



Andy Beshear
Governor

Jamie Link
Education and Labor Cabinet Secretary

Employer Education and Engagement Committee

Minutes
February 12th, 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 18th,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 13th,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 seeks 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 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 4th, 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 15th, 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 12th, 2024

Time: 1:00 pm to 2:00 pm

Administrator: Nanci Howard

500 Mero Street • 4th Floor NE • Frankfort, KY • 40601

Toll-Free: (800) 372 - 7172 • Direct: (502) 782-3421 • Email: Nanci.Howard@ky.gov

Created by: Anu Kumari, Administrative Specialist Senior

Education and Labor Cabinet, Office of Vocational Rehabilitation

500 Mero Street • 4th Floor NE • Frankfort, KY • 40601

Direct: (502) 782-1409 • Email: anukumari@ky.gov



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Jamie Link
Education and Labor Cabinet Secretary

Employer Education and Engagement Committee

Minutes
April 9, 2025
1:00pm – 2:00pm
Zoom Only

Members Present:

Chair, Merry Reid Sheffer, Amanda Hutchison, Deana Wilson Kimbler, Kimberly Wickert, Rebecca Wilson, Zachary Sappenfield and Aaron Poynter.

Members Absent:

Dawn Gardner and Jessica Beaven, Katie Wolf Whaley, Todd Coffey, and Becky Wilson.

Staff Present:

Nanci Howard, KYOVR, Administrator, Kristen Beach, KYOVR Assistant Director, Betty Whittaker, KYOVR Staff Assistant and Anu Kumari, KYOVR Administrative Specialist Senior.

Welcome:

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

Announcements:

KYOVR Administrator, Nanci Howard announced and shared information about the upcoming office of vocational rehabilitation order of selection public hearing.

- Date: April 14th, 2025.
- Topic: Order of Selection categories.
- Sessions: Two Session- (Morning session and an evening session).
- Time: 10:00–10:30 AM EDT and 6:00–6:30 PM EDT.
- Format: Hybrid via Zoom.
- Platform:
- Morning Session- [Meeting ID: 871 0116 9402](#)
- Evening Session- [Meeting ID: 840 7235 5077](#)

She encouraged participants to check the KYOVR [Website](#) for more information under the heading “Order of Selection.”

Kentucky Chamber of Commerce Disability Hiring Academy:

Chair, Merry Reid Sheffer reported on the Disability Hiring Academy organized by the Kentucky Chamber. The Employer Education and Engagement Committee aimed to support existing projects.

Their strategy involved promoting Employment First initiatives through social media and partner outreach.

Merry shared that her meeting had connected Amanda Owen with Laurie Mays at the Kentucky Chamber, during which she learned about several hiring academies, including:

- Multiple Hiring Academy
- Second Chance Employment
- Veterans Hiring Academy
- Disability Hiring Academy

Merry shared Laurie Mays prospective regarding the Disability Hiring Academy. The Academy’s primary audience included community businesses, employer attendees, and human resources professionals, rather than service providers.

They had discussed potential future collaborations, including:

- Providing Laurie Mays access to providers to review curriculum.

- Connecting her with employees and employers to discuss training and retention strategies

Laurie Mays had planned to begin organizing the next Disability Hiring Academy in August 2025 and intended to reach out to the committee at that time.

Laurie had highlighted the success of a panel featuring employees with disabilities and their employers, who also facilitated collaborative discussions.

Chair Merry Reid Sheffer opened the floor for questions, comments, and additional input regarding the Disability Hiring Academy. No questions, comments, or suggestions were presented by the committee.

RETAIN Kentucky Partnership Updates:

Upcoming April Webinar:

Chair, Merry Reid Sheffer requested an update on the RETAIN Kentucky Partnership. Kimberly Wickert provided the update and stated that the Kentucky Employment First Council and RETAIN Kentucky had jointly presented the Employer Seminar Series.

Topic: RETAIN Kentucky & Employment First presents: Employer Strategies for Recruitment and Retention.

- Date: April 16th, 2025
- Time: 12:00- 12:45pm ET
- Speakers: Sarah Dixon, Unified Sign and Designs
- Focus:
- Strategies to recruit an inclusive workforce,
- Ways to retain employees,
- Success stories.
- Registration [Link](#) was provided.

Kimberly noted that RETAIN services were ending on April 30th, 2025. She offered to share her documented processes including recruiting presenters, setting up meetings, obtaining slide decks, and preparing marketing materials with the Employment First Council and Katie Wolf Whaley to help ensure a smooth transition.

Chair, Merry inquired about document processes related to employer engagement webinars and potential interest from other organizations.

Kimberly mentioned that early discussions with Katie Wolf Whaley and suggested the Supported Employment Project as a possible support partner.

She emphasized the voluntary of the Employment First Council members existing workloads. Kimberly Wickert committed to exploring additional potential partners and reporting back to the committee.

Merry Reid Sheffer expressed confidence in identifying new partners and highlighted upcoming presentations, including Sarah Dixon on customized roles and another by Sherry Glenn from Brown-Forman. She reviewed the project's success and invited updates or new ideas from Kimberly Wickert and Betty Whittaker.

Brainstorming for Future Projects Discussion:

Chair, Merry Reid Sheffer discussed with committee about the Brainstorming for future project including support for the Advocacy and Education Committee's FAQ handbook. She encouraged suggestions for supporting other committees' projects or exploring innovative collaborations with external agencies, while acknowledging the constraints of volunteer time.

2025 Annual Report Recommendations:

Kentucky Office of Vocational Rehabilitation Administrator, Nanci Howard, requested recommendations for inclusion in the 2025 Annual Report. Chair, Merry Reid Sheffer, suggested incorporating the KY RETAIN webinar/seminar project. She proposed that the committee could support the initiative by participating in a curriculum review or by facilitating connections for the Disability Hiring Academy, scheduled for August 2025. She acknowledges that the initiative was still in process.

Additional Announcements:

Chair, Merry Reid Sheffer inquired about upcoming events from other participants organizations.

Supported Employment Training Project

Committee Member, Amanda Hutchison shared a supported employment training project. She provided a [link](#) to a newly launched book club focused on "*Demystifying Disability*" highlighted the committee features includes welcoming environment and the flexibility for participants to join at any time or read at their own pace.

Committee Member, Zachary Sappenfield shared upcoming "Nuts and Bolts" classes were mentioned, and he offered to share the [registration link](#). He briefly described with committee about the focus of the "Nuts and Bolts" classes. Which covered various

aspects of supported employment, including supported employment services and social role valorization. He noted that the recordings were available on the STEP website.

KYOVR Administrator, Nanci Howard reminded council members about the availability of Employment First infographics and tabletop banner, offering them to anyone in need for upcoming events.

Upcoming Job Fair:

Committee Member, Deana Wilson Kimbler announced upcoming commonwealth of Kentucky's Virtual Job Fair.

- Date: April 16th, 2025
- Time:
 - 10:00 A.M. – 11:00 A.M. - Veterans & Military Families
 - 11:00 A.M. – 1:00 P.M. - Open to All Job Candidates
- Host: The Kentucky Department of Veterans Affairs.
- Features:
 - An exclusive opportunity to connect with multi-sector employers such as Humana, Nucor Tubular Products, Starbucks, the University of Kentucky, others as well as job seekers from across the Commonwealth.

She shared the event link with committee members.

Future virtual job fairs will take place on the third Wednesday of each month in 2025. Upcoming dates are:

- May 21, 2025
- June 18, 2025
- July 16, 2025
- August 20, 2025
- September 17, 2025
- October 15, 2025
- November 19, 2025
- December 2025 – no virtual job fair

Public comment:

No comment addressed.

Next Meeting:

Date: May 14th,2024

Time: 1:00 pm to 2:00 pm

Administrator: Nanci Howard

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Toll-Free: (800) 372 - 7172 • Direct: (502) 782-3421 • Email: Nanci.Howard@ky.gov

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Direct: (502) 782-1409 • Email: anukumari@ky.gov



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Employer Education and Engagement Committee

Minutes
June 11, 2025
1:00pm – 2:00pm (EST)

Attendees:

Chair, Merry Reid Sheffer, Rebecca Becky Wilson,

Staff Attendees:

Nanci Howard, Kentucky Office of Rehabilitation (KYOVR) Administrator, and Betty Whittaker, KYOVR Staff Assistant.

Members Absent:

Dawn Gardner and Jessica Beaven, Katie Wolf Whaley, Todd Coffey, Amanda Hutchison, Kimberly Wickert, Zachary Sappenfield, and Aaron Poynter.

Guests Present:

Bev Harp, Innovative Supports for Autistic Workers (ISAW).

Staff Absent:

Kristen Beach and Deana Wilson-Kimbler

Welcome:

Employment First Committee Chair, Merry Reid Sheffer welcomed everyone to the meeting. The agenda was reviewed by all participants.

Job Accommodation Network (JAN) Employer Handbook Discussion:

It was suggested using the JAN Employer Handbook as a tool for the committee to repurpose and use to educate employers through the work of the committee. No further discussion was held.

Innovative Supports for Autistic Workers (ISAW):

Bev Harp of the ISAW project provided a brief presentation to committee members and discussed ways on how the Employer Education and Engagement Committee could support the program's efforts. Bev shared a [link](#) to the ISAW curriculum and resources, noting that the training is open to anyone interested in learning more about ISAW. Bev proposed that the Employment First Council could assist by developing promotional videos to help educate employers. One suggestion was to present three themed promotional videos per quarter, each followed by a 10-minute discussion to address employer questions. The committee also discussed surveying employers by utilizing the SurveyMonkey platform in advance to identify questions employers would like addressed in the videos. The RETAIN Kentucky list serv and collaboration with the Kentucky Chamber of Commerce were identified as potential resources for outreach and distribution.

2025 Annual Report Recommendations:

It was recommended highlighting committee collaboration with the Kentucky Chamber of Commerce in support of ISAW promotional videos, as well as exploring potential partnership opportunities with the Coalition for Workforce Diversity.

Additional Discussion:

Chair, Merry Reid Sheffer reported on a meeting with Laurie Mays from the Kentucky Chamber held on April 3rd, 2025, during which she offered the committee's expertise to support the upcoming Disability Hiring Academy. The academy is scheduled for February or March 2026, with planning set to begin in August 2025. Laurie Mays is expected to reach out in early 2026 to initiate collaboration, which will include reviewing materials,

providing input, and introducing job candidates with disabilities to serve as learning partners in the academy. Callie Miracle from the Kentucky Chamber of Commerce is scheduled to present at the Employment First Council quarterly meeting on July 11th, 2025, at 1:00pm (EST) Chair, Merry Reid-Sheffer, stated she would reach back out to Kitty Zachery and Susan Brown to see if Employment First can amplify their efforts as well.

KYOVR Administrator, Nanci Howard discussed the [Frequently Asked Questions](#) document being developed by the Advocacy and Education Committee. She noted that all committee members had the opportunity to provide feedback.

Action Items:

- Bring stakeholders together to discuss promotional videos and trainings for ISAW.
- Utilize the Employment First Council website as a resource for outreach of promotional materials for ISAW and other organizations working together with the committee.
- Utilize SurveyMonkey to gather employer feedback to prepare for collaborative efforts.
- To expand efforts beyond the Employer Education and Engagement committee to include the Coalition for Workforce Diversity and the Kentucky Chamber of Commerce.
- The ISAW project will become a standing item on future committee agendas.
- Invite Bev Harp, Susan Brown, Kitty Zachery, and Callie Miracle to the next Employer Education and Engagement Committee meeting on July 9th, 2025, at 1:00pm (EST).

Public Comment:

No public comment addressed.

Adjournment:

Chair, Merry Reid Sheffer thanked everyone for their contribution and adjourned the meeting.

Next Meeting:

Date: July 9th, 2025

Time: 1:00pm to 2:00pm

Administrator: Nanci Howard

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Employer Education and Engagement Committee

Minutes
August 13th, 2025
1:00pm – 2:00pm (EST)

Council Members Present:

Committee Chair, Merry Reid-Sheffer, Council Chair, Katie Wolf Whaley, Rebecca “Becky” Wilson, Zachary Sappenfield, and Amanda Hutchinson

Council Members Absent:

Dawn Gardner, Jessica Beaven, and Todd Coffey

Committee Members Absent:

Aaron Poynter and Melissa Marvel

Staff Present:

Nanci Howard, Kristen Beach, and Deana Wilson-Kimble

Staff Absent:

Anu Kumari Betty Whittaker

Council Chair, Katie Wolf Whaley announced she has joined the TEAMKY Virtual Job Fair workgroup for veterans, their families and employers. She will send the informational flyer to the committee.

Innovative Supports for Autistic Workers (ISAW) Update/Discussion

Committee Chair, Merry Reid Sheffer provided a recap of the June meeting for those absent. She said Bev Harp from the Innovation Supports for Autistic Workers (ISAW) provided a presentation to the committee in June regarding a conversational training for employers about hiring individuals with Autism and the benefits. The idea is to make the training and material more interactive. Conversation was held regarding how the Employer Education and Engagement Committee could assist with ISAW. Merry continued by reminding the committee of their partnership with KYRETAIN and their Employer Seminar Series. Staff from the KYRETAIN project has provided the committee with their listserv to use to promote the ISAW training as well as posting on social media sites and webpages. The idea is to also use SurveyMonkey to survey attendees who attend the ISAW presentations and to investigate for potential future topics and collect ongoing data. It was suggested the trainings occur every quarter. UKHDI will assist with the platform.

Committee Chair, Merry Reid Sheffer also mentioned inviting Kitty Jones from the Owensboro Chamber of Commerce, Callie Miracle and Laurie Mays from the Kentucky Chamber of Commerce, Kitty Zachery and Susan Brown from the Louisville Coalition for Workforce Diversity, Amanda Owen from the Owensboro Coalition, and Bev Harp to the next committee meeting in September.

2025 Annual Report Recommendations

Vocational Rehabilitation Administrator, Nanci Howard, provided the committee with a timeline of the completion of the annual report.

- Mid-July – Preparation and planning for annual report.
- Early August – Brainstorming Session with EC.
- Early September – Touch base with EC on progress.
- Late September – Complete report draft.
- September 30th – Send draft report with meeting materials to full council.
- October 10th - Present to the full council for review and potential motion to approve.
- October 13th – move through appropriate Cabinet channels for review and/or edits.
- December 1st – on the Governor’s desk!

Items to include in the annual report:

- Presentation given at the TASH Conference in Louisville on Employment First by Merry Reid Sheffer will be included in the annual report.
- The TEAMKENTUCKY Virtual Job Fair workgroup.

Additional Discussion:

Council Chair, Katie Wolf Whaley, mentioned an upcoming training for providers on how to speak to and engage with employers. The training will allow providers to gain the knowledge and language to interact with employers effectively.

A Job Development and Networking in-person training will be held at the McDowell Center in Louisville on Wednesday, August 27th. Two sessions will be offered at the following times:

9:00–11:00 AM

1:00–3:00 PM

The training will count for 2 hours of CEUs. If committee members are interested, they must rsvp by August 25th.

Committee Chair, Merry Reid Sheffer announced that Mattingly Edge has a new Executive Director.

No further discussion was held.

Public Comment

No public comment addressed.

Adjournment

Chair, Merry Reid Sheffer thanked everyone for their contribution and adjourned the meeting.

Next Meeting

Date: September 10th, 2025

Time: 1:00pm to 2:00pm

Administrator: Nanci Howard

500 Mero Street • 4th Floor NE • Frankfort, KY • 40601

Toll-Free: (800) 372 - 7172 • Direct: (502) 782-3421 • Email: Nanci.Howard@ky.gov

Created by: Anu Kumari, Administrative Specialist Senior

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500 Mero Street • 4th Floor NE • Frankfort, KY • 40601

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Education and Labor Cabinet Secretary

Employer Education & Engagement Committee

Minutes
September 10th, 2025
1:00pm – 2:00pm (EST)

Attendees:

Merry Reid Sheffer, Katie Wolf Whaley, Laurie Mays, Terry Madden, Zachary Sappenfield, and Amanda Hutchinson.

Staff Attendees:

Nanci Howard, Kentucky Office of Vocational Rehabilitation Administrator, Anu Kumari, Kentucky Office of Vocational Rehabilitation Administrative Specialist Senior, KYOVR Assistant Director II, Kristen Beach, and KYOVR Staff Assistant, Betty Whittaker.

Members Absent:

Dawn Gardner, Jessica Beaven, Todd Coffey, Rebecca Wilson, , Kitty Jones, and Aaron Poynter.

Guests Present:

Bev Harp, Innovative Supports for Autistic Workers (ISAW).

Welcome:

Employment First Committee Chair, Merry Reid Sheffer, welcomed everyone to the meeting. Introductions were held. All participants reviewed the agenda.

ISAW Update and Discussion

Employment First Committee, Merry Reid Sheffer emphasized the importance of continuing the progress and momentum created by the Kentucky RETAIN Program and sustaining employer engagement efforts. With the conclusion of Kentucky RETAIN in May 2025, the committee has identified a new opportunity to collaborate with Bev Harp and the Innovative Supports for Autistic Workers (ISAW) program.

ISAW/Employment First Monthly Video Collaboration Series

To extend the reach of autism-informed employer training, ISAW and Employment First will begin producing a series of short, topic-specific videos. These will serve as practical resources for employers in areas such as:

- The benefits of hiring autistic workers
- Interviewing and onboarding strategies
- Workplace accommodations (e.g., sensory and social communication supports)

The Committee also discussed recruiting employer questions to guide video content and invite employers to participate in the series in an effort to guide other employers on the benefits of hiring individuals with Autism

The Committee will host quarterly, interactive gatherings, via Zoom, to allow employers to discuss the video content, ask questions, and share best practices. These sessions will be hosted on the UKHDI platform.

Timeline

- Early October 2025 – Release of the first short video
- Early November & December 2025 – Additional monthly videos released
- January 2026 – First interactive employer session (meeting format, not webinar)

Monthly Video Series Outreach Efforts

- ISAW's newsletter distribution will support ongoing outreach for the series.
- The Kentucky RETAIN webinar listserv, coordinated by KYOVR Staff Assistant Betty, will serve as the initial audience base.
- Partners such as the Kentucky Chamber and the Coalition for Workforce Diversity will help amplify promotion and extend employer engagement.
- All videos will be archived online for ongoing access by employers.
- Bev Harp and the ISAW team will lead content development and facilitate discussions.

Evaluation

Following each session, surveys will be distributed to capture employer feedback, guide future video topics, and measure impact. The UKHDI Qualtrics platform will be utilized to streamline collection and reporting.

Policy of state guardianship

The committee highlighted several policy-related challenges that must be addressed to strengthen employment opportunities:

- Guardianship requirements create significant barriers for individuals with disabilities seeking employment.
- Challenges include:
 - Obtaining required occupational licensure..
 - Signing new-hire paperwork, where guardians must provide authorization.
 - Receiving wages or accessing pay when bank cards cannot be issued in the individual's name.

These issues highlight the need for clearer and more consistent policies across regions. Guardianship language has recently been incorporated into a draft Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) between Vocational Rehabilitation (VR), Medicaid, and other partners, which may provide a framework for addressing these concerns.

2025 Annual report recommendations

- Employment First Council Chair, Katie Wolf Whaley, and KYOVR Administrator Nanci Howard will incorporate identified policy barriers and solutions into the draft Annual Report.
- Committee will review the draft to ensure priority issues, including guardianship and accommodations, are accurately represented.

Additional discussion

- Employment First Council Chair, Katie Wolf Whaley, reminded and shared with committee members a [link](#) to the "*Modifications to the Regulations Implementing Section 503 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, as Amended; Extension of Comment Period*". The public comment period will conclude on September 17, 2025, which impacts federal contractors' hiring practices for people with disabilities.
- Committee Chair Merry Reid Sheffer announced that a tentative "save the date" has been set for the Kentucky Association of People Supporting Employment First (APSE) Conference is planned for December 8–9 in Elizabethtown, offering an in-person opportunity for providers to gather and share resources.

Public Comment:

No public comment addressed.

Adjournment:

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

Next Meeting

Date: October 8, 2025

Time: 1:00pm to 2:00pm (EST)

Administrator: Nanci Howard

500 Mero Street • 4th Floor NE • Frankfort, KY • 40601

Toll-Free: (800) 372 - 7172 • Direct: (502) 782-3421 • Email: Nanci.Howard@ky.gov

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Education and Labor Cabinet, Office of Vocational Rehabilitation
500 Mero Street • 4th Floor NE • Frankfort, KY • 40601

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Employer Education and Engagement Committee

Minutes

October 8, 2025

1:00 pm – 2:00 pm (EST)

Zoom

Members Present

Merry Reid Sheffer, Rebecca Wilson, Zac Sappenfield, Dawn Rollins, and Terry Madden

KYOVR Staff Present

Nanci Howard, Anu Kumari, Kristen Beach, and Betty Whittaker

Guest(s) Present

Bev Harp, Innovative Supports for Autistic Workers (ISAW)

Welcome | Introduction | Agenda Review

Employment First Employer Education and Engagement Committee Chair, Merry Reid Sheffer, welcomed attendees. Introductions were held, and the agenda was reviewed and acknowledged by all participants.

ISAW Update and Discussion

The committee discussed continued collaborative efforts following the conclusion of the KYRETAIN project and emphasized supporting existing initiatives rather than duplicating efforts. The primary focus was on the Council's developing partnership with Bev Harp on the ISAW project, which will include quarterly gatherings and short educational videos for employers.

The Committee also noted upcoming opportunities such as the KYAPSE Conference scheduled for December 8–9, 2025, in Elizabethtown, KY.

The Committee discussed the following ways to further promote the series.

- The KYRETAIN email list serve will be a starting point for distribution.
- Access to the series will be provided to the Community Rehabilitation Provider (CRP) mailing list.
- Additional outreach will be extended to:
 - Kentucky Chamber of Commerce
 - Coalition for Workforce Diversity
 - Autism-Friendly Business Initiative (AFBI)
 - Kentucky SHRM and Louisville SHRM
 - Lexington SHRM Contact
 - St. Matthews and Oldham County Chambers
 - Louisville Independent Business Alliance (LIBA)
- The group also reviewed logistics such as scheduling, survey distribution, interpreter availability, and reservation coordination with Brandon Cannada from UKHDI.

Update from Bev Harp:

Bev Harp, Project Director at the Human Development Institute, presented the completion of the first Two-Minute Autism-Informed Employer video titled “*Why Hiring and Accommodations Matter.*” The video highlighted hiring autistic workers, emphasizing reliability, attention to detail, and workplace inclusion.

Video Format & Purpose:

- Each video will be approximately two minutes long and adapted from HDI’s Autism-Informed Employer online course.
- The videos will serve as concise educational “teasers” directing employers to the full training available at HDI Learning.org.

Upcoming Video Topics:

- Quarterly theme: Hiring and Interviewing
- Two videos on interviewing practices (to be released in November and December)

Distribution Schedule:

- October 22, 2025 – First video release (Bev will submit one week prior for review)

- November 19, 2025 – Second video release
- December 17, 2025 – Third video release
- All videos will be distributed on *Wednesdays at noon* to maximize engagement.

Quarterly Gathering:

- A virtual employer engagement session is planned for January 14, 2026, at noon, pending confirmation of Brandon Cannada’s availability.
- The gathering session will provide employers an opportunity to discuss video topics, ask questions, and share best practices.

Survey and Registration:

- Draft survey and registration materials were reviewed.
- Members supported including pre-/post-knowledge questions, open-ended feedback, and resource links (Council and HDI webpages) rather than direct marketing prompts.
- The HDI Qualtrics platform will be used for registration and post-attendee surveys.

Interpreter Accommodations:

- KYOVR Division Director Kristen Beach advised scheduling ASL interpreters by request, through the registration process.
- A cut-off date for interpreter requests will be the registration form.
- Bev Harp will confirm HDI’s standard process for accommodation requests.

Committee Feedback:

- Members provided positive feedback on the video’s clarity, relevance, and data-driven messaging.
- The two-minute format was recognized as concise, engaging, and effective for employers.

Next Steps with ISAW:

Email Distribution:

- Bev Harp will consult with HDI to determine the appropriate formatted mass email distribution platform.

Quarterly Gathering:

- Plan logistics and agenda for virtual gathering.

- Continue identifying future quarterly video topics based on survey feedback and employer interest.

Other Focus Items:

- Video Production: Complete and submit the next two videos on interviewing and onboarding for upcoming releases.
- Approve email content and format prior to the October 22 distribution.

2025 Annual Report Update

Kentucky Office of Vocational Rehabilitation Administrator, Nanci Howard, reported that the draft 2025 Annual Report has been circulated for review. Members are encouraged to submit feedback by October 10, 2025, prior to Cabinet approval. The report highlights the Council’s accomplishments and will be presented for content approval during the upcoming quarterly Council meeting.

Public Comments

None.

Adjournment

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

Next Meeting Date

- November 12, 2025
- 1:00 pm- 2:00 pm (EST)



Kentucky Employment First Council
500 Mero Street, 4th Floor NE
Frankfort, KY 40601
Toll Free: (800) 372-7172
Direct: (502) 782-3421
Email: Nanci.Howard@ky.gov

Andy Beshear
Governor

Jamie Link
Secretary, Education and Labor Cabinet

Employment First Council

Employer Education and Engagement Committee

Meeting Minutes

November 12, 2025
1:00 pm – 2:00 pm (EST)
Zoom
Meeting ID: 851 4762 5002

Members Present

Chair Merry Reid Sheffer, Melissa Marvel, Amanda Hutchinson

Members Absent

Council Chair, Katie Wolf Whaley, Becky Wilson, Aaron Poynter, Zachery Sappenfield

Staff Present

Nanci Howard, Anu Kumari, Betty Whittaker, and Deana Wilson-Kimble

Staff Absent

Kristen Beach

Guest(s) Present

Bev Harp, Innovative Supports for Autistic Workers (ISAW), Terry Madden, and Dawn Rollins

Welcome | Agenda Review:

Employment First Committee Chair, Merry Reid Sheffer, welcomed attendees. The agenda was reviewed and acknowledged by all participants.

ISAW Update and Discussion

The committee continues its collaboration with the University of Kentucky Human Development Institute (HDI) through the Innovative Supports for Autistic Workers (ISAW) initiative. This project aims to release a monthly two-minute employer-focused video followed by a quarterly workshop to promote inclusive hiring and workplace practices.

Next Steps with ISAW- Action Items

Series 1: "Hiring"

The updated schedule is as follows:

- Video 1: November 19, 2025
- Video 2: December 17, 2025
- Video 3: January 14, 2026

Workshop (Live Session)

- Proposed date: February 11, 2026 or February 18, 2026 (*TBD; awaiting input from Council Chair Katie Wolf Whaley*)

Workshop Preparation

- Develop the quarterly workshop registration form.
- Create the workshop feedback survey in Qualtrics

Communications & Outreach

- Bev Harp will prepare the email copy accompanying each video in the series.
- Distribute the emails through the HDI/UK listserv (primary send platform)
- Send communications to the *Community Rehabilitation Program* (CRP) list and *RETAIN* attendee list.
- Send workshop notifications to the following networks:
 - *Chambers of Commerce* (Louisville and Lexington)
 - *Coalition for Workforce Diversity* (CWD)
 - *Society for Human Resource Management* (SHRM)

- *Louisville Independent Business Alliance (LIBA)*
- Committee members will also forward additional employer contact emails to Chair Merry Reid Sheffer to include in the distribution list.

Interpreter Accommodations:

- Secure ASL interpreting services by January 16, 2026, as needed, based on registration responses, and the committee will coordinate with OVR staff.

Other Focus Items:

- Bev Harp will share the master plan; all committee members will provide feedback via email.
- Bev Harp will design a leave-behind resource (print or digital) for the video series and workshop promotion.

2026 Meeting Dates Discussion

The committee agreed to continue holding monthly meetings to maintain project momentum. The Administrator will schedule 2026 meeting dates. Members were encouraged to invite colleagues and other potential collaborators to participate in future committee meetings.

Public Comments

The Kentucky APSE Conference is scheduled for December 8–9, 2025, in Elizabethtown, KY

Adjournment

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

Next Meeting Date

- December 10, 2025
- 1:00 pm- 2:00 pm (EST)



Kentucky Employment First Council
500 Mero Street, 4th Floor NE
Frankfort, KY 40601
Toll Free: (800) 372-7172
Direct: (502) 782-3421
Email: Nanci.Howard@ky.gov

Andy Beshear
Governor

Jamie Link
Secretary, Education and Labor Cabinet

Employment First Council

Employer Education and Engagement Committee

Meeting Minutes

December 10, 2025
1:00 pm – 2:00 pm (EST)
Zoom
Meeting ID: 851 4762 5002

Members Present

Council Chair, Katie Wolf Whaley, Amanda Hutchinson, Zachery Sappenfield

Members Absent

Chair Merry Reid Sheffer, Melissa Marvel, and Aaron Poynter

Staff Present

Anu Kumari, Kristen Beach, Betty Whittaker, and Deana Wilson-Kimble

Staff Absent

Nanci Howard

Guest(s) Present

Bev Harp, Innovative Supports for Autistic Workers (ISAW)

Welcome | Agenda Review:

Employment First Council Chair Katie Wolf Whaley welcomed attendees on behalf of the Committee Chair. The agenda was reviewed and acknowledged by all participants.

ISAW Update and Discussion

The Committee discussed continued collaboration with the University of Kentucky Human Development Institute (HDI) through the Innovative Supports for Autistic Workers (ISAW Pro) initiative. Key elements include:

- ISAW will continue developing 2-minute employer-focused videos designed to promote inclusive hiring and employment practices.
- Videos will be distributed monthly to the Employment First and RETAIN email lists.
- Quarterly drop-in discussion sessions will accompany the video series to support deeper engagement.
- HDI will oversee email distribution and host the virtual sessions using Campaign Monitor and Zoom.

Draft Introductory Email Review

The committee reviewed the introductory email prepared by Bev Harp, which included:

- An overview of the 2-Minute Autism Informed Employer (AIE) video series,
- Information on HDI's long-form online training course (3+ hours),
- Topic previews of upcoming video.

Additional Updates:

- *Episode 2* is currently in voice production, and *Episode 3* is nearing completion.
- Bev Harp is recreating the project's master plan to support coordinated implementation.

Funding & Staffing

- The Committee noted that HDI's TIP grant may support email distribution costs and potentially provide staffing assistance for hosting the quarterly sessions.
- Funding and staffing arrangements are still being clarified, and additional information will be provided as details are confirmed.

Timeline Adjustments

- The originally planned release date for the first video was *November 19*, but it did not occur.
- Committee approved a revised launch timeline beginning in *January 2026* to avoid holiday conflicts. Members confirmed support for the updated timeline.

Introductory Email Requirements Discussion

The Committee confirmed the following updates for the introductory email:

- The timeline and schedule will be updated to reflect the 2026 launch.
- References indicating that ISAW is funded by the Office of Vocational Rehabilitation will be removed to ensure compliance with Employment First Council communication requirements.
- The collaboration will be accurately described as between:
 - *Human Development Institute*
 - *Kentucky Office of Vocational Rehabilitation*
 - *Kentucky Office on Autism*
- The email will include a hyperlink to HDI’s Autism Informed Employers online training module.
- The Committee agreed that this email will serve as the official introductory communication once required language updates are completed.

Quarterly Discussion Session Scheduling

The Committee identified “*March 24 at noon*” and “*March 26 at noon*” as the proposed dates for the first quarterly discussion session.

Session format:

- A 45-minute Lunch & Learn session
- Aligned with the first three monthly ISAW Pro videos
- Katie Wolf Whaley will confirm the final scheduling and hosting availability with:
 - *Merry Reid Sheffer (Committee Chair)*
 - *Nanci Howard (Council Administrator)*
 - *The HDI staff member assigned to support hosting*

Communications and Outreach Strategy

- The first video in the ISAW Pro series will be distributed after January 5, including the Zoom registration link for the March discussion session.

- Committee members and partners will disseminate the series across established networks, including:
 - *Kentucky Department of Education (KDE)*
 - *Kentucky Chamber of Commerce*
 - *Kentucky Autism Training Center (KATC)*
 - *Commonwealth Council on Developmental Disabilities (CCDD)*
 - *National Partnership for New Americans (NPNA)*
 - *Community Rehabilitation Programs*

The series launch will also be highlighted at the upcoming Employment First Council Quarterly Meeting.

Additional Discussion

The Committee discussed the status of Employment First Council appointments. It was noted that Council terms related to gubernatorial appointments concluded in October. In accordance with the guidance of state boards and commissions, agency representatives may continue serving until reappointments are finalized, while individuals appointed by name require formal reappointment to continue in service. The Committee noted that the Governor's Office has contacted some individuals; however, the full membership roster has not yet been finalized. The upcoming Council meeting is expected to proceed pending confirmation of appointments. Positive engagement from a Kentucky Chamber of Commerce representative, including participation in Kentucky APSE activities and support for inclusive workforce initiatives, was also noted.

Public Comments

None.

Adjournment

Employment First Council Chair Katie Wolf Whaley thanked everyone for their contribution and adjourned the meeting.

Next Meeting Date

- Wednesday, January 7, 2026
- 1:00 pm- 2:00 pm (EST)