>> Stacy: Good afternoon everyone, and welcome to RespectAbility's second webinar on how people with disabilities can become more engaged in their communities, both during election season, and in general. My name is Stacy Cervenka. I am the Senior Director of Policy here at RespectAbility. And I work with Congressional offices, federal agencies, and state legislatures to expand possibilities for people with -- or expand opportunities for people with disabilities through bills, legislation, laws, regulations, and other means. We also work with the grassroots disability community to lift up the disabled vote, and ensure that people with disabilities know how to become engaged in their communities, and make change on the local, state and national level. Before we get started today, I wanted to put in a quick plug for RespectAbility's National Leadership Program which is our paid internship or paid fellowship program, that is for early career professionals who have an interest in working in a variety of fields, including media, entertainment, communications, marketing, public policy and civic engagement, faith inclusion, workforce development and leadership -- a variety of fields. If you are a college graduate who is looking to break into any of these fields and have an interest in -- essentially a paid internship, you may want to check it out at RespectAbility.org. That's RespectAbility.org. And if you go to the main menu, you can find the National Leadership Program and hopefully you'll apply. So the first thing I'd like to do is to introduce our panelists. So why don't we start with Rostom?

>> Rostom: Hello everyone my name is Rostom --

>> Stacy: [crosstalk] When you introduce yourselves, turn your video on. Sorry.

>> Rostom: Hello everyone, I'm Rostom Dadian, the Senior Associate of Policy at RespectAbility. It's great to be with everybody today.

>> Stacy: Angel?

>> Angel: Hi everyone, I am Angel Ponce. I am director of MOPD -- Mayor's Office for People with Disabilities in Houston. My pronouns are he/him. I'm a Hispanic man, salt and pepper short beard, I have a white T-shirt on today and a black blazer, and I'm happy to be here with all of you.

>> Stacy: And Lydia?

>> Lydia: Hello all, this is Lydia X.Z. Brown. I am a youngish East Asian person with short black hair and glasses. I am wearing a mask. I am sitting inside and there's artwork on the walls behind me in a very, like, neatly lit modern space. I use they/them pronouns, and I am currently the Director of Public Policy at the National Disability Institute.

>> Stacy: Excellent. Well, thank you so much for being here today. The first question I wanted to ask each of you, and we'll start with different people each question, I guess this first one, we'll. start with you, Lydia. What barriers do you think people from marginalized communities, specifically people with disabilities, face when they seek to get involved in community activism, and what are some of the things that can be done to eliminate or mitigate these barriers?

>> Lydia: This is Lydia. The barriers that marginalized people face when attempting to become involved in civic engagement or in community activism all boil down to one major issue, and that is an issue of access. This cuts across all types of experiences of access, whether it is what we in the disability community commonly think of in terms of inaccessible transportation, inaccessible website materials, inaccessible organizing methods, inaccessible language, inaccessible tools or techniques or expectations for what kinds of labor a person must perform in order to be active. And it also structures beyond that type of access to include difficulty in accessing child care for parents, or for people respond responsible for caretaking for older relatives, or people with disabilities who are also caretakers for other people with disabilities. It can be access in terms of financial access -- the cost of taking time away from paid work in order to be involved civically outside of one's job, if you were not already paid to do it. It can be financial barriers in terms of having to pay more for accessible or reliable transportation. It can be cost of having to move from one area to another in the course of -- in the course of one's life in order to access opportunity. It can be access in terms of barriers put up around expectations or assumptions that somebody must have certain professional experience or educational attainment in order to be involved in a certain way, and that many people, whether because of class or disability or race or gender or sexuality might face compounded barriers to those opportunities because of systematic discrimination and prejudice, as well as lack of equitable access to economic resources and financial stability that can make it that much more difficult to be able to avail ourselves of those opportunities. And it can also be access in terms of how those spaces are crafted, and who is assumed to belong within them. And if we are not perceived as the kind of people who ought to belong and participate in those spaces to begin with, then those spaces are designed deliberately to be accessible only to some -- those who are already have been systematically privileged and advantaged to be able to access those spaces -- while those who experience marginalization because of race or disability, gender, class, or otherwise, are systematically removed from, excluded, disappeared, or outright excluded from those spaces.

>> Stacy: Excellent, thank you. Angel do you have anything to add as far as barriers that marginalized people, particularly people with disabilities, face when they seek to get involved in community activism, and things that can be done to -- mitigate or eliminate those barriers?

>> Angel: Absolutely, and Lydia, you hit it right on the spot. Accessibility is a big issue. Transportation is another one. With the population that we work with here in Houston, we're working with non-English speakers a lot of the times, and so I think access to material that is accessible to them is also a big barrier, right? So especially when we're talking about voting and voting rights, we've heard from the community that they don't have access to Spanish material, or a voting guide in Spanish. A lot of the times we've also hear from the community about maybe an accessible format for them from the disability community that are also Spanish speakers, or they speak other languages other than English. And so I think a good way to get around this is to really, as advocates in the community, is to really advocate and engage with folks that are promoting events, such as voting rights, to also include radio and Spanish radio stations, include interviews with folks that are experts in that field. Another thing that I would point out is we get a lot of folks that are blind or low vision that otherwise don't have access to that material, so braille copies can come very helpful, as well as -- I was speaking to one of our Representatives here in the city of Houston, and this person told me about an opportunity to have an e-book available to folks that not just includes a voter's guide, but also other material as to how community members can become more involved. And so I would advocate for things like that.

>> Stacy: Excellent. Rostom, do you have anything to add as far as barriers that exist and what can be done to mitigate or eliminate them?

>> Rostom: I think when we're talking about barriers that exist, one thing that comes to my mind is that when I ran for local office, just dealing with the people in the office that didn't really have any experience with people with disabilities. I got a lot of, like, good job buddy, and I think that the community absolutely has to have access, but we also have to be able to give the people that are in those offices training, and make sure that the people who are in office now understand the needs of the disability community as a whole, and understand that it is their responsibility to be able to give us access, and make sure we have what we need to contribute to the community as well.

>> Stacy: Excellent. Well my next question -- and Angel, we'll start with you -- how do you recommend people with disabilities navigate the process of becoming more involved civically, and specifically running for elected office?

>> Angel: Good question Stacy. One thing that I would recommend for folks to do is to first surround themselves with people that either know a little bit about how to get involved, they're campaigning, or that have some type of experience in that field. If folks are thinking about running for office, this usually means that they are already outspoken, right, about how they feel about about certain topics, and so what I would recommend is don't be afraid to voice your ideas. My recommendation here is to really have a brief elevator pitch of a slogan that people can connect with easily, right? For example, you can say "my name is Angel, I'm running for state representative, and I believe in one two three, and my plan to represent you is by X Y and Z." And so that could be something really short and simple and sweet that would stick to person -- to people. The other thing I would say is to network, network, network. Many -- as many make friends as as you can possibly imagine, right? And so I would think that folks that are interested in running for office is to really surround themselves with people, perhaps in leadership -- positions that have -- that either a disability or that know people with disabilities that are in that area, and this can help folks build political connections, as you can imagine. And so I think that is a really good first step for folks.

>> Stacy: And that is a really good first step, but knowing some of the people who are watching this, maybe people with disabilities who may not have been active civically or in the political process before, and may not know anyone who is involved politically -- I might not know anyone in my family or my circle of friends who is engaged. So Lydia, what are some, I guess, what are some recommendations that you would have for someone with a disability who's looking to get more civically engaged, and specifically running for office? Are there any concrete steps or specific advice?

>> Lydia: This is Lydia. Running for office is an incredibly time and labor intensive activity, and it is one that many people of disabilities feel systematically excluded from. But there are advocates who are working to change that. There is a fantastic new organization called Disability Victory, which is aimed specifically at supporting, encouraging, and training people with disabilities to be able to consider running for office and what that takes. But it is also important to take into account what your personal situation is. Do you have the economic support necessary to take care of your needs, and the community support available to make it possible for you to take care of what you need, in order to consider a run for office in a local, state, or federal election? Every election is different, and unfortunately, many local Boards of Elections aren't really prepared, just as we were talking about over the last several minutes, and like Angel was giving some great examples about this, that there aren't necessarily resources that are geared toward accessibility measures, or toward specific experience issues or concerns that disabled people might have. There aren't necessarily resources available to provide support for people who might have sensory related disabilities, who might experience post-traumatic stress responses, for people who are deaf or blind or use wheelchairs. And local political parties and their apparatuses may or may not have significantly engaged with people with disabilities before. And so if you are a person who is thinking, "I would to be part of this process. It matters to me that people who come from our community might consider the possibility that we could be represented in these positions of making and studying policy," that it is incumbent upon you to some degree to unfortunately have to serve as that conduit for education, and that is a burden that is very difficult for many of us who are often pushed into a position of always having to be the one to educate others, but that may become your responsibility where you have to educate people, everywhere from Boards of Elections to election administration authority, to polling places, to people who are working with a political party as to what kinds of access measures are necessary in order for you to be able to participate, and for people within your community to be able to have the information that they need to be informed, to be engaged, and perhaps to support you in that process. And there are growing resources that are available, and there are also measures right now under consideration by Congress to make that process easier. There's a bill being considered by Congress now that would allow for candidates with disabilities to make it easier and more financially feasible to put resources aside to run for office, as well as for people with disabilities who are elected to office to be able to receive the necessary funding support to pay for accommodations or modifications that must be made in order for them to perform their duties once they have been elected. But those are proposed, those are not laws that are actually in place now. And right now the measures that exist are embedded in the Help America Vote Act, which does include some funding for accessibility disability-related measures, in relation to the ability to vote and access the ballot box, but as we know, many polling places are not necessarily accessible to all voters with disabilities. Many states and localities are considering ballot measures that would exclude participation by blind and low vision voters, and many people with disabilities who have intellectual or developmental disabilities may also be presumed incompetent, and even if they are bringing a support person to assist them, because of the disability that they have, rather than being provided information in plain language and being presumed to be just as competent and interested in participation as everybody else who is in their community. So those are all barriers that you may have to overcome in your process, but they are not insurmountable, and there are growing numbers of examples of elected officials at all levels of government who have disabilities, both those that were born with disabilities, and those who have acquired them later, and in both major political parties, and all across the country. And that number will hopefully only keep growing.

>> Stacy: Excellent, thank you Lydia. Rostom -- so what specific -- if I'm a person with a disability watching this webinar and I want to run for office, what are the next steps that I should take? What can I do?

>> Rostom: What I did was I did a lot of research at the start of my process. I tried to understand as much as the position that I was running for, and I tried to learn about the people in those places. And then just like my fellow participant says, network. Network with those people, tell them who you are -- talk about your disability, because we are people with disabilities. And then a lot of the time what I did is I tried to make sure as much as I could that everything I did was created so that I could be able to share it with people afterwards, because it makes no difference for me to run and win if I'm not doing my part to continue to make space for other people with disabilities. So do your research, create a plan, and make sure that you make room for the people behind you.

>> Stacy: Excellent and if I can add a few suggestions myself from my own personal experience, the first one would be to start attending local boards and local commissions, such as your town council or your city council or your tribal council or your school board or your tenants association -- any -- your public transportation advisory committee -- find out when those meetings are and attend them. Become a presence at -- those meetings because you as a member of the public have a right to be there. And often, there are periods of time -- there's time on every agenda for you to ask questions or for you to air your concerns. So becoming the person that always attends the city council meeting, or that always attends the tenants board meeting and -- makes them aware of concerns that you have, either as a person with a disability or otherwise, is really helpful. And then you're surrounding yourself with people who are very civically engaged and -- you'll kind of meet them, and you kind of establish yourself as a presence. I know as a member of our public transportation advisory board, there are members of the public and certain organizations that always come and always make public comments and always ask us questions. We know who they are. You know, they are community leaders even if they don't have a position. So that's a really great way to begin getting involved. Find out when your town council or -- your tenants association or your school board meets -- and start attending those meetings as a member of the public. The other thing is there's two programs that I really want to plug. The first one is the American Association of People with Disabilities' Congressional internship program. That is a great program for people with disabilities to get internships with a stipend in Congressional offices. And then -- I mean, when I did mine, I was not political at all. I barely knew the difference between a Republican and a Democrat, or just basically -- and I got an internship in a U.S. Senator's office, and it led to me working in that office for five years and becoming extremely political and -- I've had this career for 20 years now. So the American Association of People with Disabilities' Congressional internship program. If you want to run for office yourself, learn from the best: get a senate or house internship. The other one is, as I plugged earlier, RespectAbility's National Leadership Program. If you're interested in running for office, come intern for us. It's a paid internship, $17.50 an hour. For about 15 to 20 hours a week, you get to learn about policy and civic engagement or whatever other -- field you're interested in, and you'll make connections in those fields. And we will help you connect to other leaders who are interested in the same things you are. So our RespectAbility policy -- our RespectAbility Fellowship is another great way, if you're interested in running for office one day, to start making connections with people in the policy and civic engagement field.

>> Angel: Stacy, if I may add to that -- that's okay -- I want to add to the part of -- sometimes when we -- when folks are thinking about running for office, there may be some positions that require years of political experience. And so what I would say to add to those boards and commissions, not just attending, but if folks feel that they are interested -- in joining those boards and commissions, don't hesitate to do that. You know, a lot of boards require a mayor -- or city manager appointment, but that is a good start to start building that resume, so that in the future if you're thinking of running for city council member or mayor or even a Senator, you have that background experience already.

>> Stacy: Absolutely. So getting -- most of us aren't surrounded by elected officials every day. Most of us don't know people in politics. So finding these programs can be really helpful and attending these boards and -- as he said, becoming a member of these boards -- I attended my public transportation advisory committee as a member of the public. I had my kids with me. I went up to make a comment. I had my baby in a front carrier. And I was holding my other kid by the hand. I made some very strongly worded comments, and before I knew it, I was invited to be on the transportation advisory committee. So if you come and you show that you know what you're doing, people -- leaders will recognize that. Okay, so --

>> Lydia: This is Lydia. I would also add to that that you don't have to be in a specific formal appointment or a position, paid or volunteer, in order to make your voice heard and to participate in a process. By law most bodies of regulatory and legislative import, locally, state, and federal, are required to make their meetings, their minutes, their agendas open to the public, in person and increasingly as well streaming and by hybrid format. And that means that you don't have [audio cuts out] about that a specific position in order to express an opinion on an issue in order to express the importance of listening to a particular community, in order to share your knowledge and your experiences or those of people that you know. So whether it is about transportation, whether it is about access to banking services, whether it is about fair housing, or whether it is about your ability to get a job or to have complaints about benefits administration dealt with fairly -- you are able to express, this is what my experience has been, this is what I think should be done, and you do not have to have any formal position to do that. And the more that you show up in those spaces, make your voice heard, and make yourself known, then that will also help you to build connections, to become a more effective advocate, no matter what path you decide to pursue.

>> Stacy: Absolutely. So this next question is for Rostom. So Rostom, what skills, traits, and mindset does it take for a disabled person to run for office? And so by that I mean what -- what personal traits and attitudes might a person want to cultivate, and what skill sets might they want to cultivate in order to be ready to run for office?

>> Rostom: I think for me what's important is to understand that everybody, as long as they meet the requirements, are able to run for office. The skills that are important to have are to be able to, again, go and network, understand what your goal is. When you know what your goal is, you can continue to advocate for what the needs are of your community, and how to continue to advocate for people with disabilities. It's important to create those spaces for people, and it's important for you to gain that experience, and to continue to advocate for yourself as well, and put yourself in the position to be able to learn, because learning is a continuous thing, and we're never done learning. So it's -- I think it's important to also understand that no matter where you get or what office you hold, the work is never done. So a lot of the times we feel, as people with disabilities, discouraged. But it's important to continue to keep going and understand that it's okay to reassess and reestablish a plan if it doesn't work the first time. So a lot of those things should be in consideration when running for office or getting involved in community activism.

>> Stacy: Absolutely. Now Angel, what inspired you to get involved in community activism, and how did you get started?

>> Angel: Thank you Stacy. So I became a disabled person later in life. I was involved in an automobile wreck which resulted in a spinal cord injury. And so now I am a wheelchair user. And I didn't know about disabilities before then. I never really even paid attention to anybody using a wheelchair or walker or white cane or blind or low vision person. And so it was my experience as a person with a disability and encountering those barriers here in my local community that really led me to volunteering and -- getting into internship opportunities with my local government. And so -- I'm a strong believer in advocacy outside of the city, but I am also a strong believer in when we want to see change, we need to be within to advocate for that change. And so that is really what led me into joining city government is because I felt that in order to make these significant changes, I needed to reach a certain position within my -- within -- departments to be able to then have a greater voice to implement that change. Unfortunately, we all know city and how that works and -- or local governments and state governments, and sometimes just people don't understand. And so being in this position has allowed me to not just advocate for my constituents with disabilities, but to really bring education to other directors and a chief of staff or deputy chief of staff and let those folks know, hey, this is what I'm hearing from the community. And so that's what really fires my ability to continue. And now, with that being said, which led me into a director position with the mayor's office, now my mission is to implement a recently awarded ADA self- evaluation and transition plan for the City of Houston. And so we're a few months in, and things are looking very good for us now.

>> Stacy: Excellent. So now, Lydia, what prompted your desire to run for public office in the Maryland house of delegates?

>> Lydia: This is Lydia. There are not very many openly disabled people serving in positions of elected office, and there even fewer openly autistic people who are serving in positions of elected office. And so that representation matters to me. But more than that, as somebody who has long time -- for a very long time worked in advocacy to improve our society for the better, with a particular attention to access, with attention to equity for those who have been marginalized in a variety of ways, I believed very much that my presence, whether or not I was going to be successful in an election, would help to change the conversation to issues that matter to voters, and to all people, whether or not they have decided to vote or are currently eligible to vote or not. Because the reality is that all people are impacted by policy -- by policymaking that happens in local, state, or federal legislative bodies. Your state legislature in particular affects how you interface with lenders in your state, how you interface with publicly administered benefits in your state, with how you would interface with workforce development and education in your state, with how your roads are managed, with what kinds of bills you pay when it comes to tax season, what kind of credits you can and cannot claim. And all of these things have immediate and real effects on everyday life, from healthcare, to transportation, education, public safety, and the workforce. And so it is important to have people who are running for office and serving in elected office who understand the experiences of people with disabilities and others who are marginalized, who understand what the research says, but who also understand what the community knows, and what communities experience. And for me, it was very important in making that decision to bring my expertise and experience as somebody who is disabled and who has also spent a very long time working in public policy for the betterment of all, to bring that work and knowledge with me.

>> Stacy: Excellent, thank you. Now moving back to Rostom. You know, Rostom, as a person with a disability, I know that often when I walk into a room -- I happen to be blind and I use a long white cane -- when I walk into a room, I know that many of the people in that room are going to have misperceptions and misconceptions about me, and many of them are going to be negative, and that if I walk into a job interview or I stand in front of a group and run for office, I know that there are -- I know going in that I'm going to be facing stigma. And so that does take a certain amount of -- resilience and gumption to face. And so how do you overcome fear and anxiety when participating in community activism and running for office?

>> Rostom: I think what I've come to understand is having those experiences and being able to face those experiences head-on, and being like, hi, I have low vision, if I'm in a situation where I need accommodations then I tell people I need accommodations. But if there's something that -- something that someone assumes, I kindly and -- nicely explain to them, like, this is who I am, I'm a person, and I'm a person with a disability. So this is how you should treat people with disabilities, and this is how you should treat me. I'm just someone here trying to use my rights as a citizen to advocate for myself, right? But I think it's really difficult, because when I started my policy journey, I was sitting in a community college library, and my friend was reading out to me the local office holders in the past election, and I noticed that nobody was running for office against them. So they were running unopposed, and I was like, maybe in a couple years, like, one of us should consider running. And it wasn't until, like, 5 years later that that plan I had created out of just -- being aware of what's going on in the community would, like, come to fruition. But those biases that we face -- they're always there. They were there when I told -- my counselor in high school I want to learn -- I either want to learn how to code or run for public office. And the response I got was, like, well, you're blind do you think you can do these things? And I said, of course I think I can do these things. This is who I am, and this is what I want to do, I just need to be able to figure it out. But just getting that experience and unfortunately dealing with that tough experience is one way --

>> Lydia: Rostom, you might not be able to see this, but I'm giving the camera the side eye, the look of incredulity. And seriously, the fact that people say these things out loud, like, it is not surprising, as a long time disability advocate, but it is so disheartening and upsetting to hear over and over again, this constant presumption of incompetence, that also translates into this assumption that not only are we incapable, but that, therefore, it doesn't even matter if we are interested, because we're non-entities and non-considerations.

>> Stacy: You know, it reminds me of one time when I was in high school where I was working at the movie theater, and one of my fellow high school students at the movie theater said, "yeah, my goal is to work for the state department." And I was like, "wow, that's amazing, like, we're going to have offices next to each other, because that's my goal too." And he was like, "no. I mean, like, I'm really gonna work for the state department one day." And I'm like, "me too, I am as well." And I ran into him on Facebook about 10 years later. I was working -- I was living in Washington, D.C., and working for a senator. He was living in my hometown, I think, working at, like, Best Buy, which is a fine thing to do, but I think I got closer to working for the State Department.

>> Rostom: Right -- and that's the thing. We face these things on a daily basis, so unfortunately we have to be prepared to deal with them and kind of that's what I tried to do with our interns here is to teach them that we all go through these, and we have to navigate them together and learn how to -- break down those biases in society.

>> Stacy: Absolutely. And I think -- it does take a certain amount of -- I know we in the disability community don't like -- don't always like the word "courage," but I think it does take a certain amount of non-hokey courage to walk into a room where you know that there's going to be stigma and there's going to be misconceptions about you, and walk into that room anyway and say, you know what, I don't care what these people think. I know what my goal -- I know who I am. I know what I want to do. And I'm not going to let these people's misperceptions impact my goals. I mean it's -- it's something that that takes work. So I guess my next question for you all is can you provide specific examples of community-led initiatives that are promoting equality and inclusion in election processes and community life? So can you name any specific resources that folks might want to look into? I guess we'll start with Rostom.

>> Rostom: I think that -- shameless plug, but our National Leadership program is somewhere you can come to learn about policy and learn about the political process and how to get involved in your community, how to create those connections, and how to find the people who are doing the work that you want to do. You know, that's -- it is how I got started, I was a Fellow starting with RespectAbility and then I became full-time staff. So to me, this work and the National Leadership Program really means the world to me, and it changed my -- experience in the workplace, in the workforce.

>> Stacy: Thank you. Angel, do you have an example of an organization that's promoting equity and inclusion in electoral processes, in community life?

>> Angel: I'll plug in my office as well.

>> Stacy: Go for it.

>> Angel: We have -- an information and referral service team, and at least three of our members are volunteer registrants. So when we go out and meet with the community, we encourage folks to register to vote. One of the other initiatives that we do is collaborate with our paratransit system, and not just encourage transportation to voting places, but we don't ever want $1.25 to be a barrier for folks to go and vote, and so providing free transportation there and back for folks with disabilities has been one of -- our missions here. And it has -- it's gone well. And then the last thing I would -- put in there is we have a intergovernmental affairs office through the Mayor's office and these folks, you know, through legislative sessions, have been there with us, and we collaborate heavily with the department to not just bring attention, but voice our concerns on bills that affect the disability community.

>> Stacy: So I want to ask one more question, and then I want to open it up for questions from people who are attending the webinar, and if they don't have any questions, I have some additional questions for you. But Rostom, I guess I want to end with -- what one piece of advice would you give a person with a disability who's early on in their political journey? So if there's somebody out here watching, and there's one piece of wisdom you could give them, what would that be?

>> Rostom: I think the best piece of advice I've gotten, and I think was most impactful for me, is to find your people and find your community, because -- it's never easy to go alone, right? If you want to go fast, you go alone -- so find your community, and find the people who -- who accept you for you, and understand who you are. And after that, it's just being able to communicate your needs and your wants and your life goals with them. So that's a piece -- the piece of advice I would give.

>> Stacy: Angel, what one piece of advice would you give people with disabilities who are early on in their civic engagement or political journey?

>> Angel: I would say collaborate. Collaborate heavily with organizations, folks that you are interested in learning more about. One example is -- for myself is I've collaborated with the ReelAbilities Film and Arts Festival here in Houston. And through this partnership, we've been able to reach a lot of folks in Houston, not just on arts and films, but for example, this year one of my favorite films was No Ordinary Campaign, which follows the story of a person that is diagnosed with ASL at the age of 36. And so this film shares his story, his journey to reclaim the future through -- his future through advocacy by voicing his story, and how -- how broken the healthcare system is for people living with ASL. And so collaboration, share as much information as you can with your community members.

>> Stacy: Lydia, if you are here, it appears you're muted and your camera is off.

>> Lydia: I am here!

>> Stacy: Is there a specific organization or initiative that's promoting equity and inclusion that you think our participants should know about?

>> Lydia: There are many projects that exist, both those that are affiliated with a particular political party, and those that are nonpartisan that are aimed at providing tools and education to people who are interested in becoming more civically engaged, or considering a run for office, or considering positioning themselves for appointed office. And -- some of those that I can point to are the Victory Institute that works with people in the LGBTQ community for example, New Politics Leadership Academy, which works with veterans and alumni of national service programs. That's just a couple of examples -- and I mentioned before Disability Victory which works with people with disabilities, as well as the national initiative RevUp, which is hosted by the American Association of People with Disabilities, and the voting access advocacy being done by National Disability Rights Network and the affiliated Protection and Advocacy agencies across the United States that are all aimed at educating voters with disabilities and ensuring equitable access to the ballot box. At a local level, I have heard that there are some initiatives that exist to help provide funding for people from different marginalized communities to better consider accessing information, participating in civic processes, or potentially considering a run for office, but I don't know of any specific initiatives off the top of my head within that category, and it's probably because it is a newer model of directly resourcing and financing individual people to attain those opportunities and to develop the tools and get the education they need to be better civically engaged. But there are also a wealth of free resources available, including many plain language resources, for example, from SARTAC, the Self-Advocacy Resource and Technical Assistance Center, and the Autistic Self-Advocacy Network, ASAN, as well as a recent guide published by the Autistic Women and Nonbinary Network, that all provide resources especially to voters and members of the community with intellectual and developmental disabilities to understand issues, to understand policy, and to understand how to better engage with appointed and elected officials, as well as with agencies that make determinations that affect our everyday lives. And those are all resources that are available for free online in accessible formats for people using screen readers, and people who benefit from plain language. So I definitely encourage people to look out for any of those resources.

>> Stacy: Great, and I want to make sure that we have time for people to ask questions, so I'm gonna ask you one last question, and then we will open it up to folks who have comments that they can place in chat -- I believe you can put your comment in chat, or I think there is a Q&A feature that you can use. But my final question is can you give -- what one piece of advice would you give people with disabilities who are early on in their political journey? What one piece -- if there was one piece of wisdom you could share with people, what would it be?

>> Lydia: For me, speaking from experience as a policy advocate who also ran for office, I would encourage those of you who are thinking about how to serve, and whether or not you are considering a run for office or seeking an appointment to appointed office as one of those pathways, to recognize that there are many ways to understand victory and success. And an electoral loss is not necessarily a failure, and certainly not a loss for the community. Because the mere presence of people with disabilities who are choosing to pursue appointed or elected office matters. It matters in reshaping the narrative, in showing what is possible, and in calling attention to the issues that are important to our communities, and that affect people who are not always well represented where it counts.

>> Stacy: Excellent, and my piece of advice would be similar to Rostom's: find a disability rights or disability justice organization that resonates with you -- an organization that is disability led -- and get involved, whether that is an organization that deals with your particular disability, or a cross disability organization that is in your particular locality, or a national organization -- whatever organization resonates with you. Again it -- for me early on it was the National Federation of the Blind. For someone else it might be the American Association of People with Disabilities. So find whatever it is that resonates with you, maybe it's your local Independent Living Center, and get involved. That's how you'll find out about a lot of opportunities. So now we do want to open it up to questions, if there are any from the community, if there are any from participants. Eric, would you be able to tell us if there are any questions from participants?

>> Eric: Hello, this is Eric. There are no questions from participants at this time, but I will let you know if that changes.

>> Stacy: Okay, well, I guess I'll ask one last question then, and, you guys, while I'm asking this question, if there are any participants that have questions that you would like to ask, please feel free to ask them. I kind of asked my last question already, so -- this is kind of an odd one to end on I guess. Well I guess, really, are there any final thoughts that you'd like to share with our audience as they go out this election season and prepare to register to vote and to perhaps get involved in campaigns or register -- volunteer as a poll worker or to run for office themselves, and certainly as they plan to cast their ballot and vote -- any final thoughts? I -- we will start with Rostom.

>> Rostom: So I think the final thought for me is, if you have, like, any inclination to get involved or run, just start looking up what you have to do, start finding where you can get involved and -- do it. Just get involved, and continue to learn how to make the change you want to see happen.

>> Stacy: Excellent. Lydia, what would you say?

>> Lydia: I have two pieces of advice that are closely connected, and they are, one, if you believe that a local elections board or a candidate for office are not paying attention to issues that matter to you, and how you vote, and what information you have -- ask questions. Raise the concerns. Show up at a town hall. Send an email or a web message or a social media message to the campaign, to the party, or to the elections board, and ask the question. Ask what their position is on a particular issue. Ask whether it -- the particular polling place in your neighborhood is wheelchair accessible. And secondarily, and related to that first thing, is to advocate for what you need. If you want to volunteer as an election judge or a poll worker, if you want to work on a campaign, if you want to put your name in the hat to run for office this or another cycle, ask for what you need. If you know that you're going to need early access to certain forms, if you know that you're going to need a specific file format, if you know that you're going to need extra time to be in a space for sensory or cognitive reasons, you can advocate for those needs to be met. And if it does not feel safe or comfortable for you to do that on your own, then you can ask for that in community or with a support person or a trusted friend or an advocate. Because if we do not ask those questions, if we do not raise those issues, then we can't rely on or assume that people who do not have disabilities who do not come from our community will do so.

>> Stacy: Absolutely. Angel?

>> Angel: I would also add two things to that. The first -- that I would add is people of all ages with disabilities should continue to self-educate themselves about the topics that bring concern to their lives. I would also add that this means that specifically young people be more open-minded and foster honest conversations with others that see topics sometimes differently than they do. I think the whole point of political debates is to -- show why your truth is better than the opponent -- right? And so the more knowledge you have, the more power you have. And the last thing I would say to that is join open discussions on social media. This could -- we know that the web can be an effective tool for language barriers. So for example -- if you are a Spanish speaker seeking other young professionals that think the same way that you do, seek groups over social media that speak your language and understand your culture and the barriers that you face -- and then taking those concerns to the public sphere, I think, is just as important for being heard.

>> Stacy: Excellent. Well thank you all so much for being here today. We really appreciate it. Eric, are there any final questions from participants?

>> Eric: Stacy -- I was trying to talk, but I realized I was muted. We have two questions, actually, from the audience so -- we're gonna ask those, since we have about six minutes left.

>> Stacy: Okay, so we'll have one person answer each.

>> Eric: Yeah, the first one is how do you navigate educating fellow policy makers about disability without getting tokenized and/or burned out. And whoever wants that one --

>> Stacy: I guess -- we can all, if everybody takes 30 seconds with it. Rostom, do you want to go ahead?

>> Rostom: I think that just being able to get to those places and having them see who you are and understand where you're coming from, and explaining to them what your experience is and what you need from society, that that would help to break down any of the biases the policy makers would have.

>> Stacy: Excellent. I would say for me when I think about it, I think sometimes it's important when you're getting burnt out to rest, to take a step back for a second, and realize that you don't have to be the one to do everything. And sometimes this work is really overwhelming, and it's really disappointing, and it's frustrating, and it's sad, and it's angering. And sometimes you need to take a step back and be with your family, be with your kids, be with your loved ones, be with your friends, be with who -- go out in nature, do what makes you happy. And also to know that, while we are all responsible for doing our part, none of us is responsible for doing all of it. And what -- the only thing we can do is take the baton that has been given to us by the people who -- the disability rights and disability justice advocates who have come before us, and are the reason that we're here where we are today -- they've passed that baton to us, we run it a little further down the road, a little further down the track. We may not make it all the way there, but our job is to -- our job is to just take it as far along as we can. And we may not make it to the finish line in our lifetime, and sometimes you have to come to terms with that, but it is our job to move it as far along as we can. Lydia, what would you say to that?

>> Lydia: For me, it is important to always carve out spaces and relationships that are outside of advocacy work as a reset and re-centering. And just as importantly, it is necessary to build relationships with other advocates, disabled or not, so that you're not doing the work by yourself. If you feel that you are isolated, that you are the only voice, then you will burn out. And we are, of course, stronger as a community, we are stronger together, even within as we do not always share all the same viewpoints, we don't always work on the exact same issues, our community is as strong as our relationships are, as we fight for disability rights and alongside other movements for social justice.

>> Stacy: Excellent. Angel, do you have any answer to that question, and then we want to quickly move on. I know there's one more.

>> Angel: Yeah, I'll just add that whenever I'm feeling burnt out, what I do is I do something else that I love to do, and that's to -- engage in some exercise activity. That also allows me to really think more clearly and then come back even better and stronger and faster.

>> Stacy: Excellent and what is our final question, Eric?

>> Eric: The final question is how can people with non-apparent disabilities raise the profile of people with disabilities if they run for office?

>> Stacy: I think having a non-apparent disability, being open, and being open about that non-apparent disability, and not hiding it, not passing, making sure that the constituents know that you are a person with -- autism, or that you have ADHD, or dyslexia, or whatever your non-apparent disability is, and talking about how that incorporate -- or how that impacts how you relate to systems, and how you access systems, how did that impact your education, how did that impact your access to transportation, how did that impact your job search -- so being open about it and not trying to pass, but really sharing your experience. And then also uplifting the experiences of people with other types of disabilities, and going to those people and asking what do they need. Just as you don't want people to assume what you need and what you don't need and what you want, ask other people with other types of disabilities what they need. Rostom, what would you say?

>> Rostom: I would say being able to bring back what you know and share it with other people with disabilities, so that they can also be able to be connected with those people, so creating -- a space of inclusion so the connections you make are also the connections that you create for other people.

>> Stacy: Excellent. Lydia?

>> Lydia: I think it's really important to remember that you have a unique and valuable perspective to bring, and while none of us can speak for literally every single person in the community, and certainly none of us -- can or should bear the burden of being the sole representative in a certain space within a legislative body, in a certain advocacy campaign, we do have a responsibility to be accountable back to our communities, and to also raise community issues, and to build, again, those stronger relationships where we can learn from others in our community to better advocate for our issues, to better advocate for everybody in the community, and to be able to share the burden of that labor, so that we can all become more effective advocates while we learn and grow from each other, whether that is across and within the blind and autistic and mental health communities, among people with dwarfism, among people in the deaf-blind community, among people who've become disabled because of acquired injuries for a variety of reasons, domestic violence, police brutality, injuries on the job, etcetera, we all have a lot to learn from each other, and we also have space to learn how our communities have always and already been connected. And that is our responsibility, and it is also one of our greatest strengths.

>> Stacy: Excellent. Angel, how do you recommend a person with a non-apparent disability -- help the entire disability community if they run for office?

>> Angel: I think Stacy, you said it well. It's self-disclosing. I think -- if you don't know -- if people don't know about it, they -- it just kind of -- they don't think about it. And so I think voicing not just -- your -- what your disability or disabilities are, but what are the barriers that hold you back from -- from participating in that area.

>> Stacy: Excellent. Well thank you everyone. We know we went a little overtime, so we really want to thank you for staying with us, and for participating in today's webinar. And we encourage you -- we will be hosting two other civic engagement webinars later this summer, and early this fall, as we prepare for the upcoming 2024 election. So we hope you'll join us. Stay tuned to RespectAbility, and we hope you'll subscribe to our policy newsletter, and -- stay informed of all RespectAbility and RespectAbility Policy and Civic Engagement Department events.