



Tennessee Chapter

2026 VIRTUAL CONFERENCE
“Partnering with Purpose:
Turning Expertise into Action”

Date: February 18, 2026
Time: 9:45-3:30 Central Time
11-4:30 Eastern Time

REGISTRATION LINK: [CLICK HERE](#)

PDF VERSION OF PROGRAM: [CLICK HERE](#)

COST: [AER Member](#) - FREE

Non-Member - \$25

We accept donations.

CONFERENCE PAYMENT LINK: [CLICK HERE](#)

[ACVREP](#) and [CRCC](#) Credits Available

TVI's are encouraged to submit CE's for PD credit



ABOUT THE CONFERENCE

The TNAER 2026 Conference highlights the service providers and resources supporting Tennessee residents who are blind or visually impaired. We invite professionals to join a conversation on how to best use our expertise through individualized instruction.

We move beyond typical "show-and-tell" presentations to focus on a vital question: "How can we work together as dedicated colleagues to improve lives?" Our goal is to serve our students, clients, and families through meaningful collaboration.

This event creates better ways for professionals to share information and build strong connections. These efforts ensure every client will benefit from our recommendations and help TNAER continue to support our professional community.



Conference Committee Chair:

Meredith Bailey

Committee Members:

Heather McDonough,
Meredith Bailey, Christie

Elliott, Diane McCluskey, Keith Tackett and Larisa DeZayas

TN AER Board of Directors: Christie Elliott, Meredith Bailey, Patience Piesecki, Heather McDonough, Rachel Schles, Brad Blair, Quinn Howard, Cindy Adkins, Keith Tackett



STAY WITH US TO THE END! OUR ESTEEMED KEYNOTE SPEAKER BEGINS AT 2pm Central/3pm Eastern Joshua Robinson, O.D., F.A.A.O.

Dr. Joshua Robinson obtained his undergraduate degree from Indiana University and earned his doctor of optometry degree from the Illinois College of Optometry. He completed the Low Vision Rehabilitation and Ocular Disease residency program through the Illinois Eye Institute, The Chicago Lighthouse, and Spectrios Institute for Low Vision. He is a Fellow of the American Academy of Optometry and a Diplomate in the Academy's Low Vision Section.

Currently, Dr. Robinson is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Ophthalmology and Visual Sciences at VUMC and holds the Janet and Jim Ayers Directorship for Leadership in Low Vision Care. His practice combines adaptive lenses and tools with rehabilitative instruction to equip and empower individuals with permanent vision loss. By focusing on the benefits of collaborative care, he ensures that medical insights and instructional support work together so that every person can succeed.



In his keynote speech for TN AER, Dr. Robinson will share the journey that inspired him to enter the field of low vision optometry. His presentation focuses on bridging the gap between medical eye care and specialized instructional services, explaining how clinical perspectives complement the work of other professionals. Through solution-focused communication, he will demonstrate how these partnerships directly benefit every individual served.



Conference Schedule

Breaks are at your discretion.

CENTRAL TIME ZONE

9:45am Welcome

10:00am Session 1: Ethics

11:00am Session 2: Collaboration

12:00pm Session 3: Pathway

1:00pm Session 4: Tools

2:00pm Speaker: Dr. Josh Robinson

3:00pm Announcements, Awards, & Scholarships

EASTERN TIME ZONE

10:45am Welcome

11:00am Session 1: Ethics

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3:00pm Speaker: Dr. Josh Robinson

4:00pm Announcements, Awards, & Scholarships



Our strength lies in our connection through AER. As our professional home, it provides the foundation for us to support one another across all delivery models, elevating the quality of instruction at every stage of the lifespan. Together, we can find innovative ways to collaborate and uplift each other, ensuring that the individuals we serve in Tennessee benefit from the high-quality, individualized support they deserve every day.

SESSION DESCRIPTIONS

Session 1 - 10am Central/11am Eastern

Professional Ethics: The Duty to Hire Experts and Respect Their Role

We will discuss how certification of professionals – reflecting their specialized training – drives quality service. We highlight the ethical obligation certified professionals must uphold to practice to their full professional scope, and we explore the contexts in which that scope is defined. We will discuss positive ways to address accountability gaps in an unregulated environment. Our goal is to provide both blind/low vision specialists and employers with a common starting point for building the expectation of professional excellence.



Learning Objectives:

Analyze the relationship between professional codes of ethics and the duty to hire experts for specialized instruction.

Evaluate the impact of practicing to the full extent of one's role on providing individualized, high-quality services.

Apply ethical frameworks to navigate roles and responsibilities in educational and transitional realms.

Panelists:

David Veazey, Attorney at Law

Jamie Seek, M.A., SLP

Brad Blair, COMS, CATIS, CVRT

Moderator: Larisa DeZayas, COMS



Session 2 - 11am Central/12pm Eastern Collaborative Investment In Employment Outcomes

This panel brings together employment specialists and community partners to explore how collaborative investment drives career success for individuals with vision loss. Panelists will define "job readiness" and identify essential skills customers should possess before beginning vocational services. By analyzing the roles of VR, HR, and community organizations, the session highlights how to align instruction with workplace expectations. Participants will explore solution-focused strategies to improve professional collaboration, ensuring every recommendation benefits the customer's journey toward sustainable employment.

Learning Objectives:

Define "job readiness" through a collaborative lens to better align instruction with successful employment outcomes.

Analyze the roles of various community partners, such as VR and HR representatives, to improve the transition process for customers.

Evaluate current collaborative resources to identify valid tools and solutions that streamline the path to employment.

Panelists:

Trish Farmer
April Daniels
Heather McDonough, TVI
Nicole Wardlow

Moderator: K. Tackett





Session 3 - 12pm Central/1pm Eastern

The Pathway to Success: A Hierarchy of Skills for Life and Career



This presentation introduces a clear, step-by-step roadmap designed to help individuals with vision loss move from initial assessment to successful employment. We will explore how a solid foundation in nonvisual skills and sensory development serves as the base for total independence. By following this structured hierarchy—which includes mastering orientation and mobility, daily living tasks, and assistive technology—participants can gain the tools and confidence they need to reach their highest potential. Attendees will learn how these specialized recommendations benefit the learner at every stage, ensuring a smooth transition into the workplace and the community through a solution-focused approach to career readiness.

Learning Objectives:

Analyze the hierarchy of essential skills to establish a structured roadmap for sensory skill development and independence.

Apply O&M instructional models that focus on foundational sensory development as a prerequisite for career readiness.

Evaluate how specific recommendations benefit a learner's progression from basic to advanced community integration.

Presenter: Meredith Bailey



Session 4 - 1pm Central - 2pm Eastern

Feature Matching:

Partnering Learners with Appropriate AT Tools

This one-hour presentation provides a comprehensive introduction to the SETT Framework, a collaborative model designed to help teams identify the most effective assistive technology for their students. Participants will explore how to gather detailed information about the Student, their learning Environments, and the specific Tasks they need to perform before selecting assistive Tools. Rather than simply providing a device, this approach ensures we anticipate how a student will benefit from a recommended tool based on their unique strengths and sensory skill development. By focusing on feature matching and iterative trials, instructors and families work together to create an individualized system that supports the student's independence and active participation throughout their educational journey.

Learning Objectives:

Analyze student environments and tasks to identify AT features that support independence and non-visual skill development.

Apply the SETT Framework to gather data on learner strengths, ensuring individuals benefit from tailored tool recommendations.

Evaluate AT effectiveness through iterative trials to support a student's active participation and educational progress.

Presenters:

Diane McCluskey, OTR/L, ATP

Christie Elliott, COMS, CATIS





Keynote Speaker: 2pm Central/3pm Eastern

Joshua L. Robinson, OD, FAAO

Dr. Robinson is an anchor in the continuum of care for individuals with vision loss across Tennessee. As the Director of Low Vision Rehabilitation at the Vanderbilt Eye Institute, he provides the clinical foundation for patients of all ages—from early childhood through the senior years. By searching for ways to bridge the gap between clinical care and functional skills, Dr. Robinson is essential to the success of the service network that supports the blind and low-vision community throughout the state.

Chapter Business - 3pm Central/4pm Eastern Announcements, Awards, & Scholarships



This 30-minute session is a great time to catch up on our latest news and celebrate the hard work of our members. We will start with helpful updates about our chapter's upcoming plans and then present awards and scholarships to honor those who have done excellent work. It is an exciting time to meet, especially since we are officially the AER Outstanding Chapter through July 2026! This meeting allows us to recognize these big wins and share ideas that will benefit our future instruction and professional growth.

PANELIST and SPEAKER BIOS (in random order)

DAVID VEAZEY



David is an attorney licensed in Tennessee and Georgia, and currently serves as a Contracting Officer in the Pennsylvania State University's Office of Sponsored Programs.

Previously he staffed the research office of the University of Tennessee at Chattanooga, where he also led efforts to organize campus workers to improve working conditions. Before that, he was a general-practice lawyer in Chattanooga for 12 years, following several years in the non-profit sector in the U.S. and abroad.

David holds a J.D. from the University of Tennessee College of Law, a Master of Arts in Economics from Fordham University, and a Bachelor of Arts in Liberal Arts from St. John's College – Annapolis. He spends his free time volunteering at the Chattanooga Zoo and serves on the board of United Campus Workers Southeast – CWA Local 3821 and on the Tennessee Department of Health's AIDS Centers of Excellence advisory board.

JAMIE SEEK



Jamie serves as the Speech/Language and Related Services Manager at the Tennessee Department of Education. Before joining the department, she worked for over twenty years in Tennessee public schools as a speech-language pathologist, serving students with disabilities from preschool through high school. Jamie holds a bachelor's degree in Greek and Roman Studies from Rhodes College and a

master's degree in Audiology and Speech Pathology from The University of Memphis. She is passionate about collaborative practices in education and how they help students gain access to communication and educational success.



BRAD BLAIR, COMS, CATIS, CVRT

Brad Blair lives and works in west Tennessee where he serves adults with vision loss. He teaches across various skills areas including in assistive technology, braille, cane skills, and independent living. Blind from birth, Brad brings his lived experience of blindness to the table, combining it with his training to offer the best instruction he can to the people he serves. In addition to his work with a nonprofit agency, Brad serves on his state AER board and has past experience on the international

AER Board of Directors representing the needs and concerns of working professionals in the field. He also teaches in a university personnel preparation program, using his daily teaching experience to help mold the next generation of instructors. Finally, Brad is completing his Ph.D. at Northern Illinois University in educational psychology with a focus on blindness and the experiences of adult braille readers; he is also completing a separate Master's degree in research, evaluation, and assessment through NIU. Brad likes using his graduate training to improve his everyday teaching. He also plans to use his skills to help his chosen field to ask better questions, to use stronger evaluations, and to do better those things it's already doing well. In his spare time, Brad enjoys playing music, writing poetry and fiction, cooking, and playing chess.



TRISH FARMER

Ms. Farmer is currently a Program Manager of Business Services for TN Department of Human Services. Previously she served as Executive Director of the Governor's Committee for Employment of Persons with Disabilities, for three gubernatorial administrations. Prior to her appointment, she was Assistant Vice President of Finance and Audit for a health care corporation specializing in the treatment of head injuries and general rehabilitation. Her prior experience includes serving as Chief Financial

Officer for a retail, wholesale corporation which consisted of seven corporations; Senior Accountant with Deloitte and Touche; and Senior Auditor for the Comptroller's Office of the State of Tennessee.



APRIL DANIELS



April Daniels is the Manager of Transition Services at STAR Center, Inc., where she leads Pre-Employment Transition Services (Pre-ETS) and the MAPs program supporting youth and young adults with disabilities. She specializes in person-centered planning, community-based supports, and the use of enabling and assistive technology to promote independence, career exploration, and successful transitions into adulthood. April is committed to building inclusive pathways that empower individuals to achieve meaningful outcomes in education, employment, and community life.

HEATHER MCDONOUGH, TVI, M.Ed.



Heather McDonough is the Exceptional Education Advisor for both the Visually Impaired and Deaf/Hard of Hearing programs at Memphis Shelby County Schools. With over 20 years of teaching experience, predominantly teaching students with visual impairments in Nashville Public Schools, the Tennessee School for the Blind, and Memphis Shelby County Schools, she has worked with students of all ages, but predominantly high school. Heather has been instrumental in helping numerous students plan for their futures and secure scholarships to college, including one who earned the prestigious QuestBridge scholarship. She holds a bachelors degree from the University of Memphis and a masters degree from Vanderbilt University. Outside of her professional work, Heather enjoys life in Memphis with her large extended family, including a new great-nephew, and two cats. She is also passionate about animal welfare, fostering pets for the Humane Society of Memphis and Shelby County.



NICOLE WARDLOW



Nicole Wardlow is an accomplished Sales and Operations Leader with over 20 years of experience spanning sales management, business development, administrative operations, and employment placement. Currently serving as a Sales Manager at Camping World in Jackson, Tennessee, Nicole has been promoted twice and is recognized for driving performance through strategic planning, team leadership, and data-driven decision-making. She has led sales teams, implemented CRM systems that significantly improved forecasting accuracy, and partnered cross-functionally with marketing to

increase lead generation and revenue.

In addition to her sales leadership, Nicole brings a strong foundation in administrative management and workforce development. Her background includes roles in employment placement, human resources, and government administration, where she supported hiring processes, employee onboarding, scheduling, reporting, and compliance. Known for her ability to mentor others, build relationships, and manage complex operations, Nicole blends people-centered leadership with strong organizational and analytical skills. She holds a bachelor's degree in criminal justice and is highly proficient in Microsoft Office, CRM platforms, reporting, and team development.



DIANE MCCLUSKEY, OTR/L, ATP

With 38 years of experience as an occupational therapist, Diane McCluskey, OTR/L, ATP, has dedicated the majority of her career to supporting children with disabilities. Her focus shifted toward assistive technology (AT) in educational settings in 2004, eventually leading to a tenure as a district-level AT coordinator where she specialized in implementing technical solutions for student success. In 2023, she joined the Tennessee

Assistive Technology Project for Education through the Tennessee Educational Cooperative, where she continues to leverage her extensive clinical expertise as an Assistive Technology Professional to benefit students across the state.



CHRISTIE ELLIOTT, COMS, CATIS

Christie Elliott graduated from the University of Arkansas at Little Rock in 2015 with a Master of Arts in Rehabilitation of the Blind. Since 2009, she has been a dedicated member of the STAR Center team, where she spent six years as a Job Skills Instructor for adults with disabilities before transitioning into her current role. As an Orientation and Mobility Specialist, Christie provides expert instruction to individuals who are blind or visually impaired, supporting clients across the entire lifespan from birth through the end of life.

In 2022, Christie further expanded her expertise by earning a Graduate Certificate in Assistive Technology from Western Michigan University. She holds dual certifications through ACVREP as a Certified Orientation and Mobility Specialist (COMS) and a Certified Assistive Technology Instructional Specialist for the Blind and Visually Impaired (CATIS). She currently serves as the Chapter President for the Tennessee Chapter of AER, representing the diverse field of professionals dedicated to serving the blind and visually impaired community.



PANEL MODERATORS

KEITH TACKETT



Keith Marcus Tackett has worked in the field of Blind Rehabilitation for more than 30 years. He has worked for nonprofit agencies as well as state and federal. He holds certifications as a rehabilitation counselor, vision rehabilitation therapist and low vision therapist. Currently he is employed at a VA Medical Center as a Blind rehab rehabilitation specialist. When not at work, Keith enjoys traveling, playing with his two dogs and parrot, and spending time with his husband and family.

LARISA DEZAYAS

Larisa DeZayas is a Certified Orientation and Mobility Specialist (COMS) since 1997, when she earned her Honour's BA from the University of Toronto and her O&M certification from Mohawk College. Throughout her career, she has provided instruction to individuals of all ages across Wisconsin and her home state of Tennessee, notably helping develop the Advanced Low Vision Clinic at the Zablocki VA Medical Center. Larisa has served as President for both the Wisconsin and Tennessee AER chapters and is an advocate for compassionate mentorship and the continuing education of vision professionals.





SPECIAL THANKS TO MEREDITH BAILEY, CVRT, CATIS

TNAER 2026 CONFERENCE COMMITTEE CHAIR and TNAER Board President-Elect



Meredith R. Bailey brings over a decade of experience in the field of vision rehabilitation for individuals who are blind or have low vision. She holds a master's degree in Vision Rehabilitation Therapy from Western Michigan University and is certified as a Vision Rehabilitation Therapist and Assistive Technology Instructional Specialist by the Academy for Certification of Vision Rehabilitation & Education Professionals (ACVREP).

Meredith has worked across various states, providing comprehensive vision rehabilitation services, including daily living skills, assistive technology, braille instruction, and employment readiness training. Meredith serves on the Board of Directors for the Association for the Education and Rehabilitation of the Blind and Low Vision (AERBVI) and represents the Hard of Hearing community on the Governor's Council for the Deaf, Hard of Hearing, and Deaf-Blind. As a Deaf-Blind individual herself, she is deeply committed to ensuring that all individuals have access to the services they need to live fulfilling lives on their own terms. Her dedication to advocacy and empowerment fuels her passion for creating inclusive opportunities for independence and self-determination among those with sensory disabilities.



THE 2026 TN AER CONFERENCE COMMITTEE WOULD LIKE TO EXTEND OUR WARMEST THANKS TO:

AER Main Office Executive and
Administrative Staff

All the Panelists, Committee Members,
and Attendees!

William Koehler, M.Ed. COMS TVI

STAR Center

Signal Centers - Assistive Technology

Allied
Instructional
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Association for the
Education and
Rehabilitation of the
Blind and Visually
Impaired (AERBVI) and
the benefits of
membership, see**

www.aerbvi.org/membership





From the BYLAWS:
ARTICLE II. PURPOSE

The purpose of the TN AER shall be to assist the promotion, development, and improvement of all phases of education and rehabilitation of persons who are blind, low vision, visually impaired and Deaf-Blind. This shall be accomplished through:



in

- Increasing public understanding of the social and economic gains for individuals and for society by providing opportunities for persons who are blind, low vision, visually impaired and Deaf-Blind to become self-sufficient, self-supporting, and contributing members of society.
- Providing a forum on an international, regional, and local level for the discussion of issues relating to services for persons who are blind, low vision, visually impaired and Deaf-Blind and the prevention of visual impairment; and providing publications and conferences relating to the purpose.
- Encouraging an interdisciplinary approach to programs or services for persons who are blind, low vision, visually impaired and Deaf-Blind through the maximum use of knowledge and skills of related professions.
- Fostering research to advance knowledge and skills for the improvement of services for persons who are blind, low vision, visually impaired and Deaf-Blind.
- Assisting in the development of professional standards for personnel engaged in providing specialized programs and services for persons who are blind, low vision, visually impaired and Deaf-Blind.
- Assisting in the development of professional standards for specialized programs serving persons who are blind, low vision, visually impaired and Deaf-Blind.
- Initiating and cooperating with other groups in the development of programs of social action for the benefit of persons who are blind, low vision, visually impaired and Deaf-Blind.
- Increasing public understanding of the nature and cause of blindness and visual impairment and its impact upon individuals and society.

