



Kentucky Employment First Council

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Employment First Council

Public Policy Committee

Minutes

May 7, 2026

9:00 am – 10:00 am (EST)

Zoom

Meeting ID: 817 4368 7977

Members' Present

Committee Chair/Legislative Liaison Andrew Johnson, Council Chair Katie Wolf Whaley, Council Vice Chair Jeff White, and Amy Luttrell

Members Absent

Susan Brown, Cora McNabb, and Leslie Hoffmann

Staff Present

Nanci Howard, Anu Kumari, and Holly Hendricks

Welcome | Agenda Review:

Committee Chair Andrew Johnson welcomed attendees, and the agenda was reviewed by all participants.

Order of Selection update

The Kentucky Office of Vocational Rehabilitation provided an update on the status of the Order of Selection (OOS) waitlist. The agency reported that the regulations have been finalized and are now publicly available for viewing.

As of the end of April, 5,648 individuals remained on the waitlist. On May 1, OVR removed 84 individuals from the waitlist and moved them into accepted status. These individuals were identified from Priority Category 1 based on the earliest application dates and are located throughout the state. Counselors were expected to begin contacting those individuals to start the Individualized Plan for Employment (IPE) process and initiate services. Plans must be completed within 90 days, although staff hoped services could begin sooner.

The agency will continue to monitor spending associated with newly accepted cases before making decisions about removing additional individuals from the waitlist. The agency reported that additional waitlist movement was not currently anticipated before implementation of the new case management system, which is scheduled for July. However, it was clarified that expenditures and funding availability are continuously monitored, and additional individuals could be moved from the waitlist sooner if funding and operational capacity allow. The agency indicated they expect to review spending again around early August, following implementation and training activities.

Case Management System:

The agency is preparing for the rollout of the new case management system and related staff training activities. Approximately 25–30 staff members will participate in Train-the-Trainer (T3) sessions in Louisville during the week of May 18. Those staff members will then provide statewide training to field staff during the first week of June. During that period, most field services staff will be unavailable for regular service delivery activities due to virtual training requirements. McDowell Center and Carl D. Perkins Vocational Training Center staff training will follow a staggered schedule to ensure continuity of services at those locations.

It was also reported that thousands of case files are currently being reviewed and updated to ensure accuracy prior to migration into the new system.

Funding and budget considerations were also discussed. It was clarified that funding remains available; however, varying case costs, staffing shortages, vacant positions, and implementation costs associated with the new case management system continue to impact budget planning and agency operations.

Committee Questions and Answers:

Question: *Clarification was requested regarding whether OVR intended to wait until after implementation of the new case management system before reviewing additional movement from the waitlist.*

Answer: It was clarified that spending is monitored on a weekly basis; however, newly accepted cases may not show significant expenditures for two to three months. It was clarified that clearer cost projections are expected around the end of July, following implementation of the new case management system and completion of statewide staff training activities.

Question: A question was raised regarding whether the implementation of the new case management system was the primary reason additional individuals were not being removed from the waitlist and whether a long-term strategy existed for addressing the overall backlog.

Answer: It was clarified that the system itself was not preventing movement from the waitlist. Staff capacity, file preparation, and case migration activities were identified as major operational factors. The expenditure and funding availability are continuously monitored, and additional individuals may be removed from the waitlist as fiscal and operational conditions allow

Question: A question was raised regarding whether the agency was experiencing funding shortages and whether OVR anticipated fully expending its budget by the end of the fiscal year.

Answer: It was clarified that funding is currently available; however, service costs vary significantly between cases, making expenditure forecasting complex. Staffing shortages and implementation costs associated with the new case management system continue to affect agency operations and budget planning. At this time, OVR does not anticipate fully expending the budget by the end of the fiscal year.

Question: A question was raised regarding whether the OVR regulations remained in a public review period.

Answer: It was clarified that the regulations are finalized and publicly available for viewing.

Project NEON Update/Reminder

Employment First Vice Chair/Committee Member, Jeff White, provided an update regarding ongoing activities under Project NEON. It was reported that most workgroups have continued organizational planning activities, while several groups have begun active project work.

Key priority areas:

Addressing the Impact of Wages on Benefits:

The Impact of Wages on Benefits workgroup identified the need for additional collaboration with the Department for Community Based Services (DCBS) due to the agency's role in programs such as SNAP and Kentucky Transitional Assistance Program (K-TAP). Efforts are underway through agency leadership to formally engage DCBS as an additional Project NEON collaborator. The workgroup is led by Donna Osburn.

The group has also begun developing Kentucky-specific benefits planning training materials. It was noted that existing benefits training programs provide comprehensive information regarding federal benefits; however, additional guidance related to state-administered programs is needed to support benefits planners and improve the accuracy of information provided to individuals and families.

Established Data Collection and Analysis Practices to Inform Future Decisions:

An update was also provided regarding statewide data collection and analysis efforts. Project NEON resources will be utilized to assess statewide data needs, evaluate current and previous initiatives, and identify opportunities to improve employment outcomes and service delivery across systems. It was noted that Kentucky intends to expand beyond standard system performance measures by incorporating broader data collection and analysis activities to help inform future decision-making. The workgroup is led by Jeff White, with subject matter expert Jessie Oettinger.

Additional discussion addressed Kentucky's upcoming participation in the State Employment Leadership Network (SELN) through the National Association of State Directors of Developmental Disabilities Services (NASDDDS), effective July 1. It was reported that efforts are underway to coordinate SELN activities with existing Project NEON work to maximize opportunities for improved statewide data collection, system performance evaluation, and informed decision-making.

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

Continued support for the successful implementation and integration of Kentucky's 1915(i) I-RISE initiative, including opportunities to align housing stability, residential supports, and employment-related services through additional federal technical assistance partnerships.

Ensuring the delivery of High-Quality Employment Services:

Customized employment efforts continue to identify responsibilities that will fall under Project NEON compared to activities already occurring through existing employment initiatives and programs. The workgroup is led by Katie Wolf Whaley.

Increase the knowledge base of Case Manager and Vocational Rehabilitation Counselor:

It was reported that a multidisciplinary team has been assembled to support Project NEON activities, including case managers, rehabilitation counselors, family members, and self-advocates. Ongoing efforts continue to focus on increasing self-advocate involvement to ensure individuals receiving services have meaningful opportunities to provide input and help guide Project NEON activities and priorities.

Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services Rule Update

An update was provided regarding proposed federal rule changes associated with the Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services (OSERS). It was reported that the public comment period remains open through May 22, 2026.

Members expressed interest in continuing to monitor future federal guidance and potential impacts on state reporting and compliance activities.

IEP Guidance Workgroup Reminder

An update was provided on plans to begin an IEP Guidance Workgroup focused on identifying opportunities to incorporate Employment First concepts into IEP guidance discussions. Members interested in participating were asked to respond to the previously distributed email indicating their interest.

It was reported that initial activities will likely include a preliminary meeting to review the current landscape, discuss potential approaches, and identify possible next steps. Members were encouraged to participate as available, with additional opportunities for involvement expected as work progresses.

Open Discussion

During the open discussion, the committee discussed Workforce Pell and potential implications for workforce development and Employment First-related activities. It was noted that Workforce Pell is intended to expand financial aid opportunities for short-term credentialing and workforce training programs.

Members discussed whether education and training programs may adjust program structures to meet Workforce Pell eligibility requirements.

It was noted that additional conversations with workforce partners may occur as further federal guidance becomes available.

Additional Discussion

The committee discussed continued support for the implementation and integration of Kentucky's 1915(i) I-RISE initiative. It was noted that Kentucky is now eligible to participate in the Housing Services Partnership Accelerator 2026 Cohort through its participation as NEON state. The initiative involves technical assistance partnerships with the Housing and Services Resource Center, the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, and the U.S. Department of Labor.

Public Comments

None.

Adjournment

Employment First Committee Chair Andrew Johnson thanked everyone for their contribution and adjourned the meeting.

Next Meeting Date

June 18, 2026

9:00 am- 10:00am (EST)