



Kentucky Employment First Council

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Employment First Council

Employer Education and Engagement Committee

Meeting Minutes

August 5, 2026

1:00 pm – 2:00 pm (EST)

Zoom

Meeting ID: 865 1127 0774

Members' Present

Committee Chair, Merry Reid Sheffer, Council Chair, Katie Wolf Whaley, Bev Harp, Christina Forster, Amber Jhonson, Amanda Hutchison, Deana Wilson Kimbler, Laurie Mays, and Deborah Minton

Members Absent

Rebecca Wilson and Susan Brown

Staff Present

Anu Kumari and Susie Edwards

Welcome | Introduction | Agenda Review

Employment First Committee Chair Merry Reid Sheffer welcomed attendees. Introductions were made. The agenda was reviewed and acknowledged.

Autism-Informed Employer Series Discussion Update/Ideas

The committee received an update on the [Autism-Informed Employer \(AIE\)](#) video series, reviewed recent and upcoming video content, and discussed future topics to support inclusive employment practices.

Key discussion points included:

- Episode 7 had been distributed, and materials for Episode 8 were prepared for August release.
- The series began with videos focused on the hiring process, followed by workplace support topics, and now focuses on workplace communication.
- Current communication topics include clear and precise communication with autistic employees, understanding common communication characteristics such as repeating phrases and discussing special interests, and responding appropriately to direct communication styles.
- Members emphasized that the series is designed to increase employer understanding of autism rather than expecting autistic employees to change their communication styles and encouraged continued promotion through employer networks, partner organizations, and social media platforms.
- The committee discussed potential future video topics, including strategies for supporting workplace boundaries when an autistic employee becomes highly focused on a coworker or supervisor.
- Members were reminded that the next quarterly virtual discussion session will be held on [September 24, 2026, from 12:00 p.m. to 1:00 p.m. \(EDT\)](#). The sessions are intentionally not recorded to encourage open discussion and provide practical workplace scenarios that expand on the monthly video content.

Revisit Training Innovation Project (TIP) Ideas

Christina Forster, representing the University of Kentucky Human Development Institute's [Training Innovation Project \(TIP\)](#), provided an update on ongoing TIP activities. She reported that Beth Potter and Kathy Sheppard-Jones are finalizing the 2027 training schedule.

Key discussion points included:

- *The First TIP Virtual Summit will be held on September 22, 2026, from 1:00 p.m. to 4:00 p.m. The summit will include presentations by Dr. Phil Brumro.*
- *The next TIP Learn at Lunch session, "Services Available from Vocational Rehabilitation to Support Businesses and Employees," will be held on August 18, 2026, from 12:00 p.m. to 1:00 p.m. (EDT). Ryan Henson will present on services available through the Kentucky Office of Vocational Rehabilitation and the Employer Services Branch. Recordings of previous Learn at Lunch sessions,*

including presentations by Merry Reid Sheffer and Laurie Mays, remain available on the TIP website.

- Council Chair Katie Wolf Whaley suggested exploring opportunities for Bev Harp to present the Autism-Informed Employer Series through TIP to increase awareness among employment service providers. Christina noted that Bev had previously presented for TIP and supported continued collaboration.
- Members were encouraged to continue submitting recommendations for future TIP training topics and presenters

Annual Report Recommendation Discussion

The committee discussed activities completed during the year for inclusion in the Employment First Council Annual Report, including presentations, employer outreach efforts, and partnerships that promote Competitive Integrated Employment. Members also reviewed the status of regional [Coalition Forward](#) partnerships.

Key discussion points included:

- Amber Johnson reported that the Henderson/Owensboro regional coalition will continue meeting, maintain quarterly events, expand its advisory board, and strengthen partnerships with local chambers of commerce.
- Deana Wilson Kimbler reported that Louisville, Somerset, and Morehead plan to continue their collaborative work, while the future structure of Northern Kentucky remains under discussion.
- Members discussed updating the Employment First Council's employer Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ) webpage to replace outdated Coalition Forward contact information. Deana Wilson Kimbler indicated that the Office of Vocational Rehabilitation could serve as the initial point of contact while regional partnerships continue to evolve, and the committee supported this approach while continuing to evaluate future needs.
- Members discussed whether future Annual Report recommendations should include the development of a coordinated statewide employer engagement network following the transition of Coalition Forward. The committee agreed to continue monitoring regional efforts before considering a formal recommendation.

Public Comments

- Members were informed that the Coalition FWD Annual Career Fair will be held on Thursday, October 15, 2026, from 10:00 a.m. to 1:00 p.m. at the Kosair Shrine Center, Bardstown Road, Louisville, Kentucky.
- Committee Chair Merry Reid Sheffer shared information about Mattingly Edge's Gather for Good networking event, scheduled for September 10, 2026, and invited members to participate.
- Members were encouraged to continue sharing employment-related events, partnership opportunities, and committee ideas between meetings

Adjournment

Employment First Committee Chair Merry Reid Sheffer thanked everyone for their contribution and adjourned the meeting.

Next Meeting Date

Wednesday, September 02, 2026

1:00 pm- 2:00pm (EST)