



Kentucky Employment First Council

500 Mero Street, 1st Floor SE

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

Kentucky Employment First Council Quarterly Meeting

Minutes

April 10, 2026

1:00 pm – 3:00 pm (EST)

Zoom

Members' Present

Chair, Katie Wolf Whaley, Vice Chair Jeff White, Amy Luttrell, Bill Bates/ proxy Thomas Thompson, Tal Curry, Cora McNabb, Leslie Hoffman/ Proxy Carmen Hancock, Andrew Johnson, Merry Reid Sheffer, Gretta Hylton/ proxy Stephanie Miller, Johnny Callebs, JoAnn Wells, Shelly Durbin, Susan Brown, Laurie Mays, Rebecca Wilson, Amanda Owen, Robert Larry Taylor, Lori Norton, and Rhonda Logsdon.

Members' Absent

David Allgood, Deana Wilson Kimbler, and Jeff Edwards

Guests Present

Deborah Minton, Down Rollins, Lisa Carrico, Melissa Marvel, Melanie Lybarger, and Johnny Collet

Staff Present

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

Welcome

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

Staff Report

KYOVR Administrator, Nanci Howard, provided the staff report.

Council Appointment Updates

Appointment recommendations were addressed, and it was reported that vacancies and pending appointments were tracked throughout the quarter.

Five vacancies remain with no current recommendations, including:

- Four (4) positions within business, industry, and labor
- One (1) position representing an individual with a disability following the resignation of Council member Frank Huffman, who served as a long-standing disability representative

A certificate of appreciation will be mailed to Frank Huffman in recognition of his service and contributions to the Council.

A replacement recommendation was received from the Council of State Governments, and Andrew Johnson was acknowledged for his continued commitment to Employment First and his decision to remain engaged despite no longer representing that organization.

Efforts to fill all vacancies will continue. Members were encouraged to refer interested individuals, particularly employers and individuals with disabilities, to staff for information regarding Council membership and the application process.

Committee Upcoming Meeting Schedule

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

Advocacy & Education Committee

May 01, 2026, 9:00–10:00 a.m. (EST)

Employer Education & Engagement Committee

May 06, 2026, 1:00–2:00 p.m. (EST)

Provider Capacity Committee

May 05, 2026, 2:00–3:00 p.m. (EST)

Public Policy Committee

May 7, 2026, 9:00 AM – 10:00 AM (EST)

Transition Committee

May 14, 2026, 9:30–10:30 a.m. (EST)

Members and guests were encouraged to contact Nanci Howard or Council Chair Katie Wolf Whaley for additional information regarding committee meetings.

Employment First Council Contact & Website Update

The EmploymentFirst@ky.gov inbox is monitored daily and routed to the appropriate staff and committee.

The [Employment First webpage](#) is updated regularly (monthly or as needed). Council members have access to the Employment First Council Dropbox using the email address provided to staff; members experiencing access issues were advised to contact staff for assistance.

Annual Report Update

The annual report and content direction were discussed briefly. Pursuant to **KRS 151B.213 § 5, the council must “submit an annual report by December 1 to the Legislative Research Commission, the secretary of the Education and Labor Cabinet, and the Governor summarizing its findings and recommendations.”**

Planning will begin following the July quarterly meeting, with coordination through the Executive Committee. Input will also be collected from all committees and members.

Additional Information

KYOVR Administrator, Nanci Howard, reported continued involvement in meetings with the HB 144 Commission and the Judicial Commission on Mental Health: Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities Workgroup, as well as ongoing participation in professional development activities.

Roll Call

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

Approval of Minutes

Employment First Council Chair Katie Wolf Whaley called the meeting to order and called for a motion to accept the January 09, 2026, minutes as written. **Council member Jeff White made the motion to accept January 09, 2026, minutes as written. Susan Bown, second. No opposition or abstentions. Motion carried.**

Chair Report

Employment First Council Chair Katie Wolf Whaley provided the report.

The Chair emphasized the need to fill current council vacancies, particularly business, industry, and labor representation, with four vacancies and one disability representative. She encouraged members to refer interested individuals to the council and to reach out to staff support for details on how to apply. Additionally, the Chair reported increased participation and engagement across committees, including strong attendance, meaningful discussion, and active collaboration.

Highlighted alignment with key elements of high-performing states, including leadership, policy, financing, workforce development, collaboration, service innovation, and performance measurement. She referred to a study from Kansas as a benchmark. The Chair emphasized the importance of cross-agency collaboration and reducing silos and noted strong statewide collaborations and partner engagement through initiatives such as Project NEON.

Order of Selection Update

An update was provided on the Order of Selection. A timeline for serving individuals from the waiting list is pending finalization of the state budget to determine available state funding and the ability to fully match the federal award.

Nearly 22,000 individuals were served, including Pre-Employment Transition Services, with around 7,000 individuals having open plans with implemented services and funding obligated under those plans.

Funding and authorizations are monitored through weekly data reports, including tracking obligated funds, forecasting costs, and analyzing students in training programs by year to estimate tuition obligations.

The importance of maintaining a carry-forward balance of approximately \$1–2 million was emphasized to ensure continuity of services during gaps in federal funding.

The current waiting list includes nearly 5,397 individuals.

- Priority Category 1 – 4,800
- Priority Category 2 – 270
- Priority Category 3 – 284
- Non-significant category – 17

Approximately \$40 million in case services were expended in Federal Fiscal Year 2025.

Autism Works Study Presentation

Lori Norton, Researcher and Project Director for Training and Fidelity at the University of Kentucky Human Development Institute (HDI) and an Employment First Council member, presented an overview of the Autism Works Study.

The project was described as a collaborative effort funded through a national grant and conducted in partnership with the University of Kentucky Human Development Institute and the New York State Psychiatric Institute.

The study focuses on adapting and testing the Individual Placement and Support (IPS) model of supported employment for autistic adults in Kentucky. The importance of the study was emphasized, noting that a significant percentage of autistic individuals remain unemployed despite expressing a desire to work.

Kentucky is the only state currently participating in this research and supported by strong cross-agency partnerships.

The IPS model includes rapid job search, individualized supports, ongoing assistance, and a zero-exclusion approach. The initiative is expected to expand employment opportunities for autistic adults.

Update on Project NEON

Jeff White, Quality Assurance Coordinator with the Division of Developmental and Intellectual Disabilities and Employment First Council-Chair, provided an update on Project NEON. Kentucky was selected to participate through the Office of Disability Employment Policy (ODEP) in partnership with EconSys.

The performance period is February 28, 2026, through September 12, 2028, with 550 hours of subject matter expert assistance provided annually, including 100 hours per work team and 50 hours for coordination and contingency. A requirement to complete a minimum of three (3) and a maximum of eight (8) outcomes to advance employment for individuals with mental health conditions and co-occurring disabilities is required. Strong collaboration across agencies and partners was noted, with 13 collaborators actively engaged in the project.

It was reported that work will be organized into initiative-based teams to address key priority areas. These include:

Addressing the Impact of Wages on Benefits

Review of Kentucky's Medicaid Buy-In program and exploration of strategies to better

support employment as a pathway to independence, including development of benefits-related training resources. This team will be led by Donna Osburn with subject matter expert Michael Dalto.

Established Data Collection and Analysis Practices to Inform Future Decisions

Development of a comprehensive statewide system to track and evaluate Employment First outcomes across working-age individuals, including those with IDD, serious mental illness, substance use disorders, and co-occurring conditions. This team will be led by Jeff White with subject matter expert Karen Lee.

Successful Implementation of Kentucky's I-RISE Initiative and its Integration

Expansion of provider participation through outreach and recruitment efforts, as the program currently lacks an established provider network. This team will be led by Lori Norton.

Ensuring the delivery of High-Quality Employment Services

Continued advancement of customized employment practices and alignment with evidence-based service delivery. This team will be led by Katie Wolf Whaley.

Increase the knowledge base of Case Manager and Vocational Rehabilitation Counselor

Increased knowledge and awareness among case managers and vocational rehabilitation counselors regarding available services and systems. This team will be led by Carolyn Wheeler.

Additional Updates

Kentucky will initiate membership in the State Employment Leadership Network (SELN) effective July 1. This initiative will support the state in strengthening data systems and improving employment outcomes.

The Employment Waiver Survey and baseline data collection efforts are underway.

Monthly Project NEON community of practice webinars will be shared with the Council.

Committee Reports

Advocacy and Education Committee

The Chair was present for the meeting but lost connection and was not present for the committee update. Employment First Council Chair Katie Wolf Whaley provided an overview of the committee's work. It was reported that ongoing efforts focused on improving the dissemination of Employment First information and coordinating outreach across committees.

The Transition Distribution List and Dissemination Plan were discussed as a tool to support outreach efforts. Strategies include the use of QR codes linking to Employment First resources and leveraging partner networks to expand access to information.

Employer Education and Engagement Committee

Employer Education and Engagement Committee Chair, Merry Reid Sheffer, provided an overview of the committee's work.

The Kentucky Employment First Council, in collaboration with Innovative Supports for Autistic Workers (ISAW), announced the 2026 [Autism-Informed Employers quick-hit video series](#), with a new two-minute video to be released monthly and quarterly discussions to follow. It was noted that three videos have been released, with additional content planned.

The first quarterly discussion session was held on March 26, 2026, with approximately 60 participants and included video highlights, a brief presentation, and open discussion.

Upcoming topics include sensory, movement, social, and communication supports in the workplace.

The committee also provided updates on the Training Innovation Project (TIP), which presents the "Learn at Lunch" webinar series.

Upcoming TIP Webinar Information

Titled: Enabling Employment Opportunity with Immersive Technology

Presenter: Matthew Chaussee, CEO of CareerViewXR

Date: April 21, 2026

Time: 12:00 PM to 1:00 PM ET.

Registration information is available on the [website](#).

Provider Capacity Committee

Committee Chair, Shelly Durbin, provided an overview of the Provider Capacity Committee's ongoing activities. Efforts have been developed through the creation of a provider-focused webinar aimed at using different funding sources.

It was reported that a nine-topic curriculum has been developed, with approximately 4–5 slides per topic, and materials are being finalized with a focus on accessibility prior to launch.

The webinar will include information on multiple pathways for providers to expand services and funding, including:

1. Becoming an Office of Vocational Rehabilitation (OVR) Vendor
2. Obtain Certification as a 1915 (C) Waiver Provider
3. Seek Funding through State General Funds
4. Becoming an I-RISE provider
5. Become an employment network (Ticket to Work)
6. Develop a relationship with local school districts
7. Develop a fee Schedule for private pay services
8. Utilizing ABLE accounts to fund employment services

The committee presented the “Waiver Participant Demand for New Supported Employment Services (Spring 2026)”.

Public Policy Committee

Public Policy Committee Chair Andrew Johnson provided an overview of the committee's activities.

Kentucky General Assembly session has begun, and the Public Policy committee has been monitoring legislation. It was reported that there was some discussion about Project NEON and the ongoing impact.

The committee will reconvene to monitor legislation and policy matters relevant to Employment First.

Transition Committee

Committee Chair, Tal Curry, provided an overview of the committee's work. The committee reported ongoing efforts focused on improving coordination and dissemination of Employment First information to transition-age youth, educators, and partner organizations.

The Transition Distribution List and Dissemination Plan were discussed among committee members.

The importance of providing clear, concise, and accessible information was emphasized, particularly for educators and school personnel. Strategies included short messaging, “hook” statements, and targeted content.

Timeline -

- Google Sheet access test deadline: April 9, 2026
- Full dissemination entries due: May 7, 2026
- Review prior to meeting on May 14, 2026

Employment First Council Elections

Advocacy and Education Committee – Chair Elections

Council Chair Katie Wolf Whaley opened the floor for nominations for the Advocacy & Education Committee Chair. Bill Bates had previously nominated David Allgood for the role; however, he declined the nomination. The current chair, Amanda Owen, expressed interest in continuing in the role.

Council Member Tal Curry nominated Amanda Owen to continue serving as Committee Chair. Chair Katie Wolf Whaley called for additional nominations from the floor. No further nominations were heard.

A motion was made by Vice Chair Jeff White to close nominations and accept Amanda Owen as Chair of the Advocacy & Education Committee. No second was required. There were no oppositions or abstentions. The motion carried unanimously.

Public Comments

None

Adjournment

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

Next Meeting Date

July 10, 2026

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

Location and Zoom meeting information will be forthcoming.