

Building Healthy Communities

Opportunities for New Jersey municipalities to promote inclusion of people with disabilities

The New Jersey Inclusive Healthy Communities (IHC) grant program is a new and exciting initiative of the state Department of Human Services Division of Disability Services (DDS) that seeks to advance the inclusion of people with disabilities in building healthy communities at the local, regional and state levels.

The U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention estimates that almost one in four New Jersey adults have some type of disability and that people with disabilities suffer greater health disparities including heart disease and diabetes. More and more, Americans are recognizing that people with disabilities experience inequalities in all aspects of life that contribute to health and well-being, including access to employment, affordable and quality health care, healthy housing, education, transportation, and more. There is increasing recognition that as the Ford Foundation recently noted, “to build a world where everyone is equal, we need to recognize how disability interconnects with the issues of social justice and follow the lead of the individuals at the center of the fight.”

IHC initiative

To address these challenges, the New Jersey Division of Disability Services launched the IHC initiative to empower local and statewide efforts to advance system changes that specifically feature inclusion of people with disabilities. According to Peri Nearon, Executive Director of the DDS, “DHS is thrilled with the response we have received to the IHC grant program where we are supporting major efforts at the community, regional and state levels to really make lasting change that supports the health of people with disabilities.”

Currently in its first grant cycle with 18 grantees working on a range of diverse initiatives, the IHC grant program provides capacity building and implementation grants to municipal and county agencies, as well as non-profit organizations throughout

the state, all focused on promoting inclusive practices that support the health and well-being of individuals with disabilities in the communities where they live.

Grantees are involved in a wide variety of initiatives that focus on:

- Including people with disabilities as part of planning efforts to create healthy communities;
- Implementing lasting strategies that deliver the benefits of healthy communities to people with disabilities; and
- Advancing changes in practices, policies, systems, and the physical environment that prevent people with disabilities from having full access to the conditions that support health and well being.

Increasing access

The first cohort of IHC grantees are diverse in terms of their organizational missions and IHC initiatives: Grantees are working to increase access for people with disabilities to community gardens and recreational opportunities and nature trails; quality health care including primary, oral and women’s reproductive care; affordable housing and transportation options; and improved preparation for college success.

They are working at the municipal and county level to reexamine local policies and plans to ensure that they are fully inclusive of people with disabilities. They are working to develop training and guidance to ensure that emergency and disaster responders can better understand how to address the needs of

Opportunity in 2022

Given the enthusiastic response to the first round of IHC capacity building and implementation grants, the Division of Disability Services is currently planning the release of the next IHC Request for Proposals in mid-January 2022.

Municipalities are encouraged to keep an eye out for the RFP in mid-January and sign up for notices from DDS at: <https://tinyurl.com/2p8c2hrv>

@ You can learn more about the IHC program and the work of the current grantees at: <http://eac.rutgers.edu/ihc-grant-program/>

people with disabilities.

IHC grantees are working to build guidance that municipalities can use to be more inclusive of people with disabilities. IHC grantees not only work to advance inclusion of people with disabilities in the places they serve but to ensure that their work contributes to policy and systems change in other New Jersey communities and statewide.

Several municipalities are grantees and other municipalities are working closely with other IHC grantees.

“It’s important that residents who experience disabilities know that their voices matter to the township,” said Evesham Deputy Mayor Heather Cooper. “The more access you can give to all people to participate in a community, the better the whole community is.

Municipal level

At a recent meeting of 16 of the IHC grantees, grantees shared some of their experiences working at the municipal level. Some talked about the need for greater education and awareness of local officials to make inclusion of people with disabilities a priority. Other grantees discussed the need for local officials to embrace the philosophy that full inclusion of people with disabilities in local policies, planning, and decision-making is a way to improve the health and cohesion of the whole community. Grantees talked about people with disabilities who do not feel welcome to be fully included in local government decision-making processes.

They shared experiences indicating that ensuring inclusion of people with disabilities in local decision-making did not seem to be anyone’s designated “job.” Grantees also talked about the limited awareness on the part of local civic and community leaders that advancing full inclusion of people with disabilities to build healthy communities may start with compliance with the American with Disabilities Act but goes far beyond it. 📌

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