

# Kentucky Inclusive Workforce Summit Elevates RETAIN Message of Inclusion and Accessibility

*Spring 2024 RETAIN Success Story*


In September 2023, RETAIN Kentucky cohosted the Inclusive Workforce Summit to help amplify the RETAIN message of stay-at-work/return-to-work (SAW/RTW) best practices, accessibility, and inclusion in the workforce. Hosting the event also strengthened RETAIN’s relationship with partners like the Kentucky Chamber of Commerce and the Kentucky Workforce Innovation Board, enabling RETAIN to better connect with the business community and legislators.

## Background

The Commonwealth of Kentucky adopted an [Employment First](#) framework through Executive Orders issued in 2018 and 2020 and subsequent legislation passed in 2022. Employment First sets an expectation of work as the first and primary option for people with disabilities who want to work. The state’s Employment First Council includes members representing the workforce, people with disabilities, employers, and providers of disability services, among others. The RETAIN Kentucky team recognized that Employment First helps advance RETAIN’s goal of improving the employment outcomes of people with work-limiting injuries and illnesses. This meaningful connection provided a powerful opportunity to leverage state legislation to promote the RETAIN program.


## Challenge

Employers often overlook people with disabilities, injuries, or illnesses. This creates barriers to achieving RETAIN’s goal of helping people stay at or return to work after experiencing a work-limiting injury or illness. This can lead to ripple effects including financial and health consequences, employers losing productive workers, and people applying for disability benefits.



### Challenge-Action-Results

**Challenge:** Employers overlook employees with disabilities, injuries, or illnesses, creating unnecessary barriers to SAW/RTW goals.



**Action:** RETAIN Kentucky cohosted the Inclusive Workforce Summit to spread the word about its program and to promote SAW/RTW best practices.

**Results:** The 259 people who attended the summit included legislators, employers, human resource professionals, community leaders, and service providers.

## Actions

RETAIN Kentucky, led by the Office of Vocational Rehabilitation, partnered with the Kentucky Chamber of Commerce and the Kentucky Workforce Innovation Board to bring together key constituents in Kentucky's workforce system; to raise awareness about RETAIN services; and to increase attendees' awareness of SAW/RTW best practices, accessibility, and inclusion. This included the following actions:

***Building partnerships.*** RETAIN Kentucky partnered with the Kentucky Chamber of Commerce and other organizations to sponsor the event. These partnerships helped RETAIN more effectively reach employers (including health care providers), workforce leaders, and legislators. Because RETAIN and its partners had previously cultivated relationships with a variety of people and organizations, they were able to invite the right people to make an impact.

***Raising awareness about RETAIN.*** RETAIN team members planned a program that was relevant and interesting for the people they wanted to reach, while remaining faithful to their purpose. They held the audience's attention with a fast-paced, engaging agenda and provided information that was practical and applicable to their work. In doing so, they introduced these key audiences to the RETAIN program, its services, and its goals. The program also sowed the seeds for sustainability by highlighting the importance of SAW/RTW in addressing workforce shortages and growing a healthy Kentucky economy for legislators and workforce leaders.

## RESULTS AND KEY TAKEAWAYS

The Kentucky Inclusive Workforce Summit took place on September 13, 2023, in Lexington, Ky. The event's achievements included:

- Bringing together 259 leaders and interested parties from throughout the Kentucky workforce and business communities. Attendees included disability advocates, health care providers, legislators, employers, human resources professionals, community leaders, and service providers.
- Strengthening state and regional partnerships. The benefits of this collaboration extend beyond planning a successful event. These new relationships provide another avenue for the RETAIN Kentucky team to reach key audiences, such as employers and legislators.
- Promoting the RETAIN program and best practices in SAW/RTW, accessibility, and inclusion to employers, workforce leaders, and policymakers throughout the state. Plans are underway to host a second event in 2024 to provide an opportunity to build program sustainability.
- Spurring the development of a how-to guide to help other states mirror this success and advance the overarching RETAIN goal of reducing workforce disability.



*Kentucky is participating in RETAIN (Retaining Employment and Talent After Injury/Illness Network) to build connections and improve coordination among employers, health care providers, and other key parties to help workers with new injuries or illnesses stay in the workforce. The Kentucky Office of Vocational Rehabilitation leads Kentucky RETAIN, together with the University of Kentucky Human Development Institute and committed project partners, including the Council of State Governments. The U.S. Department of Labor, in collaboration with the Social Security Administration, sponsors RETAIN.*

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