

First Steps to Bright Futures



**FIRST
STEPS**



Upper East Tennessee
Human Development Agency

The Program

The First Steps Program was established in 2023 and uses a true two-generation approach to provide families the first steps to self-sufficiency.

The First Steps Program is an awesome resource for families in our Northeast TN communities! I appreciate the opportunity to assist the class participants with their educational needs. I've been able to assist several First Step participants with their FASFA, the admissions process, and academic performance and financial aid appeals. In today's society, higher education certificates and degrees can be a major boost to a family's self-sufficiency and economic advancement. It is a joy to partner with First Steps to positively impact people's lives.

Donna Quillin

EOC Advisor with ETSU TRIO

The Upper East Tennessee Human Development Agency (UETHDA) is tackling poverty in a unique way through its Head Start and Community Services Programs. This collaboration supports Head Start families by providing education, financial support, and social resources to improve their overall well-being to help them become self-sufficient.

The program offers Head Start parents the tools to reach their goals through a series of four weekly classes. These sessions cover topics such as income management, job skills, educational opportunities, and kindergarten readiness. Mental health professionals also provide guidance on parenting and self-care. A key focus is financial literacy, helping families break the cycle of poverty and avoid predatory lending practices.

Education is a cornerstone of breaking the poverty cycle. The program gives parents resources and support to pursue higher education, improving their family's economic stability. Additionally, it provides job skills training and connects parents with employment opportunities. Many participants, who became parents at a young age, are offered parenting skills training to enhance their family life.

To ensure success, the program strengthens the connection between Head Start families and local schools. By offering advice and support from elementary school professionals, parents gain the knowledge they need to successfully transition their child into kindergarten. Ongoing follow-ups are conducted to remove any obstacles to participants' journey toward self-sufficiency.

By exempting program participants from other TANF programs, UETHDA avoids duplication of services, ensuring families receive the support they need to thrive.



The Participants

Background/Demographics

Not everyone will experience a mental illness in their life, but we all have reasons to be proactive and take steps to protect and build up our mental health—and that's exactly what parents in the First Steps program are doing. They understand the impact mental health has on our lives, and the impact our lives can have on our mental health. Whether it be learning how best to communicate with their children, processing their own trauma, or adopting new coping skills and techniques, these parents have shown me they are dedicated to taking care of themselves and their families. I've thoroughly enjoyed getting to work with the parents in the First Steps program and celebrate their willingness to learn and grow in new ways!

Casey Caudill

Northeast Regional Coordinator
Mental Health Association of East Tennessee

- A total of 40 households were selected to participate in the 2023-2024 First Steps program year.
- The majority of individuals in the program were female with 64% of household members reporting as such. The most common age group for adult household members was 25 to 44 years of age.
- The racial and ethnic diversity of the First Steps participants follows the demographics of the UETHDA service area, with the majority being white and non-Hispanic. 16.67% of participants and their household were non-white, and 13.33% were Hispanic.
- Just over 68% of adult participants in First Steps were high school graduates or held equivalency degrees, with 15.56% having less than high school or equivalent degrees. There were no adult participants with two or four year college degrees.
- For household members of participants, 29.31% were fully employed and 25.86% were employed part-time, leaving 44.83% of household members unemployed.
- According to the 2023 department of Health and Human Services poverty guidelines, 54.76% of First Steps households were in deep poverty with incomes less than 50% of the poverty level.

Background & Demographics

42	Households (2023-2024)	54.76%	Live in deep poverty
64%	Female	16.67%	Participants and their household were non-white
25-44	Most common age group	13.33%	Hispanic participants
68%	High school graduates		
0	With 2 or 4 year degree		

Program Assistance Provided

5 Main Program Parts

Economic supports
Education
Health & well-being
Social capital
Supportive assistance

First Steps is comprised of five main program domains: Economic Supports, Education, Health and Well-Being, Social Capital, and Supportive Assistance. The total cost of supportive assistance was \$135,495. This assistance ranged in scope from rent and mortgage payments, to clothing, food, and other daily essential items. Transportation expenses, such as vehicle repair, car payments, and insurance were also included in this support. Due to the ruralness of portions of the service area, and lack of adequate public transit, transportation is necessary for employment, educational opportunities, healthcare, and more. The majority of this assistance was comprised of scholarships, which were used to raise participants' financial intelligence and teach them how to budget, use extra income on essentials, and invest in their families' financial well-being. Detailed descriptions of this supportive assistance are listed in this report, with examples of how participants used scholarships included.

Participants used their scholarships to



Pay Off
Debt/Bills



Buy Christmas
Presents



Buy Gas for
Their Car



Open a
Savings Account



Make
Car
Repairs



Have Family
Time

Scholarships are used as a teaching tool and a financial investment in the lives of families that are enrolled in our First Steps classes. This human interaction and case management helps move them to self-sufficiency by increasing their financial intelligence through real-life, tangible money management practices. Participants are required to bring receipts and budgeting worksheets to each class and discuss with the group and case managers what they did or intend to do with the scholarship they receive as an incentive to attend the program.

Additional Services Provided

In addition to the First Step curriculum and program assistance, participants were also provided with other services on an individual need basis. These services include car repairs, electronic device assistance, household necessities and other additional services that may benefit them.

Staff takes participant's children for back-to-school shopping.



Numbers are based on the number of participants at the time of this document's printing.



Program Results

I am writing to share my experiences with the Upper East Tennessee Human Development Agency's First Steps Program. They have included me in the Financial Education portion of their program for over two years. During that time, I have presented workshops to their clients that discuss credit improvement and money management through debt reduction and budgeting. Following the workshops I am available to their clients for one-on-one consultations. One client just reported to me that their credit score has improved from 541 when we first met to 665 as of November 14, 2024. This client will soon be ready to get a loan for a reliable automobile which will improve their overall self-sufficiency.

Alan Pickle

America's Financial Wellbeing Coach
Operation HOPE Inside Powered
by First Horizon Bank



During the 2023-2024 Head Start school year, a total of forty students have been enrolled in First Steps across four classes. Employment and enrollment in post-secondary education or vocational education training programs were assessed at the program's intake and upon completion. Participants were asked at the start of the course for their self-reported knowledge in the key domains of social capital, health and well-being, and Education. The questions in these sections were about their emotional and mental health support, their engagement in their child's academic planning and success, their knowledge in their own educational opportunities, their knowledge in financial literacy, their knowledge in their own job opportunities, their knowledge in kindergarten readiness, their own parenting skills, and their support network and connections to those around you. These were on a 1 to 5 scale with 1 being the lowest amount of knowledge and 5 being the highest. Participants were also asked at the end of the course for their knowledge in these same domains in order to assess the change in their self-reported knowledge.

Employment

A total of 16 out of 40 (40%) participants were employed at the start of their First Step's class. At the end of the class, 23 out of 40 participants (57.5%) were employed, had a promotion, or accepted a higher paying job, an increase of 17.5%.

40% employed at program start
57.5% employed at program end

McNemar's test for Pairwise Proportions was conducted on the proportions of employed vs unemployed pre and post class. This showed a significant increase in employment outcomes. Thus, we can conclude that First Steps had a statistically significant positive impact on helping students.

Education or Certification Enrollment

First Steps participants were asked upon enrollment if they were enrolled in higher education or job training/vocational classes. 3 out of 40 (7.5%) of the participants were enrolled upon entering First Steps. At the end of their class, 18 out of 40 (45%) were enrolled in higher education or job training/vocational classes, an increase of 37.5%.

McNemar's test for pairwise proportions was also conducted for these education outcomes. It showed with 95% confidence that the proportion of students enrolled in higher education or job training/vocational classes is statistically significantly higher at the conclusion of a First Steps class than the beginning.

(7.5%) 3 out of 40

participants were enrolled in higher education or job training program upon enrollment

(37.5%) 18 out of 40

participants were enrolled in higher education or job training program at the end of class

Self-Reported Knowledge Results

Overall Averages

In the pre-class self-reported knowledge assessment, the average response score across all knowledge domains was 2.78 out of 5, with the participants' average score ranging from a low of 1.62 to a high of 4.12. The post-class self-reported knowledge assessment had an average response score of 4.48, with the participants' average score ranging from a low of 3.62 to a high of 5. The overall average score increase was 1.70, ranging from a low of 0.5 to a high of 2.88. All participants increased their self-reported knowledge from the pre-class to post-class assessments.

Domain Averages

The social capital domain was the lowest scoring domain on the pre-class self-reported knowledge assessment, with an average question response of 2.56 and education was the highest domain with a 3.29 average. The post-class self-reported knowledge assessment showed increases in all domains, with health and well-being increasing 1.35 points to 4.25, and education increasing by 1.15 points to 4.44, and social capital increasing 1.99 points to a 4.545 average, the highest score in the domain groups.

Question Averages

In the pre-class self-reported knowledge assessment, participants had the lowest average scores on the questions rating their knowledge about their educational knowledge opportunities at 2.35 points each, while engagement in their child's academic planning and success had the highest average scores at 3.325 points each. The post-class self-reported knowledge assessment saw marked increases across all knowledge questions, with participants reporting the highest average knowledge of kindergarten readiness at 4.675 points and the lowest average was their own emotional and mental health support at 4.25 points. Knowledge of their own education opportunities had the highest increase at 2.3 points, while parenting skills increased the least by 1.05 points.



Success Stories

From First Steps Participants

Participant One

Participant one in the First Steps program is a single mother raising her two daughters while working full-time and pursuing her bachelor's in business online. Despite her busy schedule, she remains deeply committed to her job, family, and the program, attending every class and follow-up session. When an unexpected surgery caused financial strain, we were able to assist with some bills during her recovery. When asked what the program meant to her, she shared: "First Steps has helped me in a lot of ways with my confidence as a mother. It's been a support group when I had nowhere else to turn to, and you'll have non-stop help in any way the team is able to help. First Steps is a life changing group if you let it be."

Participant Two

"First Steps completely changed my perception of how to deal with the everyday challenges that parents can face. I have learned so much about myself and my capabilities since being in the program. Now, I am pursuing my dream career path, all with the help, guidance, and nonstop support of First Steps."

Participant Three

The First Steps staff met participant three while recruiting for our first class in Sullivan County. She had recently moved to Tennessee from Washington state with her four children to escape a domestic violence situation. During our conversation, we learned that she had lost her job that very morning due to an injury. She had worked remotely for over 10 years but had to submit an FMLA request after a car accident left her with an arm injury. The morning after submitting the request, she received a call informing her that her job had been posted. Less than a week later, her termination was finalized. As a homeowner, she found herself struggling to pay her mortgage and support her family of five. First Steps was able to cover her mortgage payment, helping her stay in her home. She attended every class in the First Steps session and was highly engaged. She quickly partnered with the American Job Center to build her resume and apply for multiple jobs. Since then, she has secured an excellent job in Human Resources, working from home.

Participant Four

"First Steps has helped me in many different areas, and I am forever grateful for the whole team. They do not just give you what you want, they show you resources and teach you strategies on how to accomplish your goals but also hold your hand along the way. First Steps gave me a sense of family which is something I don't really have. The support and love they show is the boost I needed to get my life on the right track."

Statistical Testing

Knowledge

Normality was tested using the QQ-Plot of the differences in the pre and post knowledge test which suggested normality and the Shapiro-Wilk test confirmed that the differences were normally distributed. The overall average response showed a statistically significant increase between the pre and post class self-assessments and each individual question on the assessment also showed a statistically significant increase from the pre to post class-assessments, with the average increase being 1.70 giving a 95% percent confidence interval of between 1.50 and 1.90. Thus, First Steps significantly increased participants self-reported knowledge by an average of 1.70 out of 5 points and the true knowledge increase is between 1.50 and 1.90 with a 95% level of confidence.

Likewise, each question was tested for statistical significance using the paired t-test. All questions showed statistically significant increases in self-reported knowledge during the First Step class period. The largest mean increase was in self-reported knowledge about participants' own educational opportunities, followed by increases in rating of their support network and connections to those around them and their knowledge in kindergarten readiness of their child.



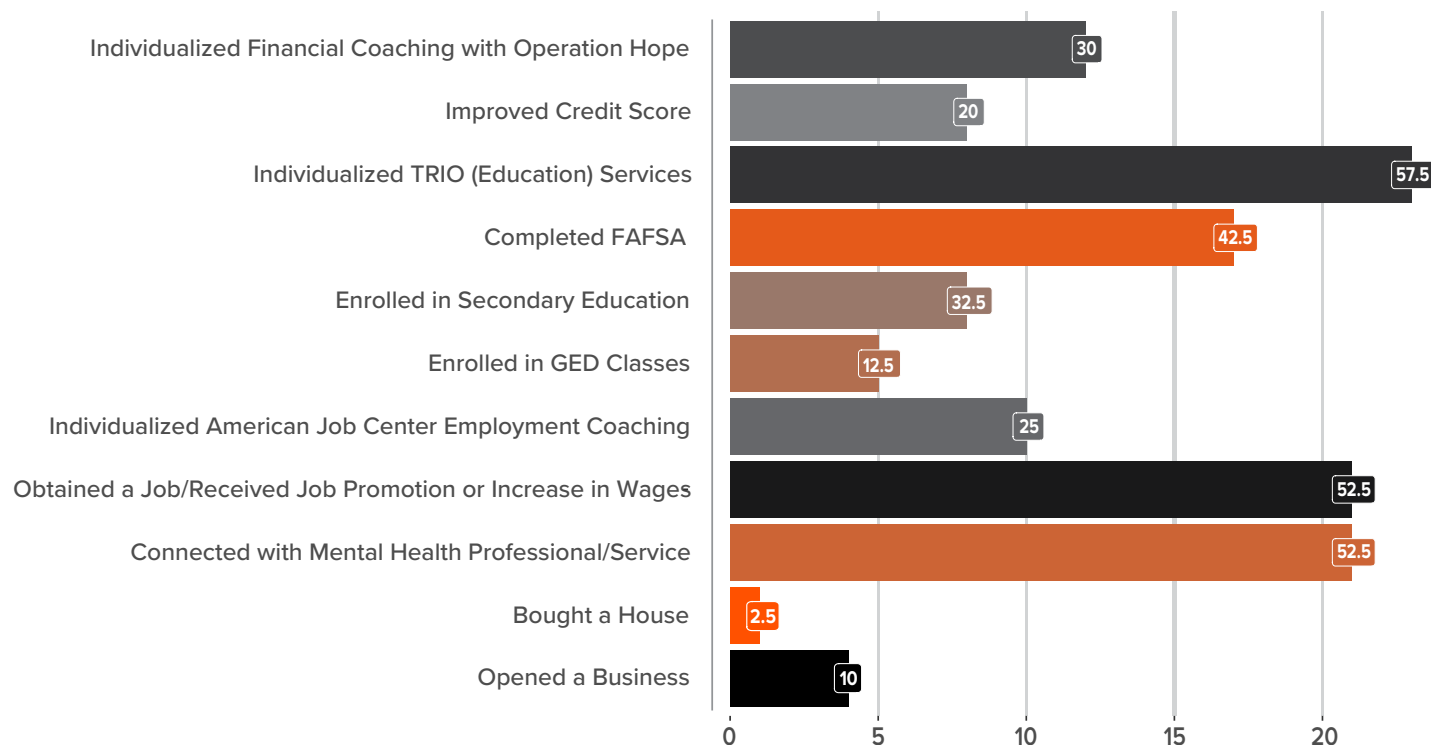
Outcomes

The results were overwhelmingly positive...

Outcomes were measured across all relevant domains for participants. The results were overwhelmingly positive and include the employment and educational outcomes stated previously, as well as all households obtaining or maintaining housing through follow-up. Participants improved their social networks, increased parental engagement with their child's academic success, and reported improved financial well-being. There was a one non-positive outcome with a participant reporting no improved financial well-being.

Outcomes

Number is percent of participants. Scale is total participants.



Numbers are based on the number of participants at the time of this document's printing.

Self-Reported Outcomes Based on Pre- and Post- Tests

97.5% Participants reported an increase in parental engagement in the academic planning and success of their child to improve classroom behavior, attendance and grades during the duration of the program based on pre- and post-tests.

100% Participants reported an improvement in parenting skills as their children's first and primary teachers during the duration of the program based on pre- and post-tests.

100% Participants reported they were able to expand their families' networks and connections to other families during the duration of the program based on pre- and post-tests.

100% Participants reported they increased their knowledge of, and access to, and utilization of, community resources during the duration of this program based on pre- and post-tests.

100% Participants reported they increased their knowledge of financial literacy during the duration of this program based on pre- and post-tests.

100% Participants reported they improved the health and well-being of themselves, and their families (physical, mental and emotional health) based on pre- and post-tests.

Conclusions

Results show that First Steps has significantly increased students self-reported knowledge across the domains of Education, Health and Well-Being, and Social Capital.

All students had an increase in reported knowledge in every domain. The Social Capital domain showed the largest increase and is likely a key contributing factor in their improvements in both knowledge and obtaining employment and furthering their education. The testimonial statements reflect this with several students speaking about how they built a community where previously they had none.

First Steps significantly increases the proportion of students who are also enrolled in higher education or job skills/vocational training during the class period and also significantly improved students' employment situation. These results are remarkable and should have lasting impacts on students' families for years to come.





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