

Hiring Deaf and Hard of Hearing Employees



EMPLOYMENT FIRST KENTUCKY¹

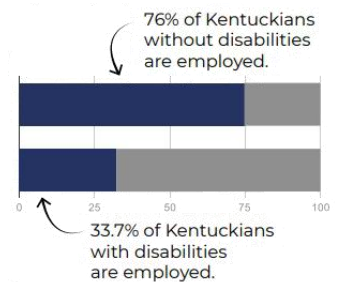
It is the policy of the Commonwealth of Kentucky that competitive integrated employment shall be considered the first and primary option for persons with disabilities of working age who desire to become employed, including those with the most significant disabilities.

Simply put, it is the idea that everyone has the right to work!

Why it Matters

Kentucky has among the highest rate of people with disabilities in the nation and among the lowest rate of people with disabilities who are employed. *

This 42.3% gap ranks Kentucky tied for 48th in the nation.



What it Will Do

Employment First will help to:

- Build an inclusive workforce
- Strengthen Kentucky's economy
- Improve the quality of life for citizens with disabilities across the Commonwealth

Kentucky's Employment First Council

The Employment First Council advises the executive and legislative branches of government on increasing meaningful opportunities for competitive integrated employment for citizens with a disability seeking employment, regardless of their level of disability. The twenty-eight-member Council is appointed by the Governor.

For more information about Kentucky's Employment First Council, contact:

employmentfirst@ky.gov

**Source: 2023 Annual Disability Statistics Compendium*

This guide was created in partnership with the Office of Vocational Rehabilitation (OVR) and the Kentucky Commission on the Deaf and Hard of Hearing (KCDHH) to support employers, human resources professionals, hiring managers, and supervisors in successfully recruiting, hiring, onboarding, and retaining Deaf and Hard of Hearing (DHH) employees. It may be used at any stage of the employment process—from drafting a job posting to supporting long-term career advancement.

You do not need prior experience working with Deaf or Hard of Hearing individuals to use this guide. The goal is to provide practical, plain-language guidance that helps employers create inclusive, accessible, and legally compliant workplaces.

There are approximately 4.5 million people living in Kentucky (2021 KY Cabinet for Economic Development), and about 15.5 percent, or nearly 700,000, Kentuckians over the age of 18 have a hearing loss. (Summary Health Statistics for U.S. Adults: National Health Interview Survey, 2022)

- Kentucky ranks third per capita in people identified as deaf or hard of hearing. (2010 American Community Survey Data, United States Census)
- Loss of hearing is considered the number one war wound among American veterans. Half of all blast-related injuries result in permanent hearing loss for veterans (Hearing Loss Association of America). As of fiscal year 2020, more than 1.3 million Veterans were receiving disability compensation for hearing loss, and more than 2.3 million received compensation for tinnitus (VA Research).
- Hearing Loss ranks as the third most common health issue in the United States behind heart disease and arthritis (National Institutes of Health).
- Approximately 2 to 3 out of every 1,000 children in the United States are born deaf or hard of hearing. Nine out of every 10 children who are born deaf, are born to parents who can hear (National Institute on Deafness and Other Communication Disorders).



***KCDHH is an agency within the Kentucky Education and Labor Cabinet
Printed with State Funds***

Understanding the Deaf/Hard of Hearing (DHH) Population

One Size Does Not Fit All

Many variables, such as age of onset and degree of hearing loss, determine the communication needs and abilities of individuals who have hearing loss. While English may be the first language for some, especially those that experience hearing loss later in life, American Sign Language (ASL) may be the first language for others. The grammar and syntax of ASL is different from English, which can lead to difficulties with written English for some native ASL users.

- Some are comfortable with speaking, some are not.
- Not all benefit from hearing aids/cochlear implants.
- Some use sign language, some use speech, others may use both.
- Some may need ASL interpreters and others captioning services and/or other assistive devices.

Hearing loss is a sensory difference and has nothing to do with cognition.

❖ Benefits of Hiring DHH Employees

Hiring DHH employees is not about lowering standards, it's about removing barriers and gaining access to skilled, capable workers who contribute meaningfully to the workplace.

- **Access to an Underutilized Talent Pool** - DHH individuals represent a large, skilled, and often underemployed workforce. By recruiting DHH candidates, employers can increase access to qualified, motivated employees.
- **Strong Visual Attention and Focus** - Many DHH employees develop heightened visual attention and concentration skills from fewer distractions in noisy work environments.
- **Lower Turnover and High Retention** - Studies and employer reports consistently show that employees with disabilities often demonstrate strong commitment to employers who provide inclusive workplaces.
- **Tax Incentives and Financial Benefits** – Employers may be eligible for [federal tax incentives](#)² which help offset accommodation and accessibility costs.

❖ Legal Foundations & Employer Responsibilities



Under Title I of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), employers are required to provide equal employment opportunities to qualified individuals with disabilities, including DHH individuals. This includes:

- Providing reasonable accommodations during the application, interview, and employment process.
- Engaging in an interactive process with the employee to identify effective accommodations.
- Ensuring accommodations allow equal access to benefits and privileges of employment.

A reasonable accommodation is any modification or adjustment that enables an individual to perform essential job functions or enjoy equal employment opportunities, unless it causes undue hardship to the employer.

❖ The Hiring Process: From Posting to Offer

Job Postings and Recruitment

- Use clear, concise language in job descriptions.
- Focus on essential job functions, not how tasks have been performed.
- Include a statement encouraging applicants to request accommodations.
- Ensure online application systems are accessible.

Application Review

- Evaluate candidates based on qualifications, skills, and experience.
 - Avoid assumptions about communication ability or job performance.
-

❖ Interviewing DHH Candidates

Scheduling the Interview

- Ask candidates if accommodations are needed for the interview.
- Arrange accommodations in advance. (e.g., sign language interpreters, CART, captioning)
- **Remember:** the employer is responsible for providing and paying for interview accommodations.

During the Interview

- Speak directly to the candidate, not the interpreter.
- Maintain normal eye contact and pace.
- Allow for visual access (good lighting, minimal background noise)
- Focus questions on job-related skills and qualifications

What Not to Ask

- Do not ask questions about the nature or severity of hearing loss.
 - Do not ask if the candidate uses hearing aids or cochlear implants.
 - Avoid assumptions about what the candidate can or cannot do.
-

❖ Reasonable Accommodations for the Workplace

Ensure equal opportunity in the application process.

- Include unbiased hiring practices.
- Use job-related selection criteria.
- Gather diverse hiring panels.
- Offer training on EEOC policies to supervisors, and employers.

Enable a qualified DHH individual to perform the essential functions of a job.

- Make use of [assistive technology](#)³ like videophones or an amplified/captioned phone if necessary.
- Make use of training programs such as those offered by the Kentucky Office of Vocational Rehabilitation to ensure that qualified DHH candidates have the necessary skills to flourish in their position.

Enable DHH employees to have equal benefits and privileges of employment.

- Provide [effective communication](#)⁴ for access to meetings, employer-sponsored services, employee benefits, social events, etc.
 - The National Technical Institute for the Deaf at Rochester Institute of Technology maintains a list of [resources and tips](#)⁵ for employers.
-

❖ Commonly Requested Accommodations

◦ Sign Language Interpreters

When hiring a sign language interpreter, please remember that they **must** hold a valid Kentucky state license to practice. This means that the interpreter has met minimum standards set forth by the state licensure board ([KRS 309.300 to 309.319](#))⁶.

[How Do I Find an Interpreter?](#)⁷ This document lists sign language interpreter agencies and freelance interpreters and their contact information. An interpreter referral agency will match your needs with interpreters who are available where and when you need them. The referral agency will make the necessary arrangements. If you contact an interpreter directly, it may be less expensive but can take longer to coordinate.

○ **Communication Access Realtime Translation (CART)**

A [CART provider](#)⁸ types into a stenographic machine, which is connected to a computer. The computer, using special software, translates the stenotype shorthand into English which is simultaneously displayed on a computer monitor or a tablet. CART service enables communication access for DHH people who do not use ASL interpreters, sign language transliterators, and/or oral interpreters. Go to for more information.

[How Do I Find a CART Provider](#)⁹

○ **Assistive Technology**

There are many forms of assistive technology available to support DHH employees. Assistive technology can improve access to communication, increase independence, and enhance job performance. Not all DHH employees will need the same technology, and needs may vary from situation to situation and change over time.

Employers are encouraged to work with the employee and resources such as KCDHH, OVR and the Job Accommodation Network (JAN) to determine effective and reasonable assistive technology solutions.

Examples of available Assistive Technology:

- Speech-to-text applications
- Captioned and amplified telephones
- Videophones and Video Relay Services (VRS)
- Visual alert systems (flashing alerts for phones, doors, and alarms)
- Computer/mobile accessibility features (live captions, transcription tools)
- Collaboration platforms with built-in chat or captioning functions

○ **Note Takers**

Providing a note taker allows the DHH individual the freedom to focus on the content being presented. Providing a trained note taker assures the DHH individual that the written record of core concepts, key points, and supporting details will be accurately captured.

- **Captioned Media**
All training videos and video messages from CEOs, Administration and others should be captioned.
 - **Testing Accommodations**
In a test that includes voiced instructions, deaf individuals may be provided with captioned instructions, sign language interpretation, and/or extra time for reading and understanding the text.
-

❖ Onboarding and Retention

First Day and Initial Training

- Ensure orientation and training materials are accessible (captioned videos, interpreters, written materials).
- Introduce communication preferences to supervisors and team members, as appropriate.
- Confirm accommodations are in place from day one.

Ongoing Support

- Revisit accommodations periodically; needs may change over time and vary with different situations.
- Ensure access to staff meetings, trainings, and social events.
- Provide accessible performance evaluations and feedback.
- Use visual or vibrating alert systems (e.g., strobes, paging devices) and consider a buddy system to ensure Deaf and Hard of Hearing employees can respond safely during emergencies.

Career Advancement

- Ensure equal access to professional development opportunities.
 - Include DHH employees in leadership training and promotional pathways.
-

❖ Frequently Asked Questions

Does the ADA apply to all employers?

Title I of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) applies to private employers, state and local governments, employment agencies, and labor organizations **with 15 or more employees**. Employers with fewer than 15 employees are not covered by Title I of the ADA; however, they may still have obligations under state laws or other federal programs.

Who pays for accommodations?

Employers are responsible for providing and paying for reasonable accommodation, including during interviews.

Are accommodations expensive?

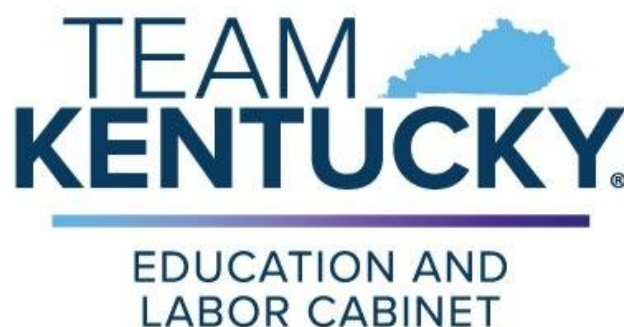
Many accommodations are low-cost or no-cost. Additionally, providing interpreters or CART is required only when necessary for critical communication (interviews, orientation, training, meetings, evaluations, safety briefings, disciplinary meetings, etc.) and helps keep costs reasonable. Employers may consult the Job Accommodation Network (JAN) for guidance on cost-effective solutions.

What if other employees are uncomfortable?

Training and open communication help build understanding. Discomfort is not a valid reason to deny accommodation.

What if accommodations stop working?

The ADA requires an ongoing interactive process. Employers and employees should work together to adjust accommodations as needed.



❖ RESOURCES



[Kentucky Office of Vocational Rehabilitation](#)¹⁰

800-272-7172

DHHS@ky.gov

The Kentucky Office of Vocational Rehabilitation has a [Deaf and Hard of Hearing Services](#)¹¹ department. This department can help provide training for employers, human resources officers, and hearing colleagues.

Services provided to individuals who have been identified as having a combination of hearing and vision loss in varying degrees. Eligible individuals receive services to get a job, return to a job, keep a job, or get a better job. Several staff may work together to provide the services needed by an individual who is deaf or hard of hearing. Services may be provided by a rehabilitation counselor for the deaf or communications specialist for hard of hearing.



[Kentucky Commission on the Deaf and Hard of Hearing](#)¹²

800-372-2907

kcdhh@kcdhh.ky.gov

KCDHH acts as an advocate for deaf and hard of hearing people on legislative issues, as well as a consultant to the governor, General Assembly, and various state and local governmental agencies concerning policies and programs that pertain to people with hearing loss. KCDHH provides information, referral and advocacy services, and an interpreter referral service for state agencies.



The Job Accommodation Network¹³

800-526-7234

The Job Accommodation Network (JAN) is the leading source of free, expert, and confidential guidance on job accommodation and disability employment issues. JAN provides free one-on-one practical guidance and technical assistance on job accommodation solutions and Title I of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) for people with disabilities.

References

1. <https://kcc.ky.gov/Vocational-Rehabilitation/boards-and-councils/Employment-First/Documents/Employment-First-in-Kentucky-rev2024.pdf>
2. <https://www.dol.gov/agencies/odep/program-areas/employers/tax-incentives-for-employers>
3. <https://deafvibes.com/living-with-hearing-loss/work-and-career/deaf-workplace-accessibility/>
4. https://www.rit.edu/ntid/sites/rit.edu.ntid/files/nce/employers/P2128_NTID_Tips_for_Comm_with_Employees.pdf
5. <https://www.rit.edu/ntid/nccc/employers#working-with-a-deaf-employee>
6. <https://apps.legislature.ky.gov/law/statutes/statute.aspx?id=30350>
7. <https://www.kcdhh.ky.gov/oea/ic-private.html>
8. <https://www.kcdhh.ky.gov/oea/whatiscart.html>
9. <https://www.kcdhh.ky.gov/oea/cartproviders.html>
10. <https://kcc.ky.gov/Vocational-Rehabilitation/Pages/Kentucky-Office-of-Vocational-Rehabilitation.aspx>
11. <https://kcc.ky.gov/Vocational-Rehabilitation/seeking-services/programs-services/Pages/Deaf-and-Hard-of-Hearing-Services.aspx>
12. <https://www.kcdhh.ky.gov/>
13. <https://askjan.org/index.cfm>

UPDATED: 4/2026