

Kentucky Commission on the Deaf and Hard of Hearing
188th Quarterly Commission Meeting
January 23rd, 2026
via Videoconference

MEMBERS PRESENT: Anita Dowd, Mona McCubbin, Bonnie Covey, Jason Smith, Melissa Kelly, Jeannie Taylor (E), Michelle Niehaus, Tommy Evans, Gerry Gordon-Brown, Erin More, Leslie Tindall (proxy for Sec. Link), Sarah Roof, Barbie Harris, Amy Hatzel (E)

MEMBERS ABSENT: Marva Johnson, John Perry, Alexander Ansley

STAFF PRESENT: Emily Kimbell, Blake Campbell, Jessica Endler-Smith, Justin Stanley

COMMUNICATION FACILITATORS: Tracy Lundergan, Mikayla Qualls, Shannon Grider

VISITORS: Lejla Cosic (CHFS)

Ms. McCubbin called the meeting to order at 12:32 pm.

Ms. McCubbin asked the Commissioners to review the previous meeting's minutes and to suggest changes.

MS. HARRIS MOVED TO ACCEPT THE MINUTES FROM THE PREVIOUS COMMISSION MEETING AS READ. MR. SMITH SECONDED. THE MOTION CARRIED WITHOUT DISCUSSION.

MS. HARRIS MOVED TO ACCEPT THE MINUTES FROM THE PREVIOUS EXECUTIVE BOARD MEETING AS READ. MR. SMITH SECONDED. THE MOTION CARRIED WITHOUT DISCUSSION.

Reports

Chair's Report

Ms. McCubbin noted that most of the agenda items had been moved to new business to allow greater discussion time. She welcomed the new commissioners and acknowledged the productive pace of the meeting.

THE CHAIR'S REPORT WAS ACCEPTED AS READ.

Agency Report

Ms. Dowd, Executive Director, provided a comprehensive agency update:

Deaf-Blind Services Collaboration: KCDHH has strengthened partnerships with vocational rehabilitation's deaf-blind coordinator, deaf-blind employment specialist, and the Helen Keller National Center regional coordinator. While acknowledging historical weaknesses in deaf-blind services, Ms. Dowd reported that KCDHH staff may attend SSP (Support Service Provider) training offered by OVR if space permits. KCDHH has also joined the deaf-blind project's quarterly collaborative meetings with stakeholders.

Aging Population Initiatives: Ms. Dowd highlighted a successful presentation partnership with Heuser Hearing Institute for providers from the Department for Aging and Independent Living. She emphasized the critical intersection of aging and hearing loss, noting that unaddressed hearing loss correlates with increased dementia risk due to social isolation. She expressed commitment to making hearing loss a recognized public health priority and suggested forming a subcommittee focused specifically on aging populations.

Cabinet for Health and Family Services (CHFS) Engagement: Ms. Dowd reported two meetings with Secretary Stack regarding the "Our Healthy Kentucky Home" initiative. While KCDHH was included in January 2026 spotlights alongside Early Hearing Detection and Intervention and the Commission for Children with Special Healthcare Needs, she noted the absence of explicit "hearing loss" terminology in the public-facing materials. Ms. Niehaus expanded on a subsequent meeting with Commissioner Marks from the Department for Behavioral Health, Developmental and Intellectual Disabilities. She reported developing a two-page briefing for Secretary Stack requesting: (1) creation of a cross-agency workgroup focused on deaf/hard of hearing services; (2) aligned data collection strategies to identify individuals with hearing loss and track accommodation provision; (3) training for employees with hearing loss regarding workplace accommodations; and (4) staff training on securing communication access. Ms. Niehaus emphasized the briefing focuses on utilizing existing staff rather than requesting new positions, with implementation expected in phases as data collection improves.

Kentucky Early Language and Literacy Initiative (KELLI): Ms. Dowd expressed enthusiasm about the revitalization of the former "Common Ground" education group, now renamed KELLI. With facilitation support funded by Alabama's REAL Project and led by Dr. Cheryl Johnson (University of Colorado professor, audiologist, and co-founder of Hands & Voices), the initiative has successfully engaged key decision-makers previously absent from discussions: the state's early intervention coordinator, Kentucky Department of Education representatives, and the Early Hearing Detection and Intervention coordinator. The first major facilitated meeting took place on January 30, 2026.

Public Health Project Completion: The graduate student's public health project concluded with deliverables including a healthcare provider checklist and framework for a communication access toolkit. These materials will be transferred to the Community Impact Council for completion, with emphasis on developing online resources, including webinars and videos, rather than static documents.

Personnel Update: Ms. Dowd reported completion of interviews for the Information Officer position and anticipation of Cabinet approval soon, with hopes of onboarding by March 2026. She emphasized the importance of securing a candidate with current digital media expertise to enhance KCDHH's outreach capabilities.

Budget Outlook: The agency faces potential general and restricted fund reductions per the Governor's recommended budget. While specific impacts remain uncertain pending legislative action, Ms. Dowd noted possible effects on currently vacant positions.

Legislative Update – Hearing Aid Insurance Coverage (House Bill 164): Ms. Dowd reported the reintroduction of hearing aid insurance legislation, though in a less comprehensive form than the previous year's version, after insurance industry intervention. The current bill mandates coverage up to \$2,500 per ear (increased from \$1,400) for children under age 18 and requires an "adequate pediatric network" of providers, a term requiring further definition. Mr. Evans noted nationwide pediatric audiology shortages and referenced Ohio's similar legislation (House Bill 315/"Madeline's Law"), which extends coverage to age 21. He cautioned that even after passage, implementation challenges with commercial insurers—particularly self-funded plans—typically require ongoing advocacy. Ms. Dowd committed to distributing bill information, sponsor details, and advocacy guidance to commissioners prior to committee hearings.

THE AGENCY REPORT WAS ACCEPTED AS READ.

Employee Spotlight: Telecommunications Access Program: Ms. Dowd introduced Jessica Endler-Smith, Telecommunications Access Program (TAP) Coordinator, who has served KCDHH for thirteen years in various capacities.

Ms. Endler-Smith explained that TAP provides telecommunications equipment to Kentucky residents meeting three criteria: (1) one year of state residency; (2) documented hearing loss or speech impairment; and (3) minimum age of 13 for wireless devices (age 5 for landline devices). The program provides one telephone device and one signaling device per person every four years. She detailed recent program enhancements, including addition of the Jitterbug smartphone (replacing the flip phone model) and reintroduction of the electrolarynx (artificial larynx) device. Ms. Endler-Smith also highlighted her participation in the Telecommunications Equipment Distribution Program Association (TEDPA) and the National Association of State Relay Administrators (NASRA) boards, as well as her representation of deaf and hard of hearing interests on Kentucky's Assistive Technology Services (KATS) Network board.

In response to Ms. Taylor's question regarding power banks for hearing aid/cochlear implant batteries during emergencies, Ms. Endler-Smith clarified that TAP's legislative mandate covers telecommunications equipment only, not ancillary power sources. Ms. Dowd noted that a few states provide personal devices through different legislative frameworks, which would require new Kentucky legislation to implement.

Regarding budget sufficiency, Ms. Dowd and Ms. Endler-Smith confirmed that historically the program has received adequate funding to meet demand, though future-year allocations remain uncertain pending budget resolution.

Blake Campbell addressed emergency preparedness, explaining his participation in Kentucky's Functional Needs Support Services collaborative. He described a recently completed comprehensive shelter guidebook distributed to public health departments statewide, detailing accommodation requirements for all disability groups including deaf and hard of hearing individuals. He emphasized that shelter responsibilities focus on communication access (interpreters, captioning, written communication) and provision of electrical outlets for personal device charging, rather than supplying personal medical devices or batteries—though he affirmed ongoing advocacy for comprehensive access.

Finally, Ms. Covey shared personal testimony regarding her complete deafness without cochlear implants (due to electrode insertion destroying her residual hearing) and the life-saving value of TAP-provided alerting devices for fire alarms and weather emergencies.

Commissioner Roles and Responsibilities Document: Ms. Dowd presented a newly drafted document outlining commissioner roles and responsibilities, developed with Ms. McCubbin and reviewed by Mr. Evans and Ms. Taylor. The document emphasizes commissioners' function as community liaisons who both bring community perspectives to the Commission and disseminate Commission information back to their constituencies.

A key proposed initiative involves establishing a communication network (potentially text-based) to rapidly mobilize community advocacy during time-sensitive situations such as legislative action or emergency communication failures. Ms. Dowd referenced challenges during the UPS plane crash and Louisville bank shooting when television broadcasts failed to properly frame sign language interpreters, limiting access for deaf viewers. She proposed that coordinated community contact with decision-makers creates greater impact than single-agency advocacy.

The document will remain in provisional use for several months before potential formal adoption into the Commissioner Handbook. Ms. Taylor suggested that formal adoption might warrant commissioners' signed acknowledgment of the guidelines, though Ms. Dowd noted the document serves primarily as informational guidance rather than binding requirements.

Old Business/New Business/Open Forum

Emeritus Position Nominations: Nominations were accepted for emeritus commissioner positions, with appointments to be voted upon at the April 2026 meeting. Up to three emeritus positions may be filled concurrently. Ms. Hatzel expressed gratitude for her previous emeritus service and interest in continuing, highlighting the importance of continuity and historical perspective during leadership transitions and changing political landscapes. Ms. Roof affirmed the importance of emeritus positions as organizational historians who bridge past initiatives with current work.

Upcoming Meeting Dates:

The following quarterly meeting dates were confirmed for 2026:

April 24, 2026

July 24, 2026

October 23, 2026

Expiring Commissioner Terms: Three commissioners' terms expire in June 2026: Mr. Perry (AARP representative), Ms. Harris (KAD representative), and Ms. Roof (parent representative). Ms. Dowd reported plans to actively recruit candidates beginning in February, particularly seeking individuals already connected to relevant organizations. She noted that the parent representative position presents unique continuity challenges since the current representative also serves on the Executive Board with a longer term.

Commissioner Comments and Announcements: Ms. McCubbin expressed strong optimism regarding the KELLI initiative, drawing on her 45 years of experience in deaf education to note that previous efforts often cycled without systemic change. She highlighted the critical importance of having Part C (early intervention) and Part B (school-age) decision-makers at the table alongside service providers, expressing hope that this structure combined with expert facilitation could finally produce meaningful improvements in Kentucky's early language access systems.

Mr. Evans announced the formation of a Deaf and Hard of Hearing Alliance at Cincinnati Children's Hospital, an interdisciplinary group including audiologists, speech-language pathologists, interpreter services, and developmental pediatric specialists. The alliance aims to enhance accessibility, expand ASL availability, and promote cultural

competence throughout the hospital system. He credited audiologist Andi Kottlowski (a Gallaudet University graduate) with initiating the effort and noted valuable collaboration with staff interpreters, including Joe Phelan.

Ms. Roof announced Deaf Awareness Day at the Louisville Zoo scheduled for August 29, 2026. She inquired about DeaFestival planning, prompting Ms. Dowd to explain that event planning remains stalled pending resolution of matters related to the Knowledge Center on Deafness. Ms. Dowd emphasized she cannot commit agency resources without funding assurance but remains open to alternative community gatherings if the traditional festival cannot proceed.

Ms. Niehaus announced upcoming outreach regarding the 988 videophone crisis line, plus renewed opportunities for psychological first aid and mental health first aid training with both deaf and hearing trainers. She also noted Children's Behavioral Health Awareness Day on May 7, 2026, encouraging commissioner participation.

Ms. Covey reported contact from Cochlear Corporation's PR firm regarding potential media coverage in the Courier-Journal and Northern Kentucky Tribune that would include information about KCDHH. She confirmed prior consultation with Ms. Dowd regarding conflict-of-interest concerns and offered to share contacts for coordinated messaging following Cabinet communication protocols.

MS. HARRIS MOVED TO ADJOURN. MR. SMITH SECONDED. The meeting was adjourned at 2:57 pm.