

Kentucky Commission on the Deaf and Hard of Hearing
190th Quarterly Commission Meeting
July 24th, 2026

Board Members Present: Mona McCubbin, Anita Dowd, Leslie Tindell, Michelle Niehaus, Lejla Cosic, Tommy Evans, Bonnie Covey, Barbie Harris, Gerry Gorden-Brown, Jeremy Sharp, Melissa Kelly, Jeannie Taylor (E)

Board Members Absent: Jason Smith, John Perry, Sonja Smith, Alexander Ansley, Erin More, Amy Hatzel (E)

Staff Present: Sam Kapsal, Blake Campbell, OJ Disney

Communication Facilitators: Shannon Grider, Derek Drury, Tracy Lundergan

Ms. McCubbin called the meeting to order at 12:33 p.m.

Ms. Kelly conducted roll, noting several absences, but concluding quorum was still met. Ms. McCubbin asked KCDHH staff present to please introduce themselves as well before beginning the meeting.

Ms. McCubbin called for a review of the 189th Commission Meeting Minutes and Executive Board Minutes.

Ms. Harris moved to accept both documents as read. Mr. Evans seconded. The motion carried without discussion.

COMMISSION CHAIR'S REPORT

Ms. McCubbin presented her quarterly chair report.

Commissioner Appointment: Ms. McCubbin began her report with updates on current commission appointments. She welcomed Ms. Barbie Harris, who was reappointed as the Kentucky Association of the Deaf (KAD) representative and will continue serving for another term. She also informed the Board that the Governor's Office recently clarified that the term of the AARP representative, Mr. John Perry, expires in February 2027 based on his appointment date. The Kentucky Registry of Interpreters for the Deaf (KYRID) appointed Ms. Sonja Smith as its new president following the expiration of Ms. Marva Johnson's term. Although Ms. Smith was unable to attend this meeting, she will be joining the Commission board for the 191st Quarterly Meeting in October. Additionally, Mr. Jason Smith has resigned

as president of KAD, and the KAD board appointed Ms. Patricia Ison as his successor. Following orientation, Ms. Ison will also be attending the next meeting. Lastly, Ms. McCubbin welcomed newly appointed Parent Representative, Mr. Jeremy Sharp, and invited him to introduce himself. Mr. Sharp shared that he works in engineering management at Toyota, where he recently invited Ms. Dowd to present the best practices for working with deaf and hard of hearing employees. Mr. Sharp has a 6-year-old son with bilateral hearing loss who utilizes cochlear implants. He is excited to serve the board as Parent Representative. Following, Ms. McCubbin noted that Certificates of Appreciation would be mailed to Ms. Roof, Ms. Johnson, and Mr. Smith in recognition of their years of service on the Commission Board.

Document Updates: Ms. McCubbin shared that, while updating the Commissioner Handbook, Ms. Dowd identified some discrepancies between the current operation policy document and how meetings are being conducted. Ms. Dowd brought these concerns forward, seeking clarification regarding the process for updating governing documents. In response, a committee was formed to revise the Operations Policy and Commission Bylaws. The committee, consisting of Ms. Hatzel, Ms. Taylor, Ms. Covey, Mr. Evans, and Ms. Harris, will meet to draft these changes and share a revised document for board review prior to the next commission meeting.

COMMISSIONER CHECK-IN

Ms. McCubbin introduced the Commissioner Check-In, expanding on the description provided in the Quarterly Report Memo. She thanked Mr. Evans for developing the Commissioner Report Form during his term as Chair, noting that while the form remains available for use, participation has been limited. Following discussion, it was determined that adding a Commissioner Check-In to each quarterly meeting would provide a consistent opportunity for Commissioners to report on relevant initiatives, events, concerns, or accomplishments within their respective organizations, as well as gather updates to communicate back to the groups they represent.

KSHA Update: Mr. Evans began the conversation with a Kentucky Speech-Language-Hearing Association (KSHA) update. He recently met with the newly appointed KSHA president, Ms. Heather Gaddis, to discuss the creation of an advocacy group consisting of leaders from various deaf and hard of hearing centered agencies. This would provide an opportunity for organizational leaders to collaborate on shared priorities, develop legislative initiatives, and strengthen advocacy efforts. Additionally, Mr. Evans noted the potential benefit of having members with lobbying power included in this group.

Next, Mr. Evans provided updates surrounding cochlear implant technology. The newly implemented “360 Rule” will change cochlear implant candidacy criteria for children, allowing more children whose families have chosen the oral communication approach to be evaluated. Mr. Evans also shared the Cincinnati Children’s Hospital and other pediatric hospitals have started using robotic guided surgery for this procedure, improving accuracy, thus preserving more residual hearing. Discussion also addressed insurance approval challenges for bilateral cochlear implants, particularly in cases of single-sided hearing loss, as well as differences in cochlear implant outcomes. Mr. Evans explained that children implanted at an early age generally adapt more smoothly to cochlear implants, while adults often require more extensive rehabilitation and adjustment.

Mr. Evans provided an additional update on developments in the medical field. Cincinnati Children’s Hospital has received approval to offer gene therapy as treatment for a specific genetic form of profound hearing loss associated with auditory neuropathy. Although this specific gene is rare, the advancements in treatment are noteworthy.

Additionally, Mr. Evans shared that education options for deaf and hard of hearing children are expanding in Northern Kentucky. Ohio Valley Voices has opened a new location in Northern Kentucky and St. Rita’s School for the Deaf is transitioning from a private entity to a state entity, making it a more accessible option for families seeking a manual communication education option for their child.

CHFS Update: Ms. Niehaus provided an update on behalf of the Cabinet of Health and Family Services (CHFS). She shared that her team recently funded representatives from four regions to attend the Hearing Loss Association of America (HLAA) convention and are receiving great feedback from attendees. Ms. Niehaus also announced a new partnership between NorthKey Community Care and Heuser Hearing Institute to provide mobile hearing screenings at mental health clinics, a successful example of integrated care. Additionally, promotion for captioning software and assistive technology has expanded throughout southeastern Kentucky. Following a communication access plan presentation, CHFS was asked to develop a health care with hearing loss focused blog, addressing the needs for accessible communication in medical settings. Ms. Kimbell and Ms. Taylor have both contributed content, emphasizing the importance of communication access plans in both physical and behavioral healthcare environments. Ms. Niehaus will share the link to this digital blog once it has been approved for publication.

Consumer Feedback: Ms. Covey shared that while attending the HLAA convention herself, several attendees asked about the phone software she was using to control her cochlear implants. She reported that many consumers indicated they had not been shown how to use the applications by their audiologists. Mr. Evans thanked Ms. Covey for the feedback and stated he will remind his team to provide education and resources to all patients.

Public Events: Ms. Taylor shared information about the HLAA Walk4Hearing event. The annual fundraiser is scheduled for October 10, 2026, from 9:00 a.m. to 2:00 p.m. at Tom Sawyer Park in Louisville, Kentucky.

Ms. Harris announced that the Kentucky School for the Deaf will host a 5K fundraiser on October 10, 2026, beginning at 9:00 a.m. at Millennium Park in Danville, Kentucky. The event will honor Arlen Finke while raising funds to support KSD students.

Ms. Harris also reminded Commissioners of the Kentucky 250th anniversary celebrations taking place in Danville this summer. She highlighted a special event taking place on Saturday, July 25, from 9:00 a.m. to 3:00 p.m. at Jacobs Hall. Presenters, Mr. Archie Harris, Mr. Kevin Kruetzer, and Ms. Carolyn Gulley will be sharing on various KSD historical moments in time. In response to a question from Commissioners, Ms. Harris stated that recording or virtual access to the event has been requested, but details have not yet been finalized.

Ms. Taylor asked if the commissioners had additional information regarding the emergency preparedness training hosted by Kentucky State University recently. Mr. Campbell responded that unfortunately the event has now concluded, with the last session having taken place July 18. Ms. Dowd shared that the newsletter sent monthly to subscribers includes an upcoming events section, and the KCDHH website and social media pages are updated regularly to provide these announcements.

AGENCY REPORT

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

Website Accessibility: Ms. Dowd began her agency report following the discussion regarding the KCDHH website and social media platforms. She informed the Board that the federal compliance deadline requiring state agencies to provide accessible digital content has been extended by one year. Mr. Jim Rivard, Network Technician II, continues to update the KCDHH website to meet accessibility requirements. As part of this process, KCDHH will transition toward sharing links to organizations' websites rather than posting event flyers directly to ensure compliance with accessibility standards. Ms. Dowd also noted that while training on digital accessibility standards is available, many training resources present accessibility challenges of their own. However, many software programs now include built-in accessibility checkers to assist users in creating compliant documents.

Interagency Collaboration: Ms. Dowd recently met with the Department of Public Advocacy and anticipates additional meetings in the future as they partner to address accessibility in the court systems. Additionally, Ms. Dowd reported recent discussions with the Kentucky Commission on Human Rights (KCHR) regarding accessibility barriers within its complaint process. She expressed concerns that public-facing materials are written at a reading level that may be difficult for many consumers to understand and noted that limited communication options may further discourage individuals from pursuing discrimination complaints. Ms. Dowd recently met with KCHR staff to discuss these concerns, emphasizing the importance of plain language, accessible communication, and appropriate accommodations. Ms. Dowd reported that the Executive Director expressed interest in continuing the conversation and invited her to return for additional collaboration on improving accessibility.

Ms. Dowd also provided an update on her efforts to connect with Kentucky state agency ADA coordinators. She has been working to establish communication with the State ADA Coordinator to better understand the current training process and advocate for additional resources, including a contact list of organizations across Kentucky that specialize in various disabilities and could provide guidance when questions arise. She noted that these efforts are ongoing and emphasized the importance of ensuring state agencies have the knowledge and resources necessary to provide appropriate accommodations.

HLAA National Conference: Ms. Dowd continued her report with an update from the national HLAA conference. KCDHH hosted two booths at the event, one providing general agency information and resources, and the second titled, “Access at Home”. This booth provided accessible technology demonstrations and remained very popular throughout the course of the day. Ms. Dowd and her team plan to continue the use of the “Access at Home” booth at future conferences.

DeaFestival: Ms. Dowd provided a brief update on DeaFestival, noting that planning remains contingent upon additional information from the Knowledge Center on Deafness (KCD). However, she and Mr. Campbell recently met with a representative from a potential festival venue in Lexington and plan to conduct an onsite visit in the coming months. The anticipated event date remains Memorial Day weekend 2027.

KELLI Update: Ms. Dowd reported that the Kentucky Early Language and Literacy Initiative (KELLI) continues to make progress to improve Kentucky early intervention. The group recently confirmed that the Kentucky Early Intervention System (KEIS) is not automatically determining deaf and hard of hearing children eligible for services, despite existing regulations indicating they qualify. In response to these ongoing challenges, KELLI is exploring the development of an early intervention system operating independently from state government. Ms. Dowd reported discussions are ongoing regarding potential implementation models, including identifying a lead agency and securing the financial resources necessary to support this system.

The group is also exploring opportunities to strengthen its advocacy efforts through additional research and stakeholder engagement. Ms. Dowd reflected on previous successes in 2021, when the team was able to partner with Secretary Friedlander to create legislative change. She shared that KELLI plans to meet with Dr. Steven Stack to discuss current challenges and opportunities for improving early intervention services. Additionally, they are hoping to engage Dr. Matthew Bush, utilizing his research to back the need for systemic changes in early intervention. Ms. Taylor asked if student data collection initiative being developed at Eastern Kentucky University, discussed in the previous commission meeting, could also support these efforts. Ms. Dowd noted that Ms. More was not present to provide an update but confirmed that Ms. Haley Holstein from EKU continues to participate in the KELLI workgroup.

Mr. Evans suggested reviewing Indiana's early intervention model as a potential example for Kentucky. Ms. McCubbin shared the team recently reviewed several successful programs, including Georgia, Colorado, and Ohio, considering best practices. She noted that while these models provide valuable guidance, challenges related to funding and identifying an agency to administer the program remain.

KCDHH EMPLOYEE SPOTLIGHT

Ms. Dowd introduced Mr. OJ Disney as this quarter's KCDHH Staff Spotlight guest. Mr. Disney shared that he has worked as the Document Processing Specialist II for four years. His responsibilities include processing applications, consumer relations, technical support, assisting in equipment ordering, outreach, and financial recordkeeping. After inquiry from the Board, Mr. Disney shared his experience with cochlear implants. He received his implants 12 years ago after consulting with Dr. Matthew Bush and the devices work wonderfully for him. As a child, Mr. Disney attended mainstream school utilizing hearing aids. Initially confident he could continue using the same strategies in college, Mr. Disney later found communication barriers, including unfamiliar accents and facial hair that obscured lipreading, challenging. As a result, he began using interpreters and notetaking services. He gradually learned ASL, relying on lipreading to expand his vocabulary.

NEW BUSINESS

Executive Board Positions: Ms. McCubbin opened the new business section, addressing vacancies on the Executive Board. She thanked Ms. Sarah Roof for her years of service as Vice Chair and welcomed Mr. Jeremy Sharp as the new Parent Representative. Due to the resulting vacancy, the Executive Board discussed the position at its previous meeting and

recommended Ms. Kelly to serve as Vice Chair until elections are held in April 2027. Ms. McCubbin opened the floor to additional nominations. Hearing none, nominations were closed, and Ms. Kelly was elected Vice Chair by the Commission.

The results of this election created a vacancy for the Executive Board Secretary position. Mr. Evans was nominated to serve in this role. Ms. McCubbin again opened the floor for additional nominations. Hearing none, nominations were closed, and Mr. Evans was elected Secretary by the Commission.

TAP LRC Report: Commissioners discussed the data presented in the Telecommunications Access Program (TAP) Legislative Research Commission (LRC) Report. Ms. McCubbin asked for clarification regarding the program's funding, and Ms. Dowd explained that the program is funded through a three-cent monthly surcharge on Kentucky telephone service called the TAP/TRS Fee.

State Fair: Ms. Dowd announced the Kentucky State Fair will be held August 20-30, 2026, and invited Ms. Kimbell to speak on volunteer opportunities. Ms. Kimbell explained that the KCDHH booth will operate with a more flexible volunteer schedule rather than designating shifts. She noted that coverage is especially needed on opening day, weekends, Senior Citizens' Day, and Veterans Day. Additionally, KCDHH plans to bring "Access at Home" to the fair this year. She encouraged Commissioners interested in volunteering to contact her by email and noted that volunteers will receive complimentary admission and parking on the days they serve.

OPEN FORUM/ANNOUNCEMENTS

Open Forum: Ms. McCubbin opened the discussion by sharing her desire to refocus this portion of future Commission meetings, utilizing any remaining time to discuss current "hot topics" affecting the deaf and hard of hearing community. She noted that the Board's diverse membership provides an opportunity to hear a variety of perspectives and experiences, with the goal of fostering discussion and understanding rather than reaching an agreement.

Ms. Dowd initiated the conversation, discussing recent comments received on a KCDHH social media post suggesting the Commission favors certain communication methods or communities. Ms. Dowd emphasized that KCDHH serves all Kentuckians with hearing loss, regardless of their communication method or use of amplification technology and encouraged Commissioners to help reinforce this message when opportunities arise. Ms. Dowd shared that she has seen individuals succeed through a variety of communication approaches, including spoken language, sign language, simultaneous communication, and cochlear implantation. Communication needs vary based on factors such as age, type, and

degree of hearing loss. Ms. McCubbin agreed, noting increased acceptance of diverse communication approaches and that her own perspective has evolved through personal experience with hearing loss.

Mr. Sharp expressed appreciation for the discussion and for Ms. Dowd's support for the vast range of choices parents can make for their children. He shared that when he was appointed as the Parent Representative, he initially felt nervous joining the board because of the choices he made for his son. He feared his limited signing ability would cause disconnect with fellow board members and expressed he has even felt frustrated with himself sometimes for not being able to communicate directly to signing board members. He ended, stating that this conversation reaffirmed his belief that the Commission values diverse perspectives and is a place where everyone has a voice at the table.

Announcements and Adjournment: Appreciating the positivity in Mr. Sharps closing remarks, Ms. McCubbin moved to the announcements. The next Executive Board Meeting is scheduled for September 4, 2026, via Zoom. The next Quarterly Commission Meeting will be held on October 23, 2026.

Ms. Harris moved to adjourn. Mr. Evans seconded the motion. The motion carried, and the meeting adjourned at 3:36 p.m.