



Kentucky Employment First Council

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Employment First Council

Executive Committee Meeting Minutes

March 19, 2026

3:00pm – 4:00pm (EST)

Zoom

Meeting ID: 846 2844 7176

Members Present

Council Chair Katie Wolf Whaley, Vice-Chair Jeff White, Amanda Owen, Merry Reid Sheffer, Shelly Durbin, and Tal Curry

Members Absent

Legislative Liaison, Andrew Johnson

Staff Present

Nanci Howard and Anu Kumari

Welcome | Introduction | Agenda Review:

Employment First Council Chair, Katie Wolf Whaley, welcomed attendees and officially called the meeting to order.

Project NEON Update

Employment First Council Vice Chair, Jeff White, provided an update regarding Project NEON with partners from EconSys and the U.S. Department of Labor's Office of Disability Employment Policy (ODEP). Project NEON focuses on individuals with mental health conditions, substance use disorders, and co-occurring disabilities. Project

NEON is also coordinating efforts with participation in the State Employment Leadership Network (SELN).

It was confirmed that Kentucky will participate in Project NEON for a three-year period, providing an important opportunity to build on existing Employment First efforts and advance systems change across the state. A list of subject matter experts has not yet been received from ODEP; however, flexibility was noted to engage additional experts identified by Kentucky.

Key Focus Areas and Workgroups

Workgroups are being established to support progress in the following areas:

- Wages and Benefits Impact
- Data Initiatives
- Quality of Employment Services and Training
 - Lead by Katie Wolf Whaley
- Building Capacity and Knowledge for Case Managers and Vocational Rehabilitation Counselors
 - Lead by Carolyn Wheeler
- Promoting the 1915(i) / I-RISE Initiative (Long-Term Supports)
 - Lead by Lori Norton

Developing Project NEON Network

The Project NEON Network is being developed to support implementation and collaboration across the state. The network will support testing and implementation of strategies developed through Project NEON.

- Thirteen agencies and organizations are currently collaborating on Project NEON
- Five organizations have already joined the network prior to formal outreach.
- Efforts to expand the network are ongoing.

Project NEON Next Steps

The committee will continue to expand the Project NEON network, engage partners, and promote participation in webinars and related activities.

Advocacy and Education Committee Chair Elections Discussion

The committee discussed the Advocacy and Education Committee Chair election. During the January 9, 2026, Council meeting, council member, David Allgood, was nominated to serve as Chair of the Advocacy and Education Committee. As both David Allgood and the current committee chair were absent, the election was tabled.

Following the meeting, David Allgood formally declined the nomination. Current committee chair Amanda Owen subsequently expressed interest in serving as Chair. No additional nominations were received.

The Employment First Council will open nominations at the next Council meeting on April 10, 2026. If more than one nominee is presented, a vote will be conducted. If only one nominee is present, a vote to confirm will be held.

Committee Reports

Transition Committee and Advocacy and Education Committee Collaboration

The Transition Committee and Advocacy and Education Committee reported continued collaboration to align outreach and communication efforts.

Discussion focused on leveraging existing distribution channels, including Department of Education newsletters, to share Employment First information more effectively. The committees discussed incorporating brief Employment First content (“snippets”) into established communication platforms to improve reach and avoid duplication of efforts.

Additionally, a universal QR code linking to the Employment First Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ) webpage has been developed to support consistent access to information across presentations and materials.

Employer Education and Engagement Committee

Merry Reid Sheffer, Chair of the Employer Education and Engagement Committee, provided an update on the committee’s work. The committee reported on the continued collaboration with Innovative Supports for Autistic Workers (ISAW), a project of the University of Kentucky Human Development Institute.

A monthly Autism-Informed Employer (AIE) video series has been developed as part of this partnership. The series includes short, two-minute videos designed to support employers in creating more inclusive workplaces for individuals on the autism spectrum. The third video in the series has been released, and the series will lead to quarterly discussion sessions. This will provide opportunities for participants to ask questions, share experiences, and suggest future topics. The first quarterly discussion is scheduled for March 26, 2026. Over 60+ individuals were registered at the time of this meeting and additional outreach efforts are ongoing.

Public Policy Committee

On behalf of Andrew Johnson, Chair of the Public Policy Committee, Council Chair Katie Wolf Whaley provided an update regarding recent legislative activity. The committee discussed a House bill that raised concerns related to potential unintended consequences for individuals with significant disabilities, particularly regarding access to Comprehensive Transition Programs (CTPs).

It was reported that these concerns were addressed, and necessary corrections were made prior to the bill's advancement. The committee also noted renewed engagement and focus on policy-related activities.

Provider Capacity Committee

Shelly Durbin, Chair of the Provider Capacity Committee, provided an update on the committee's work. The committee reported on the Waiver Employment Survey, which was distributed to case managers and stakeholders to understand better employment demand and capacity needs across the state.

Due to significant response volume, a revised response process is being implemented to reduce processing time and support timely follow-up.

The survey has generated valuable data, including the identification of geographic areas with increased demand for employment services. This information will support targeted efforts to expand provider capacity and improve service delivery. The survey deadline was extended to allow for additional responses.

The Council requested that the Provider Capacity Committee document the following for inclusion in the Annual Report:

- The purpose and approach of the Waiver Employment Survey
- The impact of emphasizing Employment First requirements
- The increase in engagement and requests following the survey distribution
- Key data insights, including identified needs and geographic trends

Finalized Agenda for April 10, 2026, Quarterly Meeting

Discussion was held regarding the finalization of the Employment First Council April 10, 2026, meeting agenda. There were no changes to the draft agenda, and it was accepted by all.

Announcement

An announcement was shared that Public Policy Committee Chair Andrew Johnson has left his position with the Council on State Governments but remains an appointed member of the Employment First Council. He expressed interest in continuing as Policy Committee Chair until a replacement is identified.

The Governor issued a proclamation recognizing Developmental Disabilities Awareness Month and highlighted Employment First as part of the announcement.

Additional Discussion

KYOVR Administration Nanci Howard presented the upcoming committee meeting dates. Committee members reviewed all scheduled committee dates.

Public Comment

None.

Adjournment

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

Next Meeting Date

Thursday, June 18, 2026
3:00 PM – 4:00 PM (EST)