>> Franklin Anderson: Okay, hello everyone and welcome! Thank you for joining us today. I am Franklin Anderson from RespectAbility, and I'm going to give a few announcements to get us started, and then I'm going to turn it over to the real talent to kick us off today. So with that being said, I would like to get started by sharing some announcements on accessibility. During this webinar you can turn on captions by clicking the CC button on the bottom of the Zoom screen. You can also pin the interpreter's video to ensure that they're visible throughout the presentation. To view the live transcript in a separate window, click the link we are putting in the chat box. Please also put any questions for our speakers in the Q&A box. And I'd like to note as well that this webinar is being recorded, and after open captions are added, you will be able to find it at RespectAbility.org/10.

Next, make sure you don't miss our other upcoming fireside chats. On April 26th, we will be hosting a virtual networking event for those interested in today's topics. And our next fireside chat will be on May 17th, which will be focused on changing attitudes surrounding disability, with the connected networking event happening on May 24th. And lastly, on June 21st we will have our fireside chat on developing leaders, with the related networking event happening on June 28th. You can register for those at RespectAbility.org/10.

And finally, all of these incredible events you've heard about are in celebration of RespectAbility's incredible first decade of achievements in fighting for people with disabilities. All of our accomplishments and all of our programs have been powered by generous support from the public, but there are so many things left to accomplish to fully eliminate harmful stigmas and create more opportunity for people with disabilities. We need your support to ensure the next decade -- the success in the next decade. So please consider donating in honor of this milestone to help us make an even bigger impact in the decade to come. Visit our anniversary fund page to join the movement.

And now I would like to move to introducing Jimmy Fremgen of RespectAbility's Policy and Workforce team. Jimmy Fremgen is the Manager of State Policy at RespectAbility, where the team works to advance opportunities in education, employment, and civic engagement so that people with disabilities can fully participate in all aspects of community. Born and raised in northern California, Jimmy worked as a high school history and government teacher, before moving to a career on Capitol Hill to serve as senior policy advisor to the late Congressman Elijah Cummings. Then, after coming back to California, Jimmy worked as a staff member in the California State Legislature. As an advocate for Californians with disabilities, Jimmy has fought to increase access to guide dogs for the blind, and worked to protect residents of long-term care facilities from negligence and harm. Jimmy was also a candidate for the U.S House of Representatives in California's seventh congressional district. Jimmy, who lives in Sacramento, is a heart disease survivor, an avid golfer, a civics nerd, and he loves to cook. So without further ado, I now turn the microphone over to Jimmy Fremgen.

>> Jimmy Fremgen: Thank you Frank. I really appreciate that introduction, and thank you all for being here today. I am honored to be your host for the first half of our program today, but before we get started I want to bring in my colleague Rostom, who is our phenomenal and wonderful Policy Associate here on the policy team. Rostom and I are representing the larger policy team, which is made up of -- also of our colleagues Wally and Matan, unfortunately neither of whom are feeling very well today. And so Rostom and I are soldiering on in their stead, and hope to live up to their example, as challenging as it might be to fill those shoes. So Rostom and I are going to be leading a conversation with you today around the policy work that RespectAbility does, telling you a little bit about what policy is, answering any questions that you may have for us in the Q&A box. And then Rostom is particularly distinguished in that he is a former Apprentice -- a program that we are now calling our Fellowship program -- and he will be discussing the role that Fellows play here at RespectAbility, and the integral role that they have in accomplishing some of the gains that we have made and will continue to make for people with disabilities. So, Rostom, before we get started, I wanted to toss it over to you. And you didn't have Frank give you a wonderful introduction, but I wanted to give you a chance to introduce yourself to the lovely folks that we have joining us today.

>> Rostom Dadian: Thank you Jimmy. Hello everybody. My name is Rostom Dadian, and I am a Policy Associate here at RespectAbility. In my previous life I did web design. And I took on the Fellowship at RespectAbility because I grew up with a visual impairment. And now as a Policy Associate, I support the team in all aspects of our work. So I'm going to pass it back to you Jimmy.

>> Jimmy Fremgen: Thanks Rostom. So today's conversation -- I'm going to break down the three major lanes of policy work that we have, and then also we'll be talking about our Fellowship program. Our department that Rostom and I work for is the Policy and Workforce Development department, and so there are two primary components there. When you think about policy, another way that you can think about it is generally anything that involves politics. RespectAbility is a non-partisan nonprofit that works to advocate for people with disabilities. So we work with people on both sides of the aisle, and folks that are in the middle, and folks that don't want to be on either side of the aisle. We work in state legislatures, in Congress, on Capitol Hill, in local district offices and district events. And we also go out and engage with some local government leaders as well. Our primary focus is at the federal and state level, though of course if someone were to come -- someone were to come to us and have questions about local policy and how to get involved or how to make change, we would partner with one of our coalition members to make that happen and to direct them to resources that would be the most helpful to them. But the other major component that we have is our workforce programs. And workforce -- while RespectAbility is not a direct service organization, like a lot of folks might be familiar with with non-profits, the workforce -- initiatives that we take on are oriented around supporting policy goals, or supporting direct service organizations in the work that they're doing at the local level. So you can kind of think of us as kind of the glue between policy makers and those direct service professionals.

On the Federal level, RespectAbility has a federal policy position which right now is currently vacant, but we as a team are working collaboratively to fill that in. As was mentioned, I worked for five years on Capitol Hill in the United States Senate and in the House of Representatives, and so I've had the opportunity to assist our team in developing our federal agenda this year while we're seeking to fill that role. Some of you -- and many of you I'm sure are aware of some of the major considerations that are happening at the federal level, chief among which for people with disabilities and especially in workforce is WIOA -- the Workforce Investment and Opportunity Act. This is a bill that was passed into law a number of years ago, but is up for reauthorization. And with reauthorization come lots of wonderful opportunities for improving that bill, taking the lessons that we've learned over the previous several years in implementation and how money has been divvied out, and trying to redirect and improve upon -- kind of sharpen or hone the programs that are contained within WIOA.

We're also within WIOA especially concerned about ETS which stands -- ETS stands for Employment Transition Services. As a former educator, my first experience serving people with disabilities was working with our special education department at my school. And I came to learn over my time as an educator -- and then of course as a policy professional have continued to learn -- that somebody who may have lived their entire life within the K-12 education system may have been supported for much of that time by a formalized structure that allowed them to succeed, that gave them the kind of scaffolds and supports that they needed to navigate challenging or new and emerging situations, right? All of us whenever we enter into new situations have to go to different resources and have the opportunity to learn from others and to be coached along and to seek that out. Unfortunately, we see a drop off at the end of those formalized State-supported services when individuals no longer have the direct resources that they've become accustomed to throughout their lives. And this isn't a reflection of the fact that people with disabilities can't be phenomenal workers, can't be strong components of any sort of workplace. And we see that here at RespectAbility, as of course, we are a disability-led and largely disability-composed workforce here. The issue is more that the communication isn't there and that those additional lessons that you may receive in other environments are not being provided. So ETS -- E-T-S or pre-ETS -- pre-Employment Transition Services are a major component of making sure that those supports exist, that they are intentional, and that we're deliberately developing and and providing those kinds of services.

And then of course as RespectAbility looks to do more workforce issues and looks at that nexus to workforce, and you zoom out a little bit more, we start to look at things like transportation. Being accessible and inclusive in our transportation efforts, and especially in the way that federal transportation dollars are allocated and are sent around -- sent around the country is incredibly important to people with disabilities, whether you are traveling for work and you're commuting between cities via airplane, or you're traveling on a bus, or you are simply going down to your local transportation hub, having accessible transportation is a fundamental component of a safe and secure and steady employment situation. And so we are trying to be intentional about looking for those potential -- unconventional or less obvious intersections with workforce than might normally be considered, and that includes things like transportation.

So the way that RespectAbility does this kinds of policy work at the federal and at the state level is by engaging with members. So when I say members, of course I mean elected officials, members of Congress, members of the legislature, policy makers in administrative roles, whether that's in the federal executive branch, or in state executive branches with Governors, and with policy makers that are in implementation roles at the local level. So while we may be part of helping to develop language around WIOA, for example, we will also go in and meet with -- and my role of State policy manager is to go into the states and say, "how is this happening? What are we doing? How is this federal funding being allocated, and do you need help? Do you need expert assistance? Do you need a coalition that we are participating with? Do you -- what kind of questions do you have?" And being a true partner and making sure that that -- those services are being delivered effectively. And a lot of that happens from ad hoc meetings in the hallways in state capitals. A lot of it happens on Zoom meetings where we can reach out and build relationships over time. And a lot of it happens when folks proactively reach out to us. And so we try to maintain those open lines of communication.

And then of course, the last portion of the work that I mentioned is our workforce work, and this is an area in which Rostom and I have actually had a chance to collaborate real closely on. RespectAbility has three main subdivisions within our workforce portfolio. And they all -- of course, because this is policy it would not be -- it would not be complete if it didn't come with acronyms. So we have our Building Better Futures Initiatives, which we call BBFI, our Enabling Independence to Work initiative, which we call EIW, and then -- and then the work that we do around entrepreneurship and supporting people with disabilities starting and maintaining their own small businesses.

BBFI, or Building Better Futures Initiative, is a program that is starting in California that is specifically oriented around training and supporting direct service organizations like workforce Development boards, local labor organizations, labor unions, employers, around developing employment resources, being inclusive for people with disabilities, reminding them that people with disabilities are a cornerstone component of any workforce, because of course, anybody can have a disability at any time, can receive a diagnosis, or can realize that they have had a disability throughout their career and that something that they may develop a need for an accommodation, and that that is not only appropriate, it is a civil right. It's something that that individual is entitled to, and actually will support productivity in the workplace. And so, helping to inform employers, train them on the best ways to interact, is an incredibly key component of what we do at BBFI. And Rostom actually -- and we're going to get to our Fellows in a moment, but Rostom, as part of our Fellowship program, actually educated our Fellows on how they can seek out accommodation, and the best ways to interact with their employers, so that when they go into the workforce, and they're policy professionals in their own right, that they are prepared and are ready to engage in that kind of conversation and be leaders in their own workforce environments.

The second component is Enabling Independence to Work, which is a multi-year project that we've entered into with the United Spinal Institute. And we are working with them on making sure that we decrease barriers to the workforce for people that rely on full-time assistive care. Full-time care is something that is significantly expensive. The barrier for receiving and maintaining a level of care can be very high. And unfortunately, a lot of states that do supplement -- supplement the income of people that require this care put caps on how much you can earn before you lose access to those -- to those supportive resources. That's obviously something that is going to discourage folks from being engaged and -- not being engaged, excuse me -- from wanting to engage with the workforce and pursue better jobs. So what we have found in a number of cases -- and we know this anecdotally and we know this also statistically -- that there are some individuals that have found that they hit that cap or they're -- they have to stay right below it. And in some cases it's around 150% of the poverty rate. Some states are different. In California that number is around $38,000 a year, which for anybody living in California, you know is a number that is woefully inadequate for the cost of living anywhere in the state. And so what we have found is that for individuals that want to be part of the workforce, but also rely on full-time supportive care, they're forced into a vow of poverty because of their disability, and because of their needs. And that's something that we find wholly unacceptable here at RespectAbility, and in our partnership with United Spinal. And so we're working on innovative models and tools that other states have used, we're amplifying best practices, and we are doing everything that we can to educate legislators in understanding that it is a problem, and also understanding that there is in fact a solution that we can work towards that will reinforce and support the needs of workers with disabilities.

So with that, I want to pause to have to see if we have any questions about the state or federal policy work. And while you are synthesizing your questions and getting ready to share them with us in the Q&A box, I'm actually going to toss it over to Rostom, because I think the last component of the work that we do that's tremendously important and helps us build capacity within the policy world for disability-led change, not only in workforce, not only in disability civil rights, but in every component of policy, because of course people with disabilities exist and live and are key parts of every community. We have our Fellowship program, and Rostom is a former Fellow and is now a current member of our staff. And so I want to toss it over to Rostom to talk a little bit about his experience with the Fellows and share a little bit with you about how we work with our Fellows now before we get into questions.

>> Rostom Dadian: Thank you Jimmy, appreciate it. So our Fellowship program is integral to the work that we do here at RespectAbility. When I started here at RespectAbility, my intention was to build a network of like-minded people for myself and find a place for myself to land so that I can do good work that brings meaningful change to people like me. Being born with a visual impairment taught me that I had to advocate for myself and that, in a sense, learning it on my own was very difficult. So when I came across RespectAbility's National Leadership Program, I was able to find community, and I was also able to find a professional network that put me in a place where I knew I could do meaningful work. And that meaningful work led to me not only finding a place where I can make a difference from everybody, regardless of what their political leanings are -- and that's very important to me. Because building a future for everyone is the cornerstone of what I wanted to do for my life. In our Fellowship program, we teach our Fellows to look around them and look to what they want to do for their futures, and how policy and civic engagement can help them reach their goals, and help them build a better future for other people with disabilities. And what was really important to me, like I said before, was finding that community. During my fellowship here we had a cohort of blind and visually impaired individuals. And for me, before that I really didn't have a community of other people who understood what my disability was. And I know that it's difficult when you have a disability and you can't share that experience with others. So finding that sense of community was important to me during my time as a Fellow here at RespectAbility.

When I transitioned to doing my externship, we actually built out a vision fair with the Fox Family Foundation. And we were able to bring together different groups in Los Angeles to create a vision screening fair, where doctors saw people who wouldn't necessarily have the capability of being able to pay for that visit, or someone that hasn't really had the opportunity to do that. That was really meaningful to me, and I think that was important for my future, because I knew that was what I really wanted to do.

What I do now at RespectAbility is I work alongside Jimmy and the rest of our policy team to train the Fellows in civic engagement -- teaching them to speak out and find importance in their own communities, and showing them how to make meaningful change to add their voices to society. Because it's not only important to have things work for everybody, but it's important to show that we have a intersectional lens to our work. And I think that the work we do here at RespectAbility is important, and I am excited to be here and train the future Fellows so that they can work towards a better and more inclusive society. And I think I'm going to pass it back to Jimmy.

>> Jimmy Fremgen: So Rostom, you know, we have an election coming up in 2024. And one of the questions that we get a lot on our policy team, and one of the questions that folks have on their minds a lot of the time when we have discussions around policy, is what they can do to make a difference. And so I'm wondering from you and the work that we do here and what you've seen throughout your career and through your lived experience, when you have conversations with folks about what they can do to make a difference, what are some of the things that you recommend and where do you tell them to start?

>> Rostom Dadian: Wonderful question. I think that when I get that question, I want to guide whoever is asking me that question to the local level first. Because I feel that at the local level is where you can make the most change. So start looking around your communities. Look at what you can add to your local community. And then start to brainstorm and build out who -- can help you make that change. Who's going to be your partner and go along with you to envision the future you want for your community? Start at the local level, or get involved with initiatives that speak to you personally. Because what I find is when there is passion, there is more proactive -- there's a more proactive lens that people have. They -- are pushed by their passion, and they are pushed by what they feel adds meaning to their lives, and what they think they can add to other people's lives.

>> Jimmy Fremgen: Yeah, I think that's absolutely true. And one of the things that is really important to remember is that, especially on the local level, getting to know your elected representative and having conversations with them is something that is way more accessible than most people are aware of. And in the same play -- same way that you might see a practice in your workplace or you might want to advocate for yourself for a promotion or make a change in how policies are developed in your own office, you have to go to the people that have the power to make those decisions and make the case that you are in fact deserving of that new role, or that added responsibility, or that that job needs to change or -- you can make those kinds of cases to your elected official. You can say, "I really believe that you can have a role in solving this problem and we need your help and we need your assistance." And make your case. But the only way to do that and to be effective in that is building those personal relationships.

>> Rostom Dadian: I think that's extremely important Jimmy, and I also would like to point out that if you do an initial reach out and you don't get communications back, continue to pester the person you're reaching out to, because it's important that you don't give up and that you get your voice heard, because you -- they are elected to serve us, and that's the job that they have to do. So don't be mad, don't be sad, just continue to be proactive about reaching out. And if you don't get a response from that certain outlet, look around and see who else can help you, or if somebody can make that connection for you.

>> Jimmy Fremgen: You know, Rostom, when you said that I was laughing because the folks on the call don't know, but I actually inflicted this on you a couple months ago. We were preparing for a visit to the state capitol in Washington, and I remember you and I having that same conversation, and saying "I haven't heard back from these folks." And when I was a legislative staffer working in the state legislature in California, and working in the House of Representatives, I would get literally hundreds of emails a day. And in those emails were often meeting requests. And just by dumb luck, sometimes I would get a meeting request that I was really excited about, but I would immediately get called away to do something else, and I would get distracted. And so I think you make a really good point is that persistence is incredibly important. And there are a thousand cliches about persistence, but you know, it really is true that the squeaky wheel gets the grease, because if you're somebody who has a problem with your pothole, or with inaccessibility of sidewalks, or the problems accessing the shuttle to the airport in your community, or whatever it might be. The only way that your representative is going to be aware of that, unless it's a problem that they've personally encountered themselves, is if you let them know.

The other thing that I think is really important to remember is the human element -- is that, just like I said, I got distracted in my own work and would sometimes get pulled away. It's important to remember that our elected officials are human beings themselves, and that relationships mean being kind and being respectful and being courteous, because oftentimes by doing that, you may be the only kind person that they've encountered that day. You may be the only person that they've encountered that really was thoughtful in how they were interacted with. It's like when you call and you try to get a discount on your cable bill, you know, if you're kind and friendly, a lot of the time those folks are so used to having somebody yell at them or having them in -- having someone in their face that they're incredibly grateful for a positive interaction. And so persistence is not a problem, but being -- somebody that's impolite or being unkind can be. And so as frustrating as political situations can be, as challenging and as aggravating as they can be as individuals when you bring them to your elected official, I think being thoughtful about it and the way that you do it in the settings in which you do it are incredibly important.

Rostom, I was gonna ask you -- I know that we've both interacted with a lot of officials. How do you find your elected officials? How do you get to know them? What are the -- what are the venues and ways in which you can do that?

>> Rostom Dadian: Well honestly, the way I went about it is just reaching out to my local city council members, and being able to meet with them. A lot of them have office hours, so what I would do is, like, schedule a coffee time with one of them. And it's really that easy to do. The thing you have to remember is just be proactive and jump into the work, so that's what -- that's what's important. And to continue to build that relationship, like Jimmy was talking about, because communication is important, and remembering that they are human and they want to add something to society just like you. So that being said I think that we're hitting time, Jimmy, so --

>> Jimmy Fremgen: Yep. Yep, I know. We're getting the hook here. So Rostom, thank you for joining me for this part. And I want to encourage anyone that's interested in the policy work that we do here at RespectAbility to sign up for our policy newsletter. It does go out once or twice a month, depending on what's going on in our community and what we're engaging with. And we would love to hear from you about what you want to see RespectAbility do, and where you feel like the emphasis needs to be in the policy world.

We would like now to turn it over to our next moderator. It's gonna be Shelly Christensen. Shelly is the Senior Director of Faith Inclusion here at RespectAbility. She's a pioneer and leader in the faith community, disability and mental health inclusion movement, and her passion for the work is anchored by her experiences as a parent advocate. Shelly was trained as a parent advocate, holding school accountable for her son's rights to a free and appropriate public education, as mandated in the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, and has worked with her family synagogue to treat all children with equity and respect. Shelly is also an author and wrote the Jewish Community guide to inclusion of people with disabilities, and co-founded Jewish Disability Awareness Acceptance and Inclusion Month, which we actually just celebrated recently here in the calendar year So Shelly has done a lot of incredible things, but I'm going to toss it over to her, because as one of my friends and as somebody who I love chit chatting with, I know that she has a lot to share, and you'd much rather hear from her directly than hear me tell you about how great she is. So Shelly, take it away.

>> Shelly Christensen: Thank you Jimmy, and thank you both of you for a wonderful presentation about the work that RespectAbility does in Policy and Workforce Development. And I'm going to invite Stacie and Debby to be on camera. And so by way of introduction, my name is Shelly Christensen. I use the she series of pronouns. I'm a white mid-aged woman with dark curly hair. I'm wearing red glasses. I'm wearing a burgundy top, and I have a beige and black sweater over that. Behind me is a light gray wall, bookcase, and a Tiffany table lamp. So joining me today to talk about advancing opportunities are Stacie de Armas and Debby Fisher.

Stacie de Armas is Senior Vice President of Inclusive Insights and Initiatives at -- and a leader within Nielsen's Diversity Equity and Inclusion practice. She's an inclusion and identity researcher, consumer behaviorist, and subject matter expert on diverse communities. Specializing in data at the intersection of community advocacy and entertainment, Stacie is responsible for producing inclusive thought leadership and new research initiatives for diverse consumers, content, and audiences. Stacie is an adjunct professor of consumer qualitative research at California State University Los Angeles, and California -- California State University Northridge. She received her Master's degree in Business Administration with a focus on marketing from Texas A & M. And Stacie is a first generation Cubana, and lives in Los Angeles with her two children. Welcome Stacie.

And Debby Fisher was trained as a psychology -- a clinical psychologist, and she's been an agent of change her entire life. She's been a psychological and neuropsychological diagnostician, a psychotherapist in residential and outpatient clinic settings. Debby has been the regional director of clinical operations for a national managed care behavioral health organization, and has worked in the c-suite of human service agencies, both in permanent and interim capacities, including RespectAbility. Debby is a passionate advocate so people with chronic behavioral health, medical, and cognitive disabilities can be meaningfully engaged in their communities. Debby is a past president of Adas Israel in Washington D.C., where she co-chaired its first inclusion task force with Judy Heumann, of blessed memory. Debby is currently the President of the Religion and Spirituality Interest Network of the American Association on Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities. So welcome Debby.

I'm gonna -- first question for you Stacie. RespectAbility and Nielsen research have been in a partnership for multiple years to use data to advance opportunities throughout the entire entertainment industry. And what I'm curious about is how RespectAbility has worked with Nielsen to advance disability representation and tracking, and why is that important?

>> Stacie de Armas: Well thank you so much for having me, first. My name is Stacie de Armas. I use she/her pronouns. I am a Latina, I have wavy brown hair, and I'm wearing a cream blazer with a bright green blouse. I am in my parents' kitchen, so behind me is a few chairs and the kitchen counter.

Thank you for that question, Shelly. And one of the things I think is really important about the work that we're all doing is the intersection in it. So earlier we heard about public policy work, and I think oftentimes we think that there's -- you know, folks that are also working on, you know, in healthcare and access. We often don't realize the power of all of our work together, and that we all have a place and a part in influencing this conversation. So in the work that I do, I am in media and entertainment. And I think we often hear a lot of conversation about representation in media and visibility in media. And oftentimes it's around -- it's an advocacy conversation around the importance of accuracy. But what we often don't recognize is that it actually impacts everything from the opportunities people receive, to the quality of health care they get. How people are portrayed in TV and movies and news articles and beyond influences how they're perceived and treated in society. And you know, we often look at statistics like, you know, different identity groups in STEM, for example, and what we can do about that. And everyone has a role there, but media and entertainment does too, right? We think about the lack of visibility of certain people in roles when you're watching television, it's no surprise that for certain identity groups, these opportunities are -- not only are they -- not, you know, thought of as something that people can achieve, but they're also not offered to Identity groups. And the same way that negative or inaccurate portrayals can perpetuate harmful stereotypes.

So the thing that I've been working on with RespectAbility, and I'm grateful for the Entertainment group there headed by Lauren, that team has helped Nielsen. Nielsen is often known for our television measurement, right? We measure -- for television and streaming and content, we measure how many people are watching different shows. An important measure, it's the currency that is transacted on in the industry. But we also take a look at attributes of content. And as we started our work in trying to understand the connection between representation and content of different identity groups, and how watchable or bingeable content is, it became important for us to find a partner in the space who is -- has done rigorous work, and is practiced, and can help us build out our platform to illustrate the value of inclusion, and specifically disability inclusion in content. So that's what we've relied on RespectAbility for, and we're gracious -- and grateful, I should say, for the partnership. I'm happy to be more specific if there's opportunity later, but I definitely, you know, would like to hear other perspectives as well. Oh, I think you're on mute Shelly.

>> Shelly Christensen: Am I still on mute?

>> Stacie de Armas: There we go.

>> Shelly Christensen: There we are. I -- looking at the representation of disabled people in the media, in entertainment, I hear a lot of -- a lot of times people will say, particularly knowing I'm passionate about disability inclusion, they'll say, "oh, did you see this show? It had a person with disabilities." And, you know, the more they get into the conversation, they're really talking about a person playing that role who is not disabled, and that's becoming kind of a nails on a chalkboard sort of thing that's happening, right? So how does Nielsen actually use data to advance opportunities for underrepresented populations, Stacie?

>> Stacie de Armas: So that is a fantastic question and I love that you brought it up, because there is a distinction between character portrayals, and between who's being cast. So we have a product that we launched, and I should say very -- you know -- we launched this product and we came to RespectAbility just a few months after realizing we needed help in this space. But -- so I'd like to say RespectAbility has been with us from the very beginning, but honestly it's probably just a few months after, so we'll just call it equal. But what this service does is it allows us to understand on-screen inclusion of cast at the talent level.

So if we look at a basket of content from any given publisher, so whether it's, you know, Netflix or NBC or you know, Disney or whomever, we can understand what inclusion looks like at the cast level, either for the whole publisher, for any given show, for any given date -- you know -- genre, I should say. And so that, if you can imagine these metrics -- so in and of themselves, they can help publishers and studios better understand where they stand in terms of bringing on diverse talent, in this case talent that has a disability, but importantly, where they need to be, right? What kind of movement they need to have to have not just inclusive stories which is very important, but also being inclusive of the talent that they're bringing on board. We can look at that in front of the camera.

RespectAbility has been so helpful for us in defining what those categories or that taxonomy looks like, right? What is -- you know, this can't just be visible disabilities, we have to be inclusive of, you know, non-apparent and apparent. And so it has been wonderful working with RespectAbility to better learn the taxonomy. I think, you know, I just gave an example of where thankfully, you know, RespectAbility has helped us understand the difference between apparent and non-apparent, and not saying perhaps, you know, visible or whatever, and within those categories, what we really should be looking for and measuring.

One of the great things that we have moving forward is we are going to be advancing with RespectAbility and looking at a very specific program that allows us to be on the receiving end of talent coming to us through RespectAbility where we'll be populating this internal database that media and entertainment companies use when they're looking for casting, as an example, or for understanding talent that is associated with different pieces of content. So for us, you've been a wonderful partner in not just sharing ideas with to understand if we're in the right direction, but really developing what matters. And in the case that you just mentioned, Shelly, looking at the talent level of who is being cast in shows can hopefully help break, I think what you referred to as sort of nails on the chalkboard kind of rhetoric, which we keep hearing with people that do not have necessarily a disability being cast to portray a role of someone who does.

>> Shelly Christensen: That's so interesting too, because I wonder how many -- people who are casting others in those roles are really aware that there are disabled people who are talented actors, talented in front of the camera and behind the camera. And so I want to just, again, call out our Entertainment and News Media division at RespectAbility for the partnerships and really really impacting how others in the field perform and raise awareness.

>> Stacie de Armas: And you know, if I can add one last thing, the other thing for this work is also being able to understand where people with disabilities, in this case, or content that is reflective of themes that are within the disability umbrella, where that content or those people end up falling in terms of genre. So one of the things we often find is that people that are cast that have a disability are oftentimes in documentary or in -- I'm sorry, I lost my train of thought -- or documentary or feature film. Now, so there are -- and we know this to be true, right? But what about presence -- of people with disabilities in America's most watched content, things like, you know, episodic content or series based content. And that's where people are watching the most content. And so if we really want to change perceptions and give opportunities, it is -- I'm not saying to not, you know, also tell great stories -- documentary stories, or also to you know, have wonderful, you know, theatrical components, but it's also important that we look at all areas of the industry to know if most of -- if most of America's eyeballs are on the episodic and, you know, series based content, that's where we need to see improved representation so that we can really change some you know hearts and minds.

>> Shelly Christensen: Thank you Stacie.

>> Stacie de Armas: My pleasure.

>> Shelly Christensen: I love your passion for this work. Of course. We're gonna now turn it over to Debby Fisher. And for Debbie, let's have a bit of a conversation about faith inclusion. And it's been one of the pillars of RespectAbility since the very beginning. Initially we centered our work in Jewish community inclusion. And in 2022, building on that success, we expanded our work to include multi-faiths. We adopted a new name for this work, and it's Faith Inclusion and Belonging. How does this name reflect what disabled people want in their spiritual, faith, and/or religious engagements?

>> Deborah Fisher: Before I answer, thank you Shelly for including me in this conversation. And for those who are participating, just so that you know, I am a middle-aged white woman, brown hair, wearing a lime green sweater and shirt. I've got my earphones hanging down. I'm wearing glasses. And in the background in my home office is some office equipment and a yellow wall.

And to answer that question -- the most surprising, to me, information about interest in faith and religious involvement comes from the Collaborative on Faith and Disabilities, that has actually been doing surveys to just -- understand what the interest in the disability community is for religious participation. And shockingly, the numbers that they have come up with most recently is 84 percent. This is a number that's actually been pretty stable over the years that this survey has been done. So 84 percent of disabled people say their faith is important to them. Only 45 percent of people with severe disabilities attend a place of worship at least monthly. Only 10 percent of faith communities do congregation-wide disability awareness. And perhaps most disappointing is that 32 percent of families change their congregation, church, faith community because of a lack of access or availability of supports for their disabled congregants or family members. So at its core, and probably in contrast with the general public and the statistics that are out about worship in the general public, the disabled population really is interested. And despite that, access is woefully low.

>> Shelly Christensen: That's where -- those statistics point to the work that we do in the Faith Inclusion and Belonging department. Introducing and advancing DEI in faith-based spaces is central to our collaborations with disability and faith-based organizations, and one of the current collaborations in our Faith Inclusion and Belonging team is with the American Association on Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities, or AAIDD, in the Religion and Spirituality Interest Network, of which you are the current President. How can collaborations like this advance DEIA and promote belonging in faith communities?

>> Deborah Fisher: I'm glad you asked that question, because this is clearly an area of enormous interest, and about which I'm quite passionate. I think that one of the misunderstandings that people have about faith and religious practices is that that is somehow a stand-alone area of interest for -- people. And what we understand is that if you think about faith or religious worship, you really are thinking about spirituality. And for me, when I think in terms of spirituality and people's experiences, I start to think about some of the wellness information that we understand all human beings benefit from in order to be able to lead successful lives. And so if you think about faith in that context, if you think about the spiritual comfort or spiritual support that a religious belief, worship, or just belonging to the community that identifies with values that a person shares, then in fact, the opportunity to ensure that disabled people have both access to those communities, but also can be members of and belong with, and that those relationships are reciprocal, becomes absolutely clear.

And why collaborate? Well, I actually think that one of the values that RespectAbility brings to this space has to do with -- precisely with the tagline that you have for fighting stigmas and advancing opportunities. There's no greater opportunity than the place that you belong to begin to model, to begin to demonstrate, to begin to help communities feel comfortable with and recognize the -- equality of all human beings. And faith spaces in particular that pride themselves in that moral and -- caring and loving and kindness value system have a particular opportunity to do that. And by the way, that's where you have employers. That's where you have friends. That's where you have people with shared social interests. There's so many places that -- ways to -- ensure that the human values that are basic to everything else that we're doing to -- basically not just fight the stigmas but eliminate them and to advance opportunities can take place in the faith communities. So the collaborations really have to do with advancing that. And they require so much educating, and so much informing, and so much attention to eliminating the barriers that people throw up through their -- inherent biases -- and misconceptions about disabled people.

>> Shelly Christensen: Exactly. And you know, just in terms of faith community involvement and inclusion and belonging, we tend to think about it in terms of just worship. But the truth is faith communities in particular are places where people gather, where they find common interests. And so it's not about finding a particular worship service for somebody, because you know, if that's important to somebody, certainly. It's also what's important to that person in terms of community, in terms of activities, and -- helping to discern faith communities that offer some of those things. So I just -- yeah. I just want to ask you both, if you have just one -- one parting information or bit of advice that you'd like to share about the work that you do, the collaborations with RespectAbility, and how together we advance opportunities.

>> Deborah Fisher: Well, I think as a follow-on to what we've just been talking about, I think it's just precisely that. If we can expand the notion of what faith and belonging means to recognizing that the spiritual life of all of us advances opportunities for both connecting but also for wellness, then all of the work that is being done at RespectAbility is going to benefit from both the internal experience of taking care of workers, co-workers, employers, and their allies, and friends and family on the one hand. And on the other hand, in exposing a broad community to the wealth of -- skill and value that the disabled community brings to any environment and any community in which they're included. So to my mind, the role of this department is so far reaching, and the opportunities that RespectAbility can -- mine in order to ensure that this is part of the conversation that we're having, I think, can make a huge difference.

>> Shelly Christensen: Thank you Debbie. And Stacie, your thoughts?

>> Stacie de Armas: So I guess I'd leave you with just two short thoughts. One is passionate advocacy promotes change, but data driven insights ensure its success. And I encourage all of us where we have the opportunity to add to our advocacy message data that shows that those efforts are indeed leading to results. We need to use data to empower our voices and our stories, and then of course celebrate the diverse perspectives that are a result of that. So that is -- my closing -- my closing part. Advocacy plus insights equal success.

>> Shelly Christensen: There you go. Thank you Stacie and Debby so much. I'm going to turn this back over to Frank right now.

>> Franklin Anderson: Thanks so much Shelly. To wrap us up, I just wanted to remind folks of the upcoming fireside chats and virtual networking events. And a reminder -- if interested in the advancing opportunities virtual networking space, please register by this Friday. We do have other events coming up, including fireside chats on changing attitudes and developing leaders, along with virtual networking events tied to those as well. And you can register at RespectAbility.org/ten. And finally, once again, I just also want to note that we are celebrating our 10th anniversary this year. If you're interested in becoming a part of our movement and supporting all the great work we do at RespectAbility, and helping to ensure another 10 years of success, please visit RespectAbility.org/donate/anniversary-fund. Thank you everyone!