

Evesham Township: Striving for a Fully Inclusive Municipality

Video Transcript

- [Rebecca] So, welcome. We're happy to have you here today. My name is Rebecca Martin, and I'm a graduate assistant at 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 the IHC academy trainings.

We are thrilled to have you today and to be joined by Mayor Jacqueline Veasy and Councilwoman Heather Cooper from Evesham Township, who are going to talk to us about their community mission to build a community that's centering disability inclusion work to create a community that works for all people who live there.

Before we begin, I have a few notes that I need to go over. One is that we'd like to make you aware that we'll be recording today's training. We have enabled captions, as I said, and if I become aware that an interpreter has joined, then I will put it in the chat so that you can find her or him. And then, there will be time for questions and answers toward the end of our conversation today.

You can feel free to add any questions that come up for you in the chat, or you can also hold them till the end. That's up to you. And given your interest in today's training, we'd like to send you some updates about IHC trainings, if that's okay. Then you don't need to do anything, but if you would like to be removed from that list, then please give me an email or leave me a message in the chat and I'll put my email in the chat in a moment.

One moment. Okay, screen reader-accessible slides for today's presentation are available. I sent out the link this morning, in case you'd like to download them, but I'll also put the link in the chat in a moment.

And then, finally, I'd like to take a moment to express our deep appreciation to Peri Nearon and her team at the New Jersey Division of Disability Services, hi, Peri, for making this training series and the IHC grants program possible. Thank you so much. So now without further ado, I'm going to turn it over to Mayor Jackie Veasy, and she's going to tell us about Evesham's inclusive municipality.

Thanks.

- [Mayor Veasy] Hi, everyone. Welcome to this webinar tonight. We're honored to be here with you. We're just going to give one minute because we do have a PowerPoint slide, so our team's going to share their screen with the PowerPoint. Okay. So, this is Evesham Township.

I love the picture of this drone. It's right in the center of our Main Street area. If you want to go to the next slide, Rob, we are... Just a little overview about Evesham Township, we have just under 50,000 residents in Evesham. We are the largest municipality in Burlington County, and there's 40 towns within Burlington County. We have many different types of residents.

And I've been in office since 2019, and what we determined back in 2019 is that we have a lot of residents who like to be involved and they like to be included in discussions, and this is all ranges of residents from babies to seniors. We have a very active senior citizen community.

So, what we wanted to do was to form several groups and commissions that could help give feedback to us as to how we can make our community better for all residents. So, we included our Shade Tree Commission into our Environmental Commission to make sure that they were being heard.

We reseeded our Historical Commission because our history is very strong in Evesham Township. We've been around since the 1600s, and everyone wanted to make sure we were preserving our history in our downtown area, especially all throughout the community. And as we've grown and learned, there's a lot of history here in Evesham that we didn't even know, that I didn't know.

So we're continuing to learn. We established, and this was one of the biggest things that we did, a Disability and Veterans Advisory Board. So, 20% of our community either is in the disability or veterans category, and that was a huge need that was being underserved in our community, and it was something that I saw right away in 2019. So, we formed a group of volunteers that work to help guide our actions on council for all of our residents who have a disability or who have served as a veteran.

And sometimes, they work together, the disabilities, and a lot of veterans have disabilities. And then we had a Senior Citizen Advisory Board, but they weren't as active as it felt like they could be. So we got them a little bit more active as well, and to serve them, which a lot of senior citizens, as you know, have a disability or are also veterans.

So, kind of all works hand in hand. We also have an Economic Advisory Board and a Human Rights Advisory Committee. And just recently, we have connected the Human Rights Advisory Committee to work hand in hand with our Disability and Veterans Advisory Board, because as we've learned through this whole process, that Councilwoman Cooper will definitely tell you more about, we've learned that human rights and disability rights go hand in hand with each other, so the Human Rights Advisory Committee, as well as the Disability and Veterans Advisory Board, are working together this year.

They have in the past, but it's official this year, to make sure that we're handling everyone in our community with equal access to all events and everything that we do. So, if you want to go to the next slide, the question, though that we had was, after creating so many boards, are we really inclusive?

And what does inclusive really mean? And as we've continued to work together, we wanted to really look into what does it mean to be an inclusive community? How are we serving everyone who lives in our community, and how can we do it better? And not just do it better, but make a foundation for leading us to the future so that we set standards that we're always thinking about how to be truly inclusive and include everyone in everything that we have to offer in our community.

And like I said, I will thank Councilwoman Cooper, who has served as the deputy mayor for four years prior to this year, and we rotate through in our council. But as deputy mayor, she taught me with her background how we could do better, and how we could push to be better. So, I'm going to turn it over to Heather now, and she's going to take it from here to talk about what it means to be an inclusive community and how we work towards the Inclusive Healthy Community grant and what we did with that information that we had.

So, Heather.

- [Councilwoman Cooper] Thank you, Mayor. Hello, everyone. I'm excited to be here, and thank you, again, Rebecca, for the opportunity. A lot of what we learned as we established the Disability and Veterans Advisory Board was that people who were underrepresented or their voices were not heard, we didn't hear from. Having a strong senior advisory group, a few other areas, we have Environmental Commission, we have planning boards, we have boards that are advisory in nature that do the business of the town, which maybe focuses on traditional infrastructure.

And in local government, there are documents that start to guide what the town should look like and the planning for the town into the future. And so what we learned quickly through a series of surveys and interviews with the people that we knew we were going to try to access and talk to, was that how we communicate to each other was what was deficient.

And so a lot of what we had to identify first was who could help us get this information out, and while Evesham is made up of businesses and community members, civic organizations, our schools, our fire department, we have a municipal utility authority, what could we, as a municipality and local government control in terms of who we could reach out to, what impact we could have, and we knew we had to start with the local government itself and the municipality itself, and that included our employees, that included the members that made up all of the advisory boards.

And so, establishing that Disability and Veterans Advisory Board was our way of adding that additional layer of family members, individuals themselves who experience a disability, and other members who might work in field, community providers, those types of people were also then included in that as well. So, what we had to do was think about how we communicate with each other.

And a part of the survey we did with CQL, which is... I'm going to screw up the definition of the name, but they are a surveyor organization that focuses on quality improvement, quality of service delivery to providers all across the country.

So, how we communicate and the ways in which we communicate, and how we even describe people and label people was one of the first things that we asked them to ask people about, and that was our employees. We also asked people what physical barriers did they feel like they faced in our communities, specifically the facilities in a municipality.

We have sports facilities, libraries, our municipal building itself. And so we did also ask people what did they feel like was in the way, our courtroom, our bathrooms, just basic spaces that we take for granted and use on a regular basis. And then what we wanted to also ensure is that as we're going through this experience, we received the IHC Grant with several hundred thousand...it was \$100,000...

so, several thousand dollars, so we're like, how can we, as government, work with private sector and make sure that these policies and procedures are going

to improve the quality of life and also be sustainable? Right, we just didn't want to put up some great pictures, say some great things to people, have some groups, but we wanted it to be a sustainable practice.

So, next slide we can go to can start to talk about the things that we did. So, not only did we work with CQL, if people are familiar with or not, here's some of the things that we did. So, we applied for the Inclusive Community grant from the state, and we wanted to develop a permanent inclusive component of what is known as the Township's Master Plan for individuals who experience disabilities.

The Master Plan, again, is the planning document for future growth and development of a town. We wanted to also identify a permanent inclusion component so that as people in the future are writing policies, designing future buildings or infrastructure, all of our facilities also have the same information, and people with disabilities are always included in all elements of development.

Because these are generational changes, so when we have capital budgets as a town, we look at use of life over a 20-year span. When the town goes through experiences, evolution, and growth, we have to consider all the people that live there and make up the town.

And what I have found in my years of working professionally career, that people experience disabilities across every ethnicity, religion, age group, and so on, and so when we're making changes, we want to make sure that the voice of people in this particular group are not left behind. And that matters from the physical components present on our boards that we have participate in all areas.

So, this was really just beyond accessibility in a physical sense. This included all elements. We can go to the next slide. So, go back. Can you go back to the collaborative slide?

So, this particular slide is a reflection of a story that we created with an organization called The Collaborative, which these stories and pathways that we wanted to create about what was important to us as an inclusive town, we built through this experience of community surveys and community meetings.

So, we did online surveys that were sent out, like, in a Google... Why can I not think of the word? These Google surveys that went out. They went out to everyone in town. It went out to the schools, it went out to as many people we

could reach through email, social media, all of these discussions that we had out here, thank you, in how we did the community surveys.

So, they were township employees, general public, caregivers, provider-managed organizations, family members were all included. We did the community meetings in Zoom and in person. We were still coming out of COVID, right? And then not only did we do the surveys but the results of the surveys, then we had second rounds of community meetings so that we could talk to people about what was important.

So, we did all that. That took some time. We had a strong, very strict guideline, but also flexible, I will say, with our grant, but it helped us stay on track to move the conversations forward about what we wanted to accomplish. We know that the Pinelands also is a part of some of the IHC grant funding, and some of the information was overlapping because Evesham is a town that is made up of a lot of Pinelands areas.

And what we heard from people was about accessibility, especially in light of COVID, into our parks, our open space. We heard that the design of some of our bathrooms, our outdoor facilities were not walkable. We heard that closed captioning was not something we did as a town, and here, we've gone through almost a year and a half of COVID and we're like, "Oh, my gosh, did we not remember that this was important, sign language interpreters having people in the right spaces to help translate information?"

Really easy in local government to forget these very basic things that are happening, we hope, all across the country, right? They should be fundamental. Making sure people have multiple ways to communicate. And I think, through the pandemic, it increased our awareness of this, by having to be remote and not being with each other in the same way.

So, the simple things, so I'll say simple, but in local government, some implementation ideas can be very complex, and inclusivity meant that people had to be involved and they had to tell us what was important and what we did not remember, and those were actually hard conversations because having worked in the field myself over 30 years, and then to know that here in the government that we would think would be, you know, in 2023, we were forgetting fundamental things like having ADA designated areas in our council meeting and in our courtroom, so if somebody who uses a wheelchair to get around could have a seat in a comfortable place.

Those were immediate changes that we were able to make, the closed captioning via livestream and Zoom meetings, working towards interpreters when people convey that they might need that for, let's say public meetings, any of our public meetings. Those recommendations also started to be laid out into our Master Plan, which, Mayor, maybe you could comment a little bit about the elements of the Master Plan and what it's important to capture, if I could ask that from you.

- So, the Master Plan is the planning document that oversees the entire community. So, when we are making recommendations as a township for new buildings or for parks or anything that has to do with what the look and feel of the town is, that is part of the Master Plan of the town.

So, one thing that we knew we could definitely update and make better and stronger to help make sure that we were being completely inclusive was the Master Plan, because that is a planning document for our community as a whole. So, it does relate to mostly government-owned properties, municipal properties, but it also is part of a planning document.

If someone was to go to the planning board, would have certain regulations in there that would fit with our Master Plan as to how we would like our community to be. This is a very large document. It's not even a document, it's more a group of documents that all come together that we work off of. So, some examples of elements of the Master Plan are the Open Space and Recreation Plan, the Fair Share Housing Plan or COAH Plan.

All of that is all part of it. We have a Downtown Plan. All of that, when put together, makes up the Master Plan. So, you can't walk into a township building and be like, "Can I have the Master Plan?" Because it's not how it works. It's, like, hundreds, thousands of pages of documents. But elements of the Master Plan can be updated regularly and then prepared and looked at for review.

And every 10 to 12 years, the Master Plan gets updated so that it can be inclusive. So, we're kind of in our phase right now of updating our Master Plan.

- Thank you, Mayor. And so, the beginning planning for the Pilot Program initiated those elements as we shared, and they will be incorporated into the Master Plan. The other areas, and you could put the collaborative map, again, that was a story map, all of these elements and these things which, you know, are picture-based and tell the story about the things we want to do leads us to inclusion.

And then the inclusion elements from here also include walkable spaces in our Black Run Preserve, which is one of our largest parcels to our formerly known as Beagle Club open space land that are walkable spaces that people want to be able to access in a safe way. Having park areas that are accessible, have accessible swings, even walking paths that people can get to the swings in the park, that was a lot of what came up.

We also heard that even things like our bathrooms need to have changing stations for people who are adults that have caregivers that need to help them and assist them in the restrooms. We heard that people want to feel included and their voice heard at areas like advisory, let's say, Youth Advisory Committee we have, or our Environmental Commission, that there's a voice at the table.

We also have a Human Rights Advisory Committee as the Mayor may have touched on that is working this year with our Veterans and Disability Group to ensure that all human rights are heard and included and also seen in a reflection of the town. And the ways in which they're seen, we talk a little bit further, that inclusivity model is that someone who might be neurodiverse could work and have a job in the township, somebody who might have various ethnicities or their gender might be different, like whatever that inclusive element of their life is, we want to make sure that that inclusion is felt in the town.

And that statement there about inclusion, about living full life and learning to live together in community, celebrating all our diversity, welcoming the gifts of everyone included for us a part two to this IHC grant. We were awarded a grant that helps us support employment for people in the municipality, and it was done in a pilot manner to serve high school students or people between ages of 18 and 21 to have workplace, let's say, practice, readiness...job readiness, excuse me, and potentially even a full-time job at some of our programs.

We're a large town, as the mayor mentioned, we have over 14 departments of varying responsibilities or jobs that somebody could take on. And so we worked with the grant, the dollars, so the person could also be competitively paid to work either in the clerk's office, at our golf course, working.

We have, let's see, the tax collector office, the tax assessor office, finance, a department of public works, like, all elements of what makes up a municipality that someone would be able to experience and have exposure to what it would be like to work in those settings.

And so for us, that was the huge representation of inclusion. And as well as I had mentioned, too, and I talked a little bit of this about... at the League of Municipalities, the Mayor and I did a presentation there, that this inclusivity was just a further expansion, when we came into office in 2019, to make sure that we have a diverse workforce, our workforce that represented and was the public-facing employees.

We're not always reflective of the town, and so our township manager is the first Latino male in our town, I'm pretty sure, is the manager. We have several members of our police force now. That has been a big initiative to make sure there's a diverse workforce.

We are a police force that has diverse women. They took an initiative and challenge called 30x30 to have 30 women at least employed over a period of time commitment that our police force has taken on. We have people of color, nationalities, cultures that represent the town itself as well.

And with the changing workforce that's been evolving, and the generational change, attrition, retirements, post-COVID world, it was really important to ensure inclusivity was long-lasting in as many places that we could oversee and manage and give guidance for.

So, the Mayor has a huge wellness initiative and campaign that she's done going on the fifth year now, and our wellness includes inclusion in so many ways. We are a town that has over 600 participants in a sports unity program. They were a lot of our surveyors and talked about what it was important, and what we heard from a lot of people about what they want, and it's the same thing that the average human being would want.

And you can see again, what people want, those simple things, someone to love, somewhere to live, somewhere to work and something to hope for. So, Mayor, if you'd like to give further comments on some of those areas I touched on. But when we talk about being inclusive, we mean it. We get the feedback from all of our advisory boards and they just keep us very busy. We're a very thriving town in these elements.

We are working towards further surveys, looking at more of the details of the implementation based on the surveys and working those into our Recreation and Open Space Plan, working it into even our capital budget, and then our future budgets in the years to come, just to make sure that we're always budgeting, always thinking about is there a cost associated with inclusion?

Where are those spaces that we can impact? You know, do we need to make sure that items, I think, in our community center...were the latest changes, needing automatic doors, making sure elevators work, like, just those fine details each employee is charged with examining. And I think the last future kind of next steps, which is always ongoing, is to make sure that the language in all of our policies and ordinances in local government are person-centered language.

That we're not describing people in a disrespectful way or antiquated even, because, right, it's always changing how people want to be described. So, making sure that our language use when we have conversations with people as well as the documents all reflect that inclusion as well. I think that's the best thing government could do in being an example to their community is that level of respect is captured in every element of the work that we do.

So, Mayor, I'll just turn it back to you if there's further comments on some of the inclusion topics that I shared.

- Yes, I will follow up and wrap it up for us, I guess, and then we can turn over to questions. But the biggest thing is that when we talk about inclusion, we don't want to just talk about how do we make things ADA accessible. And I think that's the part that everyone just goes back to, like, oh, we have the ADA accessible parking, we have this, we have that, but really making sure that when we talk about inclusion, that people feel, and the word says it, included, and that you're thinking about every person who lives in town and all the different abilities or disabilities that they may have.

Our Disabilities and Veterans Board, last year, celebrated Abilities Awareness Month, and we talked about, you know, there might be a disability, but it's not a disability, it's an ability for something else. So, how can we celebrate everyone's abilities and what do they bring to our community and making sure that they're all taken care of in the same manner? And that's what we are trying to do, and it's like we've only touched the surface of it at this point, and I'm continuing to learn.

And like I said, I appreciate Councilwoman Cooper and many other people who've come forward, who volunteer their time to make us better. And we're going to continue to work towards just being the most inclusive community that we can be and serving everyone who lives there. So, thank you everybody for listening.

We'll answer any questions that we can in regards to this, but I do want to say thank you to IHC and the grant because it really did help push us through some of the process that we were trying to get through when we started and when we first started talking, and then to where we were able to be today. So, thank you, everyone.

- Thank you, both, so much. This was so great and informative. I really appreciate you walking us through the process and all the changes that you're working to make. It was really great. We do have a question in the chat, which I think you may have started to address. So, there was interest in whether... Let me see.

It's Evesham? Is that the right way? Okay, I'm working on it.

- Yes.

- Evesham Township completed a municipal transition plan, the ADA transition plan. Is that something that the township has done?

- I'll let Heather answer because...

- Okay. So, that is completed. Our engineers complete one every time, like, there's development in the town, like, whether it's road work. Unless there's some specific ADA plan that's specific to municipalities, the manager could speak to, but those are required at every time there is a change to any of our facilities or structure.

And so, Rob, are you aware of one that's done as a whole as a municipality? Because my understanding is it's done anytime that there's a change as a part of our engineering process.

- [Robert] Oh, you're correct. Exactly what you says.

- So, we do it more than just once, we do it frequently. Yeah, I saw that question there, but in terms of government, sometimes they're specific, but if somebody wants to share more information with us... And I see that there's also...

- Yeah, I just want to say, Heather, they sent a link, so I don't know if we're answering [inaudible]. Oh, sorry, I was muted. I was saying I see there's a link there, and I'm not 100% sure to say that we can answer this question fully if we know a municipal transfer, but I know we do review everything anytime we make any changes, so we'll take a look at it.

- Yeah, yeah.

- Thank you. I have another question within my private chat, which is, could you take a moment to discuss how a municipality could take your model to create, like, a state-wide level consciousness that compels DEI in New Jersey? They would love to hear your ideas about how you could make this happen.

- Mayor, you want me to take a crack at that? I would love to say that. So, I've been so passionate about DEI because it's a hot topic, but what I find sometimes is that topic gets watered down, and all of the conversations that I'm hearing, I'm not hearing, or very rarely do I hear the topic of people with disabilities being discussed.

And to me, I think that should be in every single conversation when we say DEI, and to me, equality is different than equity and people forget that. I started to do some adjunct teaching myself on this and learned a whole lot about what's missed. And I'm so excited that you're saying that, and I would say, easily, we could take the model if it was structured out into...you know, PowerPoints are great, but I think there needs to be community conversations and that people who have experienced this can tell their story, because I think stories, and I know stories are very powerful, about what's worked.

And as a town, I feel like we are telling a story and making some historical changes. I know that in places in South Jersey, they have done similar models. That's actually what I had followed and learned about, that they were employing people experienced disabilities competitively, which is not common, by a program where they have created almost, like, a pipeline of transition from, let's say...I don't like to call them day programs, but I know it's like job training, job coaching center that would prepare job readiness for certain areas in government, and then the person could have the opportunity to work on a part-time basis in local government in a few towns in South Jersey.

And so, as I was thinking about that, and I knew there were grants available for competitive employment, I had asked the mayor if we could take this idea on. But more than just my thoughts, it was based on, out of the 10% of people who do experience disabilities saying, "Did you guys know this didn't exist here?" Or "Did you know this was missing?"

These very fundamental elements, like I said, were just not a part of it, but also what was missing was the conversations about how we talk about people that experience disabilities. And I think that it's uncomfortable for people, but I

think when we just lay out labels, like, that could be another element of this training that we could do for municipalities is what do your documents look like?

How are we talking about people? What do your staff who interact with the public every day know about someone who might be deaf, who might experience blindness, who might use a wheelchair to get around? You know, if they can't even get through the door of your municipality, you probably have a problem. So, I think you can keep it simple because it feels so overwhelming, is to always first look at facilities and structure and look at your documents.

And from there, I think the awareness just builds because it's things people never really thought about, and I think that's a great model that could be duplicated and it should be discussed under the branch of DEI in that there's inclusion. But you have to always look at what's your demographics of people that you represent in a town, and try not to forget anyone's voice because if we are missing one person from the conversation, we're still not doing the right job.

So, this has been the lesson for us over the last four years, and we know we're going to keep growing these ideas. The mayor sits on the Economic Advisory Council, and I haven't brought it to her yet, but we're going to see how we can help businesses also incorporate these same ideas that we're discussing. So, it could be a one, two, three-part series, it could be a series of conversations, but I think anything that would bring the awareness for people to create change could be replicated.

- Thank you. I do have a few more questions in the chat. So, one asked, what data is being assessed from the council on quality and leadership to monitor outcomes?

- So, what data? Was that the question?

- Yes. What data from CQL is being utilized to monitor your outcomes? And I guess...

- That's a great question.

- If any question I ask, it's not very clear what I'm asking, feel free to unmute and clarify, if you're the asker, but...

- [Allison] Hi, this is Alison. I work for the Long Term Care Ombudsman's office on MFP I Choose Home. So, we are very interested in community integration

for the folks transitioning to the community. And thank you all for speaking. So, my question is really...I'm the quality specialist, so I always think about, like, how are you tracking the improvements that you're doing are making the impact that you hope that they're intended to make?

- I'm going to let Heather speak, too, but I would assume since we only actually just started to make changes, that in a couple of years, we would do another one of these types of surveys. So, that's what I like to do as, like, a five-year plan. So, you do something five years, and then five years, you reassess.

So, that's what I'm thinking. I don't know, Heather, if you had a different plan on this. Heather has been the lead on this project.

- Because I'm, like, obsessed with making sure that it happens. So, thank you, Allison, for the question. And on the Council on Quality and Leadership, CQL, thank you for who put that in the chat... Like, my brain has to shift into coming out of acronyms. Our survey is on their website. If you go to their search, go to their website and do the search engine 'Evesham," the survey comes up, and it talks a lot about...

Like, the survey that they did was giving us guidance on what elements we should work towards and focus on. And so, like I said, the tangible measures were the things we could quickly fix, you know, so the things that we'll reflect on and say how many pieces in our Master Plan, like, that will be, to the mayor's point, I agree wholeheartedly, what we'll measure and look back on to study the impact is do more people who experienced disabilities sit on our boards, and have we included them as members in our documents.

Are more people feeling like they can access the facilities in a municipality because there's now space for them to be there? So, that would be the next measure. So, some of the analysis is just subjective in terms of data. It's not like we're taking data on a number of people that walk through the door and can now, you know, use their wheelchair.

That would be great if we had some measure of that, but I think the surveys are the best way to kind of reflect back and say, okay, we asked you to do this two years ago, do you feel that we are more accessible? And here's the things we did. And that will guide us, to some level. I think that people sometimes... And I get in CQL, like, they are the quantitative analysis data professionals by every means.

So, that data will still be subjective because it'll be hard to measure, but I think overall, what we hear on a regular basis is that people feel included when they're here in Evesham. People hear a culture of inclusivity when they say, "I love Evesham because..." And even people who don't live on our town, who maybe are watching from afar, there is a constant reminder of "You guys have really gotten more inclusive."

So again, subjective input, but we're really proud of that. We probably, at some point, can measure the number of documents we changed, how many, you know, sections of our Master Plan we've changed, how many parks we've made accessible. We'll be able to measure that way, but those are based on what we set out to survey and heard from would be those elements.

And I hope that's helpful, but CQL, they put the full analysis there and hopefully that might give you a little more details.

- Thank you. Councilwoman, I know that you have a long history professionally of working in the disability field and that you're very passionate about this. I was wondering if you could talk a little bit about why, with a background like this, you still found it beneficial to work with a disability strong...The Collaborative, but your consultant... I can't find my word, but can you talk about why someone who does have a disability background and expertise would want to engage a consultant like this to do this work?

- That's a great question. I would've ran every meeting if I could've myself, but I think that I am biased. And so, I'm very passionate about the work, yes, indeed, and have worked with organizations like The Collaborative and CQL, but I think it was important that it was someone that could help guide us in our storytelling that was not a part of the town because, that way, they have a different lens to see what's really happening.

I might think we're doing really great, the Mayor might think, like, "Oh, we're doing really great. We're having all these conversations." But it allows for perhaps more authentic or genuine feedback as well, because the reality is we're still government. We still wear those titles. And while people might know my background, they might perceive me in a different light standing before them or be more reserved to share openly about these topics.

Because again, like I said, I think while most people experience disabilities, it's all right out there, right? You can't really... There are hidden disabilities, let me be clear, but it's uncomfortable for people to share openly and especially to give feedback to government what they think could be better.

I think that's not common. And look, the Mayor has facilitated a very participatory government, and having people involved. So, having a third-party entity guide those conversations, I think allow it to be more authentic and open.

- Thank you so much. I see that Arlene Romoff has her hand raised. Arlene, if you'd like to unmute. Arlene, I...

- [Arlene] Yeah.

- Oh, there you are.

- Oh, there we go. I was waiting for the video to come up and it did. Okay, thank you. I am involved with advocacy for people with hearing loss, and so that's what brings me to this event, and it's really great listening to you all and the passion that you bring to this subject. I myself, am deaf.

I'm a late-deafened adult, lost my hearing in my late teens, and after 25 years, cochlear implants became available and I've had my cochlear implants for 25 years. So I bring a very long history on the past president and co-founder of the Hearing Loss Association of America's New Jersey State Association.

We have a very good and strong state association. Okay, I just put a article in the chat, it's from AARP, just to give you the credentials there, that the ADA requires assistive listening systems in places of public accommodation. So, your meeting rooms, your courtrooms, all community centers, those all are supposed to have assisted listening systems, okay?

The system of choice, and this comes from the national HLAA, Hearing Loss Association of America, that induction loops provide are the best accommodation for assisted listening systems for people with hearing loss. That is because all cochlear implants and most hearing aids have what we call a T-coil.

And when you go into a looped room, all you need to do is put your T-coil on, and whatever is spoken into the microphone goes straight into your device. Now, the reason this is the preferred technology, there are two whethers, FM and infrared, and there are other things with Bluetooth coming around, but they're not really available to the large masses just yet, but all induction loops are.

They've been in Europe for decades, decades, and my first hearing aid in 1972 had a T-coil, so this is not brand new technology, but let me tell you, I bring a

passion here because it works. Your meeting rooms in Washington, DC are all looped.

Why? You're a legislator with the hearing aid, you go into the meeting, you turn it on. And I just wanted to point out that your veterans have a large proportion of hearing loss because they were around blasting/bombing, and it shows. And they get their hearing aids from the VA, Veterans Administration, and those hearing aids can have T-coils, and they know about that.

And seniors, your population with hearing loss with seniors, 25% over the age of 60 have a hearing loss, and 50% over the age of 75 have a hearing loss. Do seniors want to be outspoken about their hearing loss? No, they do not.

Would they like to walk into a room that's looped, turn on their T-coil and participate with ease? Yes. And I have "lived experience." I've been involved with some townships and their people with hearing loss. I'm involved with the people, and I know two people, specific individuals that came in contact with me, that were active in their civic township/ municipality, went to council meetings, but when they started losing their hearing aids, they dropped out.

If there had been loops in those council rooms, they would've gone in, turned their little switch, not told anybody, not seeing a, "Hey, have a hearing loss." Never going to happen. And able to participate with dignity and effectiveness. And I'll leave you with this personal passionate recommendation.

I was in the Rayburn Building in a disability advocacy conference, and we had Tammy Duckworth come in and Jamie Raskin come in. And I turned on the T-coil of my cochlear implant, and I heard everything that was spoken into those panelists' microphones crystal clear, beyond what I ever imagined, because what's being picked up by the microphone, for somebody with a cochlear implant, it doesn't turn back to sound, it just goes straight to my brain.

And I was blown away. And because of that conference, I have become passionate about looping systems. And we did get our grants last year to loop in various counties that was put out. We're hoping to get that in the budget again this year, so that counties can participate.

And what we call it, let's get in the loop, and it's really the technology of choice. And you can see by AARP, this is right off the hot press here in March that they put an article about looping, and that's because it's the real deal.

And depending on size, it's affordable.

- Arlene, thank you so much for sharing about this. I know how passionate you are about this. And I would like to give a plug that Arlene is going to be speaking at a virtual accessibility fair that we're going to have March 21st. So I'm going to put the link in that, if you'd like to register. And then, Heather, I'll let you answer. Sorry about that.

- It's fine. Oh, thank you. Yeah, yeah. I appreciate. Yeah, thank you. I'm taking notes on that. So, one of our Disability Veterans Advisory Board members is somebody who's a part of the deaf community and has hearing aids that are starting to fail him, and he might have to get surgery.

Like, it's been challenging for him. He's a good friend of myself and the Mayor's and a huge advocate for the town and as many realms. And I have a young lady who works where I work during my day job, because for those who don't know, these are part-time jobs for us, so we're on our lunch hour today, the Mayor and I.

But she uses hearing aids at work, and she was here for four years before I was, and always struggled to take phone calls. And one conversation with our IT department, and he Bluetoothed all her calls right into her hearing aids, and it was as if her whole life changed.

Like, she's the happiest employee, nothing could upset her. And so, just one small adjustment, one small accessible support does make a difference for people in the deaf community. I wholeheartedly agree with all the points made. We are working on our hearing loops and giving people access because we know we have many spaces that the reverberation of sound off of walls or the older facilities, the echoes can all impact hearing aids.

And we do get that feedback often. So, we've been working to identify what our library system can help us access. And if you have other resources, I know the Mayor would love to hear about them, and we could work on that. So, we'll look for that webinar, or look for you at the health fair, Rebecca.

- Definitely. Absolutely.

- If it's something we can attend, that would be great.

- That's why I come to these, and that's why you want me here.

- Sure, yeah.

- This is gold, and we will all...

- Sure.

- We have the same objective.

- Yeah, and, like, I want you to know that there are strong advocates in Evesham for the same purpose. And we also...a part of our grant, there was an organization... We hadn't heard from them, right, there, that they're part of an organization that supports people who are in the deaf community as well, who are willing to come out and do free surveys for us to see, like, what we could do better.

That was a part of our phase two as well. But we are trying to, of course, implement the easiest things, as they references, low-hanging fruit, but just things that we could easily correct and make better. So, we know there's plenty more work to be done, and having access to as many resources in our town, we need that.

So, thank you.

- You're welcome. You're welcome.

- Okay, we have time for one more question, if anybody would like to. I was wondering if you could talk just a little bit about any collaboration that occurred with the Pinelands or anyone else in your region, just a little bit about how that came to be and how you're expanding your network in that way.

- Want me to, Mayor, or you want to take that? Okay, so we have...

- I was going to say, I could start it, but you're better at explaining it. But we have a good relationship with the Pinelands Preservation Alliance, who was the group that actually also received an IHC grant in the same cohort as us. So, it did work well together because half the town is located in the Pinelands area, and we work with them on other initiatives when we're trying to improve our highlands part of our town.

And one of the biggest things there is our Black Run Preserve, which is a public park, which became very popular during COVID. We saw how the need was there, but one of our biggest challenges is that it is not accessible for people. And so, the Pinelands noticed that with many of their parks, that they're not accessible, just the terrain, you know, pine needles, everything, the way that it's set up, sand.

And so we worked collaboratively with them because we could work to say we have a park here. We're also going for the same initiative as far as making everything inclusive and accessible to all of our residents. So, we did work with them. But, Heather, I don't know if you have more information in regards to where their project went once we did some conversations with them.

- Okay. Thank you, Mayor. That was perfect, perfectly said. The one thing the Mayor... she has the ability to give the full vision, and then I get passionate about the details. So we work really well together that way. Thank you. What I remember is that before we even applied for the IHC grant, we applied for a grant to expand parking areas that were accessible as a way for people to have access to kind of roll into the space.

But we know that our friends of Black Run Preserve, which is a nonprofit organization that helps... They're the stewards of the land, that there are conversations from the township end to expand trailways that are accessible and that people can move through, and also, even to find if...

One place that the Pinelands had, they're like specialty chairs that people can roll through the trailways. So, whether it's widening them for a traditional wheelchair to get through, or specialty chairs that somebody could rent or borrow as they make their way through, that was one element.

Also, looking at virtual tours of people cannot make it out or they're not mobile, they would have accessibility that way. And then just providing any support that they need. Sometimes, nonprofit entities need partnerships with government to apply for grants. And so, we have a grant writer that's very strong in our town, as you can see from the work that we're getting done, to help us in that way.

But we stay in regular communication with the Pinelands and observe and watch and participate in whatever we can to make sure we're supporting their efforts to make our open space areas that exist in Evesham or anywhere in Burlington County accessible for all in many realms.

- Thank you. And I see that Peri has a question.

- [Peri] Well, not a question. I just wanted to add something. I know we're out of time, but I wanted to just mention that, so what the Pinelands has done is they've gone on to write a proposal to the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation that they're hoping will be funded, and we are also working directly with them and Duke Farms and the Bloustein School on access to nature and putting

together a conference for October, and then hopefully lots of other steps around that to really begin to concretely look at access to nature, you know, as a kind of an issue on its own.

So, I just wanted to throw that out there for anybody that has interest in that area. There will be more to come on that. And just to say that this was a wonderful presentation, and just really super interesting and love your commitment to this. And I hope that other people found this, you know, as helpful as I did, really informative.

So, thank you, Heather and Mayor. Thank you so much.

- Thank you very much. Yeah, I'm seeing already in my chat people are saying great things. So, thank you, and thank you, Peri. And we are in fact at time. It's been a wonderful time today. Thank you, both, so much for sharing all of this with us. We really appreciate it.

And thank you, Robert, for your tech assistance. I also would like to thank the Division of Disability Services, as always, for supporting us in making this training and also the grant program possible. Thank you again, Mayor and Councilwoman. We really appreciate your time today.

- Thank you so much.

- And everyone...

- Thank you.

- Thank you so much. Take care.