

# **Multicultural Inclusion and Accessibility Advisory Committee -- 2023 Year End Review**

January 17, 2024

Dear Mayor Tamburro, Verona Township Council Members, Town Manager D'Arco and Deputy Manager O'Sullivan,

Please find below the 2023 Year End Review of the Multicultural Inclusion and Accessibility Advisory Committee (MIAAC).

## **2023 MIAAC COMMITTEE ROSTER**

Maura Barrett, Public Member (through June 2023)

Carla Buglione, Public Member, Secretary through June 2023

Rita Chevalier, Public Member (as of July 2023)

Kristen Dunleavy, Public Member

Kathleen Francis, Public Member

Michele Gruet, Public Member, Chairperson

Michelle O'Neill, Public Member, Secretary as of July 2023

Wesley Tahsir-Rodriguez, Public Member

Roxanna Tirado, Public Member (as of July 2023)

John Vajda, Public Member

Sarvenaz Zelkha-Singh, Public Member (through June 2023)

Verena Mikhael, Verona High School representative (through June 2023)

Emma DePaul, Verona High School representative (through June 2023)

Steve Neale, Director of Admin & Economic Development (through June 2023)

Jim Cunningham, Director of Community Services (through September 2023)

Dave Rowbotham, Interim Director of Community Services (as of December 2023)

Claudine Pascale, Director of The Verona Public Library

Diane DiGiuseppe, Superintendent of Verona Public Schools

Christine McGrath, Township Council Representative

### **Special Thanks**

The Multicultural Inclusion and Accessibility Advisory Committee would like to extend our deepest gratitude to The Verona Public Library, Verona Public Schools and the Township of Verona for their support and collaboration to make MIAAC's efforts such a wonderful success. MIAAC is uniquely structured to include those entities along with members of the public who meet and work in partnership to create new programs and expand upon existing programs and services. We are grateful for the full support of the Verona Township Council who unanimously voted to approve the Resolution to create MIAAC and unanimously voted to approve the codification of MIAAC. We are especially grateful for the leadership and unwavering support of Council Member Christine McGrath who guided the creation of MIAAC and continues to serve as Town Council Representative to MIAAC.

### **Mission Statement**

Verona's vibrant community proudly welcomes all residents, business owners, employees, and visitors. Together we are working toward being a truly inclusive place where our policies, services, and programs meet the needs of all people.

### **About**

The Multicultural Inclusion and Accessibility Advisory Committee (MIAAC) was newly established by the Verona Township Council on January 3, 2022. The Verona Township Council unanimously voted to codify MIAAC to become an official town committee on May 15, 2023.

The MIAAC is charged with the following duties and responsibilities:

1. Make recommendations regarding diverse cultural, economic, and social issues within our community to the Township Council.
2. Propose solutions to the Township Council that ensure accessibility for all community members for our services and programs.

3. Propose solutions to the Township Council that ensure accessibility of the Township's policies, programs, and services.

### **Public Meetings**

The Multicultural Inclusion and Accessibility Advisory Committee holds a regular meeting generally on the 4<sup>th</sup> Wednesday of every month via Zoom video conferencing. The meetings are open to the public. Meeting Agendas and Meeting Minutes are posted to MIAAC's web page on the Township's website: [www.veronanj.org/miaac](http://www.veronanj.org/miaac).

## **2023 Actions**

### **Expand the number of public members on MIAAC**

The Verona Township Council voted to approve the expansion of MIAAC from six public members to nine public members. Residents of Verona submitted applications to the Township. The Township selected the additional public members. We were thrilled to welcome them to MIAAC in July!

### **Conduct Accessibility Audit of Verona Town Buildings and Adjacent Outdoor Areas**

MIAAC public members (Kristen Dunleavy, John Vajda, Michelle O'Neill and Michele Gruet) conducted an accessibility tour and produced a report that was provided to the Verona Township Manager and Verona Township Council.

MIAAC members are grateful for the support of Len Waterman, Township of Verona, for his knowledge, expertise and guidance during the tour and review of the report. We also are grateful for Claudine Pascale, Verona Public Library, Mary Farrell, Recreation Department, and Carol Thomas, Verona Community Gardens, for their review of the report and thoughtful comments.

The goal of the accessibility tour was to navigate the Township buildings and grounds through the lens of people with a diverse array of ages, experiences and abilities. The tour included Verona Town Hall, the Verona Public Library, the Verona Community Garden, the Verona Community Center and the Verona Community Pool.

The report positively acknowledged recent accessibility upgrades to buildings and access points, including the new splash pad at the Verona Community Pool. The report also gave recommendations to increase accessibility in buildings, outdoor areas, parking and entryways.

MIAAC sent the report to Joseph D'Arco, Verona Township Manager. We received a complimentary response from Kevin O'Sullivan, Deputy Township Manager. The response noted the report's recommendations and provided updates on actions that will be taken by the Township to increase accessibility of Verona Town buildings and grounds. In December, the Verona Town Council held its first public hearing announcing they had applied for a \$100,000 grant through Essex County to make the accessibility improvements. The report is available for the public to view.

### **Create a Women's History Month event**

To celebrate Women's History Month, the members of MIAAC created Verona's first ever "Women of Impact Panel" event designed to celebrate women whose dedication and commitment to others has led them to make a positive impact on the town and the wider community.

Five women were selected to participate in the "Women of Impact Panel" which was held on March 26 at the Verona Community Center and broadcast live via the Township of Verona's social media.

The "Women of Impact Panel" efforts were led by Claudine Pascale, The Verona Public Library, public members of MIAAC (Carla Buglione, Kathleen Francis, Wesley Tahsir-Rodriguez and Michele Gruet), and with support by Steve Neale, Township of Verona.

Women were nominated by friends, family, colleagues and others through a public announcement and Google nomination form. We were pleased to have a gratifying number of nominations for the panel. MIAAC member Carla Buglione led the panel discussion along with Manya Brachear Pashman, Junior Women's Club of Verona. Mayor Alex Roman, Deputy Mayor Christine McGrath and Council Member Jack McEvoy attended the event.

### **Attend a program on Accessibility of Virtual Programming**

In March, MIAAC public members (John Vajda and Michele Gruet) attended a virtual event to learn about why accessibility is important in virtual events and to learn some ways that we can work towards making our events more inclusive. The event was hosted by Rutgers Hub for Aging Collaboration, Rutgers Bloustein School for Planning and Public Policy, The Inclusive Healthy Communities grantmaking program, and Age-Friendly North Jersey.

### **Launch a QR Code for Volunteers**

MIAAC public members (Kathleen Francis and Michelle O'Neill) worked with Steve Neale, Township of Verona, to create a QR Code for Verona residents interested in volunteering with MIAAC. The QR Code, launched in May, is linked to a Google form managed by the Township. This now gives residents interested in volunteering an opportunity to choose the MIAAC activities and events in which they would like to participate.

### **Organize the Progress Pride Flag-Raising and Celebration**

Building on the momentum from last year, MIAAC members organized the Progress Pride Flag-Raising and Celebration event, held on June 3. The event began with remarks from Deputy Mayor Christine McGrath and invocation by Reverend Katherine Rollo of the Church of the Holy Spirit. In addition, we were grateful for remarks from Reginald Bledsoe of the Essex County Office of LGBTQ Affairs. A new component was a musical performance of "I Want to be Free"

by Verona High School students. Town Council Members Jack McEvoy and Chris Tamburro also attended the event.

MIAAC public members (Maura Barrett, Wesley Tahsir-Rodriguez, Kristen Dunleavy and Michele Gruet) designed family-friendly crafts, invited two Verona residents to do face-painting and organized for The Towne Scoop ice cream truck to be there. In addition, MIAAC gave away Pride Flags and Pride bracelets to event guests.

### **Recognize National Disability Month**

National Disability Month is celebrated every July and is an opportunity to honor the history, achievements, experiences and struggles of the disability community. Public Members of MIAAC (Kristen Dunleavy and Michele Gruet) researched current outreach efforts by federal, state and local governments in the United States. MIAAC determined that a flag is in the process of being designed to celebrate National Disability Month, however, it is not finalized and therefore not ready for a Township flag-raising event.

MIAAC members concluded that, for this year, a solution would be to create a graphic (though the support of Elisa Northrop, Township of Verona) to be used on Verona's social media platforms to raise awareness of National Disability Month.

### **Organize the Hispanic Heritage Month Celebration**

After creating Verona's first Hispanic Heritage Month Celebration in 2022, MIAAC sought to use that experience to create a newly designed event in 2023. MIAAC public members (Roxanna Tirado, Rita Chevalier, Wesley Tahsir-Rodriguez and Michele Gruet) and Claudine Pascale, The Verona Public Library, coordinated plans for a dual event held on October 15 at The Verona Public Library.

The first half of the event, organized by MIAAC, featured children's crafts and complimentary food sampling from Verona's Sabor de mi Tierra restaurant. The second half of the event, organized by The

Verona Public Library, featured a concert of Spanish music. Town Council Member Christine McGrath attended the event.

### **Organize the Diwali Celebration**

MIAAC took the opportunity to expand Verona's third annual celebration of Diwali in 2023. The Diwali lighting ceremony was first started by Verona resident Toral Patel and she has continued to lead the event. The coordination of multicultural events with The Verona Public Library has proven to be a successful partnership. So, when planning for Diwali, Ms. Patel, MIAAC and The Verona Public Library teamed up to create a meaningful event. Rather than conducting the lighting ceremony outside, it was decided to hold the Diwali event indoors at The Verona Public Library on November 4.

MIAAC public members (Roxanna Tirado, Wesley Tahsir-Rodriguez, John Vajda and Michele Gruet) along with Verona resident Toral Patel coordinated the event with Claudine Pascale, The Verona Public Library. Verona Deputy Mayor Jack McEvoy and Town Council Members Christine McGrath and Cynthia Holland participated in the traditional lighting ceremony. The event also featured children's crafts and complimentary food sampling from Brick Lane Curry House restaurant, located in Montclair. When this part of the event concluded, guests were invited to attend - and participate in - a folk dance performance and workshop. Town Council Member Alex Roman attended this portion of the event.

### **Assist Sensory-Friendly Santa at Fair in the Square**

MIAAC was pleased to increase our assistance in helping to make the Photo Sessions with Santa a calm and joyful day for Verona families. The event was designed to be a private indoor quiet photo session with Santa for children with sensory sensitivities. The Verona Public Library graciously offered for the event to be held there on December 2, shortly before the outdoor festivities of Fair in the Square began in the Civic Center.

MIAAC public members (Michelle O'Neill, John Vajda and Michele Gruet) supported Elisa Northrop, Township of Verona, to organize the event. MIAAC members created a craft that families could do either before or after their time with Santa. MIAAC members welcomed families and ensured a quiet and calm space within each family's designated time slot.

### **Conclusion**

As a newly formed committee in Verona, MIAAC recognizes that Verona is a welcoming and vibrant community. The people that live and work in Verona have shown tremendous support for MIAAC's goals and outreach efforts. We are proud of the work we have done and we are motivated to continue to make Verona a more inclusive and accessible place for all.

Regards,

Michele Gruet

Chair, Multicultural Inclusion and Accessibility Advisory Committee