

KENTUCKY YOUTH ASSEMBLY 2025

PRESIDING OFFICERS' AGENDA

To help facilitate broader understanding of policy issues facing our Commonwealth, our KYA Governors and their Presiding Officer teams have published the Presiding Officers' Agenda.

The Presiding Officers' Agenda is a list of policy issues organized into six policy areas:

- **Environmental Health**
Developing and managing the economy and resources of our Commonwealth
- **Education and Educators**
Reforming K-12 education systems and rights of educators in our Commonwealth
- **Institutional Reform**
Improving community development and civic and cultural engagement
- **Child Welfare**
Ensuring the health and well-being of younger Kentuckians
- **Commonwealth Development**
Developing better quality-of-life and development across the Commonwealth
- **Substance Abuse**
Supporting Kentuckians and their families experiencing substance abuse issues

There are multiple policy areas covered in this agenda, each issue includes a briefing with:

- **Background on Issue**
Summary and background information on the issue
- **Questions to Address in Bills**
Guiding questions/problems that any BILLS on the issue should look to answer/solve
- **Sources for Research**
Links to research, articles, and other resources for your delegations

HOW TO USE THE AGENDA

- The best way to use the Agenda is to have bill sponsors review each issue and consider how they would best answer/solve the "Questions to Address".
- While multiple bills may address the same issue, each bill will likely have a different answer or solution to the problems that must be addressed.

PRESIDING OFFICERS' AGENDA FAQ

- Do we have to write bills on these topics?

- These topics are not mandatory (only recommended by your KYA Presiding Officers), nor are they tied to awards, but these topics will be taken into account by each Youth Governor when determining which Commonwealth bills they choose to sign into law.
- How do I know what is where?
 - There is a handy index at the end of this document for easy understanding of what the agenda includes.
- Does the Agenda take a position on an issue?
 - The agenda does not take positions on issues (or endorse any issue or solution), but rather provides “Questions to Address in Bills” so delegates can research their own positions when drafting their BILLS.

2025 AGENDA ISSUES

Policy Area | Environmental Health

ENVIRONMENTAL HEALTH IN KENTUCKY

ISSUE BRIEF AUTHORS: Ellie Smith, Governor | MS 2

BACKGROUND ON ISSUE

Environmental health is a major problem in Kentucky. In 2020, Kentucky was ranked 46th for environmental health out of the 50 states. The grade was given 38% out of 100. [Moon.com](https://www.moon.com) claims that one of Kentucky's biggest environmental issues is mining. Surface mining, one of the two major types of mining that takes place in Kentucky, is known for being extremely problematic for environments. Surface mining can lead to pollution of water. Water pollution can lead to disease and, in some cases, cholera and cancer.

Although there are some very problematic cons to surface mining, there are pros for mining and surface mining as well. Surface mining often costs less money and is safer than underground mining. Along the lines of surface mining, mining in general can often create job opportunities and lead to economic growth. In conclusion, environmental health in Kentucky is much lower than it should be, which causes dangers to citizens, but reducing mining and surface mining can potentially reduce job opportunities.

QUESTIONS TO ADDRESS IN BILLS

- What job opportunities, outside of mining, could be considered to bolster Kentucky's economy?
- How do we determine when environmental impact outweighs economic benefits?
- How can we improve Kentucky's standing as 46 out of 50 for environmental health?

SOURCES FOR RESEARCH

Blackinton, T. D. (2023, September 20). Environmental issues in Kentucky. Moon Travel Guides. <https://www.moon.com/travel/planning/environmental-issues-in-kentucky/>

FOOD WASTAGE

ISSUE BRIEF AUTHORS: Krisha Patel, Lt. Governor | MS 3

BACKGROUND ON ISSUE

Although many people don't realize it, food wastage is a very serious and overlooked problem in Kentucky. Kentucky ranks 15th among states in food wastage; 15th when it comes to mitigation efforts and 22nd in waste reuse as of 2025, with the average household wasting approximately \$2,052 annually. Food waste contributes significantly to climate change, methane emissions, and landfill overuse. With this being said, Kentucky and its citizens are being seriously harmed by the terrible effects of food wastage. If food wastage is not considered soon then it could potentially affect not only the land itself but also the health and well-being of the citizens of Kentucky.

Implementing a food wastage program in the state of Kentucky in which all jurisdictions in Kentucky provide organic waste collection services to residents and businesses will greatly benefit the state of Kentucky. This program will also ensure that local governments and special districts will establish collection systems for organic waste and process it into compost for resale and reuse. This program could provide help when it comes to slowing down the long lasting effects that food wastage has set in place. It is important that we as a state make sure our citizens' health is not being compromised while also making sure that our land stays healthy. Let's start by addressing the overlooked problem of food wastage.

QUESTIONS TO ADDRESS IN BILLS

- What are some of the long lasting effects that food wastage can have?
- Where will this program be getting funding from?
- Why should Kentucky Citizens resort to composting organic waste as opposed to doing other things?
- How effective will this program be when it comes to reversing the damage done by food wastage already?

SOURCES FOR RESEARCH

(2025) "Food waste by state 2025". World Population Review.

<https://worldpopulationreview.com/state-rankings/food-waste-by-state>

(2025, July 18th) "Food Waste FAQs". U.S Department of Agriculture.

<https://www.usda.gov/about-food/food-safety/food-loss-and-waste/food-waste-faqs>

ANIMAL CONSERVATION

ISSUE BRIEF AUTHORS: Nishtha Patel, President of BG Senate | HS 3

BACKGROUND ON ISSUE

In Kentucky, animal conservation has changed a lot over time. Back in the 1800s, hunting and habitat loss caused many animals, like deer and turkeys, to almost disappear. Over the years, new laws and the Kentucky Department of Fish and Wildlife Resources helped bring these species back, and even reintroduced elk, which now have the biggest herd east of the Rocky Mountains. Today, conservation in Kentucky focuses on protecting habitats with things like wildlife corridors, controlled burns, and conservation lands. Groups like the Kentucky Wildlife Center also help by rescuing and rehabilitating animals and teaching people about protecting nature, showing how important it is to care for both animals and the environment.

The Kentucky SPCA also plays an important role in animal conservation and welfare. Their main focus is on protecting domestic animals by preventing cruelty, rescuing pets in unsafe situations, and promoting responsible pet ownership. They work to find homes for abandoned or abused animals, provide spay and neuter programs to control overpopulation, and educate the public on how to properly care for pets. While they focus more on companion animals than wildlife, their work connects to conservation by reducing stray populations and improving the overall treatment of animals in Kentucky, making communities safer and more humane.

QUESTIONS TO ADDRESS IN BILLS

- How did the Kentucky department of fish and wildlife help bring the species back?
- How does rescuing and rehoming animals benefit communities?
- What role do organizations like the Kentucky department of wildlife and fish play in conservation?
- In what ways does the SPCA educate the public about animal care?

SOURCES FOR RESEARCH

<https://kentuckyspca.org/index.php/services/wildlife/wildlife-rehabilitation-center>

<https://fw.ky.gov/Wildlife/Pages/Wildlife-Rehabilitation.aspx>

Policy Area | Education and Educators

GUN VIOLENCE EPIDEMIC

ISSUE BRIEF AUTHORS: Elliott Chappell, Governor | MS 3

BACKGROUND ON ISSUE

Gun violence remains a pressing and devastating issue in the United States, particularly in schools. The tragic events at places like Apalachee High School in Georgia highlight the urgent need for effective prevention and rapid-response measures. In emergency situations, every second matters—time equals life. The faster law enforcement and first responders are alerted and able to act, the greater the chances of saving lives.

School shootings and gun-related incidents have increased in frequency over the past decade. Students, teachers, and parents continue to face anxiety over safety in educational settings. Current emergency response systems, such as phone calls or non-immediate alerts, can be too slow in situations where threats escalate within seconds.

One proposed strategy is the implementation of panic alert systems in all public schools, such as those outlined in Kentucky’s House Bill 14. These devices, worn on lanyards by staff, can be activated instantly:

- **3-button press:** Alerts school staff of less serious emergencies.
 - **8-button press:** Initiates lockdown, triggers visual alerts, and notifies local authorities and first responders.
- These systems function independently of school power, Wi-Fi, or Bluetooth, and include geolocation technology to pinpoint the exact location of the emergency.

Gun violence in schools is a national crisis requiring both preventive measures and rapid-response systems. Technologies like panic alert devices offer a critical step forward in ensuring safer school environments, protecting students, and giving staff the tools to act swiftly in emergencies.

QUESTIONS TO ADDRESS IN BILLS

- How do we support educators and students in feeling safer in the school environment?
- How should we approach gun violence in a policy sense?
- What technologies or policies enable first responders to handle an emergency effectively?

SOURCES FOR RESEARCH

Everytown Research & Policy. Gunfire on School Grounds in the United States. Everytown, 2024.
 U.S. Department of Education. School Emergency Operations Plans. DOE, 2023.
 Kentucky General Assembly. House Bill 14: Panic Alert System Implementation. KGA, 2025.

EDUCATION REFORMS IN THE COMMONWEALTH OF KENTUCKY

ISSUE BRIEF AUTHORS: Lillian Gardiner, President of CW Senate | HS 4

BACKGROUND ON ISSUE

Quality education is essential because it sets our future generations up for success to be intelligent and informed citizens within their community. However, Kentucky is currently facing major issues in terms of the development of curriculums, hiring qualified teachers, and overall access to education within our school systems. There is currently a large funding shortfall that must be met in order for the budget for education to work and be made whole. Inadequate funding harms the entire budget process. Due to recent inflation that Kentucky school funding has not kept pace with, there is an annual statewide shortfall of \$1.3 billion.

In terms of teacher salaries, Kentucky ranks close to last. This can contribute to the severe shortage of teachers in general as well as finding quality teachers to invest in that will in turn invest in the futures of our students. This lack of professional educators has led to a decline in engaging and valuable curriculums within classrooms, further contributing to the concerning low proficiency rates of students. Considering the large number of rural and impoverished communities in Kentucky, many students also lack the access to early childhood education which sets the pace for future learning.

In conclusion, it is of utmost importance that we close the current school funding gap in Kentucky in order to set our children and students up for future success. This would reduce the shortage of teachers as well as promote the hiring of quality teachers in schools. Furthermore, it would promote better curriculums leading to better test scores and higher rates of graduation. Lastly, better funding would provide rural communities with the resources they need to be well educated from childhood to adulthood.

QUESTIONS TO ADDRESS IN BILLS:

- How would we ensure this additional funding is used in the most efficient and effective way possible?
- What additional resources can be granted to rural schools to further increase the quality of their schools and teachers?
- How will we get the funding to close the current gap in the budget?
- What precautions will be taken to guarantee the bettering of our schools and student learning, and how will these changes look later in the future (5 years, 10 years, 30 years, etc.)?

SOURCES FOR RESEARCH:

Hill, Kiley. "Kentucky ranks near bottom for teacher salaries." FOX 56 News, 29 July 2025, <https://fox56news.com/news/kentucky/kentucky-ranks-near-bottom-for-teacher-salaries/> Accessed 6 August 2025.

Kentucky Association of School Superintendents. "Closing the Funding Gap: Ensuring KY's Education Budget Delivers." Kentucky Association of School Superintendents, 7 February 2025, <https://www.kysupts.org/closing-the-funding-gap-ensuring-kentuckys-education-budget-delivers> Accessed 6 August 2025.

National Rural Education Association. "New Research Shows Crises Facing Rural Students, Looks Critically at Distribution of Resources (Why Rural Matters)." NREA, 16 November 2023, <https://www.nrea.net/new-research-shows-crises-facing-rural-students-looks-critically-at-distribution-of-resources> Accessed 6 August 2025.

CAREER READINESS FOR KY STUDENTS

ISSUE BRIEF AUTHORS: Bryce Kimery, President of BG Senate | HS 4

BACKGROUND ON ISSUE

Career readiness is an essential part of education that prepares students for success after high school—whether they choose to enter the workforce, pursue higher education, or attend technical training. In Kentucky, our students are falling behind. According to the Kentucky Department of Education, only 53% of high school graduates in 2024 were considered college or career ready. This means nearly half of all students are walking across the stage without the skills they need to thrive in the real world.

This gap shows a serious disconnect between what schools are teaching and what the workforce demands. Students need access to hands-on experiences, vocational programs, and career-oriented classes that help them build practical skills in real time. Many schools (especially those in rural or underfunded districts) lack the resources to offer these opportunities.

QUESTIONS TO ADDRESS IN BILLS:

- How can Kentucky schools expand access to career and technical education (CTE) programs, especially in rural or underserved areas?
- What role can businesses and local industries play in creating more hands-on learning and internship opportunities for students?
- What funding sources could be used to support new career readiness programs in public schools?
- How can Kentucky ensure that career readiness standards are equitable and accessible to all students, regardless of background?

SOURCES FOR RESEARCH:

Kentucky Department of Education (2024). College and Career Readiness Data Dashboard.
<https://education.ky.gov/AA/Reports/Pages/default.aspx>

Advance CTE (n.d.). Why Career and Technical Education Works.
<https://careertech.org/why-cte>

Kentucky Center for Statistics (KYSTATS). (2023). High School Feedback Report.
<https://kystats.ky.gov/Reports/Tableau/202>

ACT (2023). The Condition of College and Career Readiness: Kentucky.
<https://www.act.org/content/act/en/research/state-of-college-and-career-readiness-2023.html>

U.S. Department of Education, Office of Career, Technical, and Adult Education.
<https://cte.ed.gov/>

GRADING SCALE REFORM FOR ALL KY SCHOOLS

ISSUE BRIEF AUTHORS: Vivian Fox, Lt. Governor | HS 4

BACKGROUND ON ISSUE

The majority of Kentucky schools have 90-100 grading scales, students at schools with smaller point scales are at an unfair disadvantage. This is impacting many students' ability to earn passing grades and all students' qualifications for merit scholarships based on unweighted GPA's. It may be difficult to persuade school districts to change traditional grading styles but its benefits are worth it.

QUESTIONS TO ADDRESS IN BILLS:

- How can we educate school leaders on the importance of this issue?
- How can we persuade students to stand up for this issue?
- How can we enforce this change?

SOURCES

<https://www.uopeople.edu/blog/effects-of-grading-system-on-students/>

FAIR & EQUAL DRUG TESTING IN HS SPORTS

ISSUE BRIEF AUTHORS: Madden Davis, Governor | MS 1

BACKGROUND ON ISSUE

Drug use in high school sports is a serious issue across Kentucky and the nation. To address it some schools have started random drug testing to keep student-athletes safe and accountable. But, this way of drug testing has resulted in unfairness and inconsistency. The U.S. Department of Education study says, about 14% of U.S. high schools regulate random drug testing of athletes, but experts note that it has little long-term impact on stopping drug use. Random drug testing can also unfairly target certain students, while skipping others entirely, creating a system that lacks full transparency and trust.

More than 115,000 participants competed in KHSAA sports during the 2023 - 24 school year. A better approach would be testing all athletes, where everyone is tested equally, regardless of the player, sport, or status. This would promote accountability while also reducing the risk of bias. According to the National Institute on Drug Abuse, 30% of high school seniors have tried outlawed drugs, ensuring safe competition is a must. Any policy should also protect student rights and privacy- relying on education and prevention, not just punishment. This would create a level playing field and support healthier choices for student athletes. Our school and others have the opportunity to lead by example and show the rest of Kentucky what equality and fairness should look like in our sports.

QUESTIONS TO ADDRESS IN BILLS:

- Should Kentucky replace random drug testing and test all high school athletes instead?
- How can schools protect student privacy while also ensuring fairness and safety in athletic programs?
- What are the financial and legal challenges of equal drug testing for every athlete?
- What kind of support or resources should come with drug testing policies to help address the real causes of drug use?

SOURCES FOR RESEARCH

- [CDC – Substance Use Among Youth](#)
- [Kentucky High School Athletic Association \(KHSAA\)](#)
- [U.S. Department of Education – Effectiveness of Mandatory-Random Student Drug Testing](#)
- [National Institute on Drug Abuse – 2024 Teen Drug Use Data](#)

PROTECTING PUBLIC EDUCATION

ISSUE BRIEF AUTHORS: Amy Meffert, Secretary of State | HS 2

BACKGROUND ON ISSUE

In Kentucky, public education is essential to ensure students from all social, economic, and geographic backgrounds have the ability to succeed. Though Kentucky has been driven by the power of public education for generations, the system is under attack. As Kentucky public schools are continuing to be deprived of necessary funding, the impact is being felt from county to county. With inadequate teacher compensation leading to educator shortages, and diminishing resources resulting in wide disparities in student outcomes, public education in the Commonwealth is being undermined. From the Council for Better Education, reports find that since 2008, funding shortfalls have affected core aspects of education in Kentucky, including staffing, class sizes, student services and transportation.

To preserve the future of learning within our state, we must invest our time and funds in public education to supply Kentucky with a better and brighter future. Pipeline programs can foster the next generation of educators, drawing talented individuals into public education while simultaneously sparking early interest in teaching and passion for guiding the next generation of the Commonwealth.

With that being said, we also must make sure education is a field worth pursuing and committing to. To attract and retain teachers, we need to provide our educators with competitive pay and benefits they deserve. To ensure students from every district have equal opportunities to succeed, we must work to close the per-pupil funding gap across the state so that disparities in student achievement are eliminated. All students and staff members deserve to be supported. By building inclusive school communities, we can create environments where everyone has the opportunity to reach their full potential. In choosing to protect public education, we can build a stronger Kentucky that empowers all.

QUESTIONS TO ADDRESS IN BILLS:

- How do we support students in obtaining a quality education in the Commonwealth?
- What programs can we enact to support our students' education?
- How do we attract and retain quality teachers to Kentucky public schools?

Policy Area | Institutional Reform

HOMELESSNESS IN KENTUCKY

ISSUE BRIEF AUTHORS: Todd Niemann, Speaker of BG House | HS 2

BACKGROUND ON ISSUE

Homelessness has become an even larger issue in Kentucky after the passage of House Bill 5. The houseless population is being arrested at high rates because HB5 makes it illegal to sleep in public places. Instead of handling the homelessness causing problems such as lack of housing, mental health resources, and addiction, the bill drove up the incarcerated houseless population.

This issue affects all of Kentucky in some way, shape, or form. Law enforcement will be spending time arresting the houseless instead of cracking down on other, far more dangerous issues such as street racing in Louisville.

One approach to this issue that I have researched is to change state regulations and permit outreach groups for the homeless to develop small houses on vacant and abandoned lots from the Louisville Landbank with state grant monies. This can ensure that all houseless individuals have a place to stay. Organizations such as Eden's Village have had to raise money to develop permanent small house communities for the unhoused.

QUESTIONS TO ADDRESS IN BILLS:

- What programs and resources can be directed to support the root causes of homelessness?
- How can we support homeless Kentuckians without turning to incarceration as a first resort?

PRISON REFORM

ISSUE BRIEF AUTHORS: Max Corbett, Governor | HS 3

BACKGROUND ON ISSUE

In February of this year, Kentucky Governor Andy Beshear announced that Kentucky's two-year rate of recidivism, or the rate at which criminals with finished sentences will reoffend in two years, was 30.81%. Throughout Beshear's two terms, this number has continued to decline, a point of pride for his governorship. However, Kentucky, like the rest of the United States, still has a much greater number of prisoners per capita than most of the rest of the world, placing a strain on the Commonwealth's economy. The goal of the United States prison system is to rehabilitate, however, released prisoners in Kentucky continue to return at a high rate.

Many states have already taken steps to attempt to lower their rates of recidivism and improve their prisons to varying effects and with varying methods. The United States Constitution allows for this, outlining that one right attributed to states is the ability to control their own prisons and policing. However, many debates arise over the best way to implement prison systems and treat prisoners. One point of contention on prisons is the morality and legality of using prisoners for labor without compensation, which has been argued by some activist groups to be a form of slavery, and has been said to negatively contribute to the mental health of prisoners. This practice is one very common in the South and is present in the Commonwealth of Kentucky.

Another point of contention is the role that the state should play in prisoner reintroduction, with liberal viewpoints typically advocating for greater government support and programs for released prisoners, while conservatives generally advocate for less spending, and thus, less programs in place. Regardless, making improvements to the prison system is something both sides of the political spectrum desire, as more efficient prisons reduce the financial strain on the state.

QUESTIONS TO ADDRESS IN BILLS:

- How can we ensure prisons' effectiveness in rehabilitating convicts into society?
- To what extent should the government of Kentucky aid prisoners in their reintroduction into society after their release?
- How can we take action to lower the rate of recidivism, or the rate at which a convicted criminal will reoffend, in Kentucky?
- What actions are other states taking to reform their prison systems and have they resulted in any positive or negative effects?

SOURCES FOR RESEARCH:

(2016, June 1). Correctional Control: Incarceration and supervision by state. Prison Policy Initiative.

<https://www.prisonpolicy.org/reports/50statepie.html>

(2023, November 13). Colorado banned forced prison labor 5 years ago. Prisoners say it's still happening. National Public Radio.

<https://www.npr.org/2023/11/13/1210564359/slavery-prison-forced-labor-movement>

(2025, February 13). Gov. Beshear: Kentucky Secures Another Low Recidivism Rate; Over the Past 2 Years Nearly 70% of Those Released From State Custody Have Not Returned. Kentucky.gov.

<https://www.kentucky.gov/Pages/Activity>

<stream.aspx?n=GovernorBeshear&prId=2400>

(2025, June 11). From Incarceration to Rehabilitation: Strategies to Reduce Recidivism Rates. PSYFORU.

<https://psyforu.com/from-incarceration-to-rehabilitation-strategies-to-reduce-recidivism-rates/>

HOMELESSNESS PREVENTION

ISSUE BRIEF AUTHORS: Lilly Kessler, Speaker of BG House | HS 1

BACKGROUND ON ISSUE

Currently, one of Kentucky's biggest problems is homelessness rates, which are on the rise and have been for the past several years. The government has tried to help by creating new laws, but inflation without the increase in wages, housing shortages, addiction, along with countless other factors, continue to leave more and more people without homes. This affects every Kentucky citizen because these are our neighbors that are in need of our help.

There isn't an easy solution to this problem, however there are many ways to help control it. A potential route is volunteers helping to build or fix up houses through organizations such as Habitat for Humanity, which would assist in the proactive prevention of homelessness. Another possible way to help decrease this problem is through the donations of physical items, money, or time. There are so many other ways to work towards getting rid of homelessness, but these are just a few ways to start that process.

QUESTIONS TO ADDRESS IN BILLS:

- How do we support homeless Kentuckians amidst skyrocketing inflation?
- What programs or resources are the most effective in supporting homeless Kentuckians?

SOURCES:

<https://kentucky Lantern.com/2025/07/11/new-data-shows-homelessness-increased-again-in-kentucky>

<https://spectrumnews1.com/ky/louisville/news/2025/07/17/kentucky-rise-in-homelessness>

<https://chp.org.au/article/seven-actions-to-end-homelessness/>

<https://endeavors.org/community-services-news/8-actionable-ways-to-help-someone-experiencing-homelessness/>

<https://www.brookings.edu/articles/despite-a-national-spike-in-homelessness-some-us-regions-are-finding-solutions/>

EXPANDING REHABILITATION PROGRAMS IN PRISONS

ISSUE BRIEF AUTHORS: Sophie Flanagan, Governor | HS 4

BACKGROUND ON ISSUE

Kentucky's Recidivism rate is approximately 30% meaning 30% of inmates released from prison are reincarcerated. Kentucky's prisons are overcrowded leading to inhuman conditions and it places a heavy financial burden on communities. The average county spends 15% of their budget on prisons. By lowering our Recidivism rate we can save money and improve the state of our prisons. The high rate of reoffending displays a critical failure in our system to serve its full purpose to both hold inmates and rehabilitate them. Right now many inmates reoffend because they lack knowledge in how to contribute or enter into society and go back to communities where crime is normalized. We must break this cycle. Research shows that rehabilitation programs can reduce recidivism by altering inmates behavior and equipping them with the resources they need to successfully reintegrate into society.

Investing in prison rehabilitation is ultimately beneficial to both our economy and our communities. We will be saving our communities money by having less people returning to prison and therefore the prison populations will decrease, have more people contributing to society and entering the workforce, and less crime fostering a safer, more productive Kentucky.

QUESTIONS TO ADDRESS IN BILLS:

- What resources could best rehabilitate prisoners?
- Is there something like this already put in place in Kentucky?
- Is there something another state or country is doing to reduce recidivism that should be brought to Kentucky?
- Would the resources be provided inside or outside of prison? Or both?

SOURCES FOR RESEARCH:

Crystal Staley or James Hatchett. (n.d.).

<https://www.kentucky.gov/Pages/Activity-stream.aspx?n=GovernorBeshear&prId=2400#:~:text=Since%202022%2C%20out%20of%20nearly,months%20of%20release%20from%20custody.>

Report 2018-113. (n.d.).

<https://information.auditor.ca.gov/reports/2018-113/summary.html#:~:text=Research%20shows%20that%20rehabilitation%20programs,steady%20employment%2C%20or%20are%20illiterate.>

Vera. (2021). The cost of jails in Kentucky.

<https://apps.legislature.ky.gov/CommitteeDocuments/8/13370/Jul%2008%202021%20KY%20Jail%20Costs%20Vera%20Inst.pdf>

CIVIC ENGAGEMENT FOR ETHNIC MINORITIES

ISSUE BRIEF AUTHORS: Kevin Tse, Speaker of CW House | HS 4

BACKGROUND ON ISSUE

The Commonwealth is built on the value of democracy, but for many ethnic minorities across not just Kentucky, but also the nation, full civic engagement is out of reach. Challenges such as language barriers, underrepresentation in elected offices, and a lack of outreach from civic institutions have limited the ability of these communities to engage in the democratic process fully.

Kentucky is one of the states with the lowest voter turnout rates in certain ethnic minority groups, showcasing systemic issues. Kentucky, the state with the shortest early voting period, and a lack of culturally relevant civic education contribute to these disparities. Additionally, socioeconomic inequalities, trouble accessing voting in rural areas, and discrimination further suppress civic participation among these groups.

These challenges weaken the representativeness and legitimacy of Kentucky's democracies because ethnic minorities make up over 15% of the Commonwealth. To ensure that civic engagement reflects the diversity of our Commonwealth, the state should adopt reforms to target these issues, expand outreach, and foster inclusive environments where all communities have a voice in shaping their government

QUESTIONS TO ADDRESS IN BILLS:

- How can Kentucky reduce or remove barriers to voting and civic participation for ethnic minorities?
- In what ways can the state improve education and translation services to ensure all communities are represented and can access voting?
- How can the Commonwealth increase the representation of ethnic minorities in public office and lawmaking bodies?
- How do systemic issues like poverty, education gaps, and discrimination impact civic participation, and how can we address them?

SOURCES FOR RESEARCH

(2025, January 16) 2024 Voter Turnout Age, Gender, Party

<https://elect.ky.gov/Resources/Pages/Turnout.aspx>

(2024, January 22) Kentucky Civic Health Assessment

<https://www.sos.ky.gov/SiteAssets/Pages/Civic-Health-Assessment/Civic%20Health%20Report%20Final.pdf>

(2025, March 12) Beyond the Ballot: The State of Civic Education in Kentucky

https://cdn.prod.website-files.com/630e58db6406d5a8f8a3ab90/67d121a35cc5ebb864d52566_Beyond%20the%20Ballot%20Research%20Report%20Small.pdf

(2023, September 15) Nonprofit aims to boost civic engagement in immigrant communities

<https://spectrumnews1.com/ky/louisville/news/2023/09/15/nonprofit-aims-to-boost-civic-engagement-in-immigrant-communities#:~:text=LOUISVILLE%2C%20Ky.,Initiative%20a%20few%20years%20ago.>

(2025, May 27) Third Spaces: Unconventional Spaces for Civic Engagement

<https://www.ksvt.org/article/third-spaces-unconventional-spaces-for-civic-engagement#:~:text=According%20to%20Oldenberg%2C%20third%20spaces,main%20streets%2C%20and%20many%20more.>

(2022, April 1) Civic Engagement Is a Social Determinant of Health

<https://www.gih.org/publication/civic-engagement-is-a-social-determinant-of-health/>

(2023, September 28) Building and Broadening Place-Based Community Engagement: A Case Study

<https://collaborations.miami.edu/articles/10.33596/coll.108>

UNION SUPPRESSION IN KENTUCKY

ISSUE BRIEF AUTHORS: Zack Hayes, President of CW Senate | HS 2

BACKGROUND ON ISSUE

Rural Kentucky communities have often emphasized class struggle between coal miners, manufacturers, and other companies. After experiencing dangerous conditions, low pay, and employer control via company towns and stores, many Kentuckians organized in unions like the United Mine Workers of America (UMWA). Other sectors soon joined in: small town tobacco farmers and large city factory workers. However, companies responded with violence. During the Harlan County War of the 1930's and 1970's, Eastern Kentucky miners in the UMWA faced coal company hired guards and armed police officers who carried out shootings, beatings, and forced miners and their families into unsafe conditions due to strikes the workers organized to better their lives.

The history of class struggle and organized resistance is baked into our DNA as Kentuckians, yet it has often been forgotten. In 2024, 8.8% of wage and salary workers in Kentucky were union members. In contrast, union membership peaked in 1989 with 14.8%. These statistics have real consequences for Kentuckians. According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, the median usual weekly earnings of union workers are \$199 more than nonunion workers. In addition, union workers are more likely to have employer healthcare benefits, retirement plans, workplace harassment protections, and higher wages. In 2017, the Kentucky State Legislature waged class warfare with a statewide Right-to-Work law. Right-to-Work means that employees in unionized places cannot be required to join the union as a condition of employment, even though the union still must represent them in bargaining and grievances. Supporters claim this will attract businesses and give workers "freedom of choice" However, the Kentucky Right to Work Act has made it easier for employers to suppress wages while simultaneously making it harder for unions to organize. Thus, capitalist interests are favored while the power of unions and the proletariat continue to diminish.

QUESTIONS TO ADDRESS IN BILLS:

- How can Kentucky strengthen union membership without discouraging business investment?
- How could Kentucky ensure union membership includes diverse and marginalized communities?
- What policies can support employers to engage positively and collaboratively with unions?
- What safeguards can be implemented to mitigate the risk of employer retaliation against workers who participate in a union?

SOURCES

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<https://www.mercatus.org/research/working-papers/do-more-powerful-unions-generate-better-pro-worker-outcomes>

HAIR DISCRIMINATION & THE NEED FOR THE CROWN ACT IN KENTUCKY

ISSUE BRIEF AUTHORS: Zunairah Sattaur, Speaker of CW House | HS 1

BACKGROUND ON ISSUE

In Kentucky, many Black students and workers still face unfair treatment because of their natural hair or protective styles such as locs, braids, twists, and afros. Some schools and workplaces have rules that ban or discourage these styles, even when they have no impact on learning or job performance. These policies often target Black individuals and can lead to punishment, exclusion, or missed opportunities.

More than twenty states have passed the CROWN Act, a law that protects people from discrimination based on hair texture or style. Kentucky has not passed this law, which means people can still be treated unfairly for how they wear their hair. This issue affects confidence, mental health, and access to opportunities.

Students writing bills could focus on passing a Kentucky version of the CROWN Act. They could also look at requiring schools and workplaces to update appearance policies or include training about hair bias and cultural respect. This issue is about ensuring equal treatment and allowing people to be themselves without fear of judgment or punishment.

QUESTIONS TO ADDRESS IN BILLS

- How do we support equal protection for all Kentuckians regardless of their natural hair or chosen hair styles?
- How does this discrimination lead to other forms of discrimination or disadvantage?

HEARING ALL VOICES

ISSUE BRIEF AUTHORS: Gabby Hooper, Lt. Governor | MS 1

BACKGROUND ON ISSUE

In Kentucky, not everyone gets the same chance to speak up or share their opinion when important decisions are being made. Some people, like those who live in small towns, people with disabilities, or those who don't speak English well, may find it hard to attend meetings or talk to leaders. Some people don't have good internet or transportation, which makes it even harder to stay informed or get involved. Even students and young people are often left out of big conversations, even though laws and decisions affect them too.

This can lead to unfair laws or rules because not all voices are being heard. To help fix this, students writing bills could think about ways to make meetings easier for everyone to join, like adding online options or making sure things are translated. They could also suggest having student or community groups that leaders must listen to. Another idea is teaching people, especially students, how to get involved in government and speak up for what they believe in. Everyone deserves to be heard, no matter who they are or where they live.

QUESTIONS TO ADDRESS IN BILLS

- What policies can be put in place to ensure that all Kentuckians have equal access to resources and support?
- How do we encourage civic engagement across communities?

Policy Area | Child Welfare

INCREASING MENTAL HEALTH RESOURCES FOR STUDENTS

ISSUE BRIEF AUTHORS: Addilynn Thorn, President of the Senate | MS 1

BACKGROUND ON THE ISSUE:

Studies show that Generation Z (those born in the years 1997-2012) and those on the older end of Gen Alpha (2013-2024) report significantly higher rates of depression, anxiety, and other mental health issues than previous generations. Since the majority of people born in these generations are school aged, it is imperative that we come up with resources for schools to use that will benefit their students's mental health. This way kids with mental health issues can be helped early on in their life and be taught ways to cope with their issues before they go out into the real world.

The most common mental health issues for adolescents include depression, anxiety, suicidal thoughts, and eating disorders. Depression has become a recurring ailment for teens. In the U.S. alone, 20.1% of adolescents, aged 12 to 17, have had a major depression episode within the past year. Anxiety is another extremely common disorder for this generation. The different types of anxiety disorders vary by the objects or situations that cause them, but they all share the symptoms of excessive anxiety and behavioral disturbances. Anxiety disorders are a huge problem because they can interfere with daily activities such as task performance, school work, and relationships. Suicide is defined as a death caused by injurious behavior with intent to die that is self-directed. Suicide is the second leading cause of death among adolescents between the ages of 10-14. It is the third leading cause among those between the ages of 15-24. In the past few years, there have been nearly two times as many suicides (49,476) in the United States as there were homicides (24,849). Double the amount of people seriously planned and organized their own death rather than someone else's. Although both of these are horribly wrong, it is awful to think about how the unstable mental state or hatred for a person that would cause a homicide is the even more prevalent in young teenagers that plan to commit suicide. The prevalence of eating disorders among U.S. adolescents fall mostly between the ages of people 13 to 18 years old. The three most common types of eating disorders are anorexia, bulimia, and binge-eating. Only 12% of those with eating disorders receive professional help.

As you can tell, youth mental illnesses are a big problem. Unfortunately, there are many things that stand in the way of kids getting professional help. First, is the awareness that mental illnesses are more prominent than we think. Lots of people are scared to tell others about what they are going through which can lead to them feeling alone and ignoring their problems until they become unhealthy. Another major issue standing in the way of a solution to youth mental wellness is financial help. Therapy and medication for these ailments can be expensive and not all families are able to afford it. Also, a person's home life can be a significant factor in their mental health. When at home with maybe neglectant guardians or other serious issues at hand, that person may never be able to receive the help that they need. However, these reasons prove exactly why schools are the ideal place for students to receive resources for their mental health issues.

QUESTIONS TO ADDRESS IN BILLS

- What can schools do to identify and help students with these conditions?
- How can awareness of the remedies and coping methods for these conditions be spread to all of the adolescents in the state?
- How can those struggling with mental health issues be more efficiently identified and assessed before the issues become too dangerous?
- How can people in our generation *without* severe mental health issues be aware of the seriousness of these ailments and have opportunities to help?

SOURCES FOR RESEARCH:

<https://jedfoundation.org/what-we-expect-in-2025-new-years-trends-in-youth-mental-health/>
https://www.nimh.nih.gov/health/statistics/major-depression#part_2565
<https://www.cdc.gov/mmwr/volumes/73/su/su7304a9.htm>
<https://www.kcl.ac.uk/news/youth-mental-health-in-decline-generations-differ-on-causes-of-apparent-crisis-survey-finds>

FOSTER CARE CHECKS IN KENTUCKY

ISSUE BRIEF AUTHORS: Julia Butler, Speaker of House | MS 2

BACKGROUND ON ISSUE:

In Kentucky, the oversight of the foster care system is flawed. Kentucky's Cabinet for Health and Family Services (CHFS) oversees over 8,000 children placed in foster care each year. Regular home visits—often scheduled in advance—aim to ensure safety, well-being, and being in compliance with licensing regulations. However, foster families frequently prepare for announced visits, creating an environment that may not reflect day-to-day realities. This includes residential foster (groups) homes. This allows potential abuse to be masqueraded as appropriate care.

Potential issues to less notification include more empty visits with no one home. There may not be appropriate protection for social workers because of lack of coordination through law enforcement agencies. Another issue is the lack of social workers to effectively monitor all homes and group homes. A final issue, lack of judicial support when problems are found after hours. Lack of oversight affects some of our vulnerable and high risk Kentucky children by not providing them appropriate protection from abuse.

Some potential routes for bills/resolution authors to explore are more oversight in group home settings, New law enforcement positions that work just with social services, more social workers to provide more oversight, new notification system for foster children to notify the social worker when there is trouble, and create a program to organize weekly alone checking in with the child in the school system.

QUESTIONS TO ADDRESS IN BILLS:

- How can we improve the quality of life for children living in foster care in Kentucky?
- What oversights should be in place for the safety of foster children and foster families?
- How can we support social workers to ensure better safety and transparency in foster care in the state?

Policy Area | Commonwealth Development

INCREASING HIGH SPEED INTERNET ACCESS

ISSUE BRIEF AUTHORS: Vanessa Gerakos, Secretary of State | HS 1

BACKGROUND ON ISSUE:

Nearly 40% of Kentuckians do not have sufficient access to high speed internet according to the FCC standards. Not only this, but statistics show that 10.8% of households in Kentucky have no access to the internet in full. The solution to fixing this issue may be pricey, but high speed internet is crucial for schooling, public safety, work, and healthcare. Possible solutions like community Wi-Fi, mesh networks, and digital equity programs help ensure affordability and access. Combining technologies and funding from federal and state programs can maximize coverage, especially in rural and underserved areas.

QUESTIONS TO ADDRESS IN BILLS:

- What resources or programs can be put in place to support greater access to high speed internet across the Commonwealth?
- How does access, or lack of access, to internet affect Kentuckians in different ways?

MITIGATING URBAN SPRAWL

ISSUE BRIEF AUTHORS: Charles Maddux, Speaker of CW House | HS 2

BACKGROUND ON ISSUE:

One of Kentucky's greatest socio-economic assets is agriculture, and this resource is currently being threatened by urban sprawl and low-density residential land use. As our cities grow, poor city planning will often cause urban sprawl and force our state to lose its valuable farmland. It can also harm neighboring farmers by hindering their ability to access their fields and cause city regulations to be pushed upon them. A study done by the American Farmland Trust found that "Between 2001 and 2016, 265,000 acres of agricultural land were developed or compromised, 120,000 acres of which were 'Nationally Significant,' or land best suited for growing food and crops." This number is being pushed not only by large cities but also by small towns with low-density residential, or LDR, land use. LDR is a particularly large problem because it is only recently being addressed in studies and records. Because of this information coming to light so recently, no legislature is currently in place.

Mitigating urban sprawl ensures that Kentucky can preserve its valuable farmland and can promote smarter urban planning in our towns and cities, helping both our farmers and our urbanites.

QUESTIONS TO ADDRESS IN BILLS:

- What resources that Kentucky already has can be used to promote smarter city planning?
- What are some Kentucky-specific strategies we could implement to mitigate urban sprawl?
- How will the legislation affect future generations and will be sustainable long-term?

SOURCES FOR RESEARCH:

American Farmland Trust Survey AFT_FUT_StateoftheStates_rev.pdf

UK survey on measuring sprawl Measuring Sprawl across the Urban Rural Continuum Using an Amalgamated Sprawl Index

Urban Renewal Study by Generis A Comprehensive Guide to Urban Renewal Zoning in Kentucky: Programs, Incentives, and Land Use Implications

INVESTING IN FIRST RESPONDERS

ISSUE BRIEF AUTHORS: Maggie Roberts, Speaker of the House | MS 3

BACKGROUND ON ISSUE:

When disaster strikes, the first people running toward danger are our first responders, but who is taking care of them? They help keep us safe and make sure we get the protection and care that we need. Yet, in Kentucky, many first responders aren't getting the support that they need; thus, many first responders work long, grueling hours to get a minimal wage while doing their job with outdated equipment. On top of this, they are involved in some traumatic situations that can cause PTSD if they don't have proper mental health help. Especially in some rural areas in Kentucky, it's hard for these life-savers to respond quickly.

According to WDRB News, Kentucky has one of the worst EMT shortages in the country. There are three main reasons for this: low pay and benefits, which make it hard to keep EMTs on the job or attract new ones; long hours and stressful work, which lead to burnout and cause many EMTs to quit or change careers; and finally, a lack of training programs and resources, so not enough new EMTs are being trained to fill the gaps. If we want to keep our communities safe and make sure help is always just minutes away, we have to invest in our first responders by improving pay, support, and training right now.

QUESTIONS TO ADDRESS IN BILLS:

- What benefits do we plan to give EMTs?
- What additional training would the EMTs and first responders require?
- How do we ensure modernized training?
- How do we make sure that our first responders have the behavioral health resources that they require?
- How can we make sure the EMTs' overtime isn't taxed?

SOURCES FOR RESEARCH:

WDRB News. (2021, September 15). *Kentucky has one of the worst EMT shortages in the country.* https://www.wdrb.com/news/kentucky-has-one-of-the-worst-emt-shortages-in-the-country/article_6a4037ea-17c2-11ec-b93c-3f7e1db8e8a3.html

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Policy Area | Substance Abuse

DRUG ABUSE

ISSUE BRIEF AUTHORS: Anna-Jo Edmunds, Secretary of State | HS 3

BACKGROUND ON ISSUE:

In the Commonwealth of Kentucky, there has been a huge issue with drug abuse. This does not only occur in some cities, this is a problem that happens everywhere. Kentucky has one of the highest rates of Opioid Use Disorder. The citizens of Kentucky face a challenge of losing loved ones to the opioid epidemic. It is not a question of “if” someone you know will overdose, it is “when”. For the past 20 years, there has been a constant increase in deaths related to opioids. In the past year this number has slightly declined, but even with the decline it is still far too high. Last year there were over 1,000 deaths related to some type of drug use. Even though there may have been a decline in the use of drugs, this does not mean it is a steady change. There are currently threats being made that will cut funding to the Department of Health and Human Services, which would also shut down other programs that help victims that have fallen to drug abuse.

If drug abuse continues to decline, all Kentuckians would benefit. There would be improved public safety, many economic benefits —especially because Kentucky has spent hundreds of millions dealing with addiction— and there would also be stronger families with better communication. All of these would help build the Commonwealth of Kentucky and make it altogether a better place. There could be many different plans of action for this, such as, promoting harm reduction tools, preventing first-time drug use in teens, and re-direct non-violent drug users to treatment instead of prison. We can build a better Kentucky, together.

QUESTIONS TO ADDRESS IN BILLS:

- How many Kentuckians do not have access to treatment?
- What bills would support long term recovery?
- Are schools fully equipped to be able to support a teen drug prevention plan?

SOURCES FOR RESEARCH:

Kentucky Department of Education

<https://www.education.ky.gov/school/sdfs/Pages/Youth-Substance-Use-and-Vaping-Resources.aspx>

Drug Control Policies

<https://odcp.ky.gov/Resources/Pages/Treatment-and-Recovery-Resources.aspx>

“Too Good for Drugs”

<https://dbhdid.ky.gov/sud/tgd>

DRUG AND SUBSTANCE ABUSE

ISSUE BRIEF AUTHORS: Nikolas Troutt, Speaker of BG House | HS 4

BACKGROUND ON ISSUE:

In the state of Kentucky, drug abuse has become a widespread problem that needs urgent attention. Over one in five adults in Kentucky struggle with a form of alcohol or drug misuse. Kentucky has one of the highest drug overdose mortality rates in the United States being 50% higher than the national rate. In the 2023-24 school year there were almost 24,000 reported cases of behavior events including drugs, vaping, alcohol, and tobacco in Kentucky schools. In 2024, 1,410 Kentuckians passed away from a drug overdose which is over a 30% decrease from the previous year, yet we still rank among the highest in the United States for overdose mortality rates. This may be a stat that shows promise but it’s not enough. In our Commonwealth we still have work to do to make sure the people in our state are safe.

As substance abuse rises in our youth and continues to be a problem in our state we need to strive for better, especially when it comes to our youth. We need to provide resources and come together as a state for those who need our help. We need to continue to teach our youth about the dangers and risks of substance and drug abuse. Most of all, we need to make efforts to make Kentucky a safer and better place.

QUESTIONS TO ADDRESS IN BILLS:

- How and what can we do to take action to fight against drug and substance abuse?
- How can we get the youth away from drugs and substances?
- What different types of drugs are responsible for these deaths?
- Why are the youth attracted to these drugs and how are they getting them?

SOURCES FOR RESEARCH:

<https://robertalexandercenter.com/understanding-the-high-addiction-rate-in-kentucky-state/#:~:text=In%20Kentucky%2C%20the%20rate%20of,of%20drug%20or%20alcohol%20misuse.>

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<https://justice.ky.gov/News/pages/2024DrugOverdoseFatalityReport.aspx#:~:text=Third%20consecutive%20annual%20decrease;%20Kentucky's,son%2C%20daughter%20and%20loved%20one.>

<https://www.education.ky.gov/school/sdfs/Pages/Youth-Substance-Use-and-Vaping-Resources.aspx>

COMBATING SUBSTANCE ABUSE IN KENTUCKY

ISSUE BRIEF AUTHORS: Lila Burke, Governor | HS 1

BACKGROUND ON ISSUE:

Substance abuse is a critical public health crisis in Kentucky, impacting individuals, families, and communities across the state. Kentucky consistently ranks among the highest in the nation for rates of drug overdose deaths, with opioids, methamphetamines, and prescription drug misuse leading the crisis. The issue has been worsened by the COVID-19 pandemic, which increased isolation, economic hardship, and mental health struggles — all major risk factors for substance use. In 2021, over 2,000 Kentuckians lost their lives to drug overdoses, with thousands more battling addiction. Rural communities have been particularly affected due to limited access to treatment facilities, prevention programs, and harm-reduction services. Additionally, stigma surrounding addiction often discourages individuals from seeking help, while gaps in funding and workforce shortages in recovery services leave many without adequate support.

Substance abuse has far-reaching effects — straining healthcare systems, overwhelming law enforcement, and impacting the state's workforce and economy. Addressing this crisis requires a multi-faceted approach that includes prevention, accessible treatment, recovery support, and targeted community-based interventions. By prioritizing substance abuse prevention and treatment, Kentucky can save lives, strengthen families, and build safer, healthier communities.

QUESTIONS TO ADDRESS IN BILLS:

- What resources and programs could be implemented to prevent substance abuse before it starts, particularly among youth?
- How can we expand access to affordable, effective addiction treatment in rural and underserved areas of Kentucky?
- What harm-reduction strategies (such as naloxone distribution or syringe exchange programs) could be expanded to save lives and reduce the spread of disease?
- How can Kentucky address the stigma of addiction to encourage more people to seek help without fear of judgement or discrimination?

SOURCES FOR RESEARCH:

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