Kentucky Commission on the Deaf and Hard of Hearing
189th Quarterly Commission Meeting
April 24th, 2026

Board Members Present: Mona McCubbin, Anita Dowd, Melissa Kelly, Sarah Roof, Michelle Niehaus, Barbie Harris, Tommy Evans, Alexander Ansley, Jason Smith, Gerry Gordon-Brown, Bonnie Covey, Erin More, Jeannie Taylor (E)

Board Members Absent: Secretary Jamie Link, Marva Johnson, John Perry, Amy Hatzel (E)

Staff Present: Sam Kapsal, Blake Campbell, Jena White

Communication Facilitators: Shannon Grider, Linda Bozeman, Tracy Lundergan

Ms. McCubbin called the meeting to order at 12:34 pm.

Ms. McCubbin began the meeting, requesting the Commissioners review the previous meetings' minutes.

Ms. Harris moved to accept both the previous Commission Meeting minutes, and Executive Meeting minutes as read. Ms. Kelly seconded for both. The motion carried without discussion.

COMMISSION CHAIR'S REPORT

Ms. McCubbin reported no new updates at this time, turning the floor over to Ms. Dowd for the agency report.

AGENCY REPORT

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

Agency Report Restructure: Ms. Dowd introduced the agency report by explaining the restructured format, as mentioned in the memo. Based on discussions from the previous Executive Board meeting, this time will now follow a more interactive format, including open discussion, questions, and expansion, rather than a presented summary. Future quarterly report memos will include prompts to provide structure and guidance for these conversations.

KCDHH Website Update: Jim Rivard, Network Technician II, has been updating the KCDHH website to improve content currency and align with new accessibility guidelines, and implementing a responsive design for mobile use. While the website has historically served as a primary resource for information related to hearing loss, shifts in research behavior have shown many consumers now rely on general web searches. In response, the website content and formatting are undergoing comprehensive revisions. Following this update, Ms. Dowd opened the floor for feedback and questions from the Commissioners.

Ms. Taylor expressed appreciation for the updated Commissioners and KCDHH staff pages. She inquired about the VLOG section, noting it did not appear to have been updated since 2021. This prompted discussion regarding available modern technologies, including the potential for a more interactive platform, as well as the resources required to implement such changes. Identified challenges included limited staffing, management of a YouTube account, and a consumer base that may not be fully familiar with these tools.

Discussion shifted to website formatting. Mr. Rivard plans to reduce the number of drop-down menu items, limit on-site content, and direct users to external resources. Ms. Taylor and Ms. McCubbin expressed support for this approach, recommending that website content focuses on KCDHH's role and involvement in each topic rather than provide extensive general information. Ms. McCubbin emphasized the importance of accessibility, noting that resources should include ASL, captioning, and voiceover when possible. Ms. Covey volunteered the use of Artificial Intelligence (AI) as a tool to support content creation. However, Ms. Dowd expressed hesitation regarding the use of AI, noting it may be beneficial in the future following further development.

Information Officer II Introduction: Upon conclusion of website feedback, Ms. Dowd introduced Ms. Jena White, recently hired as the Information Officer II at KCDHH. Ms. White shared a brief overview of her background, including her education and prior work experience, and noted how COVID-19 and her growing twin children have influenced her career path. She expressed enthusiasm for contributing to KCDHH and supporting future initiatives. Ms. Dowd announced Ms. White has already completed her first major project, the redesign of the monthly newsletter.

KELLI Incitive Update: Ms. McCubbin requested an overview of ongoing efforts to improve early intervention services for Deaf and Hard of Hearing (DHH) children. She noted the current systems in Kentucky are not adequately serving this population and emphasized the need for statewide systemic change. She turned the discussion over to participating partners, Ms. Dowd and Ms. Roof.

KCDHH has prioritized early intervention reform for several years and is now advancing this work through a new initiative with the REAL South Project, Ms. Dowd explained. The Kentucky Early Language and Literacy Initiative (KELLI) group held their first meeting in January 2026. The initiative brings together key stakeholders, including the Part C Coordinator, KDE representatives, early intervention educators, and facilitator Cheryl

DeConde Johnson. Current efforts include developing parent and provider surveys to improve data accuracy, reduce identification gaps, and gather feedback, as well as reviewing models from other states to inform best practices in Kentucky.

Discussion centered on the initiative's intended outcomes, including increased awareness, improved data accuracy and gap reduction, enhanced interagency collaboration among KCDHH, KDE, Part C, and EHDI, and potential legislative action. Additional discussion addressed barriers such as inconsistent identification practices, limited communication across systems, and the need for clearer urgency in early diagnosis and intervention. Potential solutions included expanding provider roles, increasing in-home service delivery, and strengthening family support models. The group emphasized that early intervention is both a public health and education issue, underscoring the importance of early identification and family engagement to support long-term outcomes.

UNFINISHED BUSINESS

Strategic Plan: Ms. Dowd opened discussion of the strategic plan and invited questions and feedback from the Commissioners. Ms. McCubbin acknowledged prior discussion regarding the implementation of measurable goals but agreed with Ms. Dowd that applying such formatting may be challenging given the nature of KCDHH's objectives. Ms. Dowd further justified the structure of the current plan, noting that goals are aligned with agency mandates and reflect an effort to shift external perceptions of the agency's purpose. She emphasized KCDHH's mandate to serve as an advisory entity to the Governor's Office and other state agencies. She also expressed a goal of framing hearing loss as a public health issue, comparable in awareness to conditions such as diabetes and heart disease.

Vacant Staff Positions: Ms. Dowd provided an update on current vacancies at KCDHH. The Interpreter Referral Coordinator position remains vacant. However, interviews have been conducted and hiring paperwork has been submitted to Personnel, with the goal of filling the position by mid-May. The Executive Staff Advisor and Administrative Specialist positions also remain vacant. Ms. McCubbin requested clarification on the Administrative Specialist role, and Ms. Dowd explained that the title allows flexibility to meet agency needs. Currently, the position is predicted to focus on finance and the Telecommunications Access Program. The agency is awaiting the conclusion of the legislative session before initiating the hiring process for the remaining positions.

NEW BUSINESS

DeaFestival: Ms. Dowd explained that DeaFestival is funded by the Knowledge Center on Deafness (KCD), a non-profit organization. Due to internal issues within KCD, funding has not been confirmed, delaying the start of planning. Although communication has taken place and resolution is anticipated to occur by summer 2026, the festival will not be held in September 2026 as originally anticipated. Following discussion with KCDHH staff, Memorial Day weekend 2027 has been proposed as a new festival date. Ms. Dowd then opened the floor for input from the Commissioners.

Discussion began with consideration of the proposed festival dates, noting that colleges and primary schools would likely be out of session, which could impact student involvement. Ms. Dowd acknowledged this concern but emphasized that a spring event would allow time during the school year for promotion and coordination of student participation. Conversation then shifted to funding, with Commissioners expressing community willingness to support fundraising efforts and suggesting partnerships with other agencies to help offset costs.

Ms. Dowd outlined potential changes to the festival aimed at reducing expenses and increasing participant benefit, including decreasing the number of performances and expanding community resource booths to offer services such as health screenings, emergency preparedness materials, and employment resources. Plans for a DeaFestival mobile app, led by Jena White, were also introduced. Commissioners provided feedback, including concerns about maintaining the festival's character and potential limitations on agency participation due to legislative changes. Suggestions included structured scheduling to balance performance time and resource engagement. Mr. Smith and Ms. McCubbin endorsed the new plan and expressed their support moving forward.

Applications for Expiring Terms: Application review and election began with a recap of the positions under consideration, including those to be voted on by the Board and those to be submitted to the Governor's Office for appointment. The AARP and KAD representative positions were reviewed for submission. All applications were presented, with the Board noting that only one application was submitted for the AARP position. It was acknowledged that the applicant already serves on a related board, which may limit diversity of perspective, however, no alternative applications were available. All applicants were approved for submission to the Governor's office.

The Board then reviewed applications for the parent representative position. Ms. McCubbin inquired whether both applicants could be appointed, and Ms. Niehaus clarified that current legislation permits only one appointment. Following discussion, the Board voted and Mr. Jeremy Sharp was elected as the parent representative.

Approval of Emeritus Members: Following position appointment, Emeritus status was reviewed for Ms. Amy Hatzel and Ms. Jeannie Taylor. Election was conducted, and both individuals were approved to continue serving as emeritus board members.

OPEN FORUM/ANNOUNCEMENTS

Mr. Smith announced that the Kentucky Association of the Deaf and the Tennessee Association of the Deaf have partnered to host a joint festival, combining Regions 2 and 3 to strengthen community engagement across neighboring states.

Ms. More shared that Eastern Kentucky University (EKU) will begin a new data collection initiative in fall 2026 to track the number of Deaf and Hard of Hearing students enrolled in K–12 schools across Kentucky counties.

Ms. Harris noted that, in recognition of the United States' 250th anniversary, Boyle County and the City of Danville will host a series of events in the coming months, including a passport-style historical tour featuring Jacob's Hall on the campus of the Kentucky School for the Deaf. She also shared that Bill Rice Ranch will host Deaf Camp sessions June 8–12, June 22–26, and July 6–10.

Ms. Morgan shared that she was recently contacted by a representative from KODA Nation regarding their annual weeklong KODA Camp Ohio, scheduled for July 12–17, with enrollment currently open. Mr. Smith noted that his daughter has attended and expressed support for the program.

Ms. Niehaus announced that DeafLEAD will host a virtual workshop titled "Support, Resources and Grief After Loss: 988 Suicide and Crisis Lifeline and DeafLEAD Services" on April 28, 2026, from 6:00–8:30 p.m. The session will be presented in ASL with interpretation available via Zoom, and additional details can be found on the KCDHH website.

Ms. McCubbin moved to announcements, sharing upcoming meeting dates. The next Executive Board meeting will take place on May 29th via Zoom, and the next Quarterly Commission Meeting is scheduled for July 24th.

Ms. McCubbin moved to adjourn. Mr. Smith seconded. The meeting adjourned at 3:19 pm.