



**Kentucky Employment First Council**  
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**Andy Beshear**  
Governor

**Jamie Link**  
Secretary, Education and Labor Cabinet

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# Kentucky Employment First Council Quarterly Meeting

Minutes  
January 9, 2026  
1:00 pm – 3:00 pm (EST)  
Zoom

## Members Present

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Chair, Katie Wolf Whaley, Jeff White, Amy Luttrell, Bill Bates, Tal Curry, Cora McNabb, Deana Wilson Kimbler, Leslie Hoffman/ Proxy Carmen Hancock, Andrew Johnson, Merry Reid Sheffer, Johnny Callebs, JoAnn Wells, Gretta Hylton, Shelly Durbin, Susan Brown, Laurie Mays/Proxy Dorian Moe, and Rhonda Logsdon.

## Members Absent

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Amanda Owen, Robert Larry Taylor, Lori Norton, David Allgood, Jeff Edwards, and Frank Huffman.

## Guests Present

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Jason Wheatley, Megan Kuhlwein, Sara Tinker, Terry Madden, and Melissa Marvel.

## Staff Present

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Nanci Howard, Susie Edwards, Michelle Cobb, Betty Whittaker, Holly Hendericks, Jonathan White, Anu Kumari, Kristen Beach, and Ron O'Hair.

## Welcome

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Kentucky Office of Vocational Rehabilitation (KYOVR) Administrator, Nanci Howard, welcomed attendees.

## Roll Call

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Kentucky Office of Vocational Rehabilitation Administrative Specialist Senior, Anu Kumari, provided the roll call. A quorum was established.

## Staff Report

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KYOVR Administrator, Nanci Howard, provided the staff report.

### *A. Council Appointment Updates*

- Appointment recommendations, including resumes and applications, were submitted through the appropriate channels. An Executive Order approving 18 appointments was received. One appointee resigned, resulting in 17 newly appointed or reappointed members.
- Several individuals were not reappointed; however, pursuant to *KRS 151B.211–151B.214*, they will continue to serve until their successors are appointed. KYOVR staff continue to work with Cabinet leadership pertaining to the remaining appointments.

### *Council Member Terms and Voting:*

- After initial appointments, members of the Employment First Council serve three-year terms.
- Members who are officially appointed retain voting rights and continue to count toward a quorum until they are replaced or resign.
- Members unable to attend meetings are encouraged to designate a proxy. As permitted by Council bylaws, proxy members are authorized to vote.

### *Recognition of Departing Members:*

Certificates of appreciation were sent in October 2025 to members who rotated off the Council. Those individuals were:

- Jessica Beaven
- Todd Coffey
- Amanda Friend
- Dawn Gardner
- Annette Jett
- Diana Merzweiler
- Morgan Turner

## *B. Committee Participation & Upcoming Meeting Schedule*

The Employment First Council maintains five standing committees. Meetings are open to the public:

- 1) Advocacy & Education Committee:
  - February 6, 2026, 9:00–10:00 a.m. (EST)
- 2) Employer Education & Engagement Committee:
  - February 4, 2026, 1:00–2:00 p.m. (EST)
- 3) Provider Capacity Committee:
  - February 10, 2026, 2:00–3:00 p.m. (EST)
- 4) Public Policy Committee:
  - TBD (*to be determined*)
- 5) Transition Committee:
  - February 19, 2026, 9:30–10:30 a.m. (EST)

Individuals interested in joining a committee should contact the respective committee chair or the Council Chair. The council welcomes diverse expertise, and all meetings are open to the public

## *C. Employment First Council Contact & Website Update*

- A dedicated email inbox has been established: [EmploymentFirst@ky.gov](mailto:EmploymentFirst@ky.gov) monitored daily; routed to appropriate staff/committees.
- The Employment First [webpage](#) is updated regularly (monthly or as needed). Both links were provided in the meeting chat.
- New council members should have access to the Employment First Council Dropbox using the email address provided to staff. Members experiencing access issues were instructed to contact staff for assistance.

## *D. Annual Report — Review & Update*

KYOVR Administrator, Nanci Howard, announced that the 2025 Employment First Council Annual Report has been filed and formally approved. The report has been distributed to Council members and is available on the Employment First webpage.

## **Approval of Minutes**

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Employment First Council Chair Katie Wolf Whaley called the meeting to order and called for a motion to accept the October 10, 2025, minutes as written. **Council**

**member Jeff White made the motion to accept the October 10, 2025, minutes as written. Tal Curry, second. No opposition or abstentions. Motion carried.**

## **Chair Report**

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Employment First Council Chair Katie Wolf Whaley provided the report. It was noted that the Employment First framework is increasingly being adopted and referenced by external organizations and stakeholders, reflecting broader recognition of the council's outreach and collaborative impact.

Key highlights included:

- The past year was described as a period of transition and progress, marked by the development of new partnerships and strengthened cross-system collaboration.
- Provider Capacity committee efforts were highlighted, including the upcoming launch of customized employment training supported through federal technical assistance.
- The Kentucky Association for People Supporting Employment First (APSE) conference in late 2025 was successful and fully attended.

It was announced that the “KY Autism Works Study” presentation scheduled for the meeting would be postponed until the April quarterly council meeting.

The report concluded with optimism for new initiatives in 2026.

## **Training Innovation Project (TIP) Presentation – *Employer Engagement Strategies***

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Kathy Sheppard-Jones, Researcher and Principal Investigator with the University of Kentucky Human Development Institute (HDI), presented an overview of the Training Innovation Project (TIP), a five-year national initiative funded by the U.S. Department of Education, Rehabilitation Services Administration. The project runs from October 1, 2025, through September 30, 2030, and focuses on strengthening partnerships between rehabilitation professionals and employers to increase competitive, integrated employment for individuals with disabilities.

Key highlights included:

- A national needs assessment for rehabilitation professionals will launch in early 2026, with an employer needs assessment to follow later in 2026.
- TIP will offer flexible training options, including online modules, webinars, short videos, micro-credentials, and immersive simulations.
- The creation of an academic certificate in employer engagement from the University of Kentucky.
- Establishment of a National Training Innovation Hub to host all TIP resources in one centralized, accessible location.
- Over five years, TIP aims to train at least 10,600 learners, develop approximately 250 resources, reach more than 50,000 users, and establish at least 40 partners nationwide.

Initial partners include the Kentucky Office of Vocational Rehabilitation, Kentucky Workforce Innovation Board, Council of State Administrators of Vocational Rehabilitation, Kentucky Hospital Association, CareerView XR, Kentucky Nurses Association, Jobs for America's Graduates (JAG) Kentucky, Kentucky Chamber of Commerce, and a national advisory panel consisting of several Subject Matter Experts.

Collaboration with the Employment First Council was emphasized, including interest in partnering with the Employer Education and Engagement Committee on future Lunch and Learn sessions, webinars, and other outreach efforts. Council members were encouraged to participate in the upcoming needs assessment and to share TIP opportunities within their networks.

## **Committee Reports**

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### *Advocacy and Education Committee*

On behalf of the Committee Chair, Employment First Council Chair Katie Wolf Whaley provided an overview of the Committee's work. The Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs) have been finalized, approved, and are available on the Employment First website. The committee is investigating ways to distribute the information to a much broader network.

### *Employer Education and Engagement Committee*

Committee Chair Merry Reid Sheffer reported that following the conclusion of the RETAIN Kentucky Project, the committee has been exploring new strategies to continue

engaging employers and supporting inclusive hiring practices. The Committee has partnered with the Innovative Supports for Autistic Workers (ISAW) initiative, led by Bev Harp at the University of Kentucky Human Development Institute. As part of this collaboration, ISAW will develop short, two-minute employer-focused videos addressing autism in the workplace.

Key implementation details include:

- ISAW videos will be distributed monthly beginning in January 2026.
- ISAW quarterly interactive gatherings will be held to allow discussion and feedback.
- The first gathering is tentatively scheduled for late March 2026
  - March 24 or
  - March 26

The Committee emphasized its continued interest in collaborating with other initiatives and partners to expand employer outreach and training opportunities.

### *Provider Capacity Committee*

Committee Chair Jeff White provided an overview of the Provider Capacity Committee's ongoing activities. The Committee is developing a webinar for providers focused on identifying and expanding multiple revenue and service-fee funding sources. The intent is to reduce reliance on limited funding streams and support long-term sustainability. Content development is nearly complete and is pending final formatting and accessibility approval before scheduling.

Key highlights included:

- Beginning July 1, 2026, the Division of Developmental and Intellectual Disabilities (DDID) will join the State Employment Leadership Network, a national initiative supporting competitive, integrated employment for individuals with developmental and intellectual disabilities. Participation will allow Kentucky to improve data collection and analysis related to employment outcomes.
- Over the next two months, DDID will conduct a statewide census of working-age waiver participants to establish a baseline on employment status, support needs, and interest in work.

This census will build on previous efforts conducted in 2016 and 2019 and will inform future employment strategies.

## *Public Policy Committee*

Interim Chair Katie Wolf Whaley provided an overview of the Public Policy Committee's activities. It was reported that the Kentucky General Assembly session has begun, and the committee will reconvene to monitor legislation, and policy matters relevant to Employment First. The committee previously received updates on the Project NEON initiative, which formally concluded in early 2025; however, activities and partnerships resulting from the initiative continue. Discussions are underway regarding a potential new related application in the upcoming year.

## *Transition Committee*

Transition Committee Chair, Tal Curry, provided an overview of the Transition Committee's work. The Committee developed a Transition Resource Guide for youth with disabilities, particularly targeting students ages 13–14 with Individualized Education Programs (IEPs). The guide was created in collaboration with multiple partners, including members outside the Employment First Council, the Kentucky Advisory Council on Autism, and the State Advisory Council for Exceptional Children.

Discussions are underway to reconvene a workgroup focused on IEP processes to ensure appropriate stakeholder participation.

Additionally, background information on the Autism Works Study was included in the meeting materials packet and a presentation regarding the study has been rescheduled for the April quarterly meeting.

## **Employment First Council Elections**

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### *Officer Elections*

#### *Chair Election*

Katie Wolf Whaley opened the floor for nominations for chair of the Employment First Council. She expressed her willingness to continue serving as chair if there were no additional nominations from the floor. No additional nominations were heard. **A motion was made by Jeff White to close nominations and elect Katie Wolf Whaley as Chair. No second was required. There were no oppositions or abstentions, and the motion carried unanimously.**

### *Vice Chair Election*

Katie Wolf Whaley opened the floor for nominations for the Employment First Council Vice Chair. Shelly Durbin nominated Jeff White for the role of Vice Chair. Katie Wolf Whaley called for additional nominations from the floor. No other nominations were heard. **A motion was made by Shelly Durbin to close nominations and accept Jeff White as the Vice Chair. No second was required. There were no oppositions or abstentions. The motion carried unanimously.**

### *Legislative Liaison Election*

Katie Wolf Whaley opened the floor for nominations for the Employment First Council Legislative Liaison. Andrew Johnson expressed interest in the role of Legislative Liaison. Katie Wolf Whaley called for additional nominations from the floor. No other nominations were heard. **A motion was made by Cora McNabb to close nominations and accept Andrew Johnson as the Legislative Liaison. No second was required. There were no oppositions or abstentions. The motion carried unanimously.**

## *Standing Committee Elections*

### *Advocacy and Education Committee*

Katie Wolf Whaley opened the floor for nominations for the Advocacy and Education Committee Chair. Bill Bates nominated David Allgood for the role of Committee Chair. Katie Wolf Whaley called for additional nominations from the floor. No other nominations were heard. **Due to the absence of the nominated council member and the current chair. The election for chair of the Advocacy and Education Committee was deferred until the April 2026 council meeting.**

### *Employer Education and Engagement Committee*

Katie Wolf Whaley opened the floor for nominations for the Employer Education and Engagement Committee Chair. Merry Reid Sheffer expressed interest in continuing her role as committee chair. Katie Wolf Whaley called for additional nominations from the floor. No other nominations were heard. **A motion was made by Cora McNabb to close nominations and accept Merry Reid Sheffer as chair of the Employer Education and Engagement Committee. No second was required. There were no oppositions or abstentions. The motion carried unanimously.**

### *Provider Capacity Committee*

Katie Wolf Whaley opened the floor for nominations for the Provider Capacity Committee Chair. Jeff White nominated Shelly Durbin for the role of Committee Chair.

Shelly Durbin accepted the nomination. Katie Wolf Whaley called for additional nominations from the floor. No other nominations were heard. **A motion was made by Jeff White to close nominations and accept Shelly Durbin as chair of the Provider Capacity Committee. No second was required. There were no oppositions or abstentions. The motion carried unanimously.**

#### *Public Policy Committee*

Katie Wolf Whaley opened the floor for nominations for the Public Policy Committee Chair. Andrew Johnson expressed interest in the role of committee chair. Katie Wolf Whaley called for additional nominations from the floor. No other nominations were heard. **A motion was made by Tal Curry to close nominations and accept Andrew Johnson as chair of the Public Policy Committee. No second was required. There were no oppositions or abstentions. The motion carried unanimously.**

#### *Transition Committee*

Katie Wolf Whaley opened the floor for nominations for the Transition Committee Chair. Jeff White nominated Tal Curry for the role of Committee Chair. Tal Curry accepted the nomination. Katie Wolf Whaley called for additional nominations from the floor. No other nominations were heard. **A motion was made by Jeff White to close nominations and accept Tal Curry as chair of the Transition Committee. No second was required. There were no oppositions or abstentions. The motion carried unanimously.**

Members and guests were invited to express interest in participating in Council committees. Individuals interested in joining a committee should contact the respective committee chair or Council Chair, Katie Wolf Whaley.

## **Announcement(s)**

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### *KYOVR Order of Selection Update*

It was reported that KYOVR has filed two sets of regulations on December 31<sup>st</sup>. One through the regular regulatory process and one through the emergency process. These regulations involve broader changes than only priority categories and require extensive review. Forms and guidance are being updated, and staff training has begun. New priority categories took effect immediately. There are slightly more than 4,000 individuals on the waiting list. Staff will begin reviewing the list next week and updating contact information. Eligibility will be reevaluated under definitions effective January 1,

2026. Public hearings on the regulations have been scheduled, with details published in the regulatory notices.

Additionally, the iRise initiative enrollment will begin January 15<sup>th</sup>, and coordination with Vocational Rehabilitation is underway.

## Public Comments

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Council members raised concerns regarding audio quality and accessibility in the hybrid meeting format. Staff will look for other locations and equipment before the April 10<sup>th</sup> quarterly meeting.

## Adjournment

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**Employment First Council Chair Katie Wolf Whaley called for a motion to adjourn the meeting. Council member Andrew Johnson made a motion to adjourn the meeting. Tal Curry seconded the motion. Motion passed, and the meeting was adjourned.** Council Chair Katie Wolf Whaley thanked everyone for their contribution and adjourned the meeting.

## Next Meeting Date

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April 10, 2026

1:00 pm- 3:00 pm (EST)

Location and Zoom meeting information will be forthcoming.