



Employment First Kentucky Full Council Meeting

Date: April 10, 2026

Time: 1:00 pm to 3:00 pm EST

Location: Office of Vocational Rehabilitation

500 Mero Street, Frankfort, KY 40601 | Via Zoom

Employment First:

It is the policy of the Commonwealth of Kentucky that competitive integrated employment shall be considered the first and primary option for persons with disabilities of working age who desire to become employed.

[Kentucky's Employment First Policy](#) was signed into law on March 24, 2022.

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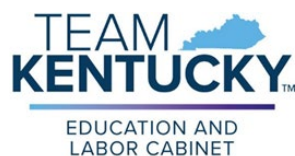


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Kentucky Employment First Council

Executive Committee

Date: March 19, 2026

Location: Virtual Meeting

Time: 3:00pm – 4:00pm (EST)

Virtual Option: [Zoom Access](#)

1. **Welcome and Introductions** (3:00pm)

Presenter: Katie Wolf Whaley, Chair

2. **Project NEON Update** (3:10pm)

Presenter: Katie Wolf Whaley, Chair

3. **Advocacy and Education Committee Chair Election Discussion** (3:20pm)

Presenter: Katie Wolf Whaley, Chair

4. **Committee Reports** (3:30pm)

Participants: Committee Members

5. Finalize April 10, 2026 Quarterly Meeting Agenda (3:45pm)

Participants: Committee Members

6. Public Comment (3:55pm)

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

7. Adjournment (4:00pm)



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Governor

Jamie Link
Secretary, Education and Labor Cabinet

Employment First Council Executive Committee Meeting Minutes

March 19, 2026
3:00pm – 4:00pm (EST)
Zoom
Meeting ID: 846 2844 7176

Members Present

Council Chair Katie Wolf Whaley, Vice-Chair Jeff White, Amanda Owen, Merry Reid Sheffer, Shelly Durbin, and Tal Curry

Members Absent

Legislative Liaison, Andrew Johnson

Staff Present

Nanci Howard and Anu Kumari

Welcome | Introduction | Agenda Review:

Employment First Council Chair, Katie Wolf Whaley, welcomed attendees and officially called the meeting to order.

Project NEON Update

Employment First Council Vice Chair, Jeff White, provided an update regarding Project NEON with partners from EconSys and the U.S. Department of Labor's Office of Disability Employment Policy (ODEP). Project NEON focuses on individuals with mental health conditions, substance use disorders, and co-occurring disabilities. Project

NEON is also coordinating efforts with participation in the State Employment Leadership Network (SELN).

It was confirmed that Kentucky will participate in Project NEON for a three-year period, providing an important opportunity to build on existing Employment First efforts and advance systems change across the state. A list of subject matter experts has not yet been received from ODEP; however, flexibility was noted to engage additional experts identified by Kentucky.

Key Focus Areas and Workgroups

Workgroups are being established to support progress in the following areas:

- Wages and Benefits Impact
- Data Initiatives
- Quality of Employment Services and Training
 - Lead by Katie Wolf Whaley
- Building Capacity and Knowledge for Case Managers and Vocational Rehabilitation Counselors
 - Lead by Carolyn Wheeler
- Promoting the 1915(i) / I-RISE Initiative (Long-Term Supports)
 - Lead by Lori Norton

Developing Project NEON Network

The Project NEON Network is being developed to support implementation and collaboration across the state. The network will support testing and implementation of strategies developed through Project NEON.

- Thirteen agencies and organizations are currently collaborating on Project NEON
- Five organizations have already joined the network prior to formal outreach.
- Efforts to expand the network are ongoing.

Project NEON Next Steps

The committee will continue to expand the Project NEON network, engage partners, and promote participation in webinars and related activities.

Advocacy and Education Committee Chair Elections Discussion

The committee discussed the Advocacy and Education Committee Chair election. During the January 9, 2026, Council meeting, council member, David Allgood, was nominated to serve as Chair of the Advocacy and Education Committee. As both David Allgood and the current committee chair were absent, the election was tabled.

Following the meeting, David Allgood formally declined the nomination. Current committee chair Amanda Owen subsequently expressed interest in serving as Chair. No additional nominations were received.

The Employment First Council will open nominations at the next Council meeting on April 10, 2026. If more than one nominee is presented, a vote will be conducted. If only one nominee is present, a vote to confirm will be held.

Committee Reports

Transition Committee and Advocacy and Education Committee Collaboration

The Transition Committee and Advocacy and Education Committee reported continued collaboration to align outreach and communication efforts.

Discussion focused on leveraging existing distribution channels, including Department of Education newsletters, to share Employment First information more effectively. The committees discussed incorporating brief Employment First content (“snippets”) into established communication platforms to improve reach and avoid duplication of efforts.

Additionally, a universal QR code linking to the Employment First Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ) webpage has been developed to support consistent access to information across presentations and materials.

Employer Education and Engagement Committee

Merry Reid Sheffer, Chair of the Employer Education and Engagement Committee, provided an update on the committee’s work. The committee reported on the continued collaboration with Innovative Supports for Autistic Workers (ISAW), a project of the University of Kentucky Human Development Institute.

A monthly Autism-Informed Employer (AIE) video series has been developed as part of this partnership. The series includes short, two-minute videos designed to support employers in creating more inclusive workplaces for individuals on the autism spectrum. The third video in the series has been released, and the series will lead to quarterly discussion sessions. This will provide opportunities for participants to ask questions, share experiences, and suggest future topics. The first quarterly discussion is scheduled for March 26, 2026. Over 60+ individuals were registered at the time of this meeting and additional outreach efforts are ongoing.

Public Policy Committee

On behalf of Andrew Johnson, Chair of the Public Policy Committee, Council Chair Katie Wolf Whaley provided an update regarding recent legislative activity. The committee discussed a House bill that raised concerns related to potential unintended consequences for individuals with significant disabilities, particularly regarding access to Comprehensive Transition Programs (CTPs).

It was reported that these concerns were addressed, and necessary corrections were made prior to the bill's advancement. The committee also noted renewed engagement and focus on policy-related activities.

Provider Capacity Committee

Shelly Durbin, Chair of the Provider Capacity Committee, provided an update on the committee's work. The committee reported on the Waiver Employment Survey, which was distributed to case managers and stakeholders to understand better employment demand and capacity needs across the state.

Due to significant response volume, a revised response process is being implemented to reduce processing time and support timely follow-up.

The survey has generated valuable data, including the identification of geographic areas with increased demand for employment services. This information will support targeted efforts to expand provider capacity and improve service delivery. The survey deadline was extended to allow for additional responses.

The Council requested that the Provider Capacity Committee document the following for inclusion in the Annual Report:

- The purpose and approach of the Waiver Employment Survey
- The impact of emphasizing Employment First requirements
- The increase in engagement and requests following the survey distribution
- Key data insights, including identified needs and geographic trends

Finalized Agenda for April 10, 2026, Quarterly Meeting

Discussion was held regarding the finalization of the Employment First Council April 10, 2026, meeting agenda. There were no changes to the draft agenda, and it was accepted by all.

Announcement

An announcement was shared that Public Policy Committee Chair Andrew Johnson has left his position with the Council on State Governments but remains an appointed member of the Employment First Council. He expressed interest in continuing as Policy Committee Chair until a replacement is identified.

The Governor issued a proclamation recognizing Developmental Disabilities Awareness Month and highlighted Employment First as part of the announcement.

Additional Discussion

KYOVR Administration Nanci Howard presented the upcoming committee meeting dates. Committee members reviewed all scheduled committee dates.

Public Comment

None.

Adjournment

Employment First Council Chair Katie Wolf Whaley thanked everyone for their contribution and adjourned the meeting.

Next Meeting Date

Thursday, June 18, 2026
3:00 PM – 4:00 PM (EST)



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Kentucky Employment First Council

Advocacy and Education Committee

Date: February 6, 2026

Location: Virtual Meeting

Time: 9:00am – 10:00am (EST)

Virtual Option: [Zoom Access](#)

1. **Welcome and Introductions** (9:00am)

Presenter: Amanda Owen, Committee Chair

2. **Update on FAQ Documents** (9:05am)

Presenter: Amanda Owen, Committee Chair

3. **Update on Email Templates** (9:15am)

Presenter: Amanda Owen, Committee Chair

4. **Additional Projects for 2026 Discussion** (9:20am)

Participants: Committee Members

5. Public Comment *(9:50am)*

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

6. Adjournment *(10:00am)*



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Employment First Council

Advocacy and Education Committee

Minutes

February 6, 2026

9:00 am – 10:00 am (EST)

Zoom

Meeting ID: 843 2807 2518

Members Present

Committee Chair, Amanda Owen, Council Chair, Katie Wolf Whaley, Bill Bates, Megan Kuhlwein, David Allgood, Melanie Lybarger, and Carrie Wedding

Members Absent

Susan Brown and Jeff Edwards

Staff Present

Nanci Howard, Michelle Cobb, and Anu Kumari

Welcome | Introduction | Agenda Review

Employment First Advocacy and Education Committee Chair, Amanda Owen, welcomed attendees. Introductions were held. The agenda was reviewed and acknowledged by all participants.

FAQ Document Update

The committee discussed recent updates and ongoing use of the Employment First Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ) document. Members shared that the FAQ is used

regularly by educators, employment specialists, and independent living partners, and that format improvements have made it easier to locate and share targeted information.

The committee noted that the FAQ is available on the [Employment First Kentucky website](#) and is approved for broad dissemination. Members emphasized that sharing the approved FAQ link does not require additional approvals, provided the document is not recreated or modified. Any newly created materials using Employment First branding (e.g., new flyers with logos) require review and approval through the appropriate communications and accessibility process.

Key Discussion Points:

Increased Usability

The FAQ [landing page](#) and audience-specific sections support quick sharing with target audiences.

Current Dissemination Efforts

Members reported sharing the FAQ with internal teams, linking it via QR codes at events, and discussing incorporating it into routine outreach practices (e.g., adding the link to an email signature).

QR Code Development

The committee discussed creating a universal QR code linking directly to the approved FAQ landing page for consistent statewide use.

Employment First Handout Update

Updating the commonly used two-page Employment First Kentucky handout to include the FAQ link and/or QR code.

Next Steps:

The committee agreed that expanding awareness and improving guidance for educators should be the next steps on how to use the FAQ will support increased utilization. Members will continue to explore dissemination opportunities through newsletters, presentations, and professional communication channels.

Update on Email Templates

The committee reviewed updates to draft email templates. Members noted the need for stronger introductory messaging to help audiences understand what Employment First is, why it matters, and how to use the FAQ resource in practice.

Key Discussion Points:

Introductory Context

Emails distributed with the FAQ document should clearly explain:

- What is Employment First?
- Why it matters in Kentucky.
- How it supports transition planning and student outcomes.
- How the FAQ resource supports implementation.

Education-Focused Messaging

Messaging should be tailored for special education directors, transition staff, and teachers, using practical, application-focused language for use in IEP meetings, transition planning, and family engagement.

Distribution Strategies

The committee discussed sharing messaging through established statewide communication methods, including education channels (e.g., KDE listservs or newsletters), professional networks, and trusted regional partners.

Engagement Efforts

The committee discussed supplementing the emails with additional formats such as short videos, podcasts, or message series to improve engagement.

DOSE Institute Outreach

The Committee discussed exploring potential presentation opportunities at the Directors of Special Education (DOSE) Institute to increase statewide awareness of Employment First among special education leadership. The DOSE Institute is typically held in late summer; dates are to be determined.

This includes gathering information regarding:

- Proposal or presentation submission processes.
- Timeline for submission or selection.
- Potential pathways for Employment First representation at the event.

Youth Conference and Event Opportunities

Committee member, Megan Kuhlwein, announced that a youth conference is currently being planned, anticipated for early summer, June 11–12, in Lexington, Kentucky, that will include youth with disabilities and a parent or trusted adult learning track. This may provide an opportunity to:

- Share Employment First information and FAQ resources.
- Provide printed materials or resource links.
- Include Employment First as a topic for caregiver or adult learning sessions.

Action Items

FAQ QR Code Development and Distribution

Develop a universal QR code linking directly to the approved [FAQ landing page](#) and place it in the shared Dropbox for statewide partner use.

Employment First Handout Update

Identify the current owner of the traditional Employment First handout and coordinate updates to include the FAQ link and/or QR code.

Email Template Refinement and Use

Continue refining email templates and encouraging members to use and adapt them in outreach efforts.

Kentucky Department of Education Newsletter to Special Education Directors

Develop and submit introductory information, resource highlights, and success stories linked to the FAQ regarding Employment First to the Kentucky Department of Education to include in their monthly newsletter.

Transition Committee Collaboration

Coordinate with the Employment First Transition Committee to align outreach strategies and support shared messaging and resource promotion for educators.

DOSE Institute Presentation Exploration

Explore opportunities to present Employment First information and resources at the DOSE Institute and gather proposal and timeline information.

Youth Outreach and Engagement

Explore opportunities to share Employment First and FAQ resources at youth-focused events and incorporate youth perspectives and success stories into outreach materials.

Conference and Event Outreach Coordination

Identify and monitor additional opportunities to promote Employment First and FAQ resources.

Additional Discussion

Employment First Council Chair, Katie Wolf Whaley, will resend the Autism Informed Employer video (Campaign Monitor distribution) to members who may not have received it.

KYOVR Administrator Nanci Howard will email the Chair of the Transition Committee to request that the Advocacy & Education Committee join the Transition Committee meeting scheduled for February 19 at 9:30 AM EST. Upon confirmation, a calendar invitation will be sent to the committee.

Public Comments

None.

Adjournment

Employment First Committee Chair, Amanda Owen, thanked everyone for their contribution and adjourned the meeting.

Next Meeting Date

March 20, 2026

9:00am – 10:00am – Friday



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Kentucky Employment First Council

Advocacy and Education Committee

Date: March 20, 2026

Location: Virtual Meeting

Time: 9:00am – 10:00am (EST)

Virtual Option: [Zoom Access](#)

1. **Welcome (9:00am)**

Presenter: Amanda Owen, Committee Chair

2. **Partnership with Emp. 1st Transition Committee (9:05am)**

Presenter: Amanda Owen, Committee Chair

3. **Newsletter Content Discussion (9:20am)**

Presenter: Amanda Owen, Committee Chair

4. **Additional Projects for 2026 Discussion (9:40am)**

Participants: Committee Members

5. Public Comment (9:50am)

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

6. Adjournment (10:00am)



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Employment First Council Advocacy and Education Committee

Minutes

March 20, 2026

9:00 am – 10:00 am (EST)

Zoom

Meeting ID: 843 2807 2518

Members' Present

Committee Chair, Amanda Owen, Council Chair, Katie Wolf Whaley, Bill Bates, Thomas Thompson, Tracy Belfield, Melanie Lybarger, and Carrie Wedding

Members Absent

David Allgood, Susan Brown, and Jeff Edwards

Staff Present

Nanci Howard, Michelle Cobb, and Anu Kumari

Welcome | Agenda Review

Employment First Advocacy and Education Committee Chair, Amanda Owen, welcomed attendees. The agenda was reviewed and acknowledged by all participants.

Partnership with the Employment First Transition Committee

The committee discussed collaboration with the Transition Committee on shared goals related to education and outreach of resources to expand the reach of Employment First initiatives.

As part of this collaboration, sharing Employment First resources such as the FAQ, and other transition resources. The purpose is to coordinate efforts to avoid duplication and identify key audiences, not only to strengthen new partnerships but build upon those

The committees also emphasized the use of a QR code linked to the FAQ landing page and discussed tracking its use in presentations and outreach materials to measure impact and support reporting.

Newsletter Content Discussion

The committee discussed developing newsletter content to support Employment First awareness, particularly for educators and special education leadership.

Members emphasized concise, engaging content using short “hook” statements to direct readers to key resources, ensuring it is practical, relevant, and aligned with educators’ responsibilities.

Discussion highlights included:

- Developing targeted messaging that links to FAQ and transition resources.
- Addressing educator challenges.
- Ensuring content supports existing work rather than adding additional burden.
- Recognizing the need to clearly communicate what actions educators should take next.
- Including actionable steps to connect students to services and supports.
- Providing accurate Vocational Rehabilitation messaging, including:
 - Encouraging early application and placement on the waitlist
 - Communicating Order of Selection Impacts
 - Highlighting available services, such as Pre-ETS
 - Clarifying actions available while waiting for services

The committee noted that while newsletters are valuable, in-person outreach (e.g., DOSE meetings) may be more effective. The committee also emphasized the need for consistent messaging to increase awareness and utilization of resources.

Additionally, the committee reviewed existing resources and tools to support outreach and content development, including:

- The [Autism-Informed Employer](#) (AIE) video series, noting that three short (approximately two-minute) episodes had been released, provides practical strategies related to hiring and interviewing Autistic job candidates.
- The [Supported Employment Training Project \(SETP\) Job Seekers, Families, and Supporters](#) webpage is identified as a useful resource for families seeking employment-related information and guidance.
- The Employment First Council flyer, which was developed to direct individuals to Vocational Rehabilitation services and provide information on [how to get help finding a job](#).

The committee discussed the use of emerging tools, such as Google Notebook, to support podcast-style or audio content as a potential outreach strategy.

A shared document will be used to collaboratively develop newsletter content.

Additional Projects for 2026 Discussion

The committee discussed potential projects and strategic initiatives to support ongoing Employment First efforts in 2026.

Key areas of consideration included:

- Development of standardized messaging scripts for multiple audiences (educators, employers, families).
- Expansion of coordinated outreach efforts through shared contacts and networks to strengthen statewide engagement.
- Exploration of alternative outreach formats (e.g., short videos, AI-generated content, podcast-style messaging).
- Increased use and tracking of FAQ QR code engagement across presentations and materials.
- Continued development of a structured newsletter content strategy.
- Exploration of improving FAQ accessibility, including transitioning from a PDF to a web-based format to address accessibility and maintenance challenges.

The committee noted limitations of the current state website, including reduced flexibility, limited engagement, and challenges with tracking metrics, and discussed exploring alternative approaches.

Action Items

- Develop concise Employment First language for statewide education newsletters.
- Identify and prioritize topics to support quarterly newsletter contributions.
- Create and maintain a shared document (e.g., Google Doc) to support collaborative development of content.
- Develop short, standardized messaging scripts for key audiences.
- Incorporate existing materials, including the FAQ, transition resources, and Autism-Informed Employer video series, into newsletter and outreach content.
- Coordinate with partners to utilize shared outreach networks and ensure efficient, non-duplicative communication.
- Provide approved content to the council for approval and to send to the supporting agency for approval to publicly distribute.
- Ensure clear communication of application steps, waitlist expectations, and available support, including actions to take while waiting for services, is explained. Also, direct consumers, educators, providers, etc., on how to connect to services.
- Promote use of the FAQ QR code and explore tracking options.
- Engage education-focused members to review draft content to ensure clarity, relevance, and usability.
- Continue identifying and documenting partner organizations and distribution networks to support expanded outreach efforts.

Public Comments

None.

Adjournment

Employment First Committee Chair, Amanda Owen, thanked everyone for their contribution and adjourned the meeting.

Next Meeting Date

May 1, 2026

9:00am – 10:00am – Friday (EST)



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Kentucky Employment First Council

Employer Education and Engagement Committee

Date: January 7, 2026

Location: Virtual Meeting

Time: 1:00pm – 2:00pm (EST)

Virtual Option: [Zoom Access](#)

1. Welcome and Introductions (1:00pm)

Presenter: Merry Reid Sheffer, Committee Chair

2. ISAW Update and Discussion (1:05pm)

Presenter: Merry Reid Sheffer, Committee Chair

3. Next Steps with ISAW (1:35pm)

Presenter: Merry Reid Sheffer, Committee Chair

4. Public Comment (1:55pm)

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

5. **Adjournment** (2:00pm)



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Employment First Council

Employer Education and Engagement Committee

Meeting Minutes

January 7, 2026
1:00 pm – 2:00 pm (EST)
Zoom
Meeting ID: 865 1127 0774

Members Present

Chair Merry Reid Sheffer, Amanda Hutchinson, Zachery Sappenfield, Melissa Marvel, Dawn Rollins, and Terry Madden

Members Absent

Katie Wolf Whaley and Aaron Poynter

Staff Present

Nanci Howard, Anu Kumari, and Betty Whittaker

Guest(s) Present

Deborah Minton, Human Development Institute, University of Kentucky

Welcome | Agenda Review:

Employment First Committee Chair Merry Reid Sheffer welcomed attendees. The agenda was reviewed and acknowledged.

ISAW Update and Discussion

The Committee received an update on the Innovative Supports for Autistic Workers (ISAW) initiative led by the University of Kentucky Human Development Institute (UKHDI), in collaboration with Bev Harp. The initiative focuses on supporting employers in implementing practices for autistic workers.

ISAW Monthly Communication Update

- ISAW will partner with the committee to release monthly employer-focused emails.
- Each email will include a two-minute video from Bev Harp.
- Content will primarily target employers and will initially focus on interview and hiring practices.
- The first email is planned for release in January, with additional emails scheduled for February and March.
- Emails will be distributed on Wednesday each month
- Wednesday, January 21, 2026 identified as the proposed launch date for the first email.

ISAW Quarterly Gathering Planning

- Quarterly interactive gatherings will accompany the monthly email series.
- Sessions will emphasize discussion, questions, and engagement.
- Two potential dates were discussed for the first gathering:
 - Tuesday, March 24
 - Thursday, March 26
- The gathering is anticipated to be held as a lunch-time session.
- A registration form will be included with email communications to identify any accommodation requests.

ISAW Website Discussion

- ISAW videos and related materials may be hosted on the HDI website to allow for timely updates.
- The Employment First website may include links to ISAW resources as a gateway for additional information.
- The importance of ensuring full accessibility of all materials was emphasized.

ISAW Outreach and Promotion

- Members discussed sharing ISAW information through organizational communication channels, including newsletters, email lists, and social media.
- Facebook, LinkedIn, and Instagram were discussed as potential platforms for sharing event and resource information.

Additional Discussion

Announcement - Upcoming Events

The following upcoming events and activities were announced:

- The Employment First Council Quarterly Meeting will be held on Friday, January 9, from 1:00 p.m. to 3:00 p.m. (EST) in a hybrid format, with in-person attendance at the Kentucky Transportation Cabinet, Conference Room C-117, Frankfort, and a virtual option is available.
 - A presentation on the TIP Project will be provided during the meeting.
 - A presentation on the Autism Works Study is also included during the meeting.
- A presentation to the [Regional Interagency Transition Team](#) is scheduled for Thursday, January 15, at 10:30 a.m., focusing on Pre-Employment Transition Services.
- An organizational announcement was shared regarding *Mattingly Edge's Annual Beignet Bash*, scheduled for Tuesday, February 17, at 5:00 p.m., at Old Louisville Brewery.

Council Membership Update

An update was provided regarding Employment First Council membership and recent appointments. An Executive Order has been received with 18 appointed/reappointed members. One individual resigned.

In accordance with statutory requirements, members who were not reappointed shall continue to serve until their successors are appointed. There are 23 active council members with 5 vacancies. Staff continue to work with Cabinet Leadership on other needed appointments.

Members were advised that applications for remaining vacancies should not be solicited at this time pending further guidance from Cabinet leadership.

Public Comments

None.

Adjournment

Employment First Committee Chair Merry Reid Sheffer thanked everyone for their contribution and adjourned the meeting.

Next Meeting Date

- Wednesday, February 4, 2026
- 1:00 pm- 2:00 pm (EST)



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Kentucky Employment First Council

Employer Education and Engagement Committee

Date: February 4, 2026

Location: Virtual Meeting

Time: 1:00pm – 2:00pm (EST)

Virtual Option: [Zoom Access](#)

1. **Welcome and Introductions** (1:00pm)

Presenter: Merry Reid Sheffer, Committee Chair

2. **Autism Informed Employer Series Discussion** (1:05pm)

Presenter: Merry Reid Sheffer, Committee Chair

3. **Next Steps - Autism Informed Employer Series** (1:35pm)

Presenter: Merry Reid Sheffer, Committee Chair

4. **Public Comment** (1:55pm)

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

5. **Adjournment** (2:00pm)



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Employment First Council

Employer Education and Engagement Committee

Minutes

February 4, 2026

1:00 pm – 2:00 pm (EST)

Zoom

Meeting ID: 865 1127 0774

Member's Present

Council Chair Katie Wolf Whaley, Deana Wilson-Kimble, Susan Brown, Zachery Sappenfield, Dawn Rollins, Dorian Moe, Michelle Thrift, Deborah Minton, Bev Harp and Terry Madden

Member's Absent

Chair Merry Reid Sheffer, Laurie Mays, and Rebecca Wilson

Staff Present

Nanci Howard, Anu Kumari, Ryan Henson, and Betty Whittaker

Welcome | Introduction | Agenda Review

On behalf of the committee chair, Employment First Council Chair Katie Wolf Whaley welcomed attendees. Introductions were held. The agenda was reviewed and acknowledged.

Autism Informed Employer Series Discussion

This series provides employers with practical information to support hiring and retention of autistic workers. The Committee received an update on the Autism Informed Employer video series initiative.

Employment First Council and Innovative Supports for Autistic Workers Collaboration Employer Series – Episode One – “Why Hire Autistic Workers?”

Key highlights

- The Committee has been collaborating with [ISAW](#) to support the development of a series of 12 approximately two-minute videos.
- The first video and email were distributed to nearly 2,000 recipients and are available on a dedicated webpage developed through a partnership between the Employment First Council and ISAW.
- The Committee previously developed quarterly themes to support the series.
- Quarterly discussion webinars are planned in alignment with the series, with the first scheduled for March 26th. The session will focus on hiring-related topics and will include employers, employment specialists, and other stakeholders, with a facilitated discussion of hiring practices.

Some members reported not receiving the initial distribution email. The email system confirmed successful distribution; however, follow-up sharing occurred through:

- Social media posts (*including Facebook*)
- Direct video and webpage links
- Extended Employment First Council distribution lists

Members were encouraged to continue sharing materials through employer networks, newsletters, and social media platforms.

Engagement and Analytics Discussion

The committee discussed challenges related to engagement metrics, including:

- Lower than expected direct video view counts on Vimeo.
- Possible undercounting due to embedded viewing on social media platforms.
- Need to review Facebook analytics and platform insights to better measure reach and engagement.

Distribution and Scheduling

The committee discussed future release timing and agreed to aim for:

- Video distribution during the first week of each month, returning to the original planned timeline.

Additional Discussion

Partnership Opportunities – Training Innovation Project (TIP)

The committee discussed potential partnership opportunities with the [Training Innovation Project](#) (TIP), including:

- Co-hosting discussions and events.
- Cross-posting videos on TIP platforms.
- Providing logistical and technical support.
- Supporting facilitation of quarterly discussions.
- Co-branding considerations for outreach materials related to current and potential partnership efforts.

The committee expressed strong support for collaboration, recognizing alignment in goals related to employer education and competitive integrated employment.

Announcement - Upcoming Events

Save the date for the Workforce and Employer Engagement Summit (virtual), tentatively scheduled for September 22, 2026. Additional information will be shared when available.

Future Training/Lunch-and-Learn Revitalization

The TIP project is exploring relaunching a training series (*name TBD*), potentially beginning in April. Topics identified through training needs assessment include:

- Accessible workplace practices.
- Disability hiring myths and accommodations.
- Universal design and assistive technology.
- Competitive integrated employment fundamentals.
- Disability etiquette for employers.
- ADA and substance use in the workplace.
- Workforce retention and stay-at-work strategies.
- Trauma-informed workplaces.
- Youth and adult disability workforce pipelines.

Members were encouraged to suggest topics, presenters, or participate in planning. Deborah Minton (*University of Kentucky HDI*) is available for questions and collaboration, and contact information was provided.

Public Comments

None.

Adjournment

Employment First Council Chair Katie Wolf Whaley thanked everyone for their contribution and adjourned the meeting.

Next Meeting Date

- Wednesday, March 4, 2026
- 1:00 pm- 2:00 pm (EST)



Andy Beshear, Governor
Jamie Link, Education & Labor Cabinet Secretary
Employment First Council
500 Mero St., 4th Floor NE
Frankfort, KY 40601
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Kentucky Employment First Council

Employer Education and Engagement Committee

Date: March 4, 2026

Location: Virtual Meeting

Time: 1:00pm – 2:00pm (EST)

Virtual Option: [Zoom Access](#)

1. **Welcome and Introductions** (1:00pm)

Presenter: Merry Reid Sheffer, Committee Chair

2. **Autism Informed Employer Series Update and Discussion** (1:05pm)

Presenter: Bev Harp, UKHDI, ISAW

3. **Partnering with the Training Innovation Project (TIP)** (1:35pm)

Presenter: Merry Reid Sheffer, Committee Chair

4. **Public Comment** (1:55pm)

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

5. **Adjournment** (2:00pm)



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Andy Beshear
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Jamie Link
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Employment First Council

Employer Education and Engagement Committee

Meeting Minutes

March 4, 2026
1:00 pm – 2:00 pm (EST)
Zoom
Meeting ID: 865 1127 0774

Members' Present

Committee Chair Merry Reid Sheffer, Council Chair Katie Wolf Whaley, Laurie Mays, Zachery Sappenfield, Michelle Thrift, Amanda Hutchison, and Terry Madden.

Members Absent

Rebecca Wilson, Deana Wilson-Kimble, and Susan Brown

Staff Present

Nanci Howard, Anu Kumari, and Ryan Henson

Guest(s) Present

Deborah Minton and Bev Harp

Welcome | Introductions | Agenda Review:

Employment First Committee Chair Merry Reid Sheffer welcomed attendees. Introductions were made. The agenda was reviewed and acknowledged.

Autism Informed Employer Series Discussion

The committee received an update on the Autism-Informed Employer (AIE) video series, a collaborative initiative of the Kentucky Employment First Council and Innovative Supports for Autistic Workers (ISAW).

The series includes short informational videos designed to promote the Autism-Informed Employers training and encourage dialogue among employers and employment support providers on increasing employment opportunities for autistic individuals.

Key Highlights:

- Two videos have been released
- A third video was expected to be released within the following week

The current video series focuses on hiring practices, including:

- [Episode One – “Why Hire Autistic Workers?”](#)
- [Episode Two – “What to expect in the interview.”](#)

Committee members shared positive feedback and noted that the short format made the content easier to share with employers and community partners.

The committee also discussed the upcoming Autism-Informed Employer quarterly discussion session scheduled for March 26, 2026. The session will include a brief overview of the video content and encourage interactive discussion among providers, employers, and other stakeholders.

To date, over 60 participants registered for the discussion session. Members were encouraged to:

- Invite employer and community partners to attend
- Share potential questions or discussion topics in advance
- Promote the videos through newsletters, professional networks, and social media

Partnering with the Training Innovation Project (TIP)

Deborah Minton provided an update on the [Training Innovation Project](#) (TIP) and shared that the TIP needs assessment survey recently closed. The survey received approximately 585 responses nationwide, and the project team is currently analyzing the results. The information gathered will help guide future training priorities and identify areas of interest for providers and employers.

The upcoming “Learn at Lunch” webinar series will replace the previous “Lunch and Learn” sessions conducted through the RETAIN project. The TIP team is currently planning sessions through September and is seeking input on priority topics.

Committee members reviewed a list of potential training topics and discussed several areas of interest, including:

- Competitive Integrated Employment: A Primer for Businesses
- Healthcare organizations as rehabilitation partners and major employers
- Services available from State Vocational Rehabilitation agencies to support businesses and their employees
- The business case for hiring and retaining qualified people with disabilities
- Understanding, supporting, and empowering employees with disabilities
- Learning from employees with disabilities

Members also noted that healthcare organizations hosting Project SEARCH programs, such as UK Healthcare, St. Elizabeth Healthcare, and Baptist Health, could be potential partners or speakers for future sessions.

The committee discussed scheduling for the webinar series and noted that sessions had historically been held at 12:00pm (EST). Committee members indicated that noon remains a convenient time for most participants.

A question was also raised regarding whether the Learn at Lunch sessions may offer continuing education credits (CEUs) for providers. It was noted that the project team is exploring options, including:

- Micro-credentialing opportunities
- Potential ethics credit hours for Certified Rehabilitation Counselors (CRCs)

Additional updates will be shared once the needs assessment analysis is completed and the Learn at Lunch schedule is finalized.

Additional Discussion

Community Updates

KYOVR Staff Support Ryan Henson shared information about a recent community event in Henderson, where Elevate partnered with the local Chamber of Commerce to host a breakfast event highlighting the employment of individuals with disabilities.

The event featured a panel of local employers who discussed their experiences hiring individuals with disabilities and addressed common misconceptions about disability employment.

Announcement

An upcoming Champions Breakfast fundraiser hosted by the Kids Center for Pediatric Therapies in Louisville, KY, is scheduled for March 25. The [registration link](#) was provided. The event will feature a keynote speaker who previously received therapy services as a child and is now employed at the organization as an adult.

Upcoming Meetings

- Employment First Council Quarterly Meeting – Friday, April 10, 1:00 PM – 3:00 PM Eastern.
- Autism-Informed Employer Quarterly Discussion Session – Thursday, March 26, 2026, 12:00 PM Eastern. The [registration link](#) was provided.

Public Comments

None.

Adjournment

Employment First Committee Chair Merry Reid Sheffer thanked everyone for their contribution and adjourned the meeting.

Next Meeting Date

- Wednesday, April 1, 2026
- 1:00 pm- 2:00 pm (EST)



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Kentucky Employment First Council

Provider Capacity Committee

Date: February 10, 2026

Location: Virtual Meeting

Time: 2:00pm – 3:00pm (EST)

Virtual Option: [Zoom Access](#)

1. **Welcome, Introductions, and Agenda Review (2:00pm)**

Presenter: Shelly Durbin, Committee Chair

2. **Annual Report Review (2:10pm)**

Presenter: Nanci Howard, Administrator

3. **Update on Webinar Series (2:20pm)**

Presenter: Shelly Durbin, Committee Chair

4. **Update on Waiver Employment Survey (2:30pm)**

Presenter: Shelly Durbin, Committee Chair

5. SELN Membership Update (2:40pm)

Presenter: Shelly Durbin, Committee Chair

6. Kentucky Project NEON Proposal Update (2:50pm)

Presenter: Shelly Durbin, Committee Chair and additional members

7. Public Comment (2:55pm)

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

8. Adjournment (3:00pm)



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Andy Beshear

Governor

Jamie Link

Secretary, Education and Labor Cabinet

Employment First Council Provider Capacity Committee

Minutes

February 10, 2026

2:00pm – 3:00pm (EST)

Zoom

Meeting ID: 849 2541 6136

Members Present

Committee Chair Shelly Durbin, Council Chair Katie Wolf Whaley, Vice Chair Jeff White, Zac Sappenfield, Lisa Carrico, Cora McNabb, Cathy Anderson, Susan Brown, Stephanie Miller, Melissa Marvel, Alisha Clark, Karen Maciag, Joann Wells, and Amanda Hutchinson

Members Absent

Leslie Hoffmann and Lori Norton

Staff Present

Ron O’Hair, Eric Barth, Nanci Howard, and Anu Kumari

Welcome | Introduction | Agenda Review

Employment First Committee Chair Shelly Durbin welcomed attendees. Introductions were held. The agenda was reviewed and acknowledged by all participants.

Update on the Employment First Council 2025 Annual Report

The committee received an update on the Employment First Council 2025 Annual Report. The report was submitted prior to the December 1 deadline to the Legislative Research Commission (LRC), the Cabinet Secretary, and the Governor’s Office and was approved on December 29. The report is available on the Employment First [website](#).

The report highlighted key accomplishments from the past year, including progress related to provider initiatives and Priority Area 3. Planning for the next Annual Report cycle was expected to begin in the fall.

Update on Webinar Series

The committee received an update on the webinar series. The webinar is intended to provide information to providers on practical strategies to expand employment services and revenue across multiple funding sources.

The following topic areas were discussed for inclusion in the webinar series:

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

Draft slides have been developed for each topic area and are being reviewed and refined. Accessibility requirements will be addressed prior to scheduling the webinar.

Upcoming Waiver Employment Survey

The committee received an update on the Waiver Employment Survey. The survey was distributed to case managers to collect data on employment status, hours worked, and service utilization among waiver participants. Survey data will support workforce planning, initiate provider capacity discussions, and assist with future system planning efforts.

Key timeline updates included:

- Survey responses were requested by February 20.
- Preliminary data review is anticipated in mid-March.

The survey is expected to support baseline data development in preparation for Kentucky's participation in the State Employment Leadership Network (SELN). The committee discussed the importance of participation across disability populations, including Acquired Brain Injury (ABI) providers.

SELN Membership Discussion

The committee received an update on Kentucky’s upcoming participation in the State Employment Leadership Network (SELN). Kentucky is expected to become a participating member beginning July 1, 2026.

SELN participation will support ongoing tracking of employment outcomes, including employment status, hours worked, and wages earned by individuals with disabilities. It was noted that Kentucky does not currently have a strong ongoing system for collecting and tracking this data. SELN participation will support data-informed decision-making, system planning, and continuous improvement efforts related to employment services.

Participation will also provide opportunities to collaborate with other participating states, share best practices, and address common barriers to employment.

Kentucky Project NEON Proposal Update

The committee received an update on the Kentucky Project NEON proposal.

- The proposal was submitted on January 30, 2026.
- Notification of award status is expected on February 20.
- The proposal requested approximately 700 hours of technical assistance support annually for three years.
- Technical assistance would support efforts related to data collection and analysis, provider capacity development, and expansion of employment services across disability populations.

If awarded, technical assistance would support data collection improvements, provider capacity development, improve the Medicaid Buy-In program, and further propel the expansion of customized employment services. Strong cross-agency collaboration was noted.

Public Comments

None

Adjournment

Employment First Committee Chair Shelly Durbin thanked everyone for their contribution and adjourned the meeting.

Next meeting

Tuesday, March 24th, 2026

2:00pm – 3:00pm



Andy Beshear, Governor
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Kentucky Employment First Council

Provider Capacity Committee

Date: March 24, 2026

Location: Virtual Meeting

Time: 2:00pm – 3:00pm (EST)

Virtual Option: [Zoom Access](#)

1. **Welcome (2:00pm)**

Presenter: Shelly Durbin, Committee Chair

2. **Project NEON Update and Kick-Off Information (2:05pm)**

Presenter: Jeff White, Council Member

3. **SELN and Project NEON (2:20pm)**

Presenter: Shelly Durbin, Committee Chair and Jeff White, Council Member

4. **Update on Waiver Employment Survey (2:30pm)**

Presenter: Shelly Durbin, Committee Chair

5. Provider Webinar Update (2:40pm)

Presenter: Shelly Durbin, Committee Chair

6. Public Comment (2:50pm)

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

7. Adjournment (3:00pm)



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Employment First Council

Provider Capacity Committee

Minutes

March 24, 2026

2:00pm – 3:00pm (EST)

Zoom

Meeting ID: 849 2541 6136

Members' Present

Employment First Vice Chair Jeff White, Susan Brown, Joann Wells, Leslie Hoffmann, proxy Carmen Hancock, Alisha Clark, Melissa Marvel, Zac Sappenfield, Lisa Carrico, and Amanda Hutchinson

Members Absent

Shelly Durbin, Katie Wolf Whaley, Cora McNabb, and Lori Norton

Staff Present

Ron O’Hair, Eric Barth, Nanci Howard, and Anu Kumari

Welcome | Introduction | Agenda Review

On behalf of the Committee Chair, Council Vice Chair Jeff White welcomed attendees. Introductions were made. The agenda was reviewed and acknowledged by all participants.

Project NEON Update and Kick-Off Information

The committee received an update on Project NEON. Kentucky was selected to participate in the latest phase of Project NEON, reflecting continued success in

advancing Employment First initiatives. Kentucky was awarded 550 hours of subject matter expert (SME) technical assistance annually for three years. A total of six states and the District of Columbia were selected through a highly competitive process.

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.
- [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.
- [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 effort will be led by Katie Wolf Whaley, with continued collaboration from subject matter expert Tricia Parkin Jones and staff support, including Ron O Hair and Eric Barth.
- [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.

Work will begin following confirmation of assigned subject matter experts.

SELN and Project NEON

The committee received an update that 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.

Initial efforts will focus on developing a data management and analysis system for

individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities, with plans to expand to additional populations over time.

The committee noted that this effort will support ongoing, data-driven decision-making. Regular data collection and reporting will be implemented to maintain an up-to-date understanding of employment outcomes.

Update on Waiver Employment Survey

The committee received an update on the Waiver Employment Survey, conducted to gather baseline data on employment outcomes for waiver participants.

The survey collected information on employment status, wages, hours worked, and interest in employment.

Key purposes of the survey include:

- Identifying the number of individuals currently working and their employment characteristics.
- Determining how many individuals express interest in employment but are not yet working.
- Analyzing geographic trends by county to better understand service demand; and
- Examining provider capacity needs.

This data will support the identification of service gaps and address provider capacity needs across the state. Additional data was collected on individuals participating in day training programs, as well as those earning subminimum wages.

The preliminary observations indicate a continued decline in subminimum wage participation. Data will inform future planning and support ongoing efforts to improve employment outcomes statewide.

Provider Webinar Update

The committee received an update on the webinar series. Series planning is underway for a provider-focused webinar designed to increase awareness of opportunities to diversify and strengthen provider funding streams.

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

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

Development of the webinar materials is nearing completion. The webinar will be approximately 90 minutes in length, recorded, and made available for future use once it is accessible for public distribution.

Public Comments

None

Adjournment

Employment First Council Vice Chair Jeff White thanked everyone for their contribution and adjourned the meeting.

Next meeting

May 5, 2026
9:00am – 10:00am (EST)



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Kentucky Employment First Council

Public Policy Committee

Date: February 12, 2026

Location: Virtual Meeting

Time: 9:00am – 10:00am (EST)

Virtual Option: [Zoom Access](#)

1. **Welcome (9:00am)**

Presenter: Andrew Johnson, Committee Chair

2. **Project NEON/Application Update (9:05am)**

Presenter: Additional Committee Members

3. **Order of Selection Update (9:10am)**

Presenter: Holly Hendricks, KYOVR Director of Field Services

4. **IEP Guidance Document Update (9:15am)**

Presenter: Additional Committee Members

5. 2026 General Assembly Update, Committee Priorities Discussion
(9:30am)

Presenter: Andrew Johnson, Committee Chair

6. Public Comment (9:50am)

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

7. Adjournment (10:00am)



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Employment First Council

Public Policy Committee

Minutes

February 12, 2026

9:00 am – 10:00 am (EST)

Zoom

Meeting ID: 817 4368 7977

Members Present

Committee Chair Andrew Johnson, Council Chair Katie Wolf Whaley, Council Vice Chair Jeff White, Cora McNabb, Joann Wells, Karen Maciag, Michelle Thrift, Austin Nugent, and Alisha Clark

Members Absent

Susan Brown, Amy Luttrell, Gretta Hylton/Proxy, and Leslie Hoffman

Staff Present

Nanci Howard, Anu Kumari, Holly Hendricks, and Betty Whittaker

Welcome | Agenda Review:

Employment First Committee Chair Andrew Johnson welcomed attendees. All participants reviewed the agenda.

Project NEON/Application Update

The committee received an update on the Kentucky Project NEON technical assistance application. The NEON program has expanded available subject matter expert (SME) technical assistance to approximately 500–700 hours per year for three years. The

proposal was developed under an expedited timeline with support from cross-agency partners.

The application focuses on several priority areas, including:

- Addressing the impact of increasing wages on public benefit eligibility and reducing benefits-related employment barriers.
- Strengthening data collection and analysis capacity through participation in national employment leadership efforts.
- Expanding employment outcome tracking across disability populations, including individuals with serious mental illness, substance use disorders, brain injury, and other disability groups.
- Supporting implementation and provider capacity related to long-term employment supports, including I-RISE services.
- Strengthening customized employment training and fidelity across provider systems.
- Improving understanding of available employment services among case managers and rehabilitation counselors to support person-centered service matching.
- The application includes collaboration from multiple state agencies and partner organizations. Notification of award status is expected on February 20.

Order of Selection update

The Kentucky Office of Vocational Rehabilitation provided an update on the status of the Order of Selection (OOS). It was reported that 4,864 individuals are currently on the waitlist.

The agency continues to assess budget projections. Federal funding award notifications are anticipated in the coming weeks, which may help clarify available resources. No timeline is currently available for when individuals on the waitlist may be served. The status is being monitored on an ongoing (near-daily) basis.

IEP Guidance Document Update

The committee received an update on the IEP Guidance Document. It was noted that work on this effort had paused and will resume this year.

Prior work included a small group review on existing IEP guidance used by educators and identify opportunities to incorporate an Employment First perspective to support improved transition-to-employment outcomes for students with disabilities.

Committee members interested in participating in future workgroup discussions were encouraged to express interest. Additional updates will be provided at a future meeting.

2026 General Assembly Update | Committee Priorities Discussion

Committee members discussed developments amid the 2026 General Assembly, particularly introduced bills within the Council’s subject matter jurisdiction. [House Bill 562](#) was discussed. Discussion included legislation related to workforce development, alternate high school diplomas, and potential implications for employment outcomes for individuals with disabilities. The committee noted possible confusing language, specifically how the change in language could impact existing programs. The committee concluded it was best to communicate with partners at the Kentucky Department of Education for clarity.

The committee discussed potential areas to monitor over the next three-year cycle, including legislative activity, workforce trends, and system changes impacting individuals with disabilities. Members agreed to continue the discussion at the future meeting.

Public Comments

None.

Adjournment

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

Next Meeting Date

Thursday, March 26, 2026
9:00 am- 10:00am (EST)



Andy Beshear, Governor
Jamie Link, Education & Labor Cabinet Secretary
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Kentucky Employment First Council

Public Policy Committee

Date: March 26, 2026

Location: Virtual Meeting

Time: 9:00am – 10:00am (EST)

Virtual Option: [Zoom Access](#)

1. **Welcome (9:00am)**

Presenter: Andrew Johnson, Committee Chair

2. **Committee Chair Update (9:05am)**

Presenter: Andrew Johnson, Committee Chair

3. **Order of Selection Update (9:10am)**

Presenter: OVR Staff

4. **KY General Assembly Update (9:15am)**

Presenter: Austin Nugent, Commonwealth Council on Development Disabilities

5. Questions and Follow-up Discussion (9:25am)

Participants: Committee Members

6. KY Department of Education Updates (9:35am)

Presenter: Allison Johnson, Office of Special Education and Early Learning

7. Questions and Follow-up Discussion (9:45am)

Participants: Committee Members

8. Public Comment (9:55am)

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

9. Adjournment (10:00am)



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Employment First Council

Public Policy Committee

Minutes

March 26, 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, Gretta Hylton/Proxy Allison Johnson, Joann Wells, Austin Nugent, and Alisha Clark

Members Absent

Susan Brown, Amy Luttrell, Cora McNabb, and Leslie Hoffman

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.

Committee Chair Update

Andrew Johnson provided an update regarding his membership status, reporting that his position with the Council of State Governments had concluded. As his appointment was tied to that role, he submitted his resignation from the Council of State Governments

effective March 13, 2026. He further shared that he will continue to serve in an interim capacity until a replacement is appointed and direction is provided through the Boards and Commissions process.

Order of Selection update

The Kentucky Office of Vocational Rehabilitation provided an update on the status of the Order of Selection (OOS) waitlist. There are currently 5,268 individuals on the waitlist, an increase of nearly 400 individuals since the previous report. Of these, around 4,700 individuals are in Priority Category 1.

No definitive timeline was provided for when services to individuals on the waitlist may resume. However, receipt of the federal grant award notification was noted as a positive development. It was further shared that completion of the state budget process will be a key factor in determining next steps. While no guarantee was made, it is anticipated that a decision regarding the potential to begin serving individuals on the waitlist may be made within the coming months.

Kentucky General Assembly Update

Austin Nugent, Public Policy Coordinator with the Commonwealth Council on Developmental Disabilities, presented an update on legislative activity within the Kentucky General Assembly. She reported that the 2026 Regular Session (January 6 – April 15) is a budget session, with six legislative days remaining prior to the veto recess scheduled for April 2–13.

About 1,300+ bills were filed, including:

- House: 939
- Senate: 354
- Approximately 130+ were identified as shell bills, which allow for language substitution at a later stage

Governor Andy Beshear signed a proclamation recognizing March as Developmental Disabilities Awareness Month, which included a reference to Employment First and the importance of equal employment opportunities.

Key budget and policy highlights included:

- Proposed funding of \$2.3 million per fiscal year for the Office of Vocational Rehabilitation
- Proposed reductions to the Kentucky Supported Higher Education Project:
 - \$20,000 in the first year

- \$35,000 in the second year
- Proposed \$20 million per year for state-run psychiatric and Intermediate Care Facilities (ICFs)
- 17,000+ individuals on Medicaid waiver waitlists
- Proposal for 450+ additional waiver slots over the next two years
- Comparison to 2024, when approximately 13,000+ individuals were on the waitlist, and 1,925 slots were provided

Budget Session Updates included:

The Kentucky General Assembly will pass the state budget for the next two fiscal years (July 1, 2026 – June 30, 2028)

- House Bill 500 (House budget)
- Senate Committee Substitute 1 (SCS1) to House Bill 500 (Senate budget version)
- House Bill 304 (Governor’s budget proposal)
- Budget differences between the House and Senate are being addressed through a free conference committee

Legislation discussed included:

- House Bill 2 (Medicaid reform)
- House Bill 498 (Adult Workforce Diploma Pilot Program)
- House Bill 562 (Alternative high school diploma)
- House Bill 686 (Kentucky Positive Youth Development Commission)
- House Joint Resolution 24 (Medicaid work requirements)
- House Joint Resolution 80 (KDE list of IEP resource guidance)
- Senate Bill 69 (Autism Trust Fund)

Legislative activity will continue to be monitored due to the potential impact on services, education, and employment outcomes for individuals with disabilities.

Questions and Follow-up Discussion

Members reviewed age distribution data for the Michelle P. waitlist, including:

- 1,077 individuals under age 5
- 4,484 ages 5–12
- 1,277 ages 13–17
- Approximately 9,663 total individuals

Kentucky Department of Education Updates

Committee Member Gretta Hylton/Proxy, Allison Johnson, provided an update from the Kentucky Department of Education.

Key updates included:

- [Kentucky Council for Exceptional Children \(KYCEC\)](#) annual awards nomination period is open through June 30, including:
 - KYCEC Business Award recognizing employers supporting individuals with disabilities
 - “Yes I Can” awards recognizing youth achievements across multiple areas, including transition and employment
- [Public comment period open through May 22 for proposed revisions to the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act \(IDEA\) Part B State Performance Plan.](#)
- [IDEA Part B annual application available for public comment through April 20.](#)
- [Supporting Postsecondary Achievement and Resources for Kentucky \(SPARK\)](#) initiative awarded to 20 school districts, including funding support through June 2027, to strengthen transition services.

The SPARK initiative focuses on enhancing family engagement, implementing earlier transition assessments, and strengthening collaboration with vocational rehabilitation at the local level, including coordination with OVR staff Holly Hendricks and Jonathan White.

KDE-related resources, including public comment opportunities and award nominations, will be compiled, reviewed for accuracy, and shared with committee members and the Employment First Council.

Public Comments

None.

Adjournment

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

Next Meeting Date

Thursday, May 7, 2026
9:00 am- 10:00am (EST)



Andy Beshear, Governor
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Kentucky Employment First Council

Transition Committee

Advocacy and Education Collaboration Meeting

Date: February 19, 2026

Location: Virtual Meeting

Time: 9:30am – 10:30am (EST)

Virtual Option: [Zoom Access](#)

1. Welcome and Introductions (9:30am)

Presenter: Tal Curry, Transition Committee Chair

2. Purpose of Committee Collaboration – FAQ Documents (9:40am)

Presenter: Amanda Owen, Advocacy and Education Committee Chair

3. Additional Projects for 2026 Discussion (10:05am)

Participants: Committee Members

4. Public Comment *(10:20am)*

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

5. Adjournment *(10:30am)*



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Governor

Jamie Link

Secretary, Education and Labor Cabinet

Employment First Council

Transition Committee | Advocacy and Education

Committee Collaboration Meeting

Minutes

February 19, 2026

9:30 am – 10:30 am (EST)

Zoom

Meeting ID: 859 9250 0062

Members Present

Chair Tal Curry, Council Chair Katie Wolf Whaley, Committee Chair Amanda Owen, Bill Bates, Jeffery Edwards, Carrie Wedding, Rhonda Logsdon, Sara Tinker, Amanda Hutchinson, Jason Wheatley/Proxy Allison Johnson, Melanie Lybarger, and Zac Sappenfield

Members Absent

Johnny Callebs, Susan Brown, Larry Taylor, and Frank Huffman

Staff Present

Jonathan White, Nanci Howard, and Anu Kumari

Welcome | Introductions | Agenda Review

Employment First Transition Committee Chair, Tal Curry, welcomed attendees, and introductions were conducted. The agenda was reviewed and acknowledged by all participants.

Purpose of Committee Collaboration: FAQ Document Discussion (Education Professionals Section)

Advocacy and Education Committee Chair Amanda Owen provided attendees with a brief history of the FAQ document.

Each committee reviewed the Employment First Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ) document developed by the Advocacy & Education Committee. The FAQ was developed to address common questions across five targeted audiences and is intended to serve as a practical, user-friendly resource. Discussion focused on collaboration across each committee to support effective dissemination and use of the resource.

A QR code has been created to link directly to the FAQ document on the website and may be incorporated into newsletters, presentations, and printed materials to improve accessibility and visibility.

Dissemination through the Kentucky Department of Education

Members discussed several approaches to expand awareness of the resource, including:

- Submitting brief informational blurbs with embedded links for potential inclusion in Kentucky Department of Education (KDE) communication channels.
- Expanding distribution through partner networks such as employment specialists, CWTP, regional contacts, and community organizations.

Information was shared regarding communication avenues available through the [Office of Special Education and Early Learning \(OSEEL\)](#) at the Kentucky Department of Education.

- Members were informed that OSEEL distributes information through two primary communication methods:
 - “News You Can Use”- a weekly communication sent to Directors of Special Education that may allow brief informational submissions with links.
 - A public-facing KDE newsletter distributed to teachers, district staff, and other subscribers and posted on the KDE website.
- The committee discussed the submission process for KDE communications and noted that materials would be submitted through KDE staff and reviewed by the communications team prior to publication.
- The committee was informed about the Kentucky Transition 360 for Educators program, which included approximately 600 educators and could serve as a platform to highlight the resource.

- It was noted that some communication systems required links rather than attachments when sharing materials.

Document Maintenance

The committee also discussed the ongoing document maintenance, including:

- Monitoring broken links resulting from website updates and digital accessibility changes; and
- Confirming website hosting stability with appropriate state IT personnel.

Implementation Strategies

To support implementation, the committee discussed:

- Pre-approved informational blurbs;
- A centralized contact and champions list; and
- Coordinated outreach across committees.

Both committees agreed to continue collaborative efforts to strengthen communication strategies and promote consistent statewide awareness while using the FAQ resource.

Additional Transition Committee Projects for 2026

The Transition committee discussed priorities and potential projects for the upcoming year, building on the completion of the FAQ document. Members noted that future work will focus on the dissemination of resources, strengthened communication strategies, and continued cross-committee collaboration.

The Transition committee members and guests reviewed the updated Kentucky Advisory Council on Autism (KYACA) [Transition Resource Sheet for students with disabilities](#), available on the accessible website [Transition Planning Resources – KYACA](#). Members noted that the resource complements the FAQ document and supports youth, families, educators, and providers involved in transition planning.

Members also identified upcoming meetings, presentations, and partner events as opportunities to share both the FAQ document and the Transition Resource Sheet through brief overviews and coordinated outreach.

Key Highlights from Collaboration Meeting

- Promoting strategic dissemination to ensure resources are actively used rather than remaining static on a website.

- Creating a centralized contact and champions list to support targeted outreach across education, employment, family, and community systems.
- Developing coordinated communication approaches, including newsletter inserts, audience-specific messaging, QR codes, and presentations within existing meetings and networks.
- Continuing collaboration across committees, particularly with the Transition Committee, to align messaging and share related resources.
- Monitoring and maintaining resources over time, including link verification and accessibility compliance to ensure continued public access.

The committee agreed that future efforts will focus on strengthening awareness, improving coordinated outreach, and increasing practical use of Employment First and transition-related resources statewide.

Additional Discussion:

A council member shared information regarding the recently released [Tech = Access infographic](#), which provides practical guidance on the use of assistive technology across education, home, and workplace settings.

Members were also informed of an upcoming session titled “[Beyond Access: Supporting Deaf and Hard-of-Hearing People with ADHD at Work,](#)” scheduled for March 18, 2026, from 10:00 a.m. to 12:00 p.m. (EST) via Zoom. The session will focus on effective support strategies for individuals who are Deaf or Hard of Hearing and who also experience ADHD, including communication strategies, executive functioning support, and workplace accommodations to address employment barriers. Registration information was provided.

Information was also shared regarding [Transition Tuesday](#), held on the fourth Tuesday of each month from 9:30 a.m. to 10:15 a.m. (EST).

Public Comments

None.

Adjournment

Transition Committee Chair, Tal Curry, thanked everyone for their contributions and adjourned the meeting.

Next Meeting Date

Thursday, April 2, 2026
9:30 am- 10:30 am (EST)