



Andy Beshear
Governor

Jamie Link
Education & Labor Cabinet Secretary

Kentucky Employment First Council Meeting

Minutes

July 12, 2024

1:00pm – 3:00pm

[Zoom Link](#)/In-Person

Transportation Cabinet

200 Mero Street, Frankfort, KY 40601

Meeting ID: 831 4350 9206

Passcode: 100392

Members Present: Chair, Katie Wolf Whaley, Legislative Liaison, Diana Merzweiler, Bill Bates, Amanda Friend, Johnny Callebs, Todd Coffey, Tal Curry, Frank Huffman, Jason Wheatley as proxy for Gretta Hylton, Amy Luttrell, Cora McNabb, Margaret Lopresto as proxy for Lori Norton, Amanda Friend, Amanda Owen, Larry Taylor, Jeff White, Andrew Johnson, Rebecca Wilson, Vice-Chair, Morgan Turner, and Merry Reid Sheffer

Members Absent: Jessica Beaven, Staci Cain, Jeff Edwards, Dawn Gardner, Leslie Hoffman, David Allgood, Annette Jett, and Robert Taylor

Staff Present: Kentucky Office of Vocational Rehabilitation (KYOVR) Administrator, Nanci Howard, KYOVR, KYOVR Florence Branch Manager, Michelle Cobb, KYOVR Employer Services Branch Manager, Deana Wilson-Kimbler, KYOVR CRP/SE Branch Manager, Ron O'Hair, KYOVR Staff Assistant, Betty Whittaker, KYOVR Division Director, Holly Hendricks, KYOVR Deputy

Executive Director, Susie Edwards, and KYOVR Assistant Director, Jonathan White

Guests Present: Kimberly Wickert, KY RETAIN

Interpreters: Tia Henson

Roll Call: Roll call was taken. It was determined there was a quorum.

Staff Report: Administrator, Nanci Howard, began her report by announcing that the meeting materials would no longer be distributed through the mail but rather via email. She concluded her report by providing virtual housekeeping rules and upcoming committee dates for Council members. She highlighted openings Vacancies on the council: two business industry and labor, and one chamber of commerce. She mentioned Council members to present their roles in future meetings. She Stated that administrative specialist position is vacant and in the process of being filled and Investigating exhibit signage for the Employment First Council. Inclusive Workforce Summit on September 30th at Marriott Griffin Gate Resort. She thanked the committees for their diligent work throughout the year.

Approval of Minutes: Council of the Chair, Katie Wolf Whaley directed members to the meeting minutes from the April 12th, 2024, meeting. **She called for a motion to accept the minutes as written. Amanda Owen made the motion to accept the April 12th, 2024, Council minutes. Second, Diana Merzweiler. No opposition. Motion Carries.**

National Expansion of Employment Opportunities Network (NEON) Project Update:

Council Chair, Katie Wolf Whaley, provided an update on Project NEON and the efforts made through the technical assistance award grant. She began by stating, the lead Subject Matter Expert (SME), Karen Lee, has been working with the committees and providing support and guidance to each committee Chair and Council leadership. She then announced there will be one-on-one meetings with Karen Lee and each Chair of the committees to discuss how the charge of the Council and Committee goals coincide with the Strategic Plan. Katie continued to say as part of Project NEON, SME, Steve Blanks, will present a three-part webinar series, "Enhancing Employer Engagement", sponsored by the Employment First Council and organized by the Employer Education and Engagement Committee. This series is aimed at increasing capacity among disability employment providers in better connecting with businesses and representing job seekers in a way that allows the business to see the benefits to hiring candidates with disabilities. The first [webinar](#) was held on June 20th with 87 attendees and the next webinars will be held July 18th and August 15th. She

said there is also focus on an effort to increase Kentucky's capacity for customized employment. Project NEON will cover costs for bringing in key-note speaker, Trish Jones-Parkins, for the Kentucky 2024 APSE Conference. She expressed gratitude for Project NEON and the work of the Council.

Executive Committee Update: Council Chair, Katie Wolf Whaley, informed the Council that we recently received a request for a letter of support on behalf of the Development Institute's proposal for the Disability Innovation Fund Model Demonstration Project. This proposal aims at increasing opportunities for competitive integrated employment in new ways and reaching often underserved groups. The Executive Committee met and voted to approve submission of this letter.

Presentation on Employment First: Council Chair Katie Wolf Whaley reflected on her recent presentation about Employment First at a statewide VR staff meeting. She emphasized the importance of collaboration among council members and the need for a unified approach to employment initiatives. She plans to share a brief overview of Employment First and its significance. Katie shared a video created by council members illustrating the meaning of Employment First. She emphasized the importance of competitive, integrated employment for individuals with disabilities. The video highlighted the need for respect, opportunity, and the value that individuals with disabilities bring to the workforce. She discussed Kentucky's employment statistics, noting that the state ranks low in employment for individuals with disabilities. She emphasized the need for the council's work to address the labor gap and high unemployment rates, particularly among youth exiting high school. Katie presented statistics indicating that a significant percentage of individuals with disabilities express a desire to work but face barriers to accessing employment opportunities. Katie stressed the importance of the Employment First Council in advocating for integrated employment services and addressing systemic issues. She also discussed the need for a cultural shift within agencies to prioritize employment for individuals with disabilities. She emphasized the importance of welcoming individuals into the system, rather than acting as gatekeepers, to ensure that those expressing a desire to work receive the necessary support.

Katie also highlighted the role of pre-employment transition services in schools and stressed the need for collaboration between educational institutions and employment services. She encouraged the council to share information about available resources and services to help individuals navigate the transition from school to work. She concluded by reiterating the importance of Employment First as a primary option for individuals with disabilities and emphasized the need for ongoing conversations within agencies about employment. She stressed the necessity of creating pathways for individuals to access employment support.

The Commonwealth Council on Developmental Disabilities (CCDD):

Executive Director of the Commonwealth Council on Developmental Disabilities, Johnny Callebs Provided a presentation on that the efforts and overview of the Council's vision, mission, and structure. He mentioned about the DD Network and its components: DD Councils, Protection and Advocacy organizations, and University Centers for Excellence in Developmental Disabilities. He discussed about that "New project" and mentioned that "Never Too Early" focusing on employment for young children with developmental disabilities. He shared resources from the completed transportation initiative with the council.

Committee Report:

Advocacy & Education Committee:

Chair, Amanda Owen, provided the Advocacy and Education report. She stated the committee has been working diligently on development of a centralized website for resources. She focused on Plan to create a FAQ section for different target audiences and encourage to submit additional resources to be added to the website and she's ensured that the QR code on the approved sheet directs users to the updated website. She mentioned that she trying to create more resources but rather collect them so that parents, employers, self-advocates, etc. will be able to find them in one place. She also stated the committee has been working on email templates as well. Amanda said to send more resources via email to Nanci Howard so she can coordinate those and gather up the information. She stated her next step would be to collaborate with other committees and concluded her report. Chair of the Council, Katie Wolf Whaley encourage committee Member to put their input for Development and growth. She stated the committee has been working diligently on developing PowerPoint slides. She stated the committee continues to collect information and resources and She concluded her report by encouraged other committees to submit additional resources to be added to the website.

Employer Education & Engagement Committee:

Chair of the Council, Katie Wolf Whaley, provided an update on behalf of Merry-Reid Sheffer regarding the Employer Education and Engagement report. The Employment First Council continues to collaborate and co-sponsor, with KY RETAIN, the monthly Employer Seminar Series. Many thanks to Kimberly Wickert and Betty Whittaker, of KY RETAIN, for the partnership. She expressed gratitude to Kimberly Wickert and Betty Whittaker of KY RETAIN for their partnership. Upcoming [webinars](#) are:

July: Innovative Supports for Autistic Workers

August: Employers as Change Agents

Provider Capacity Committee: Chair, Jeff White, provided the Provider Capacity report. He began by stating the committee has no action items today but shared information around the need for increased disability employment

provider capacity in our systems. He expressed concerned regarding the challenges meeting the demand for services and that the committee is looking forward to the potential changes in the Supported Employment service fee memorandum from the Kentucky Office of Vocational Rehabilitation. These changes may be a clear action to increase capacity among providers. Jeff White mentioned the committee efforts to streamline the handoff of services between OVR and Waiver. They are working on developing a provider workbook to assist provider agencies with the progress of their policies and procedures, in order to help agencies add employment to their service offerings and to do so in a quality manner. Jeff concluded his report by announcing he will continue his conversations with Medicaid about ways to address policy changes without regulatory or waiver changes.

Public Policy Committee: Chair, Diana Merzweiler, provided the Public Policy report. She began by informing the Council of a meeting with Education and Labor Cabinet's Executive Director of Legislative Services, Jordan Jones, Chair, Katie Wolf Whaley, KYOVR Executive Director, Cora McNabb, and Vocational Rehabilitation Administrator, Nanci Howard. She said the group discussed the Council's recommendation to align the state's definition of competitive integrated employment with the federal definition and determine next steps in putting forward this recommendation. The recommendation is at the Cabinet's Legislative Priority List and there was no date given for a follow-up but that Jordan would follow-up with OVR staff once it gets closer to session.

Transition Committee: Co-Chair, Frank Huffman, provided the Transition report. He stated ongoing efforts to find success stories for employment of people with disabilities. He expressed he is having difficulty finding success stories. Frank mentioned that he is participating in the Olmstead work that addresses transportation issues and provides personal experiences and concerns about transportation barriers to employment .

Public Comment: Co-Chair, Frank Huffman was raised question about transportation issues and asked if the Council had a Transportation Committee. Chair, Katie Wolf Whaley, stated in the development of the committees the idea was that all committees would tackle the barriers to transportation. he asked if OVR have came up with any solutions and recognizes it is a huge problem for everyone. Jeff White stated transportation is available through OVR and waiver services but wrought with so many elements and must be addressed by a case by case basis. Chair, Katie Wolf Whaley, suggested some resources to Frank and referred him to MAria Kemplin. Council member, Johnny Calleb,s suggested working with the state Olmstead's work team on Transportation. Katie will send an email introduction to him and Carolyn Wheeler to discuss his transportation issues. No further discussion was held regarding a transportation committee on the Council due to other entities having those work teams at this time.

Adjournment

Chair, Katie Wolf Whaley thanked everyone for their contribution and adjourned the meeting with a reminder of the next meeting date.

Next Meeting:

- **Date: October 11,2024**
- **Time: 1:00 pm to 3:00 pm**

