

IHC Academy: Access to Nature and Gardens

Video Transcript

- [Rebecca] I just want to thank you for coming. We're excited for this presentation today. If you are in need of an interpreter, we have interpreter Allison. That is how her name is listed today. And you can find her in the gallery and pin her at the right upper corner. My name is Rebecca Martin and I'm a graduate assistant with the grant facilitation team at the Rutgers University, Edward J. Bloustein School of Policy and Planning, working to coordinate the New Jersey Inclusive Healthy Communities Training series and IHC Academy trainings. We're thrilled you could join us today for the presentations about the first cohort projects related to access to nature. I'm excited to learn more from our presenters, Jennifer Papa from City Green, and Carleton Montgomery from Pinelands Preservation Alliance.

Before we begin, I have a few housekeeping notes that I need to make you aware of. One is that we'd like you to be aware that we're recording today's training. We have enabled captions. Actually, let me make sure we have. All right, we have now enabled captions, and let's see here. Screen reader accessible slides for today's presentations and a white paper regarding the Pinelands Is for Everyone project are available for download.

You should have received an email yesterday with the link, but I will also put the link in the chat in a moment. And also, we'd like to add you to our mailing list so that you can find out about more great trainings that we're having. So, if you don't want to be added to that list, please send me an email. I'll put my email in the chat, or you can message me through the chat.

And then finally, we'd like to express our deep appreciation to Perry Neron and her team at the New Jersey Division of Disability Services for making this training series and the entire IHC grant program possible. So, now without further ado, I will turn over the floor to our first presenter, Jennifer Papa from City Green.

- [Jennifer] Thank you. And so, are you enabled to share screening or can screen sharing?

- One second. I'll double check to make sure you have access. I'll make you a co-host, that way you'll have all the access.

- Can you see that?

- [Woman] Yes.

- Looks good.

- No sidebar. Okay. Great. Well, thank you all for coming today. I can't see you, but I'm happy that you're here and I appreciate that you're interested in seeing some of the work and learning about some of the projects supported by the Inclusive Healthy Communities program.

For 10 years...I just want to give a little bit of background on how we got into this project. For 10 years, we've been developing the former Schulte's farm, which is a five acre farm property in Clifton, New Jersey, and this property was preserved as open space in about 2011 with the help of Green Acres funding and Passaic County Open Space funding.

And ever since, well, I think it was preserved in 2005 and we took the project on in 2011. And so, since then, we've been creating these amazing spaces for learning and growing and teaching. We have a learning farm for field trips and community events. We have a greenhouse where we start all of our farm plants.

We have the two and a half acres in agricultural production for organic vegetables and fruits. And now, with the support of this Inclusive Healthy Communities grant from the State of New Jersey's Department of Health and Human Services, division of Disability Services, we're able to ensure that these spaces are inclusive for all.

It's always been, you know, an accessibility... There's always been accessibility issues at this property, and the city of Clifton, who was a partner in this project, had done an accessibility study of all of their parks. They had hired a consultant and had somebody evaluate all of their natural spaces, public parks, and included the Schulte's farm property in their evaluation.

And so, we were able to use that study and the information and the recommendations from that to improve this farm space. So the city's role was to redo the parking lot and create all of the accessible entryways and parking spaces and all of that sort of thing, and then we were doing the part that has to do with our gardens and farm and all of our programming.

So, here's the project overview. Is this looking too big or can you...is it okay? Is it too big for the screen?

- It's only...the heading is just slightly off the top but it's fine.

- Okay. So this is sort of the introductory slide about how we took this opportunity for funding and we sort of did two different things. We created accessibility at our farm, Eco-Center in Clifton, the space I was just describing, and then we were also able to include five of our community garden partners in the county of Passaic to make improvements in their garden sites which I'll get into like the second half of this presentation.

So, in the beginning of the project, we spent a lot of time having community focus groups because we don't work specifically in the space of accessibility, and so we kind of, from our own experience knew like what was the trouble with this place.

And then also from the recommendations of Clifton study. But we also wanted to hear from different community groups about like, you know, what do people want to see? What do they want to access? What are the actual barriers? And not just like the physical barriers of like creating paved pathways, etc. which we did, but like what would make it easier to grow food?

What kind of tools would somebody need? What kind of protection would they need from like the natural elements, like too much sun and key and different things like that? We had a really interesting meeting with a teacher from the city of Clifton's public high school who works with students with autism, and he mentioned, you know, kids standing at our harvest station with all of these weeds tickling their legs, you know, that that is not okay.

Like we have to make a nice level spot here. It has to be, you know, not irritating and like so such small details that we probably wouldn't have thought of were brought to our attention through these community focus groups. We also worked with a horticultural therapist from Planthropy, and she brought to our attention some of the really like unique tricks of the trade for the actual programming that would follow.

So like, what kind of infrastructure did we need to put in place so that when we invite groups for formal programming, but also even for passive recreation, what would be great to have available to make the best of those situations. So in December of 2021, we held the groundbreaking ceremony and began.

Because of all these warm winters, we were able to start doing our construction. Not that that's a good thing. And then, from March to July, we engaged in the construction part of the project. I'm going to skip this part and

go right to our... This is our groundbreaking ceremony. So, you can see some of the pathways were done already, but what you see in the front there is kind of what the surface looked like prior.

It was a lot of gravel. Very soupy even just to walk in for anybody. Trying to push a stroller through there, trying to have... You know, we host a lot of programs for senior citizens and, you know, trying to use a walker in there, different... It was just always really inaccessible. So, here's some of our before and after again, like dragging carts through the soupy gravel and now we have these beautiful paver pathways and there's a lot of like big garden spaces, and we really wanted to ensure that you could get everywhere.

So, you could get to the farm animals where we have goats and chickens and a cute farm goose named Luna. You could get to our raised beds, you could get to the patio where we host a lot of public events and concerts and things like that which you can see in the lower corner with the picnic tables. So, you know, it was an expensive project and the funding was able to cover all of them.

We also installed accessible seatings. So, we've always had these splintery, wooden picnic tables, you know, that we replace a board on here and there. They're not accessible, they're not comfortable, they're hard to get in and out of. And so we were able to create more accessible spaces with these tables. We have a few different versions of them, umbrellas for shade, those sorts of things.

So that was a very major improvement. And then, we renovated our sensory garden. We were able to make these higher raised beds, install some of these beautiful plantings, have this paved area. We've got the fountain, little pond over there with two surviving fish. We're going to replenish this spring.

And then, we added some fun horticultural therapy elements like these wind chimes. Not wind chimes, musical chimes and musical instruments that add like another sensory element for people to experience when they're in the garden. So, like I said, those were the improvements at the farm Eco-Center here in Clifton, and then we were able to work with some of our community garden partners.

So, we run a community garden program in partnership with the county of Passaic. They fund City Green to help build, help administer and help maintain community gardens throughout the whole county, and so we're able to provide many grants to community groups that want to start a community

garden, and then we can help with other pieces of like collecting your group and managing challenges, etc., but this funding gave us the bump we needed to be able to like install some of these improvements.

So, you can see on the left there this lumpy grass. It doesn't look as lumpy in the photo, but it was very hard for the seniors in this public senior housing building to get to these garden beds. So, what we did here, because there are some limitations about installing something like pavers, we used these grass mats which are this like thick rolled out material and the grass grows through it and it's incredibly firm.

And so, it created this way for the seniors to get from their sidewalk out their back door to these new improved raised beds. We also did a project at the Patterson Park "Organic Villagers" Veterans Garden. So this is housing for veterans in Patterson.

They have these beds on the side, you see how low they are. And the garden was just getting used less and less every year because it was just becoming an issue for anyone to bend over and work in those really low beds. So, we pulled those all out. We were able to create these taller raised beds. They had a pretty flat surface and are able to access it without a paver pathway.

And so, this was a huge improvement. I wish I had an aerial of this because this green space is sandwiched between a railroad track and like two super busy roads in the center of Patterson, so it looks this like really amazing green triangle from above, and it's really an oasis for the veterans that are living here.

Here are some quotes from the woman who supervises that building. She says, "Awesomeness all around, our garden is kick ass. We've grown the biggest zucchini and tomatoes, and collards, and kale. You'd be so proud that the raised beds are a game changer. Thank you for enriching the lives of our veterans and changing their lives by providing a way to grow healthy food."

So, we hear this over and over from all of our partners, just being able to garden, first of all, like the sensory experience and being in touch with nature and being able to sit out in a beautiful green space, but also being able to grow your own food and have access to that is been an incredible improvement. And this project is the Wae Center.

It's the Jewish Services for Disabled... Let me get the name of that right. It's the Jewish Services for Developmentally Disabled, and they call it the Wae Center

for promoting wellness, arts and enrichment. So again, we use these grass pass, say this plain grass space that no one was really using, and they wanted to provide this place for arts and enrichment and gardening and outdoor recreation.

And so, we have these different style beds, these you can see in the back of the photo here. They have some accessible tables. They have umbrellas for shade and then the grass mats for accessibility and then there was some indoor parts of this too that they were able to do some indoor gardening and start some of their plants so that really added to the year round opportunities for this group.

And here's some other photos of that. The other piece that we did here and also at the Eco-Center in Clifton was some of this trellising and rate, like growing things up on trellises so that people who are standing nearby can like access that without bending over.

So we've used that a lot and we've gotten a lot of great feedback about that. And I think that's sort of like, you know, that's all the visuals of our project, and like I said, the benefit of this is just now being able to open up so much more of our programming to so much more of the public.

So, we run educational programs and festivals and, you know, we're having an Earth Day festival, we have a Harvest festival, we have Twilight Farm Fest ways for people to just come and enjoy and listen to music at the farm, but then also these volunteer opportunities for gardening and farming and things like that, that formerly we're not accessible, and now because of this project, they are and we just feel so grateful to have had this opportunity to make these improvements because, you know, being able to grow food, being able to be in a natural space, especially in the concentrated urban areas where we're working is really crucial to people's good health.

So, that's the end of my presentation.

- Thank you so much, Jennifer. It was really wonderful to hear about all of the things that you were able to do. I really appreciate it. If anyone has questions, we're going to hold them all to the end after we have our second presentation, but you can feel free to put them in the chat if you would like, or you can ask them yourself at the end. So, thank you again, Jennifer, and next we're going to have the presentation by Carleton and his team from Pinelands Preservation Alliance.

- [Carleton] Okay. Oddly enough... Oh, here we go. I am a little confused about what it's asking me for screen sharing.

Select a window.

- If you see one that has your slides on it, that's the one you want to pick. I can pull it up for you.

- Just give me a second.

- Oh, I have it. I have the PowerPoint open, but I'm not... I'm sorry. I'm just not seeing...

- It's asking me - Oh, there it is.

- a question I've never seen before. Oh, okay.

- Yeah, you've got the right one up now. Oh, now we're back to us though.

- I see. The problem is I'm not... Once again, the Rutgers system is baffling.

- No worries.

- Sorry about that.

- This is the right one.

- Okay, there we go. Are we here?

- Yes.

- Good. Thank you. Okay. Hello everyone. I'm Carleton Montgomery. I'm the executive director at the Pinelands Preservation Alliance. We are an organization devoted to preserving the natural and cultural resources of the New Jersey Pinelands.

It makes up about just under a quarter of the state of New Jersey in South Jersey, mostly a matrix of vast forests and streams and wetlands with towns and villages and roads interspersed and a fair amount of suburban type development around the edges. As a area with special protections, Pinelands has really received tremendous benefits of preserving open space in public parks and preserves, and wildlife management areas, and this map just shows you that the dark green is all public preserved open space.

So, it's a tremendous amount of land. About 500,000 acres is actually open to the public which is really cool. Here's some eye candy pictures. If you haven't

visited the Pinelands, you need to come and see these places. It's really gorgeous.

One of the things that we realized some years ago, especially when the politics in the state were not very friendly to environmental protection, was that we had to do a much better job of building a constituency of people who knew and cared about the Pinelands through personal experience. So we created Pinelands Adventures.

We do canoe and kayak, outfitting, we take people canoeing and kayaking. We do hikes, we do school groups. And our principal there is that the paying customers for our services subsidize a program where we can provide guided trips to schools and community service groups for free or whatever they can pay.

And all of this is really great. It's been very successful. We've taken tens of thousands of people out for really fun and enriching experiences in nature. We also have created an organic farm. This is on 72 acres of land that was donated to us at our headquarters in Southampton, where we grow organically.

We're not certified organic, but we use organic methods. And that has also been very successful with a community supported agriculture program and other sales that support the farm and are enabling us to try to expand our work around promoting sustainable agriculture and food sovereignty through improved food systems in South Jersey.

But, we realized at a certain point, actually sparked by the Inclusive Healthy Communities grant program, it really was a catalyst for us to think about the fact that if you looked at all the programs we offered through Pinelands Adventures, if you looked at our facilities in Southampton, and at the way we communicated about nature recreation, it excluded this huge portion of the population of people with disabilities who had particular challenges of different kinds and enjoying these wonderful resources that the people of New Jersey have spent many billions of dollars to protect.

And so, we applied for and received a capacity building grant because, like City Green, we had no expertise and we really had nobody on the staff with lived experience besides everybody who knows someone who has mobility issues or other kinds of challenges.

So, we also instituted a program to listen first. So we did focus groups, we did some town halls online, a lot of conversations and learned a tremendous

amount, which is reflected in the document, a summary document we created that you can get through the link that Rebecca sent around as a note a few minutes ago.

And, a lot of it also involved engaging with people that is not just listening, but then finding ways to work together, particularly people with disabilities as well as caregivers and professionals who work in the field of improving the lives of people with disabilities so that we could make some progress on making these places more accessible.

Lessons we've learned so far, nature recreation has a role for just about everybody at every stage of their lives. From highly active to perhaps, you know, less physically demanding, but everybody can find a niche in which their physical and mental health can be improved by being in nature.

There's a tremendous unanswered demand for accessible nature sites in New Jersey. There simply are very few sites that are advertised and maintained specifically for accessibility. And that people really want to be able to participate inclusively like everyone else and with everyone else, not just special programming that sort of tacked on as something to serve people with disabilities, but instead to find universal design, not just in facilities like structures, but also in trails and other scenic sites.

And there's a lot of obstacles out there, one of them being information. There have not been readily accessible sources of information about what a trail is really like, for example, what facilities it has, what its surface is like, so that people would be reluctant to organize trips not knowing whether it's going to be a disaster because it won't work at all.

Or they'll get, you know, a quarter of a mile down a trail and find it no longer... they can't go any farther. So, we're trying to address information. We're also trying to address sort of isolation and fear of the unknown through having, beginning to organize programs that are truly inclusive and providing equipment that people can use for trails where their own, for example, their own wheelchair just isn't suitable for a given trail.

So, another key point is cross-sector partnerships. This is definitely an area where environmental groups should not stay in their lane and just do conservation. They also need to do basically health related work by partnering with experts and people with lived experience to not just improve the facilities, but also change the cultural expectations of people with disabilities and of land managers, and of organizations like our Pinelands Adventures

program so that it becomes natural and expected that everybody will find ways to enjoy nature.

We can manage our natural lands for everyone's benefit, but mostly, as of today, that hasn't been happening. I think there is a sea change taking place among public and nonprofit land managers and that we're going to see more and more great opportunities for people.

We understand that inclusivity and accessibility mean different things to different people, and it means something different on a farm versus a forest versus being able to paddle on a stream. So we need to work together to provide all those opportunities that work for people who are in very different situations.

And like I say, for the most part, you know, we can make tremendous progress for most people with pretty simple things. Like this trail is at Batsto... I'm sorry. Atsion recreation area, right off route 206. Very beautiful place, and it's pretty easy. You make the trail flat and firm and you keep it that way.

So, there is tremendous progress to be made at relatively low cost by simply changing the way we go about doing things. Our program, as I said, involves all of these elements. I don't want to go through everything in particular, but we're really trying to address not just purely physical features of different facilities, but also people's expectations and ideas of what is possible.

And that is my summary of our program which is continuing and we are beginning to work on expanding this effort beyond the Pinelands by working with other partners and making it a statewide effort.

- Thank you very much, Carleton. I appreciate it. I'm going to open up the floor to anyone who'd like to ask any questions. If you would like to unmute, you can do that. If not, you can also put it in the chat.

- I have a question - Sure - for Jennifer. I'm really interested in your mentioning of the... I want to get this term correct. The horticultural therapist?

- Mm-hmm.

- What kinds of things did you hear from that person about making, you know, a food growing place? You know, a real asset for people?

- Yeah, I mean, it was a lot of like what you were saying about it not just being... the barriers not just being physical, you know, they sometimes are like sensory issues or sensitivities or communication barriers or things like that. So,

she recommended besides like the physical improvements of like trellising and, you know, heightened raised beds and adaptive tools which she said like purchasing adaptive tools is not a good idea because they usually are an adaptation for one certain sort of limitation, whereas like there are so many hacks that you can find online and she recommended some to us of just using your regular tools in a different way or with an extension on them, things like that.

But the sensitivity issues were also really interesting. Like she suggested we create a poster that somebody could point to and, you know, it's like, too hot or I'm itchy or I'm, you know, I'm upset or, you know, something is not working for me. Like people can't articulate like that they're struggling in that way. So things like that.

Also just not expecting like, you know, the approach of the passive benefits of being in the farm and picking a vegetable or making a flower bouquet. Like something kind of simple like that, like kind of really rethinking how you approach a group, you know, of volunteers. She just offered so many different kinds of tasks that are really rewarding to people.

Like the bouquet making one specifically really struck me because we have a lot of flowers on our farm and, you know, even if we had to pick them first and they took a walkthrough and then assembled the bouquet, they felt like this was like a meaningful project. They had something to show for it.

It was really beautiful. So just, you know, a lot of things like that. I could maybe write up some more recommendations that she shared with us or share, you know, the information she gave us with you. I'd be happy to do that.

- Thank you. Carleton, we have one question for you in the chat which is, are you encountering obstacles amending trails in protected open space?

- Yes, we are. One of the things that we proposed to do with our Inclusive Healthy Community grant was to create a demonstration project of taking an existing trail in the Pinelands, excuse me, and making it accessible. And we partnered with Pemberton Township in Burlington County to make this conversion of a trail around Pemberton Lake.

It's a place that's very easy for a lot of people to get to, but it's actually very pretty. And we immediately encountered a problem at the Pinelands Commission, the agency that we want to strictly enforce all those

environmental regulations, decided that adding stone in order to stabilize the trail, the sand trail, violated their rules for wetlands buffers.

While I disagree with that conclusion, we have to work with it. So, we are working through that issue now with the agency, but it's probably put the project back two years I would expect in the end. I think it'll get done, but it's something that we're going to have to then look at, at anywhere in the Pinelands because everywhere in the Pinelands, you can't have a trail in the Pinelands.

It's only in uplands. It's just not the nature of our topography. And I think we're going to encounter similar rule issues because these environmental regulations were not written with this issue in mind. They were written with the idea that any kind of change, any kind of addition of materials is sort of inherently a negative from an environmental point of view.

And that needs to be rethought in the case of approaches that truly have no ecological harm to them, but don't fit neatly into these preexisting regulatory systems. So that's been an interesting challenge. We're working on that and I think we're going to find others. I'd also like to mention, my colleague, Sean Holland, Kane Holland is on the call too.

One of the things that we recognized early on was that if we didn't build this priority into our organization in a structural way, it was always going to be an afterthought that depended on a given grant funding being out there.

So, we were really fortunate in being able to hire Sean to join our staff, and by doing that, I think every organization knows that if you've got someone whose job description on your staff is to do this thing, you're way more likely to do it and to keep doing it into the future.

And so, we've been really lucky to have Sean there and he's a great resource for anybody who is interested in this topic to contact. Sean, I don't think will mind my saying, he's someone who is a tremendous outdoorsman, but he has the lived experience of having a significant physical disability that he has, you know, he's working with, but it really attunes him to the situation of other people who have mobility issues.

- I have to say that after being involved in this grant program, we look at every single one of our programs differently. That's been like one of the best outcomes I think of like what really, like you said, focusing on this because as you know, urban farming and gardening organization, we're working on issues

of food access and access to nature in like cities and things, and, you know, being able to focus on this deliberately opened our eyes to a lot of real issues, you know, with some of the spaces that we've created.

So, you know, we welcome that kind of challenge. But like you said, you do rely on grant funding in order to remedy or move forward in a different kind of way. I also like Carleton, what you were saying about offering real descriptions of your accessible pathways, etc. You know, that's something that we haven't done and I think that would be super useful to put on our website like so someone can really analyze what this place looks like, what would they be encountering when they get here, you know, so they can really evaluate whether they want to come or not.

- So, to do that, what we've done, again, this is one of the deliverables of the Inclusive Healthy Communities grant, is create the accessnaturenj.org website that you can go to, and we're beginning to populate it with...it's a math-based website. It's interactive so we're populating it with information about trails and other sites that have at least some degree of accessibility, whether they're designed and maintained specifically for that purpose or not so that people will get detailed information about what facilities are there, photographs of what it looks like, and how to get there.

And then, they have the opportunity also to give feedback, to feed information about it back into the system. And Rebecca's just put up a link. You can also just type in accessnaturenj.org and it'll take you to this website, which we're always improving. I know that you'll find there are issues with it, but we're working on them.

- We're all a work in progress, right?

- Yeah. Everything is a work in progress.

- Thank you. I see that Sean has introduced himself in the chat. Sean, would you like to talk about the project at all? I want to give you the opportunity if you would like to, not to put you on the spot. I guess I did put you on the spot.

So, if you do want to just feel free to unmute at any point and jump in.

- [Sean] Hello to everybody and thank you for allowing me to attend the meeting. I think Carleton was, you know, he concluded everything pretty nicely there.

- Thank you. I do have another question for Carleton that is in the chat and it's about the accessible chair you showed at the park. And, do you have to reserve them and where are they located?

People are excited to use them, so could you provide a little information about that?

- Yeah, that is also a work in progress. We've discovered that there is not a perfect product out there for a trail ready wheelchair, so we bought... The one that you see in that picture we bought, and we were actually road testing it when we took that picture with Andrea

[inaudible] who's a physician at the Risen Center, another participant in the Inclusive Healthy Communities grant program, and her son Nick. We are also in the process of acquiring additional kinds of wheelchairs to test and provide. At the moment, I think the thing...

We don't have a system yet, but there will be a system to reserve a chair as part of one of our programs, part of one of our guided hikes for example. That's our initial thought, but we want to get a better handle on how each of them functions and works because some of them are going to work better for some people and not others. Like that chair in particular is not...you can't self propel it and it's not motorized, but it has great wheels and a really wide wheel base.

So it's, you know, it's perfect for someone who really cannot control their own movements very well, but has a helper who can push it. Others are going to be much more suitable for someone who can control their own movements and we're working on acquiring some of those.

So I think the answer at the moment is to get in touch with me or my colleague, Andy Giles, who's the manager of Pinelands Adventures, and if you put in pinelandadventures.org, it'll take you to their website and, you know, we would work a particular arrangements at the moment. But we do want to have a system where that can be done and, you know, ultimately we'd like to have resources like that available in a lot of state parks around the state.

Some states have done that, and working with nonprofits have made those kinds of adaptive equipment available to people by reserving them, and it's a really good idea because, for the most part, they're not there and they're crazy expensive.

Like that wheelchair you saw cost a little over \$4,000. So, unless you're, you know, quite dedicated to outdoor recreation, you're very unlikely to own one of those yourself.

- Thank you. I don't see additional questions, so if anybody has them, please feel free to put them in the chat or raise your hand or unmute. In the meantime...

- [Woman] I have a question.

- Oh yes.

- I have a question.

- Oh, sure.

- So Jennifer, I'm curious how close public transit is to your farm?

- Public transit is not that close. It's like, you know, maybe just under a quarter mile away, and it's not a pedestrian friendly situation. So yeah, you do really need to drive here or have, like, we have...the county offers vans that will take people and things like that, so we do get like busloads of seniors coming to our farm stand and, you know, using that transportation but it's not that accessible from public transportation.

- Okay.

- Thank you.

- And that's a huge issue. There's virtually no public transit in Southern New Jersey or the Pinelands except out of, you know, the really developed areas, so.

- Right.

- I would hope in a place like Clifton that that would be a different story, but it sounds like in this location not true.

- Yeah. I mean there's a lot of, even like for our high school interns getting here from Patterson, you know, we pick them up, you know? We just meet them at the library in downtown Patterson and give them a ride in our minivan because we don't want to have those barriers for our youth summer employment program, and it's just like, you know, there's just not efficient transportation around here.

- Right. Prioritizing those areas that give access to outdoor spaces where there actually may be public transit nearby.

- That's an interesting point of advocacy, you know, to consider. Yeah.

- Yeah, in terms of where that linkage exists to think about extending it into...

- No, I appreciate that. It is a county road that we're on, so that's something that we could bring up.

- Yeah. In my day job, I run a travel training program, so it is a self-interested question - about [inaudible]

- That's still good. It's still a good point to raise. Yeah. Thank you.

- Sure.

- And Jennifer, I wanted to ask you actually, because right before the call you had mentioned there's noise outside because the parking lot is being redone and that I know that you were able to work very well with the city of Clifton and to leverage sort of with your project their involvement. So, I just wondered if you could talk a little bit about your experience partnering with the city of Clifton so that if other people are thinking about doing something similar, they kind of have a roadmap.

- Yeah, sure. I mean, this is property owned by the city of Clifton, even though it's preserved as open space, they own the property and as leasees, we actually raise all the funding to do all of the improvements and all of the work, and all the programming on the property. So, you know, it's kind of a bad business model, sort of like nonprofit in general.

We raise all this money and we invest in things that are not ours, you know. But, the city of Clifton had, I think, some great vision in preserving this property. Like I see so jealous of your 72-acre farm down there in Southern Jersey. Like we feel like we're just in this giant open space here on five acres between Route 46 and the Garden State Parkway.

This was one of the last remaining farms in this area. There's one across the street, but this used to be farmland here in Clifton in Northern New Jersey, and so they had some great vision to preserve that history. So they're excited about like what we're doing here and what we're bringing to the public and to the community. So, we've done a lot of partnering with them. We partner with their department of recreation.

We do a lot of registration of our programs through them. They have really great outreach opportunities and so they could spread the word. They fund some of the educators we bring on. It's just a little bit of funding, but it's also, you know, useful. We cover like story time in the garden kind of things. And so, Jean Herb actually, who was one of our advisors for this grant, had recommended when we were talking about this parking lot, applying for a grant with this state for permeable paving so this would be an environmentally friendly parking lot situation and in a largely concrete area.

And so they did do that, and that's what's being installed right now. So, it's also why it took so long to get it off the ground, a lot of approvals and going out to bid and finding the contractor that can do this kind of thing. So, you know, they've really been pretty delightful to work with as far as the municipality goes. We've had a pretty nice open relationship with them.

And we also work with the county, like we do a lot of that sort of, you know, public and nonprofit partnership work. We're trying to work with the city governments or the county governments to leverage some of the resources they have and like the skills that we can bring to the table.

- Thank you. Okay. So I also have a question in the chat for both of you about how you developed your partnerships with the disability community. Could you talk about how you started those relationships and how they influenced your project?

- For us, we had a lot of existing groups that came here or wanted to come here, or like, you know, whether it was like, I was mentioning the autistic classes at the Clifton High School, community organizations that work with people with developmental disabilities.

You know, like I mentioned, a lot of the work we do with senior citizens and public senior housing complexes and things like that. So we had a lot of existing community partnerships that we were able to sort of leverage and go to. And then through those networks, we were able to gain access to the actual participants. So, you know, it's interesting to work with the directors of a community organization that works in that space, but it's also great to hear from individuals themselves.

So we were able to go to those classes and we did work with a consultant to run those focus groups and speak directly to students. We went to the public senior housing and spoke directly to the seniors. We went to the Wae Center and spoke to the population that they work with. So, it was kind of like, you

know, that and then them connecting us with additional partners that we didn't already have existing relationships with.

- And for us, at first, it felt like starting from scratch and doing some research. And then, it turns out we did have existing relationships that, you know, maybe we weren't aware of. So, when we set up our first focus groups, we just use social media and naturally a lot of families that support our work generally include people who have disabilities.

And so, some of them then responded to that, and that began a relationship there without my even knowing it. Our farm was already hosting groups from the Kingsway Learning Center which has a school and adult programs for people with developmental disabilities, and a local high schools program as well for days in the field doing, you know, genuinely useful work for us, but also getting outdoors and learning about growing food.

And then, we did just sort of cold calls, you know, to organizations like Disability Rights New Jersey which has become a partner of ours on this and to independent living centers in the region. And now Sean is leading an ongoing forum for discussion meeting at least quarterly at the moment by zoom of anybody, anywhere in the state or the world who's interested in this topic to talk about how to make progress, how to achieve some policy change together, also adjust to share experiences and reactions to places that they have visited, and give us a chance to bring in people.

Like the next meeting will include, will have a presentation by the fellow who is the director of accessibility work for the National Park Service in the Northeast region. And, you know, someone we can learn from but also someone we can then talk to about accessibility issues.

So I think in response to the question, it's really been a whole variety of things that build on each other and eventually create a network of interested people who see us as an ally that they can work with and can count on.

- Thank you. Oh, I see a new question. Are you connecting with other environmental or gardening groups elsewhere in the state, and what are you learning?

- Well, I will speak to that. We are trying to, yes. What we're learning is that other groups are interested in theory, but it's tough for them to move to practice. I'm saying other environmental groups. And so, I'm trying to find ways that we can support our sister organizations, particularly those that own

and manage land, that they can begin to build this issue into their DNA the way we are trying to build it into ours.

But it's a little bit of a challenge because it's not been a priority for either public or private land managers, for the most part in some cases until recently.

- As far as City Green goes, we've been, you know, we're sort of in general contact with the other like food access organizations in the state. So, we share our work and share, like we were excited to share this project and people seem really open to it and I think it's like a lot easier to kind of create an accessible garden than it is to create an accessible, you know, Pinelands reservation.

And it can be less expensive in some ways. So, I think people are excited to learn more about it, and we've had just conversations about it but nothing formal.

- Thank you both. Are there any questions from anyone else in the audience? Feel free to unmute if you like.

- So, I have a question again for Jennifer because we also are both really interested in food systems. And, you know, food access, but also food sovereignty that is finding systems where people can really control their ability to get particularly local, healthy food. I'm interested in how you see the intersection of these two issues, how you see that evolving.

- Yeah. One of the things that we've done, we've been doing for, you know, maybe eight years or so, is we have a veggie mobile. So we bring the produce from our farm, it's a refrigerated mobile market truck, and we bring that to a lot of the partners that we work with in Patterson Passaic, Clifton, some into Essex County.

And so that was sort of our first... And not really through the lens of accessibility as far as, you know, physical barriers or anything like that, but more like from through the lens of where are there food deserts and where is there a lack of, you know, just no supermarket or no access to healthy produce. So, we started with that and, you know, that's also where we created a lot of these partnerships that I was referring to, you know, people that were bringing programming to the cities and to the neighborhoods.

We work also with like little kids who have no opportunity to like you were mentioning the transportation issue. They don't have funding to bring a school bus to the Farm Eco-Center or to our public learning garden in Eastside Park in

Patterson so we go to them and we grow gardens like at Boys and Girls Clubs or at Patterson Public Libraries or places like that in the community.

So, a lot of our work started very entrenched in neighborhoods and kind of reacted to what people asked for. We have gardens at schools and, you know, in all these different places and that kind of grew into that food access piece of bringing the veggies where people were, as opposed to making them come to us to get the produce.

The other thing we do as far as income accessibility is, we have the Good Food Bucks program that we run. So, when I heard you have a CSA, it's something that I thought of because we do work with CSA programs where people who are purchasing their produce with SNAP can get choice as much fresh fruits and vegetables with the Good Food Bucks.

So we do fund that program and if you're interested in hosting that at your CSA, we'd be happy to partner with that. So, we have a USDA grant to do that and we do that at all of our own farm stands and veggie mobile stops, but we also fund farmer's markets and even some supermarkets to do that at their locations.

- Yeah, that's a phenomenal program you've got, and we are working on that. [inaudible].

- SNAP authorization, there's a lot of bureaucracy.

- [inaudible].

- Well, just figuring out how to make it work with the normal CSA funding mechanism so that it, you know, because you can't get reimbursed for payment in advance the way you typically do a CSA.

- Right, right.

- Right?

- So, that's what we're working on.

- Oh, right. Because we run a small CSA here and we have some customers who do the pay in advance and then the customers shopping with SNAP do pay as they go.

- Yeah, yeah.

- Yeah. It's the only way to do it. But if you want to talk more offline about that, I can connect you with Lisa, our food access director.

- Thank you. I want to note that in the chat, Sean has added that the next forum is going to be April 12th at 7:00 PM and has given a link. So I just wanted to call that out. And also, Molly has noted that City Green is a funder of the Double Bucks program at Newark Beth Israel.

- Thanks, Molly.

- Great. Are there any other questions that anybody has? All right. I'm going to give everybody five minutes back to their day, but I would love to thank both of you so much for coming.

I think this has been a great chat and it's been fun to watch the two of you discuss these things because I can see how the networks of the IHC program just sort of percolate into new things and it's great. So, thank you for both demonstrating that and also showing us all the great work that you've been doing in your projects. We really appreciate you and your time. I would also like to thank Allison again for being here as our interpreter.

Thank you very much. We really appreciate you. And I would like to finally thank the Division of Disability Services for their ongoing support in this process. So, thank you all again for your attendance and have a wonderful day.

- Thank you.

- Cheers for Division of Disability Services.

- Yeah.

- Yes.

- Yeah.

[End]