

Class Action Lawsuit Seeks Much-Needed Reforms to Tennessee’s Juvenile Justice System for Youth with Disabilities

Lawsuit seeks statewide relief for class of young people with disabilities subjected to unlawful confinement, abuse, and denial of education and treatment

NASHVILLE, Tenn. (July 1, 2026) – Late last night, attorneys representing youth with disabilities in Tennessee’s juvenile justice system asked a federal court to certify a class action lawsuit. This lawsuit challenges a statewide system that harms vulnerable young people with disabilities while prioritizing institutional confinement over community-based care and support.

The lawsuit was filed in the U.S. District Court for the Middle District of Tennessee by Disability Rights Tennessee (DRT) and four pseudonymous plaintiffs; they are the proposed class representatives. Proposed class members are represented by attorneys from Sanford Heisler Sharp McKnight, the Youth Law Center, and Disability Rights Tennessee. The lawsuit alleges that state officials operate a juvenile justice system that routinely warehouses youth with disabilities in unnecessarily restrictive settings, and subjects them to violence, isolation, excessive force, and prolonged confinement. The current system also fails to provide the treatment, reasonable accommodations, and educational services for youth with disabilities required by federal law. The obligation to provide educational services is overseen by the Tennessee Department of Education (TDOE), and the lawsuit alleges that TDOE has failed in that regard.

The proposed class seeks to represent all young people with disabilities who are presently in or at imminent risk of entering the custody of Tennessee’s Department of Children’s Services (DCS). The defendants in the lawsuit are the State of Tennessee, DCS, DCS Commissioner Margie Quin, and TDOE Lizzette Gonzales Reynolds.

“All young people in Tennessee deserve care from the adults and systems around them. Young people with disabilities who enter Tennessee’s juvenile justice system deserve appropriate care and meaningful opportunities for rehabilitation, not abuse, neglect, or isolation,” said Anna Bass, Executive Director of Disability Rights Tennessee. “This case is about ensuring that children and youth with disabilities are safe, treated with dignity, and able to access the services and protections guaranteed by federal law, regardless of where they are placed.”

The motion for class certification argues that the experiences of the four young people at the center of the lawsuit—John Doe 1, John Doe 2, Jane Doe 1, and John Doe 3—reflect what many other young people with disabilities in DCS custody are experiencing. The lawsuit alleges that DCS policies and practices have allowed serious problems to continue across its facilities, including the use of solitary confinement, chemical spray, violence against youth, and a failure to provide even basic educational services. Rather than ensuring these facilities are safe and meeting young people’s needs, DCS has continued placing youth in restrictive institutional settings without meaningful oversight or accountability. The plaintiffs are asking Tennessee to

make urgently needed changes to its juvenile justice system so that young people with disabilities receive the protections and support they are entitled to under federal law.

“This case is about far more than the experiences of individual children,” said Kasi Wautlet, Senior Litigation Counsel at Sanford Heisler Sharp McKnight. “The systemic failures Plaintiffs are challenging affect young people with disabilities throughout Tennessee’s juvenile justice system. Class certification is essential to securing statewide reforms that ensure these vulnerable young people receive the care, education, accommodations, and protection that the law requires.”

This case presents an opportunity to ensure that Tennessee’s juvenile justice system fulfills its legal and moral obligation to children with disabilities,” said YLC Executive Director Jennifer Rodriguez. “Young people with disabilities should receive the treatment, education, and supports they need to succeed, not be subjected to unnecessary institutionalization, unsafe conditions, or practices that worsen their disabilities. We hope this case will help bring meaningful, lasting reform for youth across Tennessee.”

This lawsuit was filed on June 26, 2024, and is being brought on behalf of pseudonymous youth plaintiffs, their parents, and Disability Rights Tennessee (DRT) to ensure every young person in Tennessee can learn, heal, and be a part of their community. DRT is Tennessee’s federally designated Protection and Advocacy organization for individuals with disabilities. Read the original filing [here](#).

About Disability Rights Tennessee

Disability Rights Tennessee (DRT) is a nonprofit agency and the federally designated Protection and Advocacy agency in Tennessee. DRT protects the rights of Tennesseans living with disabilities and/or mental illness in the places where they live, work, learn, or receive services. DRT provides free advocacy, investigation, monitoring, and legal representation services in all 95 counties. Learn more or request help at www.DisabilityRightsTN.org.

About Sanford Heisler Sharp McKnight LLP

Sanford Heisler Sharp McKnight LLP is a national public interest law firm with offices throughout the United States. The firm has recovered billions of dollars on behalf of its clients and litigates complex civil rights, employment, whistleblower, public interest, and class action matters nationwide.

About Youth Law Center

The Youth Law Center (YLC) is a non-profit law firm that advocates to transform foster care and juvenile justice systems across the nation so that every child and youth can thrive. For over 40 years, the Youth Law Center has pursued policy and advocacy to protect the rights of youth in the child welfare and juvenile justice systems and to promote positive youth connections to community and family. The Youth Law Center is headquartered in San Francisco, California, with staff across the country. www.YLC.org.

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