



Andy Beshear  
Governor

Jamie Link  
Education & Labor Cabinet Secretary

## Employer Education and Engagement Committee

### Minutes

February 12<sup>th</sup>, 2025

1:00pm – 2:00pm

**Zoom Only**

### Members Present:

Chair, Merry Reid Sheffer, Council Chair, Katie Wolf Whaley, Becky Wilson, Amanda Hutchison, Melissa Marvel, Kimberly Wickert and Todd Coffey

### Members Absent

Dawn Gardner and Jessica Beaven.

### Staff Present

Nanci Howard, Vocational Rehabilitation Administrator, Kristen Beach, KYOVR Assistant Director, and Anu Kumari, KYOVR Administrative Specialist Senior.

### Welcome/Announcements:

Committee Chair, Merry Reid Sheffer and Administrator, Nanci Howard welcomed everyone to the meeting. Introductions were held. The agenda was reviewed by all participants.

### RETAIN Kentucky Partnership Updates:

#### Upcoming February Webinar:

Chair, Merry Reid Sheffer shared an update on RETAIN Kentucky Partnership. She stated that Kentucky's Employment First Council and RETAIN Kentucky presenting the Employer Seminar Series.

- Topic: Resources Employer can use to Promote Stay at and Return to Work
- Date: February 18<sup>th</sup>, 2025
- Time: 12:00- 12:45pm
- Speakers: Elizabeth Thompson and Kimberly Wickert
- Focus: Helping employees stay, return to, or enter the workforce by sharing resources.
- Registration [Link](#) was provided.

#### **Upcoming March Webinar:**

- Topic: Employer Supports for Families
- Date: March 13<sup>th</sup>, 2025
- Time: 12:00- 12:45pm
- Speakers: Subject Matter Experts, Kate Dean and Bethany Dean (HDI)
- Focus:
  - State and national resources for supporting employees with young children.
  - Kentucky based examples of employer-child care partnerships.
  - Strategies to assess employee needs and KY based resources available to assist.
  - Kentucky programming and support for employers regarding childcare.
- Registration [Link](#) was provided.

#### **Upcoming April/May Webinar:**

- Some committee suggestions for topics for the upcoming April and May Employer Seminar Series were:
  - Sarah Dixon from Unified Sign (to be followed up on by Kimberly Wickert).
  - Summit Academy - working with local businesses on student internships.
  - Edge Employment - providing pre-employment transition services.
  - Employer Incentives & Apprenticeship programs still under consideration - awaiting a subject matter expert.

Committee members continue to actively seek speakers and employers to recommend to Kimberly Wickert and KYRETAIN staff.

### **Kentucky Chamber of Commerce Disability Hiring Academy:**

Committee Chair, Merry Reid Sheffer initiated a discussion regarding the Disability Hiring Academy offered through the Kentucky Chamber of Commerce. Several committee members discussed the topics offered at the Academy. Kimberly Wickert shared positive survey responses, particularly on tabletop discussions with individuals with disabilities, and participants who attended requested more of these interactions.

#### **Employment First Initiatives and Disability Hiring Academy Support:**

- Kimberly Wickert suggested providing specific examples of how individuals with disabilities have successfully navigated job accommodations and employer relationships.
- Council Chair, Katie Wolf Whaley, said she presented at the event on Employment First and provided information on the Vocational Rehabilitation (VR) and provider network and emphasized the network's role in connecting businesses with support.

- Katie Wolf Whaley suggested creating a panel of providers to connect businesses with agencies.
- Kimberly Wickert suggested focusing on scalable action items for future academies.
- Merry Reid Sheffer agreed with focusing on successful existing programs.
- Melissa Marvel supported the idea of a webinar series showcasing community rehabilitation programs (CRPs) and how they benefit employers.
- Melissa Marvel suggested a "speed dating" style event to connect employers and providers for informal discussions.
- Kimberly Wickert suggested about 'provider fair' approach involving Holly Hendricks, Ron O'Hair and Erin Gwin from OVR (Office of Vocational Rehabilitation).
- Merry Reid Sheffer seeks to enhance the Academy's impact on workers with disabilities and she plans to review Academy materials and suggests a follow-up conversation, expressing interest in a CRP panel or presentation.

## **Review of 'Employer Section' in Frequently Asked Questions Document:**

### **Q. What are the benefits of hiring individuals with disabilities?**

**Answer:** Hiring individuals with disabilities can enhance workplace diversity, increase productivity, and improve employee morale. Additionally, you may qualify for tax credits such as the [Work Opportunity Tax Credit \(WOTC\)](#). If someone works with an Employment Specialist, that professional can also offer additional support in understanding your business needs and matching the appropriate applicants.

## **Committee Suggestions:**

### **Enhancing Employer Benefits and Resources:**

- Committee focused on improving the document's description of employer benefits related to hiring individuals with disabilities.
- Katie Wolf Whaley suggested to adding a resource section listing various benefits beyond the Work Opportunity Tax Credit (WOTC), including other relevant programs.

### **Addressing Workforce Crisis and Strategic Hiring:**

- Committee Chair, Merry Reid Sheffer, suggested to include information on strategic hiring to improve productivity.
- The "JAN program" (Job Accommodation Network) also addressed.

### **Ensuring Consistent Agency Terminology:**

- KYOVR Assistant Director, Kristen Beach, suggested using consistent terms such as, "State Vocational Rehabilitation Agency" or "OVR" throughout the document to avoid confusion.

### **Utilizing Success Stories for Employer Outreach:**

- Rebecca Wilson suggested referencing existing programs like UPS to provide examples for employers.
- Committee Chair, Merry Reid Sheffer proposed adding resources like Kentucky RETAIN webinars and success stories from the Employment Files YouTube channel.
- Melissa Marvel highlighting employer success stories from UPS, TLC and other companies as potential resources for employers.

- Kristen Beach proposed to connect employer-to-employer contact to promote the hiring of people with disabilities.

### **2025 Annual Report Recommendations:**

KYOVR Administrator, Nanci Howard, requested recommendations for the 2025 annual report. Katie Wolf Whaley suggested adding that the Employment First Council participated in and provided resources for the Chamber of Commerce's First Disability Hiring Academy and co-branded webinars with KYRETAIN. Merry Reid Sheffer suggested including the KY RETAIN series.

### **Project NEON Updates:**

KYOVR Administrator, Nanci Howard, provided an update on Project NEON (National Expansion on Employment Opportunities Network). Nanci stated that due to staff changes, she will no longer be the point of contact for Project NEON, and Staff Assistant, Betty Whittaker will be new point of contact for Project NEON.

### **Additional Announcements:**

Committee chair, Merry Reid Sheffer announced a Beignet Bash fundraiser for her organization on March 4<sup>th</sup>, 2025 at the Old Louisville Brewery, featuring a silent auction and fresh beignets. Melissa Marvel mentioned her organization's "Glitz" event will be held on February 15<sup>th</sup>, 2025 at the Kosair's Shriners Center, featuring a live band, DJ, and a celebration of individuals with disabilities.

**Public comment:** No comment.

### **Next Meeting:**

- **Date:** March 12<sup>th</sup>, 2024
- **Time:** 1:00 pm to 2:00 pm



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