Two Kentucky representatives — Rep. Al Gentry and Rep. Brandon Reed — have crossed party lines to co-chair a caucus focused on issues facing people with disabilities. The bipartisan caucus is currently comprised of nine republicans and nine democrats.

Gentry, who lost his dominant arm in a workplace accident when he was 28, uses his experience to empower others through sports and advocacy, and hopes to see the caucus thrive in years to come.

“The mission of the Engage and Empower Caucus is to open up a direct pathway of communication for advocates of people with disabilities and the state legislature so that we [Kentucky] can more effectively and efficiently address the issues at hand,” Gentry said.

Given the wide-ranging goal of the caucus, it will be comprised of four subcommittees, including:

1. Healthcare and Insurance
2. Building Access—Housing and Education
3. Education, Work Standards, and Employment Opportunities
4. Legislative Review—Designed for Members in Leadership

A Republican and Democrat will be designated to co-chair each subcommittee, with plans to open the caucus to the General Assembly and allow members to choose which subcommittees they want to focus on. The subcommittees will allow the caucus to address a variety of areas that will help improve the lives of people with disabilities.

Gentry says the legislature has overwhelmingly supported the idea and is excited to participate. The community, and even other states, have voiced their enthusiasm as well.

The caucus addresses a pressing need. According to the Kentucky Work Matters Report [2], 16.8% of Kentuckians reported a disability in 2015. People with disabilities continue to face barriers such as inaccessible transportation and difficulty finding meaningful employment.

Policies developed according to universal design principles [3] create opportunities for people with disabilities, both improving their quality of life and strengthening state economies. The Engage and Empower Caucus hopes to foster both of these goals.

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