


# EMPOWER UPPER CUMBERLAND PRESS KIT

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## AT A GLANCE

**Investment:** \$25 million through Tennessee's TANF Opportunity Act  
**Service Area:** 14 Upper Cumberland counties  
**Families Elevated:** 68 families (108 children) above 225% Federal Poverty Level  
**Economic Impact:** \$2.4 million in new annual household income  
**ROI:** \$24.3 million in projected lifetime taxpayer savings

**Website:** [empoweruppercumberland.org](http://empoweruppercumberland.org)  
**Digital Assets:**  Empower UC | Digital Assets

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## 1. PRESS RELEASE

### FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

**Tennessee TANF Program Delivers \$2.4 Million in New Local Income, Lifts 68 Families Out of Poverty**

*Empower Upper Cumberland shows how strategic TANF investments can create lasting economic mobility for rural communities*

**COOKEVILLE, TENNESSEE** – Empower Upper Cumberland has achieved a major milestone in the fight against generational poverty: as of July of 2025, 68 families (108 children) have moved above 225% of the Federal Poverty Level, generating \$2.4 million in new annual household income for the local economy.

As part of Tennessee's TANF Opportunity Act, Empower UC is reshaping how public assistance is used—shifting from temporary management of poverty to a system designed to end it. Families receive personalized navigator support, education and career planning, and milestone-based incentives that help them steadily build financial stability. To date, 818 families have been enrolled into the program.

*"We have a unique opportunity to transform Tennessee's human services system from one that focuses on the efficient delivery of benefits to one dedicated to lifting people beyond the need for public support,"* said Clarence H. Carter, Commissioner of the Tennessee Department of Human Services. *"Empower Upper Cumberland is a critical illustration of this new approach—positioning the government as a convener and facilitator of community-driven solutions."*

### Impact in Numbers

- **\$2.4M** in new annual household income
- **68 families** (108 children) lifted above 225% Federal Poverty Level
- **\$744,000** in annual TennCare cost avoidance
- **\$183,000** in new payroll taxes generated each year
- **\$24.3M** in projected lifetime taxpayer savings

The program directly addresses the "benefits cliff"—the sudden loss of childcare, healthcare, or food assistance when a family's income increases slightly. Instead of punishing families for earning more, Empower UC builds a financial bridge so participants can climb the income ladder with confidence.

*"I've seen too many families fall through the cracks of systems that were never built to help them truly succeed, especially when they face the impossible choice of a promotion that could actually harm their family's stability,"* said Megan Kelly Spurgeon, MPS, Director of Empower Upper Cumberland. *"Our program flips the script. We provide the navigational support that empowers people to pursue higher-wage careers, confident that each step up the career ladder leads to genuine financial improvement."*

One of those families is Elizabeth Nelson's. After losing both of her parents in 2020, the single mother moved to McMinnville searching for stability. She took a job at Waffle House to make ends meet while raising her children, but her dream of completing a college degree felt out of reach. Through Empower UC's support, she not only graduated on the Honor Roll with a bachelor's degree in human services, but now works helping other families find their path to stability.

*"Sometimes all it takes is a community, a program, a group of people who believe in change—and that same group believing in you,"* Nelson said. *"For the first time, I know my kids will have a future that looks different from my past."*

Empower Upper Cumberland is proving that when rural families are given the tools to succeed, they don't just transform their own futures—they set a model for communities nationwide.

## 2. FACT SHEET

### Program Impact

#### *Families Transformed*

- **68 families** (108 children) moved above 225% Federal Poverty Level
- **160 families** currently enrolled and progressing
- **Participants gained new employment** in healthcare, education, and manufacturing sectors

#### *Economic Benefits*

- **\$2.4 million** in new annual household income generated
- **\$183,000** in new payroll taxes generated annually
- **\$24.3 million** in projected lifetime taxpayer savings
- **26 families** off SNAP benefits
- **20 families** off TennCare
  - **\$744,000** in annual TennCare cost avoidance

#### *Program Scope*

- **Service Area:** 14 Upper Cumberland counties (Cannon, Clay, Cumberland, DeKalb, Fentress, Jackson, Macon, Overton, Pickett, Putnam, Smith, Van Buren, Warren, White)
- **Investment:** \$25 million through Tennessee's TANF Opportunity Act
- **Selection:** Chosen from 83 statewide applicants as one of 7 funded collaborations
- **Timeline:** Four-year intensive intervention for families
- **Goal:** Lift 1,600 children and 800 families out of generational poverty

#### *What Makes This Different*

- **Personalized navigation** rather than one-size-fits-all programming
  - **Benefits cliff solution** - financial bridges during income transitions
  - **Two-generation approach** - simultaneous focus on children and parents
  - **Trauma-informed care** integrated throughout services
  - **Milestones earned** that reward progress toward self-sufficiency
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### 3. LEADERSHIP PROFILES

#### Clarence Carter

*Commissioner, Tennessee Department of Human Services*

Appointed to Governor Bill Lee's Cabinet in January 2021, Commissioner Carter leads Tennessee's second-largest agency with a \$3+ billion operating budget and nearly 4,000 employees across all 95 counties. With over 30 years of experience serving four governors, a mayor, and both the Bush and Trump administrations, Carter has directed major programs including the \$16.5 billion federal TANF program as Director of the Office of Family Assistance. He previously served as Director of Arizona's Department of Economic Security, Commissioner of Virginia's Department of Social Services, and Director of Washington D.C.'s Department of Human Services. Carter is a National Academy of Public Administration Fellow and 2022 recipient of the Spirit of Fatherhood Judge David Gray Ross Award from the National Partnership for Community Leadership.

**Quote:** *"We have a unique opportunity to transform the Tennessee human services system from the typical model that simply focuses on efficient delivery of benefits to a state dedicated to lifting as many people as possible beyond the vulnerability that requires public support."*

#### Mark Farley

*Executive Director, Upper Cumberland Human Resource Agency/Upper Cumberland Development District*

Executive Director since 2012, Farley led the Upper Cumberland Development District through comprehensive organizational transformation following federal investigation and leadership crisis. Under his direction, the organization rebuilt its reputation and financial stability while expanding from traditional economic development to comprehensive poverty alleviation. Farley established strategic partnerships with Tennessee Tech University and pioneered the shift from program administration to outcome-focused community impact.

**Quote:** *"The biggest excitement we're seeing is the change in [our participant's] mindsets—people starting to understand how they can control their finances and their destiny. It's amazing to see their thinking shift toward a different way of approaching finances and life."*

#### Megan Kelly Spurgeon, MPS

*Director, Empower Upper Cumberland*

With over a decade of experience in rural workforce development and human service delivery, Spurgeon leads the day-to-day operations of the \$25 million Empower UC initiative. She holds a Master's in Strategic Leadership and has been featured on national podcasts discussing community-based poverty solutions and regional collaboration strategies.

**Quote:** *"I've seen too many families fall through the cracks of systems that were never built to help them truly succeed. Poverty can be solved, but it takes more than programs—it takes courage, collaboration, and a willingness to do things differently. We're not managing poverty; we're moving people beyond it."*

## Scott Miller

*Founder, The Poverty Solution*

National expert in community-based poverty alleviation with over 40 years of experience developing and scaling anti-poverty interventions. Miller has worked with communities across the country to design comprehensive approaches that move families from crisis to stability to prosperity. Author of "*Beyond Poverty Management: A New Framework to Inspire and Equip Leaders to End Poverty in their Communities.*"

**Quote:** *"The United States spends over \$1.1 trillion annually on more than 80 public assistance programs, yet poverty rates remain stuck at 12-15%. This isn't just a policy failure—it's a system functioning exactly as built: to manage poverty, not eliminate it."*

### Resources:

- **Book:** Beyond Poverty Management: A New Framework to Inspire and Equip Leaders to End Poverty in their Communities. - [Amazon](#)
- **Podcast:** Essential Leadership to End Poverty - [Apple Podcasts](#) | [Spotify](#)

## Becky Tsadilas

*Chief Operating Officer, The Poverty Solution*

Becky Tsadilas is Scott Miller's primary partner in providing training, technical assistance, and operational consulting to community leaders nationwide. As COO, she leads strategic implementation of poverty alleviation systems through integrated top-down and bottom-up approaches. While Miller casts the vision for ending poverty, Tsadilas ensures leaders can actually execute it—equipping them with the tools, frameworks, and confidence to transform their work from managing individual cases to achieving systemic change at scale.

**Quote:** *"Our program employs a holistic view that extends beyond helping individual families. While helping 100-200 families is valuable, we're focused on a systemic scale—the potential to move 20,000 to 200,000 families out of poverty."*

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## 4. SUCCESS STORIES

### Elizabeth Nelson

#### *Single Mother & Program Graduate*

A single mother who moved to Tennessee after losing both parents in 2020, Elizabeth started working at Waffle House while struggling financially. Through Empower UC, she completed her bachelor's degree in human services on the Honor Roll and now works as a Community Professional Resource with the program.

**Quote:** *"Sometimes all it takes is a community—a program and group of people who believe in change and believe in you. For the first time, I know my kids will have a future that looks different from my past."*

#### [Full Story](#)

**From GED to Nursing Career** — A mother of five who had dropped out of high school fulfilled a promise to her late parents by earning her GED through the Adult Education program. As the first in her family to attend college, she's now pursuing her dream of becoming a nurse. Despite seasonal employment challenges and daycare barriers, she researched schools independently and is currently completing her Medical Math coursework, demonstrating remarkable self-confidence growth.

**Single Mother Achieves 188% Income Increase** — A single mother increased her household income from \$960 to \$2,764 per month—a 188% increase—all while raising her teenage daughter. She completed QuickBooks certification and 10 professional development courses, drove over 40 miles each way to attend training sessions, and never let obstacles stand in her way. Her daughter, initially shy, has blossomed through community involvement and both are now committed to volunteering after program completion.

**Teen Mom Rises from \$9 to Store Manager** — Starting at just \$9/hour as a teen parent, one participant climbed from stocking shelves to store manager while completing high school with an 8-month-old son. Raised by her grandmother after losing her mother young, she persevered through transportation challenges (driving on bald tires) and childcare struggles. She now earns \$14/hour and has learned effective budgeting, transforming from someone who "wanted a better life" into someone actively creating it.

**Escaping Abuse to Achieve Independence** — A single mother left an abusive relationship to ensure her child had a better life. Starting from unemployment and hotel living, she secured full-time employment, earned a promotion with significant pay raise, and now has her own apartment. She learned to budget properly, advocate for herself at work, and is planning to open a savings account. Her confidence has grown tremendously, and both she and her daughter are excited about their future.

**From Homeless to Homeowner** — After facing potential homelessness when her rental went up for sale, one participant filed bankruptcy and feared she'd never qualify for housing again. Through dedicated budgeting and transportation assistance, she and her husband (who worked multiple jobs while sharing one vehicle) saved enough to purchase their own home. They've transitioned from surviving paycheck-to-paycheck to building true financial stability.

**Shade Tree Mechanic Becomes Certified Professional** — A father supporting his family on his wife's disability check worked odd jobs while his children wore secondhand clothes from organizations that eventually closed. Determined to change his family's circumstances, he completed auto mechanics certification at TCAT despite transportation and financial struggles. Through milestone payments for good grades and determination, he's now a certified mechanic providing a better life for his family.

**Medical Assistant Breaks Through Medical Crisis** — A waitress and single mother of four faced a six-week work absence when she required surgery. Rather than giving up, she researched medical assisting programs, toured multiple institutions, investigated grants and scholarships, and is now pursuing her dream career in healthcare. Despite juggling work, recovery, and family responsibilities including helping her brother's children after their mother's death, she's moving steadily toward her goals.

**Disabled Veteran's Family Achieves Financial Freedom** — A family relying solely on a disabled veteran's income lived paycheck-to-paycheck, constantly stressed about making ends meet. Through the program, they learned budgeting skills, received milestone support, and both spouses found meaningful work paths. Within their enrollment period, they went from being three months behind on bills to paying everything on time, experiencing life-changing stress relief.

**From Anxiety to Employment** — A young mother struggled with severe anxiety that prevented her from entering the workforce, despite needing to support her son as a content creator working from home. Through mental health counseling and skills workshops, she overcame her fears, earned her driver's license (she'd been driving without one), and secured full-time employment. While she knows retail isn't her forever career, she's gained the confidence to take important steps forward toward eventually starting her own business.

**Breaking the Cycle of Addiction** — A single mother whose parents and older sister all struggled with addiction was determined to break the chain with herself and her children. Working as a mail carrier with fluctuating hours and facing rent increases from \$400 to \$1,000 monthly, she refused to turn to predatory loans or give up. She's working every available hour, determined to buy a home for her son, showing that "goals are still obtainable as long as you are determined."

**First-Generation College Graduate Path** — A high school graduate who never planned to attend college was inspired by fellow participants to pursue higher education. After overcoming learning challenges and disabilities, she passed her high school equivalency exam with surprisingly high scores, secured employment as a special needs bus aide, and enrolled in online college courses toward becoming a veterinary technician or working in forestry. Her children now see their mother's strength and believe in their own potential.

**Youth Engagement: Karate Dreams Come True** — A third-grader from a family relying heavily on community services always dreamed of learning karate but it wasn't within their budget. Through youth engagement assistance, he's now attending classes, earning belts, and building social confidence through Circles meetings. His little sister even gets to participate. The family is learning that dreams can become reality with the right support.

**Ready to Learn Family Transformations** — Families attending Ready to Learn workshops together report spending quality time completing experiments and solving problems as a unit. Parents who worried about providing extras for their children now watch them thrive in

educational activities at no cost. Children from different counties and schools have found common ground, building friendships and learning soft skills together.

### Key Themes Across Stories:

- **Average income increases:** 50-225% above federal poverty level
- **Education completion:** GEDs, certifications, associate degrees, bachelor's degrees
- **Career transitions:** From minimum wage to professional careers
- **Debt reduction:** Participants becoming debt-free, improving credit scores
- **Housing stability:** Moving from hotels/homelessness to homeownership
- **Mental health:** Reduced anxiety, increased confidence, therapy access
- **Social capital:** Expanded networks, community involvement, peer support
- **Intergenerational impact:** Children seeing parents succeed, breaking poverty cycles

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All participants demonstrated remarkable resilience, determination, and willingness to invest in their own success. With supportive navigation, resource connections, and milestone assistance, they transformed not just their financial situations but their entire life trajectories.

***Together, these journeys demonstrate that with proper support, poverty is not permanent. Empower Upper Cumberland transforms determination into lasting prosperity across the region.***

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## 5. DIGITAL ASSET LIBRARY

### Media Resources Available for Download

**Access Link:** Assets available at [Empower UC | Digital Assets](#)

*To access the digital asset library or request additional materials, contact Luke Poulsen at [luke@thepovertysolution.com](mailto:luke@thepovertysolution.com)*

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## 6. FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

### Program Basics

**Q: How is Empower Upper Cumberland different from traditional welfare programs?**

A: Unlike traditional programs that provide temporary assistance, Empower UC is designed to permanently move families out of poverty. Participants receive personalized navigation, career development, and financial bridges to overcome the "benefits cliff" that often traps families in poverty.

**Q: What does "225% of Federal Poverty Level" mean in practical terms?**

A: For a family of four in 2024, 225% of FPL equals approximately \$69,300 annually—a level that provides genuine economic stability and self-sufficiency.

**Q: How are families selected for the program?**

A: Families must meet income eligibility requirements and demonstrate commitment to the program's goals. The program uses a randomized controlled trial design, with some eligible families receiving full services and others receiving basic services for comparison.

## **Results & Impact**

**Q: What's the typical timeline for families to achieve economic stability?**

A: While individual timelines vary, the program is designed for families to participate for 12-18 months. Many families see meaningful progress within the first six months and leave the program with a designed plan to meet economic goals within 2 years.

**Q: How do you measure success?**

A: Success is measured through over 60 indicators including income growth, educational attainment, healthcare access, housing stability, and long-term financial security.

## **Funding & Sustainability**

**Q: How is the program funded?**

A: Empower UC receives \$25 million through Tennessee's TANF Opportunity Act, which redirects existing federal TANF dollars toward comprehensive poverty alleviation rather than temporary assistance.

**Q: Is this program sustainable long-term?**

A: Yes. Independent ROI analysis shows the program generates taxpayer savings that exceed its cost, supporting its potential for long-term sustainability

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## **7. MEDIA CONTACTS**

### **Primary Media Contacts**

**Luke Poulsen**

The Poverty Solution

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**Becky Tsadilas**

Chief Operating Officer, The Poverty Solution

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**Macey Korth**

Marketing & Outreach Coordinator, Empower Upper Cumberland

Email: [MKorth@uchra.com](mailto:MKorth@uchra.com)


**Expert Interview Availability**

- **Scott Miller:** Program design, national poverty strategies, systemic approaches
- **Mark Farley:** Rural economic development, regional collaboration
- **Megan Spurgeon:** Day-to-day operations, community impact, success stories

**Interview Logistics**

- **Scheduling:** 48-hour advance notice preferred
- **Formats:** Phone, video conference, in-person (Tennessee locations)
- **Hours:** Monday-Friday, 9 AM - 5 PM EST
- **Languages:** English

**Additional Resources**

- **Program Website:** <https://empoweruppercumberland.org/>
- **Scott Miller's Book:** "*Beyond Poverty Management: A New Framework to Inspire and Equip Leaders to End Poverty in Their Communities*" - [Amazon](#)
- **The Poverty Solution Podcast:** Essential Leadership to End Poverty - [Apple Podcasts](#) | [Spotify](#)
- **Digital Assets:**  Empower UC | Digital Assets
- **Research Reports:** Urban Institute and MEF Associates evaluation studies

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## 8. POLICY & RESEARCH BACKGROUND

*For Policy Reporters & Research Journalists: Comprehensive methodology, evaluation framework, and national policy implications*

**Executive Summary**

Empower Upper Cumberland represents a flagship initiative within Tennessee's \$175 million TANF Opportunity Act—the most comprehensive anti-poverty experiment in a generation. The program undergoes rigorous evaluation by nationally recognized research organizations, with findings positioned to inform federal TANF reauthorization and state-level policy reform nationwide.

## The National Context

### The Scale of the Challenge

- **\$1.1 trillion** - Annual US spending on 80+ public assistance programs
- **114** - Federally authorized means-tested programs created in isolation
- **12-15%** - Poverty rates unchanged despite massive public investment
- **32 states** - Currently implementing two-generation approaches

### The System Problem

*"There are 114 federally authorized means-tested programs, all created in silos. None were meant to work together, and many actually work at cross purposes,"* explains Commissioner Carter. The initiative fundamentally redesigns human services systems, positioning government as a convener and facilitator of community-driven solutions rather than merely a benefit distributor.

## Research Foundation & Methodology

### Independent Evaluation

- **MEF Associates** - Nationally recognized policy research organization
- **Urban Institute** - Leading social and economic policy research institute
- **Impact** - Findings will directly inform national TANF policy and reauthorization

### Research Design

- **Randomized Controlled Trial (RCT)** - The highest standard for generating rigorous evidence
- **60+ distinct measures** across demographic, economic, education, and health indicators
- **Three-component evaluation:**
  - Impact assessment (direct effects on family stability and income)
  - Implementation analysis (how the program works in practice)
  - Comprehensive cost study (investment required for successful outcomes)

### Evidence-Based Framework

- **Two-Generation Approach**
- **Trauma-Informed Care** principles
- **Return on Investment** analysis methodology

## Economic Impact & Return on Investment

### Demonstrated Returns

- **\$2,300** - Annual savings per child lifted from poverty (reduced services + increased taxes)
- **\$248,000** - Annual societal savings from 108 children already elevated
- **\$40 million** - Projected lifetime savings when scaled to all 300 children served
- **~\$50,000** - Investment per child over three years for permanent poverty exit

## Current Program Performance

- **\$744,000** annual TennCare cost avoidance
- **\$183,000** new payroll taxes generated annually
- **\$24.3 million** projected lifetime taxpayer savings
- **46 families** permanently off public assistance (SNAP and TennCare)

## National Replication & Policy Impact

With 32 states implementing two-generation approaches, Empower UC's comprehensive evaluation creates a replication blueprint for rural communities nationwide. The program's rigorous methodology and third-party evaluation position findings to directly inform:

- **Federal TANF reauthorization** discussions
- **State-level policy reform** initiatives
- **Rural poverty alleviation** strategy development
- **Community-based intervention** scaling efforts

## Research Resources

- **Tennessee TANF Opportunity Act Baseline Scan** (Urban Institute)
- **Ongoing Evaluation Study** (MEF Associates)
- **Two-Generation Research** (Ascend at Aspen Institute)

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*This press kit provides comprehensive information about Empower Upper Cumberland's transformative approach to poverty alleviation. For specific story angles, interview requests, or additional information, contact the media representatives listed in Section 7.*