquiries	What This Means
Finding information and resources	33%	The person is seeking information, services, or resources and needs assistance identifying available options.
Legal rights or discrimination	28%	The person is experiencing or seeking help with discrimination, rights violations, abuse/neglect, or legal processes.
Application issues	12%	The person has questions about or needs assistance with the application process for services or supports.
Eligibility issues	10%	The person has questions about eligibility requirements or was denied services because they do not meet the criteria.
System navigation	5%	The person is having difficulty understanding, navigating, or coordinating services or benefits.

Although specific barriers varied, inquiry records generally reflected two types of support needs. Some people were primarily looking for information, services, or providers. Examples included:

- A parent seeking evaluation providers after suspecting a child had a disability
- A family moving to Tennessee looking for information about disability services and supports
- An individual searching for affordable housing or home modification resources
- Parents exploring employment supports and community programs for a young adult with autism

Other inquiries reflected challenges navigating systems and requirements needed to access support. Examples included:

- Questions about eligibility for TennCare or waiver services
- Difficulty completing applications or providing required documentation
- Concerns related to discrimination, accommodations, or legal rights
- Challenges coordinating services across multiple agencies or providers

Together, these findings suggest that people often needed help not only locating resources, but also understanding how to move forward once a need had been identified.

Overall, the barrier patterns identified through inquiry records generally aligned with findings from the statewide needs assessment. However, one notable difference emerged around finding information and support. Survey respondents generally reported confidence in knowing where to find help, while inquiry records frequently reflected requests for assistance identifying resources, providers, or available options. Rather than suggesting a lack of awareness, these inquiries often reflected a desire for personalized guidance and trusted recommendations. Inquiry records suggest that many individuals, families, and professionals turned to DD Network partners not simply to obtain information, but to receive personalized guidance and trusted recommendations tailored to their circumstances.

HOW DID THE DD NETWORK RESPOND?

A central question in this analysis was whether individuals, families, and professionals were able to get the help they needed after contacting a DD Network partner. Overall, inquiry records suggest they were. Nearly all inquiries (96%) were resolved through contact with a partner. Inquiry records also provided insight into how partners responded to requests for assistance, ranging from basic information sharing to more intensive problem-solving and coordination.

TABLE 4. TYPES OF SUPPORT PROVIDED BY DD NETWORK PARTNERS

Type of Support	What This Means
Information and referral	Provided information about programs, services, organizations, or resources that may help address a need.
Education	Shared information to help individuals or families understand a service, program, right, eligibility requirement, or process.
Problem-solving access issue	Worked with individuals or families to address barriers related to access, such as eligibility, paperwork, transportation, communication, or waitlists.
Resource research	Looked up or investigated information, providers, programs, or options not readily available through standard referral processes.
Personalized referral	Directly connected an individual or family with another staff member, agency, provider, or partner organization to support follow-up and continuity of care.
Investigation	Conducted a formal review or investigation related to abuse, neglect, discrimination, rights violations, or other concerns.

The majority of inquiries (87%) were classified as standard cases, meaning they could be resolved through standard I&R services within one to three contacts. These services often included:

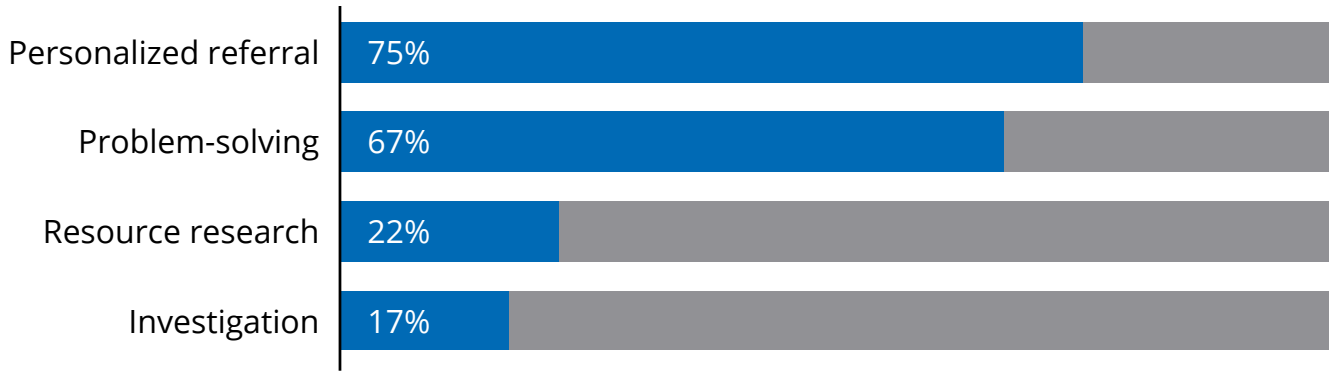
- Providing contact information, websites, or basic program information
- Identifying providers or services that matched an individual's circumstances
- Explaining available programs, eligibility requirements, or service options
- Sharing information tailored to a specific need or situation

For many, standard I&R services provided the guidance needed to move forward. In one inquiry, staff helped a family identify a Board Certified Behavior Analyst (BCBA) who could provide services in a faith-based setting. In another, a social worker contacted the DD Network to better understand the disability services available to support a family they were assisting. Staff also helped a sister identify available services and supports for her brother with an intellectual disability after their aging parents could no longer provide care.

FIGURE 5. STANDARD VS. COMPLEX CASES

Not all inquiries could be resolved through information sharing alone. Thirteen percent of inquiries were classified as complex cases. These inquiries required four or more contacts and involved active staff engagement to address barriers, coordinate services, or help resolve a problem. While complex cases represented a smaller share of inquiries, they often required ongoing coordination, follow-up, and problem-solving to help individuals move forward.

FIGURE 6. SUPPORT ACTIONS USED IN COMPLEX CASES



Complex cases often involved issues that could not be resolved through a single referral or resource. In one case, staff worked with a family over several months to complete applications, gather documentation, and coordinate communication with the support provider. In another, staff helped resolve a sudden insurance coverage issue that threatened access to multiple medical providers by coordinating with service coordinators, the managed care organization, and healthcare providers. Other cases involved helping individuals navigate waiver services, address communication breakdowns between agencies, or connect with supports after traditional referral processes had stalled.

What We Learned

The statewide needs assessment and inquiry analysis provided two different perspectives on the experiences of Tennessee's disability community. The statewide assessment captured both personal experiences and broader community perspectives about finding support and accessing disability services. Inquiry records provided a closer look at the questions, challenges, and barriers people encountered when seeking help. Together, these findings offer a more complete picture of disability-related needs across our state.

↘ COMMUNITY NEEDS WERE CONSISTENT ACROSS MULTIPLE SOURCES OF INFORMATION

Housing, financial assistance, and medical care and therapies emerged repeatedly throughout the project. These areas appeared among the highest-ranked statewide priorities, the most commonly reported unmet needs, and the most frequent inquiry topics. The consistency of these findings suggests that these challenges remain significant concerns for Tennesseans with disabilities and their families regardless of how they were asked about their experiences.

↘ PEOPLE VALUE PERSONALIZED GUIDANCE

Inquiry records suggest that people often sought more than information alone. While many individuals knew that services and supports existed, they still turned to DD Network partners for help identifying options, narrowing choices, understanding eligibility requirements, and determining next steps. This finding highlights the continued importance of trusted information and referral services that combine accurate information with personalized guidance.

↘ SOME SITUATIONS BENEFIT FROM ACTIVE NAVIGATION AND PROBLEM-SOLVING SUPPORT

Most inquiries were resolved through standard information and referral services. However, a smaller subset of inquiries required more intensive support involving coordination, problem-solving, advocacy, or ongoing follow-up. These cases often involved multiple service systems, communication challenges, eligibility concerns, or barriers that could not be resolved through information sharing alone. The findings suggest that access to knowledgeable professionals who can understand disability service systems and can help navigate complex situations remains an important part of Tennessee's support network.

IMPLICATIONS FOR FUTURE PLANNING

Continue education, outreach, and resource development efforts in areas that emerged consistently across the statewide needs assessment and inquiry analysis, particularly housing, financial assistance, and medical care and therapies.

Preserve opportunities for personalized guidance with information and referral systems, even as organizations explore new technologies and automated approaches to sharing information.

Strengthen opportunities for information sharing, cross-training, and collaboration among disability organizations to ensure staff have current knowledge of services, eligibility requirements, application processes, and system changes.

Continue using inquiry records as a source of information about emerging barriers, service gaps, and system-level challenges affecting Tennesseans with disabilities and their families. Regular review of inquiry data can help identify trends that may not be fully captured through surveys or other community engagement activities.