

COMMISSION ON RACE & ACCESS TO OPPORTUNITY

Minutes

August 19, 2026

Call to Order and Roll Call

The third meeting of the Commission on Race & Access to Opportunity was held on August 19, 2026, at 3:00 PM ET/2:00 PM CT in Room 129 of the Capitol Annex. Representative Kevin Jackson, Chair, called the meeting to order, and the secretary called the roll.

Present were:

Members: Representative Kevin Jackson, Co-Chair; Senator Amanda Mays Bledsoe, Co-Chair; Senators Karen Berg and Lindsey Tichenor; Representatives George Brown Jr., Samara Heavrin, and Nima Kulkarni; and Larry Forester and Sonita Justice.

Guests: Rev. Dr. Frank M. Smith, Jr., Senior Executive Vice President & Chief Operating Officer, Simmons College of Kentucky; Laura Douglas, President & CEO, West End Opportunity Partnership; and Rita Phillips, Chief Operations Officer, West End Opportunity Partnership.

LRC Staff: Brandon White and Logan Schaaf.

Approval of July Meeting Minutes

A motion was made by Co-Chair Mays Bledsoe and seconded by Mr. Forester to approve the minutes of the July 20, 2026 meeting. The minutes were approved by voice vote without objection.

Simmons College Second Chance Pell Program

Rev. Dr. Frank M. Smith, Jr., Senior Executive Vice President & Chief Operating Officer of Simmons College of Kentucky, provided an update on the Prison Education Program, which has the first and only accredited in-prison degree tracks in Kentucky, including general studies, religious studies, sociology, and business entrepreneurship. The program is available in three participating state facilities: Luther Luckett Correctional Complex, Kentucky Correctional Institution for Women, and Northpoint Training Center.

Responding to Co-Chair Mays Bledsoe, Dr. Smith said the Prison Education Program has not received funding from the state. Most funding has come from federal Pell Grant dollars.

Responding to Senator Berg, Dr. Smith emphasized the importance of maximizing unique opportunities in the Prison Education Program, rather than duplicating what is offered by other schools and programs. He also discussed the transformative potential of education for incarcerated individuals.

Ms. Justice praised the Prison Education Program and said she would like to explore how the Louisville Urban League could support the program.

West End Opportunity Partnership Update

Laura Douglas, President & CEO, West End Opportunity Partnership, and Rita Phillips, Chief Operations Officer, West End Opportunity Partnership, provided an overview of the mission, history, and operations of the West End Opportunity Partnership.

The partnership awards funds to organizations working in several impact areas, including housing, employment and economic development, youth initiatives, resource centers and facilities, and health and wellness. Ms. Douglas and Ms. Phillips highlighted the work of the organizations receiving grants from the partnership.

Responding to Chair Jackson, Ms. Douglas said the partnership will continue in perpetuity, but the tax increment financing (TIF) system will sunset in 20 years, as set out in statute by the General Assembly.

Responding to Ms. Justice, Ms. Douglas discussed the means by which an entity may qualify for a grant from the partnership, rather than a loan, and highlighted notable grant recipients and their work. Most of the partnership's money lending has been in the form of business loans, rather than grants, but the number of grantees exceeds the number of business borrowers.

Responding to Representative Heavrin, Ms. Douglas provided an update on an ongoing lawsuit challenging the West End's tax increment financing status.

Responding to Representative Kulkarni, Ms. Douglas highlighted recent housing investments by the partnership, and its relationship with the city of Louisville.

Responding to Senator Berg, Ms. Douglas discussed sources of opposition to the tax increment financing system, and community outreach efforts by the partnership to the surrounding community.

Co-Chairs Mays Bledsoe and Representative Brown praised the work of the partnership and discussed the applicability of its model to other areas in Kentucky.

Adjournment

With no further business before the commission, the meeting was adjourned.