



## **ADA Live! Episode 130: RETAIN Kentucky Helps Employees Stay at Work or Return to Work**

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**Guest: Kimberly Wickert:**, Director of Organizational Partnerships **RETAIN** KY - Human Development Institute at University of Kentucky

**Moderator & Host: Barry Whaley:**, Project Director at the Southeast ADA Center

**Recording:** [adalive.org/episodes/episode-130](https://adalive.org/episodes/episode-130)

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### **Kimberly Wickert:**

Hi, I'm Kimberly Wickert, and you're listening to ADA live.

Music

### **Barry Whaley:**

Hi everybody on behalf of the Southeast ADA Center the Burton Blatt Institute at Syracuse University, and the ADA National Network. Welcome to ADA live. I'm very wily on the project director at Southeast ADA Center. Listening audience. If you have questions about the Americans with Disabilities Act, you can use the online form anytime at Adalive.org. Or you can call the Southeast ADA Center at 404-541-9001. And those calls are always free and they're confidential. The Southeast ADA Center and the other nine ADA National Network centers get lots of questions about workplace accommodations, including questions about when and how employees can stay at work or return to work after a disabling illness or injury. The US Department of Labor reports

that millions of workers experience an injury that puts them at risk of leaving the workforce. While some injuries or work related, many happened off the job. These injuries impact not only the injured worker but also their families, their employers, and it has an impact on the economy. Many workers can return to work when they get timely and effective help. So the RETAIN project and initiative of the Office of Disability Employment Policy in the United States Department of Labor seeks to aid injured workers in the recovery process and return to economic self sufficiency. Our guest for this episode is Kimberly Wickard with RETAIN Kentucky. Kimberly we'll be talking about the ways to RETAIN demonstration projects help employees and employers along with other partners work together so that employees facing illness or injury can remain in the workforce. So Kimberly, I want to welcome you to the show today. The RETAIN project it's spelled R-E-T-A-I-N that stands for Retainining Employment and Talent After Injury illness Network. Let's start by telling us about the work you do at the University of Kentucky on RETAIN.

**Kimberly Wickert:**

RETAIN Kentucky is led by the Office of Vocational Rehabilitation otherwise known as OVR and works with employees, employers and health care providers to address issues related to successful return to work or stay at work. And return Kentucky is a Department of Labor research study examining how early intensive vocational intervention impacts someone's recovery and the likelihood of them remaining employed for people with non work related injuries, illnesses or impairments. And it's important to know that our services are free. And the University of Kentucky Human Development Institute where I sit is a partner leading the implementation of this research study.

**Barry Whaley:**

How long has this study been going on Kimberly?

**Kimberly Wickert:**

So phase two started in fall of 2021. We just today started our I guess you would say phase three of of the program. But the initial phase started back in 2018. Phase one was in 2018.

**Barry Whaley:**

And what were those phases How How did you roll out the project?

**Kimberly Wickert:**

So the first phase was a demonstration project and we served a little over 200 participants. And it was really focused on a couple areas in Kentucky really counties surrounding Lexington and Louisville mostly. And then phase two, we were fortunate enough to be one of five states that were awarded the grant by the Department of Labor. And we served people all throughout the Commonwealth. And we serve just under 3200 participants and that ended may 16.

**Barry Whaley:**

That's excellent. Yeah, so as you mentioned, RETAIN as a demonstration project through ODEP Office of Disability Employment Policy in the Department of Labor. Well what are our depths and goals for RETAIN? What do they want to see how

**Kimberly Wickert:**

And yeah, so the RETAIN initiative promotes closer coordination among individuals and organizations who influence a workers decisions about whether and how they stay at work are returned to work after the onset of a medical condition. And our programs implement those early intervention strategies to improve that stay at work and return to work. And you'll sometimes hear that the acronyms S-A-W for stay at work, or R-T-W for return to work. And those outcomes for the stay at work are returned to work of individuals who experience a work disability while they're employed. So our Stay at Work return to work programs succeed by returning those injured or ill or workers to productive work as soon as medically possible. And we're looking at the early coordination of health care and employment services. And that's the key to our RETAIN programs. So some of the things that our team has been working on is training and occupational health best practices for our health care provider partners, active involvement of our return to work coordinators, through medical recovery period, to facilitate that continued employment,

enhancing the communication between the worker, their employer and the health care provider. So we've been working to build that bridge accommodations and job modifications, which I'm sure you and I will talk about here a little bit later. And then retraining and rehabilitation services. So our programs provide those services through an integrated network of partners. And it includes that close collaboration between the healthcare systems, and the providers, as well as the State Workforce Development Board, the local employment service providers, employers, industry organizations, and of course worker or disability advocacy representatives. So there's been a lot of people who've been working very hard to support us.

**Barry Whaley:**

Yeah so this sounds, you know, very collaborative. It sounds like very comprehensive in your approach.

**Kimberly Wickert:**

Absolutely, yes. We, our partnership with you know, everyone that I just mentioned, has been so much of our success.

**Barry Whaley:**

So many people listening today, Kimberly, I'm sure aware of VR vocational rehabilitation, you mentioned that this is a VR initiative in the state of Kentucky. What role does VR play in RETAIN?

**Kimberly Wickert:**

One of the many great things about RETAIN Kentucky is that we're led by the Office of Vocational Rehabilitation or OVR. So we have this great partnership in their leadership to start with. But then taking that a step further, we often receive referrals from OVR when someone comes to them. And while they're going through their eligibility process and assignment to a counselor with OVR, we at RETAIN can begin working with them immediately to remove any barriers to them returning to work or staying at work. And so what we've seen by doing this is that OVR can then focus on that vocational support. And

we've had some participants that we've worked with that may be in jeopardy of losing their job because of their injury or illness has created a barrier for them to work. And so we can very quickly literally within two or three days, we will reach out to them when OVR provides them with our information or gets their permission to refer them to us. We assist in removing those barriers and have often been able to save their job. And then OVR can continue to work with them. In the long term. Some examples have been helping people get to work, you know, maybe transportation has become an issue with the onset of their injury or illness. And we can help them apply for transit services like char Lex Tran, or others in Kentucky. What we found is part of that process is simultaneously submitting medical documentation to support their request for that transit service. And we've helped Participants navigate that process to overcome that barrier. We've also had people referred to us from OVR that were in jeopardy of losing their housing, and we were able to connect them with resources allowing them to stay in their home and continue to work while they were recovering from illness or injury.

**Barry Whaley:**

So I want to recall want to return back to what you said at the beginning here. So it sounds like RETAIN addresses a systemic barrier. that you don't need to have necessarily have an open vocational rehabilitation file in order for RETAIN to begin providing services, basically expediting the save somebody's job.

**Kimberly Wickert:**

You got it? Yes. So we can help with those social determinants, barriers, as well as vocational support. And we can work collaboratively with OVR and other workforce partners to really kind of fill in where they may need help, or may need us to get to something more quickly to get those social determinant barriers out of the way.

**Barry Whaley:**

I see. Yep. That's great. We read a lot with **RETAIN** projects returned to work stay at work about intervention pathways. Can you explain what that is?

**Kimberly Wickert:**

Yeah, so our intervention is tailored to the needs of each individual participant. And all of our participants receive the support of a return to work coordinator, who works with them to help identify barriers to their stay at work, or return to work. And, you know, most of the time people know what those barriers are. But sometimes, you know, especially in the early stages, or onset of their illness or injury or disability, they may not be able to first see some of the barriers that will be you know, kind of forthcoming in their, in their work. So, our return to work coordinators can help identify those and then work together to develop a return to work plan that identify solutions to overcome those barriers. So some of the examples that I just mentioned about transportation and could be one barrier. Getting help paying for prescriptions, is something that we've seen a lot, learning to use prescription apps that significantly reduce the cost of medication, or also interventions are returned to work coordinators have used to help participants so they can then focus on staying at work or returning to work are returned to work coordinators also provide case management to navigate treatment and rehabilitation, as well as vocational support helping participants identify return to work options, career exploration, job seeking skills training, and we can help them with resume development and interview preparation. And, as I mentioned, we can provide those services in collaboration with other organizations like OVR, and community rehab program providers. And I know, we can expand upon this a little bit later as well. But peer mentoring, and assistive technology are other services that we provide to support participants. And this isn't all inclusive, but gives you an idea of several ways that the return intervention supports employees and employers and their stay at work and returned to work goals.

**Barry Whaley:**

Yeah that's, that's really a great model. I don't want to lose sight of because we mentioned VR, but you are not a VR employee, you work for the Human Development Institute, maybe our listeners need to know what Human Development Institute is.

**Kimberly Wickert:**

Yeah, so we are at the University of Kentucky. And at the Human Development Institute, we have a goal of helping people live in a more inclusive environment and provide that model to really everybody to have a more inclusive, not just workforce, but but life in general.

**Barry Whaley:**

Can anybody be eligible for RETAIN? Is there certain criteria for being accepted in the program?

**Kimberly Wickert:**

There are criteria and that eligibility criteria is they need to live in Kentucky. And we serve people throughout the Commonwealth. So they can live anywhere in Kentucky. They need to have a non work related illness or injury. And oftentimes I get questions about what is that so it can be a physical diagnosis. It can be a mental health diagnosis, we've served people who have had COVID and long COVID substance use disorder, hypertension, diabetes, and cardiac issues, to name a few. So really, I say if you have a diagnosis, and it's not work related, then we can serve you. And then the last thing is that you are either currently working or that you work you have worked in the last 12 months. So really, those three things live in Kentucky, a non work related illness or injury and you're currently working or have worked in the last 12 months.

**Barry Whaley:**

I'm sure you work with a whole lot of employers in the state of Kentucky, who are some of those employers that you're working with?

**Kimberly Wickert:**

we have a great partnership with lots of employers, one of the ones that comes to mind is GE, who often sends their employees our way. And they identify these workers who can use RETAIN support to stay at work, and then we help support them in that process. And

so oftentimes they provide RETAINs information when someone comes to them, talking about family medical leave. And so that's an example of a large employer that we've worked with. We also have some smaller employers like Easton Westbrook construction, we've worked with them, they are very committed to supporting their workers who have injury or illness, and have connected them with us to help them stay at work and sometimes find other jobs that may be more aligned with their current capacities. And then, obviously, we sit at the University of Kentucky, and you probably would expect that we work with with the University of Kentucky, but we work very closely with the ADA coordinators at UK, who will send employees who meet the eligibility criteria. And oftentimes, these individuals may benefit from an assistive technology assessment or helping with removing obstacles to stay at work.

**Barry Whaley:**

Each of the things you mentioned before, I mean, those those are all qualifying disabilities under the Americans with Disabilities Act. So I would imagine overarching, you would have to have a disability that impacts one or more major life activities,

**Kimberly Wickert:**

For our grant, you just have to have a non work related illness or injury. You don't technically have to be a qualified individual under ADA. However, I will say that probably a good portion of our participants are but it could be because we are doing that early intervention, it could be something that you know, we're helping remove that barrier and they're able to very quickly get back to work.

**Barry Whaley:**

Thank you Kimberly. This is great information ADA live listening audience. If you have questions about RETAIN this topic or any other ADA live topic, you can submit your question online at [Ada live.org](http://Ada.live.org). Or you can call the SE ADA Center at 404-541-9001. And now we're going to pause for a word from this episode sponsor RETAIN Kentucky and the Human Development Institute at the University of Kentucky.



## **Voice Over**

When people leave the labor force due to illness or injury, it can be damaging for them, their families, their employers and the economy. Many injured or ill workers could remain in the workforce. It provided with timely coordinated assistance to navigate stay at home work returned to work services. Kentucky is proud to be part of a collaborative initiative designed to address these issues that RETAIN retain employment and talent after injury illness network RETAIN. The goal of RETAIN is to support individuals return to the workforce following an injury or illness and to remain in the workforce. Learn more about RETAIN at [kyretain.org](http://kyretain.org)

## **Barry Whaley:**

Hi everybody and welcome back. I'm Barry Whaley with Southeast ADA center and we're talking today with Kimberly Wickert. She is with RETAIN Kentucky. This is a federally funded project that helps people with disabilities stay at work or return to work. RETAIN Kentucky is a demonstration project funded by the Office of Disability Employment Policy. And it is housed at the University of Kentucky I want to continue our discussion with few more questions if someone becomes disabled from an accident or illness. And they have as we mentioned before a qualifying disability, then their employment rights are protected by the ADA. They have the right to stay at work or return to work under certain conditions. What is the interplay between RETAIN, and the Americans with Disabilities Act to help these workers?

## **Kimberly Wickert:**

Similar to ADA, we approach every individual based on their specific needs. This is true in the development of their return to work plan. We don't subscribe to a cookie cutter approach because, you know, as you can imagine, everybody needs different things even if they have the same disability or diagnosis. And so the things we talked about, like you know, maybe helping find prescription coverage or prescription apps to offset medication costs are ways we help with stay at work or return to work. But we've also helped in negotiating job accommodations as well. And really one way we Do that is right from the

start. And what we found is negotiating the submission of accommodation paperwork can sometimes be a little challenging, especially if you have someone who has multiple health care providers. And we've seen that with some of our participants. So we've helped them navigate this process. By completing we have a work experience survey that we walk them through that asks a lot of questions that narrows down, really what is that needed accommodation, and then we can determine the appropriate health care provider that should complete the ABA paperwork based on that specific accommodation that they need.

**Barry Whaley:**

And you kind of touched on this, but just to expand it. Like we said, this is a very comprehensive program, bringing in a lot of different expertise, what is the role of those health care providers and RETAIN.

**Kimberly Wickert:**

So the health care providers use occupational health best practices to treat employees and identify when they can stay at work or return to work based on their recovery, their current capacities, as well as the essential functions of the job. And so these health care providers play an integral role with workers by diagnosing and assessing their status, providing treatment and care, and then communicating with third parties. And that may be a physical or occupational therapists, another health care specialist, also the employer in the return to work process, so RETAIN health care partner providers have focused on early intervention by referring to RETAIN for assistance in the employee's work goals. But the other thing that they've done that really speaks to our RETAIN philosophy is using inclusive language and practices to identify what an employee can do in their functional abilities and return to work. So for example, instead of saying what an employee's restrictions are specific to working, they would outline that person's abilities. And then that can be compared to the essential functions of their job. And one of the things that we've seen is outlining their capabilities as a health care provider also helps that employer to identify alternate or modified duty work for that employee to return to while they are

continuing to recover. So it's really a really positive and proactive approach to helping that person stay at work or returning to work.

**Barry Whaley:**

Thank you. Everybody likes a good success story. Kimberly, do you have a real success story from a RETAIN participant?

**Kimberly Wickert:**

We do, we actually have lots of them. But this is one of my favorite ones, because I got to be involved a little bit with it. But we had a participant that worked as a custodial worker and had an orthopedic issue and in his feet, both of his feet, and he was having trouble with the essential functions of his job, as you can imagine, a custodial worker has to have to move a lot and Billy expected to be walking and on their feet. And so he was required to walk an extensive amount to maintain for different buildings. And we were able to help him negotiate an accommodation by communicating with his employer, who was able to do a few things for him, one of which was to provide him with a golf cart, to get to his worksite and around his worksite outside. And then the other thing that they did was they changed his role with what he had to cover with another employee. And so instead of having to be responsible for maintaining for smaller buildings, he took on one larger building, and that kept his steps minimize going between buildings, and he was able to successfully work with this accommodation. So we were really excited to be part of that. And we thought it was a really great accommodation for him. And the employer, you know, was very happy to be able to retain him as a valued worker.

**Barry Whaley:**

And in doing so, I mean, the essential functions of the job were preserved. So that's, that's great lately, as we've said, finding the right job accommodation is critical. Are there some common work accommodations that you want to draw our attention to that you use in the RETAIN project?

**Kimberly Wickert:**

We've had participants who we've helped move from in person to hybrid or remote work based on their disability and you know, that would be an example of an accommodation that allowed employees to remain at work we've seen that I would say probably more frequently Post pandemic, because we've proved that that we can do that. Now, obviously, you know, that's not every job. But I think employers are thinking more about that. We've also helped workers negotiate gradual return to work following an injury or illness, to really help them smoothly transition back to work in increments until they're able to get back to their full schedule. One example we had, where we helped somebody go back to work gradually, but we also helped with some other accommodations was a participant that had long COVID and had some long term pulmonary and respiratory issues. And so she was fatigued. By the time she walked into her workspace from the parking lot. And so we were able to help her identify an accommodation of having her workstation moved closer to the entry of the building, to minimize her fatigue. And the great thing about this is that it was a no cost accommodation for the employer. And we also helped her apply for a disabled parking placard to give her closer access to her building. And really, this even helped her outside of work, as she was, you know, running errands out and grocery shopping, that kind of thing. So those are some examples. Another example is that we've helped people, maybe that need to be closer to a restroom or have an additional break in the day as an accommodation. And so we do all of this with our Win Win approach to reasonable accommodation, and it's a great resource for employees to help them in that process.

**Barry Whaley:**

Certainly that illustrates that most accommodation are little or no cost to the employer. Yes, I want to move on to another aspect of retaining and talk about your peer mentoring project. What is that? How does peer mentoring work?

**Kimberly Wickert:**

So we are fortunate to have Jason Jones lead our peer mentoring program at RETAIN Kentucky and as Jason has taught me and others is that peer mentoring is a form of mentorship that takes place between a person who is known as the peer mentor who has lived through a specific experience. And then a person who is new to that experience. And that would be the peer mentee, Jason has shared that just having a conversation between the mentor and mentee is mutually beneficial. But relationship requires work and commitment and follow through on both sides if it's really going to be successful. So it's very much a partnership of the mentor who has experienced a disability and navigated barriers specific to that disability, and the mentee who can then benefit from the experience of the mentor and knowing really that others have successfully gone before.

**Barry Whaley:**

So Jason acts as sort of a broker between mentor and mentee. He's identifying people who have had similar experiences to help guide someone who may be new to disability.

**Kimberly Wickert:**

So yeah, he leads our program and I believe that is part of his role. But Jason also serves as a mentor as well. But it was such a successful program that we added additional peer mentors to be able to help the participants that really we identified that we felt would be able to benefit from peer mentoring.

**Barry Whaley:**

I see. Yeah, thank you. Yeah, we we've we've talked about a lot of accommodation. One thing we haven't touched on is what role does technology play in RETAIN in returning to work? How do you use assistive technology, for instance,

**Kimberly Wickert:**

so Christina Espinosa is our division director, and Michelle Lauer is our senior coordinator. And there are team members who have the collective knowledge and skills needed to determine possible assistive technology solutions addressing the needs of the worker and promoting their success in the work environment. So I'm going to go on

record and say, I'm not the expert, but I have had the privilege of seeing their assessments, where they identify and resolve barriers to work. And oftentimes that begins at home, such as the activities of daily living, maybe transportation barriers, as well as barriers in the workplace and those specific to the individual's essential job functions. So our Assistive Technology recommendations often increase safety, productivity, and morale for that individual employee as well as their co workers. They can provide that service virtually or in person and some of the examples of assistive technology recommendations might include anti fatigue mats. Large Cap pewter monitors, better lighting in the workplace. And that may even include reduced lighting for somebody who might have photo sensitivity, and speech to text. Those are some things that that we often see in our Assistive Technology recommendations.

**Barry Whaley:**

I do want to insert one question one thing I didn't ask you, Kimberly. Kimberly, how do you measure success? How are we in RETAIN? How many people have you successfully helped to return to work? Can you quantify that?

**Kimberly Wickert:**

I can actually we just got some statistics in our quarterly meeting with the Department of Labor and of our participants who complete their return to work plan. 93% of them have stayed at work or return to work. So that is, is really something we're proud of. And it's definitely a collaborative effort from our return to work coordinators, our you know, peer mentoring, assistive technology, and other partners that we may refer out to to help support our participants in their stay at work are returned to work.

**Barry Whaley:**

Kimberly, thank you for all this information. today. I'm gonna give you the last word. How do you want to wrap this up?

**Kimberly Wickert:**

Well, thank you so much for allowing me to share information about RETAIN Kentucky. If you know someone who you think would benefit from our services, you can contact us if they live in Kentucky have a non work related illness or injury, and either are currently working or have worked in the last 12 months. We can help them in their work goals, they can call 859-562-3251. You can check us out on our website at [www.kyretain.org](http://www.kyretain.org) or email [retain@UKy.edu](mailto:retain@UKy.edu).

**Barry Whaley:**

Kimberly, thank you for being with us today. listeners. I want to thank you for joining us for this episode about RETAIN Kentucky, a project at the University of Kentucky Human Development Institute that helps workers with disabilities return to work or stay at work. As a reminder, you can access all ADA Live episodes and with archived audio, accessible transcripts and resources at our website, [Adalive.org](http://Adalive.org). We invite you to listen to the ADA live SoundCloud channel, go to [soundcloud.com](http://soundcloud.com) forward slash ADA live. Download ADA live to your mobile device. Go to your podcast app and search for ADA live. We have questions about the Americans with Disabilities Act. You can use our online forum anytime at [atalive.org](http://atalive.org) or contact your Regional ADA Center at 1-800-949-4232. And as always, those calls are free and they're confidential. Ada live is a program of the Southeast ADA Center, the Burton Blatt Institute at Syracuse University, and a collaboration with the Disability Inclusive Employment Policy, Rehabilitation Research and Training Center. Our producer is Celestia Ohrazda, with Cheri Hoffman, Mary Morder, Marsha Schwanke, Chase Coleman and me I'm Barry Whaley. Our music is from four wheel city movement for improvement. I also invite you to listen to our companion podcast Disability RightsToday for in depth discussion on court cases that have shaped disability rights and the Americans with Disabilities Act. To learn more go to [disability rights today.org](http://disabilityrights.org) See you next episode.

**Music4 Wheel City**

They watching. They don't want us be part of the city, man. They put all these steps, man. All these curbs we can't get over. All these inaccessible stores. 4 Wheel City. They don't

want us here. We'll survive and we're going to make our own place. Our own world. The 4 Wheel City-

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