Andy Beshear, Governor
Jamie Link, Education & Labor Cabinet Secretary
Employment First Council
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Frankfort, KY 40601
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Kentucky Employment First Council Meeting Agenda

Date: Friday, October 09, 2026

Location: Mayo-Underwood Building, 500 Mero Street, First Floor, Room 136CE

Time: 1:00pm – 3:00pm (EST)

Virtual Option: Zoom Access

1. Welcome | Roll Call *(1:00pm)*

Presenter: Anu Kumari, KYOVR Administrative Specialist Senior

2. Approval of July 10, 2026 Meeting Minutes *(1:10pm)*

Presenter: Katie Wolf Whaley, Employment First Council Chair

3. Chair Report *(1:15pm)*

Presenter: Katie Wolf Whaley, Employment First Council Chair

4. KY OVR Order of Selection Update *(1:20pm)*

Presenter: Susie Edwards, Executive Director of the KY Office of Vocational Rehabilitation

5. KY OVR Case Management System Update *(1:25pm)*

Presenter: Ed Monheimer, KY OVR Division Director

6. Employment First Council Annual Report update *(1:30pm)*

- Annual Report Draft Review and Input
- Council approval for submission to the Cabinet

Presenter: Katie Wolf Whaley, Employment First Council Chair

7. 2026 Project NEON update and Next Steps *(1:35pm)*

Presenter: Jeff White, NEON Lead, and NEON Work Group Leads Carolyn Wheeler, Donna Osborn, Lori Norton, Katie Wolf Whaley

8. Priority versus Mandate: Deciphering Kentucky's Evolving Employment Landscape *(1:55pm)*

Presenter: Jeff White, Employment First Council Vice Chair

9. Committee Reports *(2:30pm)*

Advocacy and Education – Amanda Owen
Education and Engagement – Merry Reid Sheffer
Provider Capacity – Shelly Durbin
Public Policy – Andrew Johnson
Transition – Tal Curry

10. Public Comment *(2:50pm)*

Participants: Members of the public (up to 3 minutes per speaker)

11. Motion to Adjourn *(3:00pm)*

Presenter: Katie Wolf Whaley, Employment First Council Chair

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Governor

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Secretary, Education and Labor Cabinet

Kentucky Employment First Council Quarterly Meeting

Minutes
July 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, Andrew Johnson, David Allgood, Deana Wilson Kimbler, Johnny Callebs, JoAnn Wells, Shelly Durbin, Susan Brown, Laurie Mays, Amanda Owen, Robert Larry Taylor, and Lori Norton

Members' Absent

Merry Reid Sheffer, Leslie Hoffman, Becky Wilson, Gretta Hylton, Rhonda Logsdon, and Jeff Edwards

Guests Present

Elizabeth Kries, Deborah Minton, Dawn Rollins, Lisa Carrico, Melissa Marvel, Melanie Lybarger, Zac Sappenfield, Deborah Davidson, Megan Kuhlwein, Tracy Belfield, and Johnny Collett

Staff Present

Nanci Howard, Susie Edwards, Michelle Cobb, Holly Hendericks, Anu Kumari, Kristen Beach, Eric Barth, and Edward Monheimer

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 for council appointments and reappointments were submitted to the Education and Labor Cabinet on May 14, 2026. No additional updates have been received.

Committee Participation:

Council members were encouraged to actively participate in committee meetings throughout the quarter. Committee work is essential to advancing the Council's initiatives, and guests interested in serving on a committee were invited to contact Council Chair Katie Wolf Whaley, Nanci Howard, or staff support.

Committee Upcoming Meeting Schedule:

The Employment First Council maintains five standing committees. Meetings are open to the public. The next committee meeting's information was shared in the meeting chat:

- Advocacy & Education Committee
  - July 24, 2026, 9:00–10:00 a.m. (EST)
- Employer Education & Engagement Committee
  - August 5, 2026, 1:00–2:00 p.m. (EST)
- Provider Capacity Committee
  - July 28, 2026, 2:00–3:00 p.m. (EST)
- Public Policy Committee
  - July 30, 2026, 9:00 AM – 10:00 a.m. (EST)
- Transition Committee
  - August 6, 2026, 9:30 –10:30 a.m. (EST)
- Executive Committee
  - September 17, 2026, 3:00 – 4:00 p.m. (EST)

Annual Report Planning Update:

Planning for the Council's 2026 Annual Report has begun. 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.**

The Executive Committee's first planned meeting is scheduled for July 21, 2026, with additional planning meetings anticipated in August and September. A draft report will be shared with the full Council before the October Quarterly Council Meeting for review and feedback. Council members were encouraged to submit accomplishments, activities, and recommendations to staff, the Council Chair, or members of the Executive Committee throughout the quarter to ensure they are accurately reflected in the annual report.

Council members were reminded to contact Nanci Howard or Anu Kumari for additional assistance or questions regarding Council activities.

Introduction of Employment First Council Members

Employment First Council Chair Katie Wolf Whaley conducted introductions of Council members. During the introductions, Kentucky Office of Vocational Rehabilitation Administrative Specialist Senior, Anu Kumari, monitored attendance and completed the roll call to determine a quorum. 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 April 10, 2026, minutes as written. **Council member David Allgood made the motion to accept April 10, 2026, minutes as written. Amanda Owen, second. No opposition or abstentions. Motion carried.**

Chair Report

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

It was reported that the Employment First Overview Sheet has been updated with the latest employment statistics from the Disability Statistics Compendium.

Key updates include:

- Kentucky's national ranking remains unchanged.
- The employment gap between individuals with and without disabilities decreased from 42.4 percent to 38.5 percent.
- The employment rate for Kentuckians with disabilities increased from 32.3 percent to 39.9 percent.
- The Overview Sheet now includes a QR code and direct link to the Employment First Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ) webpage.

The Advocacy and Education Committee was recognized for leading the development of the Frequently Asked Questions, with contributions from the Council, and thanked the Office of Vocational Rehabilitation staff for converting the document from a static PDF to a webpage to improve accessibility and simplify future updates. Council members were encouraged to notify the Chair or staff of any outdated links or additional resources that should be included.

It was also shared that information from the U.S. Department of Labor's Office of Disability Employment Policy has been released for National Disability Employment Awareness Month (NDEAM), observed each October, including this year's theme, "Celebrating Value and Talent." Council members were encouraged to utilize the available resources and promotional materials to support disability employment awareness efforts throughout the year.

Certificate of Appreciation:

Employment First Council Chair Katie Wolf Whaley presented Cora McNabb with a Certificate of Appreciation in honor of her retirement and in recognition of her leadership, commitment, and support during KYOVR's administration of the Employment First Council.

Employment First: What do we mean by employment for all

Elizabeth Kries, Human Development Institute (HDI), University of Kentucky, provided a presentation on *"Employment First: What Do We Mean by Employment for All"*

She emphasized that Kentucky's Employment First policy applies to all individuals with disabilities who desire to work and encourages competitive integrated employment as the first and preferred outcome. She highlighted the importance of viewing employment as a natural expectation rather than something dependent on access to services or supports.

Using examples from her work with youth and individuals with disabilities, Elizabeth highlighted the connection between employment, independence, self-determination, and quality of life. She encouraged professionals to incorporate conversations about employment into everyday interactions with individuals and families and to foster high expectations for competitive integrated employment.

She encouraged council members to consider how they can advance Employment First within their respective roles by raising awareness, strengthening community partnerships, and promoting inclusive employment opportunities. She emphasized that creating a culture where employment is the expectation requires ongoing collaboration and intentional efforts across agencies, providers, employers, and communities.

KY OVR Order of Selection Update

The Kentucky Office of Vocational Rehabilitation (OVR) provided an update on the Order of Selection and current service delivery. OVR clarified that the agency is operating at capacity and is not out of funding. OVR also noted that its reporting is based on the federal fiscal year (July 1 through June 30).

Since July 1, 2025, OVR has:

- Nearly 40,000 individuals served, including approximately 5,130 new applicants.
- Placed nearly 5,000 individuals on the Order of Selection waitlist.
- Supported nearly 4,000 individuals in training programs, including postsecondary education, vocational training, licenses, certificates, and other credentialing programs.
- Continued services for nearly 1,500 individuals who are job-ready and actively pursuing employment.

Nearly 6,000 individuals exited the program during the reporting period, with 54 percent achieving successful employment outcomes.

OVR began serving individuals from the waitlist in May 2026, with approximately 134 individuals taken off the waitlist during May and June. Due to implementation of the agency's new case management system, no additional individuals were taken off the waitlist on July 10, 2026. OVR plans to continue serving individuals from the waitlist using a phased approach based on application date while monitoring counselor capacity and district resources to ensure local offices have the capacity to provide services effectively. Priority Category I will not reopen until all individuals currently on the waitlist have been served.

As of July 10, 2026:

- 6,383 individuals remained on the waitlist.
- More than 5,000 individuals were in Priority Category I (individuals with the most significant disabilities).
- OVR reported an approximate 28 percent attrition rate among individuals on the waitlist.

OVR reported the following disability categories represented on the waitlist:

- Nearly 2,000 individuals with psychosocial disabilities.
- Nearly 1,500 individuals with cognitive disabilities.
- 1,393 individuals with hearing loss or communication disorders.
- Approximately 300 individuals with blindness or visual disabilities.

An update was also provided regarding federal organizational changes. OVR reported that the Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services (OSERS), including the Rehabilitation Services Administration (RSA), will transition to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS). At this time, OVR has been informed that RSA operations and vocational rehabilitation services are expected to continue without interruption.

KY OVR Case Management System Impact Update

The Kentucky Office of Vocational Rehabilitation (OVR) provided an update on the new case management system and its implementation progress.

It was reported that the development of the new case management system began in 2021. Extensive system testing has been completed, and staff training was completed in June 2026 in preparation for implementation. Initial staff feedback has been positive. The new system is expected to improve case management, financial oversight, reporting capabilities, and payment processing, including more efficient processing of Pre-Employment Transition Services (Pre-ETS).

A provider portal is planned for release approximately three to six months after the system becomes operational. The portal will allow Community Rehabilitation Programs (CRPs) and other providers to:

- Manage organizational profiles.
- Maintain staff certifications and certification expiration dates.
- Manage referrals.
- Submit reports and manage invoices.
- Track authorization and invoice status.
- Electronically sign documents.
- Communicate directly with OVR through a secure messaging feature.

The new system also includes enhanced security, internal controls, and financial management tools to improve oversight of program budgets, obligations, and expenditures while strengthening compliance with state and federal requirements.

Council Question and Answer:

Question: *Will training be provided for Community Rehabilitation Programs (CRPs) and other providers on how to effectively use the new case management system and provider portal?*

Answer: It was confirmed that provider training will be offered prior to the launch of the provider portal to ensure providers understand how to use the system and its features.

Question: *Will providers be required to use the new provider portal, or will existing reporting methods remain available?*

Answer: It was explained that use of the provider portal will be encouraged because it streamlines communication and document management; however, participation will not initially be mandatory. Existing reporting processes and forms will remain available for providers that are unable or choose not to use the portal due to technological limitations.

Committee Reports

Advocacy and Education Committee

Advocacy and Education Committee Chair, Amanda Owen, provided an overview of the committee's work.

The committee announced the completion of the Employment First Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ) webpage and the updated Employment First Overview Sheet, which now includes a QR code directing users to the FAQ webpage. The committee noted that converting the FAQ from a PDF to a webpage improves accessibility and allows resources to be updated more efficiently.

The committee's current focus is expanding outreach to the education community by increasing awareness of Employment First resources. Members are collaborating with the Transition Committee to distribute resources through educator newsletters, back-to-school communications, resource inserts, and other outreach efforts. The committee emphasized the importance of ensuring educators have access to Employment First information and resources to support students with disabilities as they prepare for competitive integrated employment.

The committee will continue collaborating with the Transition Committee to strengthen education-focused outreach efforts.

Employer Education and Engagement Committee

On behalf of Employer Education and Engagement Committee Chair, KYOVR Assistant Director and Committee Staff Support Kristen Beach provided the committee report.

The committee reported that the sixth Autism-Informed Employers quick-hit video series, has been released. Two quarterly employer discussions were held, with approximately 60 participants attending the first session and approximately 20 participants attending the second. The series continues to be promoted through a

mailing list of more than 1,600 individuals, and the next quarterly discussion is scheduled for September 24, 2026.

The committee also provided updates on the Training Innovation Project (TIP), including the Learn at Lunch webinar series, the Driving Employment Outcomes Through Innovation and Partnership Community of Practice, and the TIP Master Class, which was attended by approximately 84 participants. Planning continues for additional training opportunities and the virtual summit.

Upcoming TIP Webinar Information

- **Title:** *Learn at Lunch _Strengthening the Workforce: The Business Case for Hiring and Retaining Qualified People with Disabilities*
- **Presenters:** Johnny Collett and Laurie Mays
- **Date:** July 21, 2026
- **Time:** 12:00–1:00 p.m. ET

Registration information is available on the website.

The committee discussed recommendations for the Council's Annual Report, including the Autism-Informed Employer series, TIP activities, employer outreach efforts, presentations, and continued collaboration with regional employment coalitions. Updates were also shared on the Office of Vocational Rehabilitation's new case management system, a proposed Employment First Employer Appreciation Awards Luncheon, and the potential impact of Medicaid waiver rate reductions on service providers.

Provider Capacity Committee

Provider Capacity Committee Chair Shelly Durbin provided the committee report.

The committee continues to develop a Provider Webinar, with a targeted release in October 2026. The webinar will provide information and resources related to employment, transition, and provider services.

The committee also received updates on Project NEON, the Order of Selection, and the Coordination of Funding process. Members reported positive provider feedback regarding the Coordination of Funding process, including successful transitions to waiver-funded supported employment services while individuals remain on the Order of Selection waitlist.

Public Policy Committee

Public Policy Committee Chair Andrew Johnson provided the committee report.

The committee received updates on the Order of Selection and Project NEON initiatives. Members also discussed a proposed workgroup to explore incorporating Employment First principles into Individualized Education Plan guidance. Due to limited member interest, the proposal was tabled for future consideration.

The committee also discussed opportunities to address employment-related barriers for students transitioning from postsecondary education into the workforce. Council members were encouraged to participate in future committee meetings and share policy issues or barriers that could support the Council's Employment First efforts.

Transition Committee

Transition Committee Chair Tal Curry provided the committee report.

The committee's most recent meeting was canceled due to scheduling conflicts. However, efforts continue in collaboration with the Advocacy and Education Committee to develop resource distribution strategies and increase awareness of Employment First resources among educators and transition partners, including outreach before the start of the school year.

The committee also continues to promote the Transition Resource Sheet and anticipates making additional updates to the resource later this year.

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. David Allgood 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

October 9, 2026
1:00 pm- 3:00 pm (EST)
Location and Zoom meeting information will be forthcoming.