>> Philip Kahn-Pauli: Good afternoon everyone! My name is Philip Kahn-Pauli. My pronouns are he/him/his, and I am the Policy and Practices Director of RespectAbility. I am so excited to be here with you today, to be joined by my special guest Laka, and to be talking to you on today - our webinar for the MLK day of service. And let me start up my PowerPoint. So the presentation today is entitled "Making Your Voices Heard: Civic Engagement Strategies for People with Disabilities in 2021 and Beyond." And the reason why I want to talk to you about civic engagement is because it is a really important way of giving back to the community, working to change the world, working to make our country a better place for people with disabilities. And I really want to drive home the message that every one of you who is with us today, everyone of you who cares about people with disabilities, who is a person with a disability, can be a powerful advocate. And let's get into it. So, because today is the Martin Luther King day of service, sponsored by the Presidential inaugural committee and Americorps, I have to start out my presentation with a quote from the late Dr. King. And I wanted to share a really simple but a really great quote from him, and that quote is "everybody can be great, because anybody can serve." And he said those words at Ebenezer Baptist Church on February 4th, 1968. And on the right hand side of the screen I have a picture of Dr. King speaking at one of those sermons. Just as a quick accessibility note we have live captions today, we have ASL, and when you receive a digital copy of our powerpoint slides, we have alt text, so it is accessible. If you have any questions or you have any needs during our presentation today, just drop those into the chat box and we'll be happy to resolve any issues. But I really want to take home that message today that anybody can be great, because anybody can serve. And that's the theme today. And I'm going to share with you some of the great tools and means that you can do that. So I already introduced myself - I'm Phillip. My pronouns are he/him/his. To give you a sense of what I look like on screen, I am a 33 year old white male with glasses, a brown beard, messy brown hair. I'm wearing a blue jacket and a blue and checked shirt, and I am in front of a virtual background of RespectAbility's black and gold logo. I've been with RespectAbility for five years, and if you haven't heard of us before we are a national non-partisan nonprofit organization dedicated to fighting stigmas and advancing opportunities so people with disabilities can fully participate in all aspects of community. I've been doing this a long time but I'm really excited to share what I know, what I've experienced, and how you can get involved yourself. And a great example of how to get involved is going to be shared with us by Laka Negassa. Laka is a former RespectAbility Fellow. She is a brilliant young advocate with disability. She is -- been a part of my team for two summers in a row and welcome Laka. Please introduce yourself, and then we'll get to our conversation.

>> Laka Mitiku Negassa: Good afternoon everyone. My name is Laka Mitiku Negassa. I'm a black woman wearing an eyeglass and I have a short hair. I'm wearing a blue dress with a white blouse. My pronouns are she/her/hers. Thanks Philip.

>> Philip Kahn-Pauli: So Laka recently completed a degree at George Washington University from the school of public health, and I know she's worked really hard on her degree in between working for RespectAbility, and I'm very proud to have known her for a while and to help share her advocacy experience. So just as a quick point of order before we get into the questions that I want to talk with Laka, I want to give you a kind of a high level overview. There are -- roughly speaking -- 61 million Americans with disabilities. That means about one in five people have some form of disability, whether it's some kind of physical issue, a sensory issue, a cognitive issue, a mental health condition, or some other form of disability. And on this slide I have a picture of my colleague Tatiana Lee, who's an African-American wheelchair user who runs our Hollywood work. So 61 million people -- it's a lot of Americans. And when we talk about disability we talk about disability across multiple different categories. Disability can be permanent and it can be temporary. And on that picture I've got a picture of an actor named John Lawson, who is a double amputee and he's holding an umbrella. In the middle I have a picture that talks about visible and invisible disabilities, and it features a picture of a beautiful family of -- daughter with Down syndrome. And on the right I have a picture that talks about how disabilities can be either something you were born with or something you can acquire later in life. And I have a young African-American little person who is a actor and actively involved in RespectAbility's Hollywood work, on the right-hand side of the picture. Next up I have a picture of our huge Hollywood team of very diverse people with very different different kinds of disabilities pictured at Murray studios, where we hosted an event several years ago talking about driving Hollywood inclusion for people with disabilities. But I showcased that picture of African-Americans with disabilities, of women with disabilities, of people of all kinds of races and ages with disabilities, to really drive home the point that anyone can join the disability community at any time. The disability community, because of the challenges that are faced by it, can be very cutting edge, it can be innovative. And people with disabilities come from all walks of life. It is also the only minority community that anyone can join at any time, due to accident, illness or aging. And because of that common bond, because it cuts across so many different experiences in so many different communities, I think it is always important to recognize the intersectionality that people with disabilities share with other underrepresented communities. There are African-Americans with disabilities, there are people from the Latinx community, there are women, religious and ethnic minorities with disabilities. There's a lot of disability identity crossing over with people from the LGBTQIA community. And so the issues that impact other underrepresented communities impact us, and it is so important that we recognize that. And so what are some of those barriers? Some of the barriers that we face are fairly dramatic. Only about 65 percent of people with disabilities finish high school. Only about seven percent of people born with a disability will complete a college degree. And only about one in three people with disabilities have a job. These are huge barriers, and these are barriers that have only gotten worse because of COVID. And on this slide here I have a picture from RespectAbility's New York women's speakers bureau several years ago, where we hosted a series of volunteer service trainings for people with disabilities who wanted to become involved. And so many of the lessons taught at that service lesson are going to be shared in a much more condensed form today. So I've been doing all the talking. I want to shut up for a while and give Laka the chance to talk. And so I want to have a brief conversation with you. I want to ask you some questions and have you talk about some of your experiences as an advocate. And so let's do that. So Laka, what does disability advocacy mean to you?

>> Laka Mitiku Negassa: Good afternoon everyone again. As mentioned, my name is Laka Mitiku Negassa, and I am a black woman wearing an eyeglass and I have a short hair. I'm wearing a blue dress with a white blouse, and my pronouns are she, her and hers. Disability advocacy for me is the fight for equality and equity to allow people with disabilities have access to services or opportunities, so they can live fully just as any other member of the society. And this disability advocacy is also to allow them to have access to opportunities with accommodations so they can participate in all aspects of life. Disability advocacy is also believing in justice. And most importantly, disability advocacy is highlighting and showcasing problems with current policies and how it is adversely impacting the community, while also advocating for a different policy solution for us.

>> Philip Kahn-Pauli: That is a really great summary. And it is so important, because telling your story and telling about the impacts of the choices made by elected officials is so important. And so my next question: I have the privilege and the benefit of being a long-time policy advocate and Laka, you recently completed your graduate studies to become a public health professional. But I'm really curious: why do you think ordinary people with disabilities should get involved with disability advocacy?

>> Laka Mitiku Negassa: I believe there are several reasons why people with disabilities should get involved with disability advocacy. And the first and what I think is the most important reason is to educate and create awareness within the disability community, and also very importantly within the larger community. This awareness should focus on highlighting the abilities, accomplishments and different successes that individuals within this community have done in the past. As you know Philip, first and foremost, people have a very limited knowledge about what a disability is and the shape or form it can come with. I can say this boldly, as I myself was a person with an acquired disability. I had a very limited knowledge about what disability is before 2013. 2013 is the year where I sustained a severe traumatic brain injury and different organ lacerations and bone fractures after an auto accident. And that is why I think creating awareness and education is very important. The second reason is that the disability community and the larger community needs to hear from people with disabilities who are overcomers or who had the opportunity to break barriers. It is so they can express how they overcame whatever was hard to overcome, while also expressing what was a challenge, be it a policy or societal perceptions, and what actions would overcome these challenges.

>> Philip Kahn-Pauli: Great, and thank you for sharing that, and thank you for talking about your personal experiences. So my next question -- and I know that when you worked for me you did a lot of writing. You wrote op-eds, you wrote policy briefs, but I'm curious: why should ordinary people or members of the wider disability community write to their elected officials or write Op-eds in local newspapers?

>> Laka Mitiku Negassa: I believe it's very important for people with disabilities and their allies to write clearly. It is better when the writing is well structured and evidence supported to show problems their community is facing. It is also important to share stories of how a policy overall is adversely affecting the community. I believe sharing a story would make it even more personal.

>> Philip Kahn-Pauli: Wonderful Laka. So you sat through a lot of meetings with me and were involved with -- went to a lot of events where I would ask questions of the speakers and challenge what they were doing on people with disabilities, so I'm curious: can you share with us a favorite memory or experience you had as an advocate and doing your advocacy?

>> Laka Mitiku Negassa: So the advocacy experience that I have is the advocacy movement that I was involved in when I was a policy Fellow with you. It is when I first learned about the sub-minimum wage for people with disabilities. Apparently since 1938, Section 14c of the Fair Labor Standards Act authorized employers to pay wages that are less than the federal minimum wage to workers who have disabilities. A report on Forbes mentions that in 2019, close to 420,000 others with disabilities have been paid an average of just two dollars and fifteen cents per hour in recent years. And as part of RespectAbility's advocacy movement in the policy department, we had to go to different representatives offices, as well as a visit to Department of Labor addressing this issue. Inspired by this, I introduced this issue to a classmate in a federal policy making and policy advocacy class, and we designed an advocacy campaign to advocate for the Transformation to Competitive Employment Act or HR 873 in December 2019. As you mentioned Philip, I finished my study toward master of public public health or MPH degree, majoring in health policy in December 2020. My classmate and I had the opportunity to present this advocacy campaign in our class where most had no prior knowledge about this issue. I also had the opportunity to write a policy proposal project for my capstone class. I did it inspired by my journey of receiving care as a traumatic brain injury patient in different healthcare facilities. My research and experience highlighted that even when most TBI patients rely on medicare and medicaid for their care, one rule within medicare is preventing access to continuous and quality care. This rule is called the three hour of capability engage rule. My research and experience emphasize that having independent patient navigators or advocates is critical, and the policy option I proposed is to mandate having these independent patient navigators or advocates be a covered benefit in medicare and medicaid and all other health insurance coverage in the next round of healthcare reform discussions. I wrote this policy proposal to collaborate and shared it with the brain injury association of America and the brain injury association of Ohio, so they can also advocate for this policy option. These are my advocacy experiences. Thank you very much.

>> Philip Kahn-Pauli: Thank you Laka and I think it's -- thank you for sharing that, and I will say that there's a couple things I want to take out of that before I move on to talking further about civic engagement strategies is -- that is one of the issues, is that the experiences of people with disabilities are very difficult, and are a result of really complex policies in many cases: Medicaid, Medicare, interfacing with things involving the Fair Labor Standards Act. But ultimately the answer is very simple. The answer is simple, because people with disabilities want to work, they want to earn an income and become independent just like anyone else. And if you can, as an advocate, successfully explain why a policy or a barrier exists and what the solution is to that policy or barrier, we're going to make change. And I will say that advocates such as myself are gearing up to address the sub-minimum wage issue, even as Congress is dealing with the larger issue of the 15 dollar minimum wage. And so I would encourage anybody who has been hearing about this and cares about these issues to really dig in, to learn and get involved. Now, how can you get involved? Well next up, I want to talk about another civil rights icon who is no longer with us. I want to talk about the late John Lewis. John Lewis last year, right before he passed away, published an op-ed in the New York Times. And the first lines of that op-ed really struck home for me, and I think they struck home for a lot of people. What he said was that "democracy is not a state, it is an act." I'll say that again. "Democracy is not a state, it is an act." And what that means is that democracy has to be acted. People have to be active participants in the work. They have to be involved, they have to be engaged, they have to understand the issues of the day. And that is so important for all Americans, but it's especially important for people with disabilities. Because as Laka said, some of the barriers and the issues that our community faces aren't understood by the wider nation and the wider community. And that's why I want to talk and define civic engagement. So what is civic engagement -- and I've got a picture a lovely picture here with a bunch of book covers and the words civic engagement. Youth.gov defines civic engagement as working to make a difference in the civic life of one's community, developing the skills knowledge and values and motivation to make that difference. And it means promoting the quality of life in a community through political and non-political processes. And that means that civic engagement takes many different forms: volunteering, national service, service learning opportunities. These are all forms of civic engagement. And so while some day of service projects will involve you helping out at a soup kitchen, or raising money for a local charity, today we're talking about civic engagement in the form of being an active citizen, being involved with government, and being involved with these disability issues. And so some of the strategies I want to talk you through today are highlighted on this slide. And in this slide I have a picture of several RespectAbility Fellows meeting with Senator Dick Durbin and Senator Tammy Duckworth of Illinois. And so in the picture you've got two wheelchair users, one is Senator Duckworth, the other one is a former RespectAbility Fellow and we hope future Senator. And behind them are a series of the diverse folks from our RespectAbility Fellowship program, including Laka who is smiling a very big smile on the far right of the picture. Now with that description aside, there's three specific civic engagement strategies I want to talk to you about today. First is getting involved with elections. I realize it's 2021, we're past 2020 and we probably don't want to talk about elections, but there's elections coming up in a few months, and it's important you get involved now. Second, I want to talk about writing Op-eds. Just like Laka said, it's so important that we get the message out there about our experiences. But also, third, I want to write tell you how you can write to your elected officials and use digital advocacy tools, make it easier than ever before. So - local elections, state elections, national elections. There's a famous quote in Washington that all politics are local. And to embody that I have a picture on the right here of two hands holding up the word vote in scrabble tiles. And I want to direct you to a really incredible resource called ballotpedia - ballotpedia.org. I want to direct you to that website, because it covers elections at the federal, the state, and very importantly, local level. I mentioned local again because getting involved locally is something that you can do really easily, really quickly, and it's so important, because all politics is local. The issues that impact your county, your local city, your local town are really important. And there are things that those places can do to make lives better for their citizens with disabilities. There are school board meetings to listen to that talk about impacts on students with disabilities. There's municipal government issues around accessibility and transportation. There can even be local ballot measures around other accessibility issues. And so getting involved locally is a really important thing. Now it's easier than ever before, and I'm gonna touch on the Federal piece later, but -- do you know who is the mayor of your local town? Do you know who your local county executive is? Well it's really easy to go and find out. If you google USA how to contact your elected officials, you'll find a really great website that lets you search by your zip code, by your city, by your state. And it'll give you public contact information for everyone from your mayor, to your state Governor, as well as your state legislators. And that is so important because these are people who need to hear from their citizens. It's not all just about Congress. There's so much that can be done by state governments and state leaders to make the lives of people with disabilities better. And so I want to talk about that in a little more detail right now. Now I have to acknowledge, if you will, the virus in the room, COVID-19. Over the last 11 months our lives have been changed by COVID in so many ways and many of us have lost friends, we have lost family members. And I want to acknowledge that, and I want to say that as people with disabilities, we are uniquely at risk for the health effects of COVID, because of the intersectionality of the disability community. COVID has disproportionately hurt African-American communities and hispanic communities, and recognizing that intersectionality is important, but it also directly impacts advocacy. You can't go to Capitol Hill these days because, well, it's being guarded by the national guard. You can't easily go to state legislators these days because almost all state legislatures are meeting via Zoom, just like we're meeting today. And so we have to face the reality that we can't meet in person, we can't advocate in person, but it doesn't mean that we can't advocate. And on the slide I've got a picture of a zoomed in microscopic picture of the COVID virus. And so this is where digital advocacy comes in. And on the screen now I've got a picture that has in very large words "what is digital advocacy?" And on the right, fists raised in solidarity with the logos of things like Twitter and Facebook and Wordpress. So digital advocacy means using digital tools to advocate for the positions that you believe in, to educate leaders, to meet with elected officials. And because of COVID, it means that we have to use these digital tools, we have to meet via Zoom. But that also means that the barrier to interacting with elected officials is actually a lot lower than it used to be. You don't have to fly to Washington and go through a security checkpoint in order to meet with a constituent office or meet with your legislators. You can do that via Zoom. And if you're set up properly, you'll have accessibility, you'll have captions, and it'll be so much more accessible for everyone. And so there are some really obvious examples of ways to engage in digital advocacy. Sharing information on Facebook is really important. I would also note sharing accurate truthful and factual information on Facebook is very important. But it also means that you can connect with others. Perhaps you could set up a Facebook group of fellow advocates with disabilities, or find affinity groups of other people who share the same category of disability that you have. You can easily use digital tools to contact your state and local officials by phone or email. It's really easy to write an op-ed and submit it to your local paper, because you can just type in to the URL of your newspaper, type in an op-ed and hit send. It's also really easy to compile information about what states are doing on digital -- the workforce or digital accessibility and share that with an elected official. I -- my experience for 10 years being in DC and working with so many different state governments and elected officials: if elected officials can find out that somebody else is doing good work, they're going to try and copy it because they want to be successful. And so that means that digital accessibility is so much easier than ever before So I want to really say that a critically important focus of what I think advocates should focus on are Governors. The Governors that are elected to lead states are really critical partners in the effort to advance job opportunities for people with disabilities and to make programs, to make policy, and to pass budgets. Governors are a really important resource, because as former Governor Jack Markell of Delaware likes to say, every Governor wants to be the "jobs Governor." Every Governor competes to make their state the best place to live, the best economy that they can make for their citizens. And if you can make the pitch to them that doing good for people with disabilities means your state is going to do well economically, you can really make them partners in this work. And I say that from personal experience. RespectAbility has met with 48 governors over the last several years to really push them on the ideas around best practices, solutions for disability employment. And I'm just going to jump in and say that Amy Foster brought up a great question about what about if you're a person with a disability who can't work? Well that's really important and it's really a challenge. We recognize that, as we want more people to work but some people can't, and they won't, and that's perfectly fine. That's perfectly valid. But it also means that you have to face issues of the disability benefit system that you need to -- that elected officials need to understand. People need to understand that they need access to health care that isn't tied to employment status. And so, even if you're interested in issues other than disability issues, other than work, that you should still get involved and you should still make your voice heard. So thank you Amy Foster for bringing that up. Now I'm going to skip on to my next slide. And I have a slide here where we have pictures of RespectAbility team members meeting policymakers. And so from the bottom right to the top left I have a picture of some RespectAbility members meeting Cory Booker, another one meeting the outgoing president, as well as another picture of my boss Jennifer Mizrahi meeting the former Vice President and current President-elect as well as Dr. Biden. I have a picture at the top of our Communications Associate talking to Elizabeth Warren. I also have a picture on the top right of RespectAbility team members meeting Bernie Sanders. And these pictures really capture how in the days before COVID, you could meet your policymakers and get your photo with them and get them on your side. I'm going to skip the inaccessibility slide, and say that just because we can't take a picture on a rope line doesn't mean we shouldn't get involved, we shouldn't get to know our policy makers. But it needs to begin by getting the news out there and educating people, and the best way to do that is by writing Op-eds. And I've got a slide here that has in very large words "how to write an op-ed." And this is the very quick, very short version of how to do that. So an op-ed is an article published in the newspaper where it presents an opinion. It is an opportunity to get your voice heard. It's a chance to educate the public with facts and personal experiences. It's also an opportunity to change perceptions and possibly improve legislation. And as an example of what are the kinds of messages that RespectAbility would want to have in an op-ed, we would want somebody to talk about what it's like to be a person with a disability who wants to work, or what your experiences are like as a person with a disability who's struggling to access health care, or an example of a company that is doing good work hiring people with disabilities. And those are all kinds of things that would make for great Op-eds. When you go to write an op-ed you need to think about what are your media goals. Are there specific people you want to reach? Do you want somebody specifically to read your op-ed or do you want them to take something away? Whose opinions do you trust? What facts will move their brains? Is there some kind of human interest story to tell? These are all very important, and you'll -- for example -- see RespectAbility talks about the opportunity agenda. We try and talk about the value of workers with disabilities, what they can give back to companies. And we do that because we want to persuade employers to hire people with disabilities. We emphasize cost-effectiveness because Governors worry about state budgets, especially nowadays. And so the way you write your message and where you put your message out there is really important. It used to be that every town would have a local newspaper. That may not be the case anymore, but you should still find out by going online and doing research, what are the biggest newspapers in your state or your local community, what is their circulation. And that will start building your goals of what you want to accomplish when you write an op-ed. So I would next want to talk about focusing on the persuadables, which is a term of art in the business of advocacy and communications. And there's three components to that, which are visualized on this slide with a a stick figure choir on the left, a large diverse audience in the middle, and then a very hostile red mark over a accessibility picture on the right. So we talk about the choir, the amen choir. Those are the people who already are on your side, the people who are your base, if we're going to use a political term. Then there's also the people who are always going to be against you. And then there's everybody else in the middle. And really as I think we've found from the election this year some people only appeal to their base, while there are some people who are more successful who appeal to everyone else. And so focusing on those people in the middle who you can persuade is really important, because that is where you Govern, that is where success, and you change minds. I know that seems very hard to believe these days but believe me, you can do it, you can make it happen. I mentioned this before but I want to emphasize it again that writing Op-eds is really something that everybody should do. And it's something that you don't have to be a professional to do. As long as you bring forward your authentic experience, you have a desire to share and to educate someone else, and you present the facts of what it means to be a person with a disability, the barriers that the community face, and you accurately present data that is confirmable and from trusted sources, you'll write persuasively, you'll get your point across and you'll have an impact. And so again, I'll just say authentic experience, a desire to share and bring the facts is so important. Another rule to keep in mind is the KISS method, which is short for keep it simple and straightforward. Just as an example, because I'm a professional policy guy who has been in the swamp a long time, I can talk about HCBS, ODEP, OFCCP, FMAP, NGA, NAWB, NASWA back and forth really quickly. But those are all jargon terms that mean nothing to anybody who doesn't work in Washington. And so when you're trying to write persuasively, keep it short and keep it to the point. Quick shout out to Nicole LeBlanc, former RespectAbility Fellow who was just typing in about keeping it short. And I believe Laka had a question for me in the chat box, so Laka, do you want to ask me your question?

>> Laka Mitiku Negassa: Someone actually asked this question. They're asking how can you be compelling in your advocacy? Do you have any tips or getting local or national representatives to listen to you? Someone asked, don't know the name.

>> Philip Kahn-Pauli: Oh, that's a great question. We'll have time for more questions later, but I'll jump in that. I think a huge issue is that local and national elected officials need to know what's at stake for them. And for most folks if you go to your State representative and talk about there being 61 million Americans with disabilities, they don't care. It's just a statistic. However if you can go out there and say 20 percent of your constituents are people with disabilities, that's more persuasive. That's more compelling. And actually, for example, in some of the nonpartisan outreach work that we did this year during the Senate runoff race in Georgia, we communicated with the campaign staff to say there are over 300,000 voters with disabilities -- specifically hearing disabilities -- in Georgia, but because your campaign doesn't have captioning on your videos, you could miss out on 300,000 votes. That was compellin. And actually by the end of the Senate runoff campaign, Warnock and Ossoff had captions on their videos and alt text on their images. And so when you talk about the facts, make sure that the facts you choose are really specific and tailored to your audience. State specific statistics, community local statistics, those will be very persuasive and compelling facts. And so keep those in mind. And our RespectAbility website has access to all of that information for you. So Laka, thanks for bringing that up. I mentioned before, a good piece of an op-ed is using your personal experience. Checking the facts, re-reading it multiple times. Something else that's important, using person first language. I realize that there's a lot of discourse in the disability community about how we talk about disability, whether we talk about being disabled and that is a decision you have to make and that is something you should be cognizant of when you are writing. And again, when you're writing your personal opinion, when you're writing an op-ed, you are in the unique position to shape the public image of people with disabilities. There's some quick tips about how to structure an op-ed. Quickly introduce your topic. State your primary argument. Use a couple of simple facts to back it up. Use your personal experience. Make sure that each paragraph speaks to your bigger point. When you are writing, be your own worst critic and say why do I care? Why is this important? Link your conclusion back to your original point. And that's how it goes. I will also say when I'm talking about Op-eds, we're not talking multi-page research papers like Laka just had to finish writing in grad school. Op-eds are 500 words or less. Some op-eds are only 100 or 200 words. And so think about that. Can you tell a story about what it means to be a person with a disability in 200 words? I believe you can and I've seen it done. And RespectAbility has gotten a lot of Op-eds published that were that short and that persuasive. Something else that's really important is talking about the key messages you want to drive home. And RespectAbility actually has a webinar coming up in a couple weeks where we talk about persuasive messages. And some of those persuasive messages are those things I was talking about earlier, about how communities are their best when all people are included. Talking about the unique characteristics and talents that people with disabilities bring to the workforce. Talking about brand names is really important, for example, JP Morgan Chase, Starbucks and Bank of America are all big companies that have millions of customers and are very serious about their commitments to people with disabilities. And likewise, you want to drive home the message of whether a given government policy will help or hurt people with disabilities. Now where do you send an op-ed? Well there's a great link in this powerpoint slide that takes you directly to a list of different publications. You can also search via Google, find out who are the top media outlets in your local state.Do searches. I even say reach out and find out if there are local reporters who cover disability issues. Joe Shapiro at NPR has been a great advocate for the disability community by writing about our issues. And so find those reporters, and build good relationships with them. I have a slide here where we have a picture of a former RespectAbility Fellow being interviewed by a reporter in New Hampshire at a campaign event. And I encourage you to search out all the news you can about where disability issues are being covered in the national press. RespectAbility has had our volunteers get published everywhere from Albuquerque to Alaska, so you can do it and we encourage you to do so. Now the next thing I wanted to mention in terms of digital advocacy was writing to your elected officials, and RespectAbility is doing its best to make this as easy as possible. And I'm very pleased to say that we are not the only organization that does that. Other groups such as the National Disability Rights Network, the Arc, Easterseals, Goodwill, our partners in these fights, organizations such as Access Living in Chicago, all make use of different kinds of digital tools to write to your elected officials and make it really easy. And so I'm going to show you how to do that. We're going to invite you to do the same thing and watch this. This is the portal of digital advocacy that RespectAbility has set up, and you'll see here that on our screen we have the message that ensure people with disabilities are part of the build back better agenda. And so this is a platform, it's a website where you can very easily enter a short message to your elected officials to really communicate that idea of people with disabilities want to be part of the solutions, we want a place in our government, we want to have a place in our communities. And so this portal makes it very easy. On the left-hand side of the screen we have a short message that kind of gives you a sense of where we are as a community. We talk about how only about 33 percent of people with disabilities are working nowadays. Millions of people with disabilities have been impacted by COVID, but because it's a new administration, it's important that elected officials hear from our community now. For example, the big stimulus bill that everybody is going to be talking about for the next several weeks, it is critically important that that bill helps workers with disabilities get back to work. And that's not going to happen unless thousands of people with disabilities let their elected officials know that we want to work, we want to get back to work, and we hope that you will do away with things like sub-minimum wage, and introduce new incentives for employers to hire people with disabilities. And so you'll see on the right hand side of the screen on our voter voice action center, we have a short message. We have a subject line. We have a place where you can add your own personalized message saying "hi, I'm a resident of the state of Virginia." I'm going to do that. And then we have a main message here about how people with disabilities are being impacted by COVID. We have contact information. And with one click, I have just sent a message to the Department of Education, the Department of Labor, as well as my Governor, my lieutenant Governor, my Congressman, my two Senators, as well as these several state and local officials. Would you look at that, look at how easy that is? A couple sentences, a couple clicks, and I've gotten a very important message across to very important leaders who are making important decisions. I mentioned this before, social media is incredibly powerful these days and you can quickly send a tweet. And you may not think that a tweet might matter much, but look at the last four years. Social media is so important. Twitter is important, Facebook is important, and these are all ways that we as individuals, as community members, can reach out to our elected officials and get their attention. And so I would encourage you to do that. And if you want to go the extra step, our voter voice portal also lets you make phone calls over the internet. So imagine that. Look at how easy that is. So I'm going to go off of screen share, go back to our PowerPoint, and just say that that is what we talk about when we talk about civic engagement strategies. I'm talking about writing op-eds in your local newspaper, I'm talking about using digital tools like we just did to write to your elected officials. And it's that easy. It is that simple. And it is that important, because we all have a stake in this, and we all want to make our nation better. And that's why we are gathered here today on the MLK day of service. So I wanted to open it up to our audience if we had any questions. I also wanted to invite Laka to share any additional thoughts that she may have on this important work. I've been doing a lot of talking and my voice is getting tired.

>> Laka Mitiku Negassa: I don't have any other comments besides what you mentioned which is what I learned while working with you at RespectAbility as a Fellow. So our voices need to be heard, and we need to make it clear. And it's not just communication but it needs to be evidence-based. It's not just my experience, that is the experience of so many others. Besides that, I think you explained it well. Thank you.

>> Philip Kahn-Pauli: Absolutely. So as an example, and Laka, I really appreciate you bringing that up about that evidence piece, that data piece -- if you watch RespectAbility's website over the next several weeks, we're going to be putting out updates as new statistics on disability employment come out. We try and make sure that the data which is aggregated by the government is adapted and used for local advocates. There's a great website called disability statistics compendium that has a lot of information, a lot of localized information that can even tell you down to how many people have visual disabilities in your local county. And that's the kind of targeted compelling information I talked about being so important to being persuasive. Got a great question here from Suzanne about ASL videos as digital advocacy tools. Absolutely. ASL is so important, and that's actually one of those things that you'll see is sometimes public officials have ASL interpreters at their events, some of them don't. And that is really important and that is a target for advocacy. Because if your Governor is having updates on COVID and doesn't have an interpreter with them, they're excluding thousands of people, and that is so important. So I also bring up the importance of making sure that elected officials have captioning on their videos. That isn't just important for people with disabilities, it's also important for people with hearing impairments, who are seniors, and millions of people who lose their hearing as they get older. And so those are all things that you can kind of push on. I will just say that you have to be careful with some digital advocacy tools. Some are not optimized to be used with screen readers or other accessibility software. But, for example, if you try and use VoterVoice or encounter a barrier, let RespectAbility know and we will get in touch with whoever we can to try and make a difference. All right. We have a question from an anonymous attendee about local policies to help people with disabilities. Thank you very much anonymous, whoever you are. This is a great question and we're talking -- when we talk about millions of people with disabilities, we're talking about medicare, medicaid, that's really high level. It's all federal level stuff. But there's really powerful and important things that people can do locally to help people with disabilities. I mentioned it earlier, transportation is so important. You need to make sure that your buses are accessible. You need to make sure that your sidewalks are accessible, that you have ramps, that you have buildings that are older that start adding accessibility features. Those are all issues that can be solved locally. Another great example is around employment. RespectAbility has actually worked for several years in California, and one of the projects we worked on was trying to get disability groups working together locally in the city of Long Beach. And there's actually now a Long Beach disability services collective that works together on a monthly basis, sponsored by the mayor, who solve disability issues at the local level, which is really exciting. And it's an example of the kind of thing that can be worked on locally. You can have your Easterseals, your Arc, your local school system, your local government employer, all work together to find solutions locally for maybe not thousands of people with disabilities, but maybe just hundreds, and that's great. Another example at the state level. More and more states are starting to have disability caucuses in their state legislature. New Jersey just announced that they were going to have a group of bipartisan legislators work on disability issues at the state level. And if you can push your state legislature to do that, that's another great thing that you can do. All right. And I have a question from a current RespectAbility Fellow. Hello Chinyere, thank you for your question. And she asks a very important question, it's one of those elephant-to-the-room questions. So she's asking about what are my thoughts on non-disabled people being advocates for the disability community? Well that's one of those great challenges, because being an ally and having allies is an important part of advocacy. You'll notice that RespectAbility often talks about the wider disability community, particularly when it comes to our polling. And the reason why we do that is we try and emphasize the message that disability issues impact people with disabilities themselves, but it also impacts their parents, it impacts their friends, their loved ones and the wider community. And so I think there is a very important place for that. Self-advocates who are people with disabilities themselves need to lead, they need to make their voices heard, but there is a very important place for allies who may not have disabilities themselves to amplify the voices of people with disabilities, to say to the elected officials that this isn't just an issue that ADAPT cares about. It's not just an issue that those people care about. This is an issue that I care about as your constituent. I as a non-disabled person care about you working to be more accessible to people with disabilities. And an example of that is actually a big issue we dealt with last year of the issue of SNAP benefits. Because so many millions of people were out of work and there was a deadly virus raging in the country, RespectAbility worked with non-disabled organizations to try and advocate for online grocery delivery using SNAP benefits. About 25 percent of people who use SNAP are people with disabilities, but 75 percent aren't. Many households depend on SNAP, and by working together, by having allies without disabilities working together with allies who have disabilities, we were able to expand online grocery delivery for SNAP beneficiaries. And so that is an example of people with and without disabilities working together. So I think that that speaks to your question Chinyere. Oh, and I have a really interesting question from Josh Mayfield here. He talks about how he works directly with people with disabilities who have physical disabilities as well as psychological disorders. And he says he talks about how he doesn't hear much about individuals with both categories of disabilities as it comes to accessibility. Well Josh, that's a really great question, and I think it's a really complex issue. I'm not gonna end it there but I'll just say that oftentimes the more complex the disabilities, the harder it is to help that person work, live in the community or to access the workforce. And so as you start adding multiple categories of disabilities, it becomes really incredibly difficult to address accessibility needs, but because disability is complex and there's so much effort around it, that there are solutions to be found. For example on serious psychological disorders there are some really great programs that are detailed on RespectAbility's website that specifically help people deal with serious mental illness and become successfully employed and living in the community. So it's really -- the more complexity there is, the harder it is to have easy solutions, and so Josh, thank you for sharing that, and thank you for asking about that. All right. Suzanne Singleton has a great question about how does RespectAbility come up with its priorities regarding advocacy issues. That's a great question, and I will say that for many non-profits, their advocacy agenda is shaped by their Board of Directors. You have people who can give money toward an organization because they care about certain issues and they want to see certain issues brought forward. And there's a push and pull between the Board of Directors of an agency, and the agency staff who are charged with executing that advocacy agenda. And I will say that RespectAbility is itself going through a very serious process of developing a strategic plan, a strategic multi-year plan that's going to shape our advocacy agenda moving forward. Just as an example, six years ago, RespectAbility -- our board met and decided that making workforce development effective for people with disabilities was our highest priority. And that's reflected in our tagline "advancing opportunities fighting stigmas." And so as our organization was trying to figure out how do we address workforce issues, we raised money, and then when we raised money, we hired staff, that's me. And we hired Fellows, like Laka, to do the work of making workforce systems effective for people with disabilities. And so when it comes to setting your agenda, in many cases organizations will have a very narrow set of agendas because they are a particular affinity group. So for example Laka mentioned the great work of the brain injury association of America, BIA. They specifically work on issues related to traumatic brain injury, and that's really important, but it's -- it is a specific category across the huge spectrum of disability issues. I say this because I used to help organize BIA's Capitol Hill events every year. But the way a lot of organizations set their agenda, Suzanne, is related to the type of disability that they represent. So you have the brain injury association of America, you have the autism society of North America, a lot of disability groups are focused on particular categories of disability, and that's important because you have to have that depth of expertise. But there are other organizations such as RespectAbility, such as the national disability rights network, where we focus on the broader disability issues and have a broader agenda because of that. And so that's my over long answer to Suzanne's great question. I have another question here about any tips on getting things in order to contact government officials. It's really surprisingly easy to get names, emails and contact information. But the tip that I'm gonna give you is not to overdo it. If you do research, you can usually find who's working on particular committees. And if you call that office you can usually find out who is the particular staff member who works for that member of Congress on those issues. And if you do that, you can figure out what is their contact information. And so you're gonna have to try and balance being thorough but without being obnoxious. And so if you figure out who is a staff member of a member of Congress working on a particular issue, if they don't respond to an email, give them a couple days, then send a follow-up email. If they ignore you completely keep calling them. If they talk to you once but give you the brush off, give them a little time and then get back to them. If you have a really great conversation with somebody in a Congressional office or a State office, great! Make sure you send them a thank you note as soon as you're done meeting with them. And then after that, you can then follow up on whatever action items you got from them. And so that would be my tips for how do you effectively get things and how do you get in contact with government officials. All right, well, I do not see any more questions. I do not see any more comments in the chat box. And so I am going to wrap up this webinar on this MLK day of service. Thank you so much everyone for joining us. Thank you Laka for sharing your story and sharing your voice. I'm excited about the advocacy we're gonna do in the future, and I'm excited that we have so many more people joining us. And I would just reiterate that message that Dr. Martin Luther King shared on February 4th 1968, that everybody can be great because anybody can serve. And so we invite you today go out there, serve your community by contacting your elected officials. Go out there and make this country a better place, a more equitable place, a more just place. And I think that that's all -- that's what we can do to really share and make everything better in the years ahead. So with that, thank you very much and have a great day!