

Kentucky Employment First Quarterly Council Meeting

Minutes

April 11, 2025

1:00pm – 3:00pm

Zoom/Virtual Format

Attendees: Chair, Katie Wolf Whaley, Diana Merzweiler, Legislative Liaison, Bill Bates, Amanda Friend, Johnny Calles, Tal Curry, Gretta Hylton, Cora McNabb, Lori Norton, Amanda Friend, Jeff White, Annette Jett, Amy Luttrell, Todd Coffey, Rebecca Wilson, David Allgood, Carmen Hancock/Leslie Hoffman proxy, and Merry Reid Sheffer

Staff Attendees: Nanci Howard, Anu Kumari, Deana Wilson-Kimbler, Ron O'Hair, Betty Whittaker, Susie Edwards, Kristen Beach, Jonathan White, and Holly Hendricks

Members Absent: Jessica Beaven, Dawn Gardner, Frank Huffman, Jeff Edwards, Andrew Johnson, Robert Larry Taylor and, Morgan Turner, Vice-Chair

Interpreters: Abby Mattingly and Kayla Griggs

Roll/Call: Kentucky Office of Vocational Rehabilitation (KYOVR) staff support, Anu Kumari, provided the roll call. A quorum was determined.

Due to inclement weather, the full council quarterly meeting was scheduled as virtual only with no in-person option at that time.

Welcome: KYOVR Administrator, Nanci Howard welcomed everyone to the meeting and agenda was viewed by all participants.

Staff Report

KYOVR Administrator, Nanci Howard provided the staff report.

Outreach Materials

Nanci reminded Council members of outreach materials and other resources available to the Employment First Council members which include a floor banner, tabletop banner, tablecloth, and printed informational brochures. These resources can be utilized at conferences, job fairs, and public presentations.

Council Vacancies

Nanci reported there are upcoming vacancies on the Employment First Council, with 26 members' term expiring on October 3, 2025. She stated that applications from individuals seeking initial appointment or reappointment are currently being collected. The compiled list of applicants will be submitted to the Governor's Office of Boards and Commissions within the next several weeks.

Dropbox Update

Nanci announced that the Employment First Council's Dropbox is currently undergoing reorganization and revision. A new access link will be disseminated to members upon completion.

Project NEON

Nanci shared that Staff Assistant; Betty Whittaker will lead initiatives related to customized employment and benefits planning under the Project NEON framework. Council members were encouraged to contact Betty directly for additional information.

Approval of Minutes

Chair, Katie Wolf Whaley, called for a motion to accept the January 10, 2025, minutes as written. **Council member, Amanda Owen made the motion to accept the January 10th, 2025, Council minutes as written. Johnny Callebs, second. No opposition or abstentions. Motion carried.**

Chair Report

Employment First Council Chair, Katie Wolf Whaley provided the Chair report.

KY Chamber of Commerce, Disability Hiring Academy

Employment First was highlighted during a three-day event hosted by the Kentucky Chamber of Commerce's Disability Hiring Academy. A representative from the Kentucky Chamber is scheduled to speak at the July 11th Employment First Council meeting.

Northeast Kentucky Workforce Development Conference:

It shared by Katie that Employment First was represented at the Kentucky Northeast Workforce Development Center. She and Vice-Chair, Morgan Turner participated in a session that highlighted employment opportunities for individuals with disabilities.

Transition Resource Document

The Chair provided an update on the newly developed Transition Resource Sheet. Council member, Tal Curry, has & in the development of the resource sheet and it will be distributed once complete.

Order of Selection (OOS)

Katie reported on the current developments within KYOVR regarding OOS. Katie encouraged council members and guests to participate in the upcoming public hearings and submit comments during the designated public comment period. A link was shared that contained detailed information for further inquiries regarding upcoming OOS public hearings. The hearings are scheduled for Monday, the April 14, 2025 via Zoom at 10:00am and 6:00pm (EST).

Letter of Support

The Chair reported the Employment First Council Executive Committee had approved a letter of support on March 6, 2025 on behalf of the full council. This letter of support contained information on how KYOVR can improve self-employment processes and allow individuals with disabilities to pursue entrepreneurship should they choose to do so. A copy of the letter was included in the meeting materials. This action was taken due to impending submission deadlines.

Election for Transition Committee Chair

Chair, Katie Wolf Whaley announced a vacancy for the position of Transition Committee Chair. She called for nominations from the floor. Council member, Jeff White nominated Tal Curry for the position. Tal Curry accepted the nomination. Katie called for other nominations from the floor. No other nominations were heard.

Council Chair Katie Wolf Whaley called for motion to appoint Tal Curry as the Chair of the Transition Committee. **A motion was made by Amanda Owen to accept the nomination of Tal Curry for the position of Transition Committee Chair. David Allgood, second. No opposition or abstentions. Motion carried.**

Employment First: The Disability Perspective

Council Member, Amanda Friend presented on Employment First from a disability perspective. She stressed the importance of family support in fostering independence for individuals with disabilities. She emphasized the need for self-determination, a strong support system, and the role of adults and professionals in addressing disabilities. The presentation was well received.

Committee Reports

Advocacy and Education Committee

Committee Chair, Amanda Owen provided the report. The committee had no new action items to present at this time. A key accomplishment was highlighted: the development of a Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ) Google Doc that provided targeted answers and resources for specific audiences.

Initial feedback has been positive. Committee members and stakeholders are encouraged to provide ongoing input and feedback via the document's comment feature.

Next Steps

- A final review of the FAQ document is scheduled prior to the next council meeting.
- Goal: Obtain final approval and begin promoting effective community use of the document.
- Ms. Owen requested feedback from council members on best practices for outreach and advocacy using the document.
- While no immediate action is required currently, continued engagement and refinement are encouraged.

Employer Education and Engagement Committee

Committee Chair, Merry Reid Sheffer, provided the report. An update on the Employment First and KYRETAIN Partnership regarding the Employer Seminar Series was provided. Merry Reid announced details of an upcoming presentation

“Employer Strategies for Recruitment and Retention”

April 16, 2025

12:00 - 12:45pm (EST)

Presented by: Sarah Dixon, Unified Sign and Designs

Sarah Dixon will provide insight on employer strategies to recruit a more inclusive workforce, ways to retain employees, and promote success stories.

Merry Reid Sheffer shared the committee is brainstorming potential of supporting employer engagement projects and seeking opportunities for collaboration with other agencies. The committee discussed supporting the Kentucky Chamber of Commerce's Disability Hiring Academy by offering advisory committee members and expressed openness for new project ideas from the council.

Provider Capacity Committee

Jeff White, Chair of the Provider Capacity Committee, provided an update regarding the committee's recent initiatives. He reported that the committee had focused its efforts on four primary areas, with a central focus on communicating the potential impact of rate changes through KYOVR to support increased provider capacity.

The results of these efforts are:

- More than 20 new provider applications were submitted to OVR.
- Three new waiver providers have been approved.
- An additional four waiver providers are currently in the process of being enrolled.

Jeff noted that the enrollment process for waiver providers remains significantly more time-intensive compared to that of OVR providers.

Addressing Funding Challenges for Supported Employment Services

- Jeff reported ongoing challenges in providing supported employment services to individuals without access to alternative funding streams.

- The committee explored the potential use of alternative funding streams including ABLE accounts and, in limited cases based on individual benefits, the use of supported employment expenses as work incentives.
- He acknowledged the complexity of the order of selection process and stressed the need to effectively communicate access to service strategies.
- Emphasis was placed on the need for innovative, flexible approaches to ensure service delivery regardless of funding constraints.

Successes and Expansion of the Support Employment Training Project

- Jeff highlighted the successful expansion of the Supported Employment Training Project, including an increase in staffing capacity.
- The project remains focused on helping individuals both obtain and maintain employment that is appropriate and personally fulfilling.
- Feedback from providers and participants has been positive, reflecting appreciation for the enhanced support services.

Improving Employment Service Funding Coordination

- Ongoing efforts aim to streamline employment service funding across multiple sources, including KYOVR, the Department of Education, Medicaid Waivers, and state general funds.
- Measures are being implemented to reduce administrative burdens on providers and support the integration of wraparound services.
- Enhanced coordination is fostering the development of individualized employment plans.
- Improved communication among providers, vocational rehabilitation counselors, and case managers are contributing to a better likelihood of
- positive employment outcomes.

Engagement and Referrals

- Jeff encouraged council members to provide input and engage in ongoing discussions.
- Members were also asked to refer interested providers to participate in the initiative.

Public Policy Committee

Committee Chair, Diana Merzweiler, provided the report. She stated during the committee meeting there was a Project NEON update from Staff Assistant, Betty Whittaker. Some highlights of the report include:

Project NEON Update

- To build capacity to provide Customized Employment in Kentucky
 - Create a customized employment process, review the current CIE process used by vocational rehabilitation, create a fidelity tool, review current CIE training provided by Human Development Institute, create a rate system to support customized employment services, training and outcomes.
- Create the capacity to increase SSDI and SSI benefits support for OVR.
 - To customize basic training on SSDI and SSI work incentives for KYOVR.
 - Research and advise OVR and other Kentucky partners on how to improve Kentucky's Medicaid Buy- In program

- Collaborate with work with national experts: Annette Shea on Buy-In programs. Hours provided by Robbie Barbieri –Tennessee-based non-profit advocate.
- Customize and deliver “*Why on earth should I work my way off SSDI?*” Customize and deliver training on Kentucky state specific benefits for benefits planners.

Ron O'Hair, KYOVR Supported Employment/CRP Branch Manager will work with Karen Lee and Tricia Jones Parkin. Donna Osburn, KYOVR Administrator, will handle the SSI and SSDI work with Michael Dalto.

CIE Definition Update

Diana stated there is currently no new development.

Kentucky Department of Education Educators Training Modules/IEP Document Review

Transition Document

- Workgroup is updating the website to use clearer language for educators and align terminology between adult services and education.

IEP Document Review

- A workgroup has been formed who include, Sara Tinker, Johnny Collett, and Tal Curry to identify improvements for the IEP guidance document and association Transition documents.

Benefit Cliff/ Medicaid updates

Amy Luttrell reported no new updates on benefit cliffs.

Legislative Watch

- Senate Bills 178 and 202
- OVR restructuring legislation
- Senate Bill 103 on OVR payments for CRPs
- Changes to House Bills 9 and HB 695 on Managed Care Organizations (MCOs).

Transition Committee

Katie Wolf Whaley, Interim Chair of the Transition Committee provided the report. The report included the following highlights:

- She announced the committee reviewed the *Frequently Asked Questions* (FAQ) document developed by the Advocacy and Education Committee. No additional comments were recorded at that time.
- She continued, a brief discussion was held during the committee meetings regarding the IEP document review process and the development of content for the Transition 360 training course.
- The subcommittee also discussed the ‘Transition Resource Sheet’ for all students with disabilities ages 13 to 21. This resource was developed by a workgroup that included representatives from the State Advisory Panel for Exceptional Children, the Employment First Council, and the Kentucky Advisory Council on Autism.

Public Comment

No comment was addressed.

Adjournment

Council Chair, Katie Wolf Whaley called for a motion to adjourn the meeting. **Council member, Tal Curry made a motion to adjourn the meeting. Cora McNabb, second. Motion passed and the meeting was adjourned.**

Chair, Katie Wolf Whaley thanked everyone for their contribution and adjourned the meeting.

Next Meeting

Date: July 11, 2025.

Time: 1:00 pm to 3:00 pm.

Nanci Howard

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