



INTERIM RECORD

A SUMMARY OF INTERIM ACTIVITIES

2025

November

Volume 38, No. 8

PUBLISHED BY
LEGISLATIVE RESEARCH COMMISSION
LEGISLATURE.KY.GOV/LEGISLATION/PAGES/DEFAULT.ASPX

Lawmakers, other partners unveil plan to reduce recidivism

By Jordan Hensley - LRC Public Information

FRANKFORT — A proposed job training and education center in Boyle County for Kentucky inmates could help further reduce the state's recidivism rate, according to supporters.

Rep. Jennifer Decker, R-Waddy, and Sen. Brandon J. Storm, R-London, introduced the idea to the Interim Joint Committee on Judiciary on Nov. 6. Kentucky Community and Technical College System (KCTCS) President Ryan Quarles and Director of Reentry Services with the Kentucky Department of Corrections Kirstin Porter joined them.

Decker credits KCTCS's current partnership with the Department of Corrections for the recent drop in Kentucky's recidivism rate.

The college system already has nine colleges working with 14 state-run correctional facilities, one federal prison and numerous local jails on GED, associate and bachelor's degrees, and vocational job training, Quarles said.

Decker told the committee they would like to keep working together on recidivism and workforce participation by opening a model campus at a state prison for 400 vetted inmates to enroll in intensive education and vocational programs near their scheduled release dates.

"Every Kentuckian has a stake in this fight against recidivism, regardless of any personal ties to incarceration," Decker said. "Because when



Rep. Jennifer Decker, R-Waddy, was joined by Kentucky Community and Technical College System President Ryan Quarles and others on Nov. 6 to propose a new program to reduce recidivism

inmates return home with proven skills, they are far more likely to stay out of prison in the future, to contribute to their communities and to ensure safer neighborhoods for all Kentuckians."

Decker said Kentucky defines recidivism as reincarceration within 24 months of release.

Kentucky's recidivism rate dropped earlier this year by 1.6 points to 30.81%, but if measured by the national standard of three years, Kentucky's recidivism rate is much higher, she said.

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Reduce recidivism,

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"(It's) a standard that measures Kentucky's rate of recidivism as being 40.2% higher than any border state, but declining faster than the U.S. average," Decker added.

The program proposed by Decker, Storm, Quarles and Porter is modeled after a successful program in Michigan called Vocational Village, where the state has seen a 50% drop in recidivism, Quarles said.

Quarles said they are proposing a KCTCS reentry campus at the North Point Training Center in Boyle County due to its already existing partnerships and prison education programs.

"We're building upon a model that's working in Michigan, and we think we can do it right here in Kentucky as well," he added.

Storm told the committee the program would enhance public safety and would be a fiscally responsible program for the commonwealth to pursue.

Rep. T.J. Roberts, R-Burlington, said he appreciates the mission of the proposed program. He asked which criminal offenses would make an inmate ineligible.

Quarles said a list has not been finalized, but he knows Michigan does not allow sex offenders to enroll in a Vocational Village due to it being difficult for sex offenders to find employment.

Sen. Michael J. Nemes, R-Shepherdsville, said he believes the proposed program is needed, along

with some other reentry-related legislation. He said some inmates are having trouble completing the required apprenticeship programs in order to earn a vocational certification.

Quarles said the enabling legislation the group is working on can address those needs.

"One of the things that we want to be clear about is that this is not a criminal justice reform bill," Quarles said. "This is about workforce and for those inmates that we know will be released having the best chance possible."

The Kentucky General Assembly cannot take action on new legislation until the 2026 legislative session begins on Jan. 6.

Legislators discuss proposal on mental health parity in insurance

by Nancy Royden - LRC Public Information

FRANKFORT — Two lawmakers joined with advocates from the mental health profession on Nov. 4, urging the Interim Joint Committee on Banking and Insurance to support proposed legislation that seeks to improve mental health parity in insurance.

Rep. Vanessa Grossl, R-Georgetown, and Rep. Lisa Willner, D-Louisville, testified in support of the measure along with Sheila Schuster, chair of the Kentucky Mental Health Coalition, and Nicole Sartini, president of Bridge Counseling and Wellness in Louisville.

"The Kentucky General Assembly has recognized mental health as an issue for a number of years, and mental health needs to remain a priority for us," Grossl told the committee.

She said a measure from 2021 required insurers to treat mental health the same as physical health, and "we're here today to discuss fidelity



Rep. Lisa Willner, D-Louisville, right, testifies on proposed mental health parity legislation during a meeting of the Interim Joint Committee on Banking and Insurance. With Willner is Sheila Schuster, chair of the Kentucky Mental Health Coalition.

issues with that law to ensure that insurers are following the law with fidelity and that proper enforcement mechanisms are in place for those who do not."

Grossl said the Kentucky Department of Insurance's ability to implement the current law has drawn concern.

"Reports from the department have not addressed mental health parity nor did last month's department update testimony to this committee. We believe additional legislative oversight is warranted," she said. "At this point, we should have already been presented with two full years' worth of data via those annual reporting requirements that the bill clarified for insurers."

The proposed legislation would give oversight and enforcement capabilities to the legislature and the Kentucky Office of the Attorney

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Commission discusses juvenile services fund

by Jordan Hensley - LRC Public Information

FRANKFORT — In its final meeting of 2025, the Commission on Race and Access to Opportunity heard testimony Nov. 12 on legislation that would create a trust fund for juvenile justice-related services.

Commission member Sen. Keturah J. Herron, D-Louisville, said she plans to file Bill Request 1218 next year, which is similar to legislation she filed when she served in the Kentucky House of Representatives.

Herron said she noticed during her term in the House that funding for facilities was typically at the forefront of the juvenile justice conversation.

"What I realized was that we are looking to put a lot of money into facilities, but we were not putting money on the backside, or I guess upstream, for prevention, intervention and reentry," she said.

Under BR 1218, Herron originally proposed a \$9.6 million allocation to a Juvenile Services Fund within the Department of Juvenile Justice. Larry Forester, a citizen member of the commission, suggested Herron round the \$9.6 million allocation to \$10 million, which she agreed to.

The funding would come from state appropriations, gifts, grants and federal funds, according to the bill draft.

Herron said the fund would create a consistent source of money at the state level for delinquency prevention and early intervention services, wraparound services, and alternative detention and reentry programs.

Herron told the committee she is already aware of organizations across the state that are providing some of these services that could use more support.

"I think if we as a state, if we're putting all this money into facilities, it is our job as well to help on the backside of that," she added.

Herron said she hopes the proposed legislation can be part of the solution when it comes to improving the lives of Kentucky's youth and addressing juvenile justice issues.

"It's not going to be the sole answer for the issues that we have, but I do think that it is one piece in part of the solutions we can do," she said.

Commission co-chair Sen. Amanda Mays Bledsoe, R-Lexington, asked Herron if a national nonprofit would be able to donate to the fund and then Kentucky organizations could apply for grants from that fund.

Herron said yes. She also added she would also like to see the state get creative with the request for proposal (RFP) process by looking at a particular issue for a particular county and issuing a specific RFP for that issue and location.

One example Herron gave was suicide prevention services for youth in Northern Kentucky.



Sen. Keturah J. Herron, D-Louisville, told her fellow members on the Commission on Race and Access to Opportunity on Nov. 12 that she plans to file legislation next year that would create a trust fund for juvenile justice-related services.

"It's a very innovative way to address all of these different issues through this," she said.

Citizen Member Kimberly Baird asked Herron to clarify who might qualify to receive a grant from the trust fund and who would oversee the distribution of the funds.

Herron said she thinks the Juvenile Justice Oversight Council would be useful to help inform the department on how to distribute the funds to any type of local government entity, law enforcement entity, nonprofit groups or school districts.

Mays Bledsoe thanked Herron for her work on the legislation.

"It's really interesting and definitely innovative and creative," Mays Bledsoe said. "It's a tough problem, and you've seen it throughout the commonwealth."

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Mental health parity,

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General. It would also support consumers and providers with an advisory committee of experts in the field that reports to the attorney general, Grossl said.

Willner, a licensed psychologist, said the bill is fully bipartisan.

"That's because mental health care is not a partisan issue," she said, noting similar legislation from last year.

"I also want to point out that the bill is watermarked 'draft,' so this is very much a work in progress."

Willner said there has been significant policy progress on behavioral health parity in Kentucky and federally, but enforcement and situations providers face remain significant challenges.

"Access to in-network behavioral health services remains significantly less than access to in-network medical and surgical treatments," she said.

The federal 2008 Mental Health Parity and Addictions Equity Act requires that health plans not design or apply financial requirements or treatment limitations differently for behavioral health than they would be for comparable medical or surgical benefits, but the burdens remain in Kentucky

and federally, Willner said.

Several legislators had questions for the individuals who testified. One of them was Sen. Julie Raque Adams, R-Louisville, who asked about mental health professionals who receive claw backs from insurers.

"Do you have to have any sort of pre-authorization before you administer services," she asked.

Sartini said her practice provides outpatient services and deals with fewer pre-authorizations than others.

"We're seeing that these are happening sometimes because someone has a primary insurance and then they also have a secondary insurance. And even though we are billing under the primary insurance, there's a conflict that sometimes causes claw backs, and no one will agree to pay for it," she said.

Rep. Adrielle Camuel, D-Lexington, said mental health parity is a complicated issue, and she respects mental health professionals but has concerns that the proposed legislation in its current form doesn't open avenues for access to care.

Rep. Jim Gooch Jr., R-Providence, said it sounds reasonable that there should be mental health par-

ity, but he thinks the mental health industry "over compensates, over treats, over prescribes." He said many children are diagnosed with a condition that schools must approach like a disability.

"Now the educators have to look at them and consider their disability in how they accept behavior... because their disability may cause some particular action or some way they act out," he said.

Rep. Chad Aull, D-Lexington, asked about a projected \$300,000 cost in the proposed legislation.

Grossl said it's preliminary to hire two paralegals for the attorney general's office to ensure due diligence is met.

Schuster said unless the legislature acts to ensure insurers follow rules, mental health and addiction problems won't be solved in Kentucky.

"Very few people are willing to admit that they, or someone in their family, has a mental health or addictive disorder that's going to need insurance. That's what stigma does, and it's still alive and well," she said.

Legislators can't act on proposed legislation until the 2026 Regular Session begins in January.



Hands-free driving legislation proposed for 2026

by Jordan Hensley - LRC Public Information

FRANKFORT — Kentucky may join its neighbors next year in implementing hands-free driving legislation.

Sen. Jimmy Higdon, R-Lebanon, told the Interim Joint Committee on Transportation on Nov. 4 that he plans to file South Carolina's version of the hands-free driving bill in 2026. Higdon also serves as co-chair of the committee.

This is not the first time Higdon has sponsored this type of legislation.

"The proposed legislation would close current loopholes by requiring hands-free technology for cellphones be used while driving," Higdon said, adding he believes this version would address some concerns other lawmakers had about previous drafts of the bill.

Distraction-free driving advocate Alyssa Burns testified in-favor of the legislation alongside Higdon. In 2022, Burns's daughter Camberleigh was killed when a distracted driver struck their vehicle in Louisville. She was 13 days away from turning 2.

Burns said their vehicle was at a complete stop in a construction zone, and Camberleigh was properly restrained in her car seat when the collision happened. She said the driver of the other vehicle admitted he was distracted.

"We'll never know her full potential because of a reckless driver, who, by the way, was not prosecuted only because he said he wasn't paying attention," Burns said. "He had no drugs in his system. He had no alcohol."

Higdon told the committee that around 20% of

Kentucky's 814 vehicle collision fatalities in 2023 were caused by distracted driving.

Under Bill Request 238, or the Phone-Down Kentucky Act, drivers would be prohibited from using any part of their body to use a mobile

despite rising fatalities," Higdon said.

BR 238 would require violators pay a \$100 fine. Collected fines would be distributed to the traumatic brain injury trust fund, the Kentucky trauma care system fund and the veterans' program trust fund, Higdon said.

He told the committee he believes reducing fatalities is a "winnable battle."

"We can with this piece of legislation," Higdon added.

Sen. Brandon Smith, R-Hazard, said he is "happy to lend his support" to Higdon's legislation, but would like to see a community service requirement added to the penalty provision.

"I do think that sometimes people make mistakes, but to make them go through and have some part of this where they have to spend some time either working on cases or seeing the results of their actions, maybe the first time we catch somebody, we help them never do this again," Smith said.

Rep. Anne Gay Donworth, D-Lexington, said she also supports the legislation, but has concerns about an officer being able to catch a violator in the act.



Interim Joint Committee on Transportation Co-chair Sen. Jimmy Higdon, R-Lebanon, told the committee on Nov. 4 that he plans to file hands-free driving legislation again in 2026.

electronic device while driving.

Higdon said the legislation defines a mobile electronic device as a cell phone, portable computer, GPS, electronic gaming system, or any device used to communicate, display or record digital content. The bill includes exceptions for certain radio communication devices and if a driver needs to report an emergency, accident or safety hazard.

"Kentucky remains to be one of the few states without a comprehensive handheld phone ban,

"I would encourage some other opportunities for enforcement," she said.

Higdon said he believes the legislative process would create an opportunity for Donworth to suggest that change.

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AI task force advances recommendations for legislative session

by Nancy Royden - LRC Public Information

FRANKFORT — The Artificial Intelligence Task Force 2025 on Nov. 13 advanced recommendations for the Kentucky General Assembly to consider during the upcoming legislative session – a main goal of the group.

Co-Chairs Rep. Josh Bray, R-Mount Vernon, and Sen. Amanda Mays Bledsoe, R-Lexington, outlined the 10 recommendations during the panel's last meeting before the session kicks off in January.

"We tried to incorporate everybody's recommendation. Some of them are federal issues that would be more appropriate there, and so we've got a recommendation of that. But thank you to everyone who sent those in," Bray said.

Among the recommendations, the task force is asking lawmakers to consider changes to state law that would strengthen protections for consumer data as artificial intelligence – known as AI – continues to evolve.

The panel also recommends that lawmakers consider updates to AI policies for state agencies along with stronger policies to protect minors on social media from the potential effects of AI.

Another recommendation seeks acknowledgement that AI may impact careers, and the task force is asking lawmakers to collaborate with professional standards boards regarding the use of AI in certain professions.

Senate Minority Caucus Chair Reginald L. Thomas, D-Lexington, said the section on minors is an excellent recommendation because it promotes online safety for children and parents. He said he hopes the legislature will take action during the session on the issue.

"We see every day here in America discussions of sexual exploitation of minors, sexual trafficking of minors. We know it occurs with a great deal of frequency. And AI is out here every day causing harm and danger to our children," he said.



Sen. Gex Williams, R-Verona, speaks Nov. 13 during a meeting of the Artificial Intelligence Task Force 2025.

Thomas added that two other recommendations dealing with data centers are important and data centers should not be built in Kentucky without an environmental impact survey. He cited concerns about how power usage by data centers could impact people and businesses already on the electrical grid.

"I don't think that that cost should be passed on to the current users of that electrical system," he said. "I think if there's an increased cost that comes with data center construction or use, then that data center should pay for that increased cost, not the current consumers or the current business users who were using it before the data center came online."

The recommendations call on lawmakers to consider policies related to the location of data centers in Kentucky and their use of water and power resources.

Bray said Thomas's concerns are why those sections were drafted. He recalled past solar legislation that dealt with similar issues.

"If you'll remember the solar bill that passed a few years ago, it provided minimum requirements on setbacks, on decommissioning bonds, making sure that if a solar farm were to be decommissioned, there was money there to make it right so that local landowners wouldn't be tasked with that," he said.

Bray said the Kentucky Public Service Commission completes a grid usage study regarding capacity and availability when a large user seeks approval. He agreed that lawmakers do not want electric bills to increase due to power consumption from a data center.

"We've had a lot of conversation with power companies, data centers, the Public Service Commission, so there will be a bill coming to address those exact concerns," Bray said.

Sen. Gex Williams, R-Verona, pointed to one recommendation that would incorporate AI development and governance into the jurisdiction of legislative committees. He said the jurisdiction should fall under the Natural Resources and Energy Committee.

"There's a one-to-one relationship between data centers and energy," he said.

The general assembly created the task force to study the use of AI throughout Kentucky to foster innovation and competitiveness, to promote AI literacy and to ensure AI development and governance in Kentucky, including data centers.

Mays Bledsoe said the task force has been a "wonderful tool" for the last two years, educating legislators and offering a path forward toward a long-term plan.

"It's been a really good committee, and I've been really grateful for our conversations," she said.



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Committee Meetings

Minutes for Statutory Committees that met recently may be found at the following sites:

Interim Joint Committee on Agriculture:

https://apps.legislature.ky.gov/committees/interim/Ag/minutes_all.html

Interim Joint Committee on Appropriations and Revenue:

https://apps.legislature.ky.gov/committees/interim/A&R/minutes_all.html

Interim Joint Committee on Banking and Insurance:

https://apps.legislature.ky.gov/committees/interim/B&I/minutes_all.html

Interim Joint Committee on Economic Development and Workforce Investment:

https://apps.legislature.ky.gov/committees/interim/EDWI/minutes_all.html

Interim Joint Committee on Education:

https://apps.legislature.ky.gov/committees/interim/Education/minutes_all.html

Interim Joint Committee on Families and Children:

https://apps.legislature.ky.gov/committees/interim/IJCF&C/minutes_all.html

Interim Joint Committee on Health Services:

https://apps.legislature.ky.gov/committees/interim/IJCHS/minutes_all.html

Interim Joint Committee on Judiciary:

https://apps.legislature.ky.gov/committees/interim/Judiciary/minutes_all.html

Interim Joint Committee on Licensing, Occupations, and Administrative Regulations:

https://apps.legislature.ky.gov/committees/interim/LO&AR/minutes_all.html

Interim Joint Committee on Local Government:

https://apps.legislature.ky.gov/committees/interim/Loc_Gov/minutes_all.html

Interim Joint Committee on Natural Resources and Energy:

https://apps.legislature.ky.gov/committees/interim/NR_&_E/minutes_all.html

Interim Joint Committee on State Government:

https://apps.legislature.ky.gov/committees/interim/St_Gov/minutes_all.html

Interim Joint Committee on Tourism, Small Business, and Information Technology:

https://apps.legislature.ky.gov/committees/interim/TSBIT/minutes_all.html

Interim Joint Committee on Transportation:

https://apps.legislature.ky.gov/committees/interim/Trans/minutes_all.html

Interim Joint Committee on Veterans, Military Affairs, and Public Protection:

https://apps.legislature.ky.gov/committees/interim/Vets/minutes_all.html

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2025 Interim

LEGISLATIVE RECORD

Published monthly by the Legislative Research Commission, the *Interim Record* is designed to inform the citizens of Kentucky of the between-sessions work of the General Assembly.

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LEGISLATIVE RECORD

KENTUCKY GENERAL ASSEMBLY

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