

# MULTICULTURAL INCLUSION & ACCESSIBILITY ADVISORY COMMITTEE

## 2022 YEAR END REVIEW

### 2022 MIAAC COMMITTEE ROSTER

Maura Barrett, Public Member

Carla Buglione, Public Member, Secretary

Kathleen Francis, Public Member

Michele Gruet, Public Member, Chairperson

Wesley Tahsir-Rodriguez, Public Member

John Vajda, Public Member

Verena Mikhael, High School Representative

Emma DePaul, High School Representative

Steve Neale, Director of Admin & Economic Development

Jim Cunningham, Director of Community Services

Claudine Pascale, Director of Verona Public Library

Lydia Furnari, Acting Superintendent of Verona Public Schools

(March – June 2022)

Diane DiGiuseppe, Superintendent of Verona Public Schools (July – December 2022)

Christine McGrath, Township Council Representative

The Multicultural Inclusion and Accessibility Advisory Committee (MIAAC) was newly established by the Verona Township Council on January 3, 2022 via **Resolution**.

MIAAC's ***inaugural public meeting*** was held on March 23, 2022. The committee members met for the first time. We voted for a Chairperson (Michele Gruet) and Secretary (Carla Buglione). Steve Neale, Director of Administration and Economic Development, will be the main point of contact for town events. The committee planned and approved its monthly meeting schedule. All public meetings in 2022 were held via Zoom video conferencing.

We expanded the town's ***Progress Pride flag-raising*** to be a larger celebration of our LGBTQIA+ community. The event, held on June 8, 2022, included an Invocation by Reverend Katherine from the Church

of the Holy Spirit, followed with remarks by Reginald Bledsoe, Director of the Essex County Office of LGBTQ Affairs. Emma DePaul, a Verona High School student, spoke and shared personal experiences. Deputy Mayor Christine McGrath gave remarks on behalf of the Township Council. Our town responded with great enthusiasm and turned out in large numbers to enjoy music, ice cream (The Towne Scoop ice cream truck) and crafts. MIAAC volunteers handed out 150 Progress Pride flags to people attending the event.

We achieved our goal of developing a ***Calendar of Events*** with recommendations for additional multicultural holidays and increased disability awareness. We then presented the Calendar to the Town Council on August 8, 2022.

We planned Verona's first ***Hispanic Heritage Month*** celebration held on September 24, 2022. The festive event included dancing (salsa, merengue and bachata) and dance instruction, complimentary food samples from local restaurants (Empanada Lady and Sabor de mi Tierra) and crafts. Deputy Mayor Christine McGrath gave remarks on behalf of the Township Council. Wesley Tahsir-Rodriguez took the lead on coordinating the food. Maura Bennett took the lead on coordinating the children's craft with assistance from Verena Mikhael.

We assisted with the ***Diwali*** celebration on October 19, 2022. The event featured a traditional Diya lighting ceremony and dance performances. Deputy Mayor Christine McGrath gave remarks on behalf of the Township Council. We expanded the celebration by encouraging guests to participate and learn the traditional dances. We then invited guests into Town Hall to paint clay diyas and enjoy complimentary food and drink.

On December 3, 2022, MIAAC volunteers managed the ***Quiet Photo Session with Santa***, a 2-hour event for children with sensory sensitivities. We checked families in to the event, held at the Verona Public Library, showed them to the area and helped out as needed in the room with a craft, wood slice ornaments that could be decorated with stencils and metallic markers.

We assisted with the ***Hanukkah Celebration*** on December 21, 2022. Mayor Alex Roman gave welcoming remarks followed by the lighting of the Menorah, live music performances and dancing. Guests were invited into Town Hall for complimentary food and drink as well as several crafts and community art projects.

In addition to planning the events themselves, MIAAC began ***researching how to make the events more accessible*** to adults and children with physical disabilities and neurodivergence. Research was conducted and presented by MIAAC members Kathleen Francis and John Vajda. John also shared the Center for Universal Design documents and checklist which will be very helpful as the town increases accessibility to public events.

In May, we met with the ***Kristen Donahue, co-president of C.H.I.L.D.***, who presented information to MIAAC. She shared suggestions for the ways the town can create a more inclusive environment. We discussed the importance of education advocacy and support. Kristen encouraged Recreation Department programs and was supportive of the plans for a new swim program. She encouraged inclusive programs for Track and Soccer.

In June, we welcomed the addition of ***Andrew DiChiara*** to the ***Recreation Department***. Since then, Andrew designed inclusive programs for children and adults. He shared that he is working on and implementing Verona Swimming Pool activities as well as Social Wellness programs (yoga and exercise programs). MIAAC member Maura Bennett volunteered with the yoga program. MIAAC continued throughout the year to provide consistent feedback to Andrew on the status of his programs. Additional programs will be rolled out in 2023.

We spoke with Jason Krasnow, a Cedar Grove resident starting a ***Verona/Cedar Grove community group for neurodivergent adults***. After discussions with MIAAC, Steve Neale and the Verona Public Library, the group has scheduled its first meeting to be held at the Library in February 2023.

The Multicultural Inclusion & Accessibility Advisory Committee was quite successful in its inaugural year. This first year of accomplishments will be a solid building block for the future.