

>> It's nice to see you all. Welcome to breaking down barriers, continuity and creativity during COVID, the Massachusetts model. We are so happy and excited to talk with you today. In terms of housekeeping, please feel free to put questions in the chat as we go, and we'll save time at the end to answer any questions you guys have put in there. My name is Myrto Flessas, I'm the coordinator of mediation and facilitation at the Bureau of Special Education Appeals in Massachusetts, and I've been with the BSEA for almost 11 years. Prior to being the coordinator I was one of the mediators and facilitators with the agency, and in my current role I have the great pleasure of overseeing the six staff mediators and the mediation and facilitation program for Massachusetts.

>> And I am one of the lucky mediators. My name is Becca Stone, and I have been with the BSEA for about 9 1/2 years, and any given year I mediate roughly 120 mediations each year in about 80 towns across Massachusetts. When I'm not mediating I facilitate team meetings. I also oversee the data collection for the mediation process in the BSEA. And one of the my favorite things to do is to present to school districts and parent groups about mediation, so welcome.

>> That's right. So Becca and I are here from the Massachusetts Bureau of Special Education Appeals. For shorthand we're going to refer to our agency as the BSEA. The BSEA provides due process special education and 504 accommodation hearings, mediations and facilitations. At our agency we have a director of our agency, her name is Reece Erlichman, she's fabulous. We have a coordinator of mediation, that's me. There are six full time hearing officers, six full time mediator facilitators, and five admin staff.

>> Yeah, so Massachusetts is really committed to ensuring that mediation is as accessible a process for family and school districts as we possibly can. The Massachusetts model is designed both by our state statutory regulations that we're going to talk a bit about, but then also our team's energy, enthusiasm and commitment to promoting accessibility. Our team really strives to be approachable and knowledgeable, and we're constantly asking ourselves, and you're going to hear us say this over and over again today, what are the barriers to accessing mediation, and what can we do, what we can we do on our end to really break down those barriers?

>> So today we'll share with you how the Massachusetts model is designed to promote accessibility, and how we as a team work to reduce the barriers of access to special education and 504 accommodation due process mediation. We'll also discuss how we use the challenges presented by COVID to enhance our program's accessibility.

>> All right, so accessibility is the first piece. Massachusetts conducts a high volume of mediations annually. Over the past 10 years we have averaged about 1,000 requests each year, and we typically mediate between 750 to 800 mediations each of those years with about an 85 percent mediation agreement rate. Just to give you a sense of numbers, together, collectively Myrto and I have mediated approximately 2,300 mediations. Proportionate to our state's population, we have the highest number of mediations per year from any state. And there's good reason for that, BSEA mediation has really become a part of the fabric of how families and school districts in Massachusetts work collaboratively to resolve disputes. BSEA mediation and facilitation is really viewed as easily accessible, and our mediators and the coordinator, Myrto, as approachable.

>> So accessibility is just defined as the quality of being easily understood or appreciated, or the quality of being easy to obtain or use. We define accessibility in our mediation program as the ability of families and school districts to easily understand their actions for dispute resolution, particularly through mediation, to understand how to access mediation, to feel comfortable to contact the mediators to gather more information, or make a request for mediation, and to feel that mediation itself is a comprehensible and easy to use process to participate in.

>> Yeah. Massachusetts itself, we are a diverse state with both urban and rural communities. We have immigrant communities, and also people who have lived in a commonwealth for generations. We know that everybody here in this Zoom call really wants to ensure that mediation and the processes that we use are as accessible as possible to the folks in your own states. In Massachusetts we take this task really seriously, so we ask ourselves questions. Like so how do we ensure that we have an accessible process? What structures best promote accessibility, and we constantly ask ourselves, again, I'm going to say this one more time. What are the barriers to due process mediation? And how do we break down those barriers?

>> That's right. So we have four key points to highlight today that are the cornerstones of the Massachusetts model, and how we work to create an accessible process. So the first is due process notification. Second is our full time mediators. The mediation process itself, and our outreach. So first we'll discuss the four cornerstones to the Massachusetts model, and then we'll discuss the shifts we made during COVID in order to maintain access to mediation while continuing to break down the barriers that we see to its accessibility.

>> Sorry, took a second. There we go.

>> So the first cornerstone we'll discuss is how Massachusetts facilitates notification of due process rights to families and districts across the state. So in Massachusetts, we provide parents with a parent's notice of procedural safe guards, which is a comprehensive brochure that notifies parents of their rights under IDA and Massachusetts law, including the right to [Indistinct] mediation for free. This brochure is provided to parents by school districts when a student is referred to special education, and then again at least yearly. So that's one of the ways that notice is provided to parents about their options.

>> Yeah. Another dynamic that makes Massachusetts relatively unique is that we provide parents written notice of their due process rights to mediation and hearing every time they reject or fail to respond to a proposed IEP or 504 plan. Specifically school districts are required to notify the BSEA in writing within 5 days of receiving a rejected IEP or 504 plan, or if a parent just fails to respond to a proposed IEP or 504. Once the BSEA, once our agency is notified, we send parents a packet of information that outlines their due process rights. How to file for hearing or how to request mediation. The packet also gives information about a neutral review process called SpedEx. And again, the packet includes the notice of procedural safe guards. But what's really, really important is that the information about mediation includes the name and contact information of the BSEA mediator that covers their particular region, where they live in Massachusetts. Receiving this packet from the BSEA really ensures that when parties are not in agreement that they are contemporaneously made aware of ways that they can resolve their disputes. So to give you a sense of numbers, the BSEA processes on average 10,000 rejected IEPs each year. What that means is that we send out 10,000 letters to families and school districts annually, notifying them of their due process rights to hearing or mediation.

>> So another interesting distinction in Massachusetts is what happens with rejected IEPs. So in Massachusetts no changes are made to an IEP without explicit parental acceptance of those changes. Specifically if a parent rejects an IEP or doesn't respond to an IEP, no changes are made to the student's IEP or program. Instead, whatever was last agreed upon by all parties is considered to be the stay put, and is what will be implemented for the student until the parties agree otherwise, either on their own, through mediation, or where a hearing officer issues a decision when a hearing has been requested. However, the [Indistinct] IEP remains in effect whether or not one of the parties has requested hearing or mediation, and there's no particular time limit to requesting due process dispute resolution for a rejected IEP. It can become very complicated very quickly as teams are trying to parse out what is accepted and what is rejected, so they often need the support of a mediator to resolve these differences in order to have a workable document to serve the student.

>> Yeah. So if a parent or school district decides that they would like to request mediation, they do so directly to the mediator that covers their region. This provides direct access to the mediator, which really gets rid of the barrier of a middleman. We get calls as mediators, and Myrto as the facilitator, every single day from parents who have received our packet of information and want to learn more information about mediation and facilitated team meeting process. While a phone call does not always lead to a request of course for mediation, it does always give parents and school districts information about mediation, and information is so key. And that information comes directly from the mediator who would conduct the mediation, because remember they get the contact information of the person who's in their region. So in talking with parents and school districts, we as mediators really shift from being from the state to being approachable, knowledgeable people who are really, truly there to help families and school districts resolve their disputes. As I'm sure you can tell, we really, really believe that the notification of rights is a critical step in creating an accessible process. If people don't know that mediation exists, they can't know that they have rights. This applies for both school districts and families. All right.

>> So in Massachusetts, the second cornerstone for our program is that we have six full time dedicated mediators. All we do is special education mediation, so we as mediators have become highly specialized in this area. We understand the regulations, we understand the cases related to special education, we know how those cases and regulations impact student's programming and access to education. We understand the various specialized curriculums that are often used, we understand the various disabilities and accommodations. We really understand the minutiae as well as the big picture of the special education landscape. We all fluently speak the language of special education, and are able to with ease communicate that language with folks and explain the jargon and concepts to parties that are not as familiar with the ideas we're discussing. Parents are often not always that familiar with the frameworks of special education, and school folks often need help understanding how their daily work with students fits into public education entitlements. Our specialization helps us break down the barriers that prevent healthy, comprehensive communication and problem solving between parents and school districts.

>> Yeah, that's right. Each of us six mediators were each regionally based. For example, I cover the north shore of Massachusetts. People who live in each particular region know who to contact if they want to request mediation. I should add though, really importantly, that any party may request a random mediator at anytime, with no questions asked. So if somebody would like to work with a mediator who is not their assigned mediator, all they do is call Myrto and ask for another mediator. It's very, very simple.

>> Right. Thanks, Bec. We find the consistency we provide by having dedicated full time mediators has allowed the relationship with have with parents and school district staff as trusted mutual parties. It allows it to blossom and create firm roots in the special education community. We're also able to develop relationship with folks from local social service agencies and other state agencies, supporting our broad base of both substantive and structural knowledge around special education. As we said previously, development of these relationships helps shift people's perspectives from us being the state to this our mediator, she understands us, she understands our school, she understands our parents, she understand the dynamics at play here.

>> Yeah. So for example, over the summer I did a mediation in a district that I hadn't done very mediations. In this case I had never met the director or the assistant director for the district, and when they came to mediation they were extremely tense. About halfway through the mediation, in the private session the assistant director breathed a huge sigh of relief, and she said to me oh my gosh, Becca, I have always felt afraid of you because you're from the BSEA, but you're not scary. If I had only met you before I would've known what this process is like. Oh, my gosh, and we would've used this so much earlier. Well guess what? Now I'm getting many requests from this district. They no longer feel that the situation is being escalated when a family requests mediation, or that they feel stuck when they're in a disagreement with a family. Instead they feel hopeful, because they know that there's avenues and opportunities to get resolution. And really important, I want to say that this type of relation absolutely extends to families and their advocates as well. The example I gave was of a school district, but I could give many examples as it relates to advocates and families. Because we are known, reliable and approachable, families and their support people feel that they are really, really free to reach out to us with questions, and to request mediation.

>> And also because of our constancy in the regions that we cover we learn the particularities of the various communities. We become aware of shifting cultural norms. We're aware of what's kind of going on, what's the vibe in a community, and it allows us to be more responsive to the needs and anxieties and the concerns of the players at the table. And finally, because we are staff mediators who really work as a team, we know each other. We get to reach out to each other, we can learn from each other, we ask questions of each other. We share experiences, we're often allowed to ... Given the opportunity to co-mediate for challenging cases. We have this reliable, knowledgeable, supportive group, and as we work together, it helps us be better at mediation, and it helps us be more responsive to the parties sitting at the table, sort of broadening and deepening access to the mechanics and the depth of the process we provide.

>> Yeah, yeah. That's right. That's right.

>> So the third cornerstone of accessibility in Massachusetts is the mediation process itself. Now probably many of the points we make here we are quite similar to what most folks do in their state. Maybe some [Indistinct] differences as well, but let's see.

>> Yeah, right. So one piece that we've already discussed about how parties have direct contact with their mediator. There is no third party who receives the mediation requests. The requests come directly to the mediator from either the family or from the school district, excuse me. What happens is either the parent or guardian or the district simply calls us or sends us an e-mail. Really importantly there's no form to fill out, we're mindful about reducing literacy barriers whenever mindful. We really want it to be as simple and straightforward for everyone. What happens is the mediator passes the request between the parties, and kind of the mediator being the person passing the requests really alleviates some of the stress on the communication between the parties. We, as their mediators, the people who they're going to work with. So I am reaching out, I'm explaining the process to participants, they hear about our role, we get to hear first hand about their concerns and the issues. We also are really able to offer technical assistance. We answer process questions, and then when we don't have the answer we know how to point them in the right direction. We tend to do a substantial amount of work with parties before the mediation to really have them start thinking about how they can best utilize the process, and really, really importantly we're working on building trust with the parties before the mediation, as we're connecting with and liaising with people. I can't tell you how many times somebody says to me after we have a conversation, whether it's a parent or a school district, oh, Becca, thank you so much. You have made this process feel so much better. I was really worried about it, but now I actually feel like I can do it, and that's really gratifying, and we know that that empowers people and helps them feel like they can access this more. Kind of another piece that we are thinking about about the mediation process as well, I anticipate you do as well, we provide language interpreters, interpreters for the deaf and hard of hearing, supports for visual impairments, et cetera. We're really able to provide any type of ADA supports for folks who need that in order to access the BSEA mediations.

>> Thanks, Bec, that's right. Another important element of our program is that we go to the parties and mediate in their community. So certainly prior to COVID we typically went to the school or an administrative building within a district, but sometimes parents don't feel comfortable entering a school building, or perhaps there's a no trespass order. Some reason we wouldn't go to a school, we'll always work to find a location in the community where the family and school district is located to hold the mediation. We never want location or transportation to be a barrier to accessing the process. Obviously now in COVID we predominantly are mediating still remotely, which opens up a whole other level of accessibility, but we're going to talk more about our learnings from COVID in a moment.

>> Yeah, yeah. So the final piece that we want to highlight about the process itself is that in Massachusetts, the entirety of the mediation occurs during the mediation, during the process itself. All of us mediators have a laptop, and we have portable computers or excuse me, portable printers. We write the agreement during the mediation, and then when we're in person the parties sign the agreement then and there. There's no waiting to review the agreement later, it is completed fully in the moment. And then what happens is the parties leave mediation with a full agreement of what they agreed to, and they actually have in their hand a copy of the mediated agreement to move with. So the final of the four cornerstones that we're going to discuss this afternoon is our dedication to outreach. This is so near and dear to my heart. We want everyone in Massachusetts to know about mediation, and know it's a process they can access easily, for free, in a timely manner with a knowledgeable mediator. So as we talked about before on the most basic level, school teams provide the procedural rights brochure each year at the annual review meeting. Obviously this brochure and any documents are available to families in their home language or other format for accessibility. We also discuss how parents receive the comprehensive due process information packet from our agency, the BSEA, anytime they reject or fail to respond to an IEP in part or in full. And while both of these sets of information are good at reaching the masses, we found that the trainings that we do in local communities really help break down those barriers to accessing mediation more directly. It makes the BSEA mediators far more approachable to the parties. Like that assistant special ed director that Becca was talking about before, once we move from being sort of a name or a phone number on a piece of paper into being in person, hopefully a friendly person, an informed person, an approachable person, people feel so much more comfortable to reach out to us with questions, reach out to request a mediation, reach out to sort of think aloud. Like am I ready for mediation, and so we have really found that those presentations that we provide across the state to various groups have been really helpful.

>> Yeah, yeah. So like we said, we send out information, we volunteer to present, we seek out opportunities to present to local CPACs, to the Massachusetts PTI center, to special education director groups, collaborative school groups, local social service agencies, advocacy, you name it, we are saying here, sign us up, we would love to present for you. We present wherever we can. We also really make sure that we provide trainings using interpreters, and look to see how can we connect with underserved communities in Massachusetts. We really take our commitment to accessibility very seriously, and in doing this we're not only trying to spread the word about what parents and schools can do when they find themselves at odds, including what mediation is, how to request it, how to prepare, what to expect, all those nuts and bolts, but we're really also working to get our faces out there into the community, and to demystify the process and the mediators. We want to be known, we want to be known as approachable and accessible, so people know that they can reach out to us.

>> That's right. All right. So before we move onto the next segment of our presentation we have a polling question for you. So I'm going to read it out loud, it's going to pop up in front of you.

>> Do you want me to read it?

>> No, you can read it, although it looks like it's showing the answers of the poll rather than the poll. I don't know if that's what folks are seeing.

>> I'm seeing it as I think it's supposed to be seen.

>> Okay, I am not, so that is totally fine. So here's the question, as you all see it in front of you. How similar is your state's model to the Massachusetts model? So you can just select all that apply. My state regularly provides direct notice of the right to request due process mediation to families and school districts, my state uses dedicated full time staff mediators for special education and 504 due process mediations. My state parties make a request directly to the mediator, who will conduct their mediation. In my state, parties are not required to fill out paperwork to make a mediation request, or in my state special education and 504 due process mediators regularly present to families and school districts about how to access mediation. So we'll just give folks a second to sort of give us a sense of what's going on in your region. And then when we see the results we'll talk about those. Excellent. Okay. So it sounds like a lot of states, a lot of folks who are here are reporting that their states provide direct notice of their right to due process. Looks like about a little more than half of the states use dedicated sort of staff mediators for special education. Maybe parties in some of the states make requests directly to the mediators, although it sounds like some other states, I'm familiar with other models where they make requests to a coordinator. I'm always so interested to learn more about folks that have sort of forms for requesting mediation. And then ... Becca, I don't know if you can see it, mine isn't showing me the last ...

>> Oh, I can see it. It looks like about 43 percent have said that the mediators present regularly to families and school districts.

>> That's right. Well thank you guys, for sharing that information with us. We're always so curious and sort of thirsty to know about how programs look in other states. I don't know if any of the folks who are participating today have taken a look at the data on CADRE's website, but it's fascinating, it's very varied from state to state. So each state really has kind of envisioned and kind of constructed the way mediation works for special education in their own, unique ways, and it sort of has like a different thumb print about how it looks in each state. So we're always so curious about what folks are doing.

>> Yeah. All right. Are we ready to move onto the next one?

>> Yeah.

>> Beautiful. The poll is off my screen, is it off of your screen too?

>> It is off my screen, yeah.

>> Super.

>> Excellent. So during COVID, like all of you, we started out in a bit of a fog, a COVID fog, but we remembered the necessities and [Indistinct], so this became a wonderful opportunity to sort of think positively and creatively with ingenuity. A lot of trial and error about how to pick up and carry on during COVID.

>> Yeah, yeah. So in this section what we're going to do is we're going to go over with you about how our practices and policies shifted in the immediacy, right as COVID was starting and kind of what we did, the nuts and bolts of that. But then also thinking about what we've done over the last year and a half as we've just been in this long, protracted period of COVID, to really break down barriers, break down the barriers to accessing mediation, and also how we're working to create as many pathways to mediation as we can for families and school districts. One thing to say is I think you're going to find that the pieces that we outlined in this next section of our presentation might not seem as huge or all encompassing and grandiose if you will, in nature, as the first part of our presentation. But that's okay, and we think that it's really important, because we really believe that all of us can take steps. Be it small or large, to increase access to mediation, and what we're finding is that sometimes it's the small steps, the small things that we're doing, the tweaks that we make, that might be able to really lead to big transformations. So when we're talking through this, we're going to encourage you to kind of be thinking about where are some of the small steps in our context, in our state, that we might be able to take as well.

>> That's right. Thank you. So COVID, all right. On Friday, March 13th, very auspicious Friday the 13th in 2020, we in Massachusetts were notified that all offices and schools would close after that weekend on Monday, March 16th, indefinitely. The idea was that we sort of had a sense it may be 2 or 3 weeks. I'm going to pause here for people to laugh at that, because holy smokes. So we at the time thought oh my goodness, this is right at the beginning of our busy season, this is going to be a crazy spring. We were actually set up to have one of the busiest years we really ever had for mediations and mediation requests, and we thought oh my gosh, in a couple of weeks when we come back from this we're going to have to catch-up on so many mediations. It was not a couple of weeks as it turns out, but we are a dedicated bunch, and so no COVID, no virus was going to keep us down. So we made some pretty immediate pivots, and I think some of these are things that lots of states did. So what we did is that we were able to resume mediations remotely. Actually within a week or two we were able to be up and running. Thankfully we live in the 21st century, so within a week we had set up Zoom and trained everyone on the team on how to use the break out rooms and send invites, and talk to parents and school folks on the technical challenges. Then we sort of developed correlating documents and sort of updated all of our forms so that they would help us shift our entire process to resume mediation model. I know from the e-mails kind of flying across the country between all the state's coordinators of mediation, that many other states were busy sort of doing the same thing.

>> Yeah, yeah. So prior to COVID, of course all the mediations that we did in Massachusetts were in person, and what that sometimes meant was that folks, particularly parents, needed to be able to leave their home. Maybe they needed to find child care or take a day off of work, et cetera, in order to access the mediation. Suddenly we found that with Zoom mediations, that some of those pieces became actually a bit more manageable. We saw that parties were able to use the downtime when we were in caucus, when we were kind of [Indistinct] so parties could use that time in caucus efficiently. They might, if they were working from home, they might do some work, they might attend to the kids that needed support and help. Maybe they were attending to the needs of their COVID puppies. I've met many a COVID puppy over the last year and a half, it's kind of fun. But the bigger picture being parties seem more content to give some of the time that's necessary for the process. And so by shifting to Zoom, what we learned is that we have inadvertently, in many cases increased the access to mediation for folks who might not have otherwise been as readily available to use and to attend mediation. In fact, you might know that this is a phenomenon that industries across the world have seen, as having some more meaningful remote meeting options. So again, we're grateful for the 21st century and for Zoom.

>> That's right. So another new and pressing challenge was how to get our agreement signed in a legally binding but also still accessible way. We quickly learned how to share our screen with Zoom and edit mediated agreements with all the parties, and our agencies supported us by contacting with the secure court reporting agency who were able to have our agreement sent immediately to the parties to be virtually and legally signed. This agency sent the agreements through a legal document signing program that worked on any phone or computer. Now of course it wasn't perfect, and we often had to improvise. I know in one instance a parent could not figure out how to e-sign, so I met her in a parking lot where she signed the agreements. It was kind of funny. We were both wearing masks and we were standing 6 feet apart, and we were basically like throwing the papers back and forward to each other while standing apart. But little by little we figured it out, for each and every school district that we worked with, in a way that they could understand and they could feel comfortable with. During this time I will say that we spent a lot of time reassuring parties. We did a lot of on the spot troubleshooting. A lot of sort of case by case attention was really needed to make this process accessible to each of the parties that we worked with.

>> Yeah, yeah. Another one of the side affects, benefits if you will, of the remote mediation option, is that we're finding there is a decrease in the wait time for mediation. Typically in Massachusetts, wait time for mediation tends to be between 3 and 6 weeks , however without having to factor in driving time, we've found and we learned that we actually have a few more hours in a day, and so there could be scheduling with a little bit more flexibility. Sometimes we're able to do two mediations in a day, and then additionally, we can share pieces with a little bit more ease. So if I have a request and I don't have a quick date to offer parties, I can check in with my colleagues or with Mryto to see if any one of them can take the case, and just the ease of that is a little bit more fluid right now.

>> So it soon became clear that obviously we're not going to be looking at a 2 to 3 week shutdown. We were living in the new norm, so we went back to the drawing board to look even deeper at our processes, and consider what more could we do to identify and reduce barriers to mediation. Now we are like, far from perfect in Massachusetts, so we're constantly seeking ways to grow. Here are a few ways that we've been working on to increase the access to mediation, quality of mediation for Massachusetts families and school districts. During this period, the number of mediation requests has dropped, so we knew that our outreach to families and school districts was going to be more important than ever. So this fall we implemented a new program of monthly Zooms with your mediator. Each month we do a presentation via Zoom. The links are all on our website, the dates, the times, all those pieces are on our website. We cast a very wide net in notifying people about these Zooms. So we looked at all possible stakeholders in special education. So sort of not only parents and school districts, but really the broad spectrum of professionals and community groups who will work with students with disabilities. So the first presentation was just this last September where we did a morning and an evening presentation, and all the mediators were a part of the presentation. So the morning session alone had close to 80 participants, and after the information portion we broke into smaller groups for a more informal chat to answer questions and hear feedback. The sessions are designed to alternate morning and evening presentations each month, so we're really kind of making sure we're getting folks who maybe can't come in the evening can come in the morning, or can't come in the morning can come in the evening. And then each month is presented by a different mediator, so people are getting a chance to see all of the mediators who work in our agency. I just lost my spot. Anyway, it was very cool, because after that first session the feedback was incredible. People felt like it was so accessible, they really enjoyed that it was sort of this relatively anonymous way for parties to learn more about the BSEA due process mediation, and the facilitation process, without feeling that they needed to either like go somewhere in person or call and talk about their specific case. It was just an opportunity for pure information gathering, and the first session we actually had this really beautiful experience, where after the information session, during the informal chat portion, we were able to facilitate this wonderful, open, honest conversation between families and school folks, and these two groups, they just talked and asked us and each other questions, and it was such a nice, honest conversation. It was really just like a wonderful moment of information sharing and connecting.

>> Yeah, yeah. One of the pieces that was just so special about that is, so this was open, it's on Zoom. So anybody can participate, and so there were parents from different regions and special ed directors from different regions all over the state, and so they were having conversations knowing that they probably were never going to see each other, but just really having this really natural sharing. It was really special for us to bear witness to that as well. So we also wanted to use the COVID time to become better and move responsive mediators, so we developed another thing that we've done over the last year and a half is develop a participant survey. Probably many of you already have those in place at Massachusetts. It was one of those things that we've just never quite gotten around to developing one, but we realized that without having an anonymous survey we were really missing out on the ability to get feedback on our programming. We knew that some of this feedback would help us identify where a program is currently successful and meeting the needs and being accessible, but then I know that we believe and we appreciate that some of the data is going to tell us where we need to grow, and that we will learn about what barriers still exist. So we're really excited that we've finally gotten this done, the survey is done, it's completed and it's going to be launching within the next couple of weeks, and we're really excited to see the results, and see how we as a state continue to grow and change because of that information.

>> That's right. So during this time we also looked at how could we build in more professional development, and grow our own knowledge and our own skills as a group of professional mediators. So one way is that we initiated a monthly book group. So we're currently reading "Why Are All The Black Kids Sitting Together In The Cafeteria?" By Beverly Tatum, which is a book about how race impacts access to education. We are committed to understanding all the complexities of intersectionality, and how it affects students' access to education, as well as how it created barriers between families and school districts. We realize we all have a lot of work to do in this area. We really want to do better, so our next book is going to be focused on developing, continuing to develop our mediation skills, and then after that we're looking at how mental health impacts education and the parties that we work with. But we found that this sort of more structured book group has really forced us as professionals to really continue to learn and grow and sort of reach outside of ourselves to gain information and other's insights, and then use our time together each month to really talk and think things through about practical applications of the content we're learning.

>> For sure. Another way that we become better, stronger, more responsive team is that we are working on more peer review. Because we're currently doing almost all of our mediations remotely, our ability to do peer reviews and have the occasions to co-mediate has really increased. So while the majority of the time we absolutely still mediate solo, we have found that the ability to co-mediate is a really strong and useful tool. We've been able to use co-mediation opportunities to enhance our skills and learn from each other, and learn the different strategies that each of uses to help level the playing field for participants, enhance communication and problem solving, and really assist parties in reaching resolution. It's just been a great learning tool for us. And so with this peer and co-mediation we're finding that we've become even better at our work. More responsive to the participants, and then the result is greater accessibility for all parties across the board as we learn even more and more how do we meet their needs, how do we create a space that people feel that they can enter into.

>> That's right. And so the last item that we're going to talk about today is that we've used the time to enhance our facilitated team meeting model. So Massachusetts has historically facilitated just a little over 100 team meetings a year, but we realize that by tweaking our model we can make ourselves even more accessible to families and school districts. So rather than only having the coordinator conduct facilitator team meetings, which is sort of how it used to run, we conducted an intensive training on facilitation for all the mediators, so that everyone in our group could serve as a team meeting facilitator. And then we also adjusted mediator schedules to allow time for them to conduct facilitations each month. So through these scheduling tweaks we're typically able to double the number of facilitations we used to be able to provide in a given month, and so sort of whereas in the past we may have had to decline facilitating for lack of a facilitator, we're now able to accommodate almost all requests. We also know that when the mediators have the opportunity to observe team meetings, they're really sort of brought back to what does communication look like at that team level, which is very different than what it looks like in a mediation. So it really keeps us grounded in really understanding what does that dynamic look like, so that when we're in mediation we can be realistic about how to sort of support families and school districts in understanding how communication can look sort of at the team level.

>> Yeah, yeah. For sure, that's been a really great learning on my end. So big, big breath. Globally we recognize that there's so much more room to grow, and many more areas in which we and Massachusetts can expand and develop ourselves out. And in doing that, really having that word and that belief of accessibility in the forefront of our lives. And so as we're kind of really thinking about how we shift it, how do we grow, we encourage you to do the same in your own contexts. We've got a little bit of time at the end, we absolutely want to take your questions, but before we do, we've got one final poll for you. And here is our question for you. Hold on, one second. Let's not [Indistinct] yet. All right. What's resonated for you in this presentation? We've spoken with you about due process notification, full time mediators, mediation process itself and outreach. While we're really proud of the work that we've started here in Massachusetts, we know there's a lot of room for us to grow, so what about you? Where do you see room in your own context? We see that you guys are already starting to fill this out, but let's read it aloud. I'm interesting in exploring ways to increase access to due process mediation in my states by one, expanding how we provide notice of due process dispute resolution options to families and school districts. Two, exploring how we train and specialize our due process mediators. Three, making our mediation requests and practices more accessible to families and school districts, or number four, developing a more robust outreach to families and school districts. So we'll give you just a couple of minutes to add in your insights, and you can tell us what you're thinking.

>> Well I love the results because they are near and dear to my heart with the outreach to families and school districts. I really can't recommend enough the monthly Zoom meetings that we have just started, and I'm certainly happy to talk with anybody who wants to reach out afterwards to sort of learn some more of the details on how we've kind of approached that. It's really a wonderful sort of process and I'm excited to see how it goes in the next year. Becca, what are you thinking about when you're looking at this?

>> Yeah, I think that that piece that stuck out to you is really what sticks out to me too. And I would love to, and your questions as we're talking, feel free to ask questions or make suggestions about things that you've done or your insights. Particularly about the outreach, but then also some of those mediation requests. It sounds like a lot of people are really interested too in thinking about their mediation requests and practices, kind of the nitty gritty of things and how they can do some tweaks. And again, I think one thing that I don't want to overstate or understate, I'm not sure which way, which is to say that change is hard. We know change is hard, and we can take small steps, and it can make big change. And it's okay to take something small, like say a book club or say we want to do this, or we're going to try doing this Zoom. We'll see how it goes. And that could really lead to a lot more change and a lot more transformation for you guys in your own context.

>> And I love what you're saying, Becca. I think one thing that I've noticed in my role as coordinator is that I know I have a bazillion ideas. I have so many ideas, and I want to do all of them. And I'm super lucky, I don't want to brag or anything, but I'm so lucky, I have the best group of mediators anybody could ever want anywhere. And they have a bazillion awesome ideas, and what we've found is that while we're doing our work of mediation and doing presentations and really sort of staying on top of facilitations and mediations and the requests and all of those pieces, adding in other elements to our work and to our programming, you take a small idea, it's a lot of work to sort of get things going and make it sort of part of the structure of how you run your practice, and so we have ... I have been humbled by the work and the dedication that the mediators in our group have demonstrated in really adding any pieces that we've discussed today, and really taking them on. So far at our book club, nobody has showed up not having read the book, everybody's done it and really thought of questions and really sort of attended and participated. Everybody really, really got on board for the survey, and really we spent so much time thinking about what questions and how to make sure we're really sort of getting to the nitty gritty of what we want to know from folks about how it's working. Now is the time, we have about 10 minutes left for folks to put any questions out there. I see one question somebody had asked. How many mediations are requested annually in Massachusetts? There are about 1,000, sometimes a little more, requests annually that are processed by the six mediators, and then in the end there are typically about 750, sometimes 800 mediations that actually happen. Again, that number looked a little lower because of COVID, but just sort of looking back on the last however many years, that would sort of be the standard number. Now I don't want to say that people don't have questions because we did such a good job giving all the information, but perhaps that is the case. But if anybody does have questions they're certainly welcome to put them in the chat now. Otherwise our contact information is up on the screen, and we're always happy to talk with folks sort of beyond today's conversation. Thank you, we'll take kind comments too, that's very nice, Tina. Thank you so much, we really appreciate that. And we have genuine curiosity about what's going on in your state, how do things work? What are the pieces that you feel like really, if anybody wants to put here, to say in my state we do this thing which I think has been a really wonderful way of connecting with participants. We would love to see what folks are doing in other places across the country. If they want to share now we can read them out loud so that everybody can ...

>> Yeah. And maybe what I'll do is I'm going to stop sharing, and if anybody ... Does that sound all right, Myrto, if I stop sharing screens?

>> Yes, please. Yeah.

>> You might just see our faced too, but if you want to raise your hand or if you want to say something please feel free to unmute yourself too.

>> Yes, thank you for the kind comments. We really appreciate them.

>> Yeah, and Lori, you make a good point. So she writes that the Massachusetts model shows what can be accomplished when a state makes this level of an investment. That's a really good point. Massachusetts is many, many years in the making of the BSEA, and it is a financial investment from the state. I don't know as much, I'll let Myrto say a little bit more about the way that that financial investment happens, but it's been a really big commitment and an emphasis kind of across the board, built into the fabric of our state.

>> Yeah, I think we have a very sort of historically as special education has developed since, let's say probably the early '70s across the country, Massachusetts was really right on board at the beginning, and so again, it really makes a difference in how people sort of view our role in engagement in engagement in the conversation when we're looking at special education and folks don't agree. And so they know we're there, our director of agency is here today presenting, but she too is so accessible. She gives everybody her phone number, people will call her all the time, we're really there to partner with folks and be responsive. Here's a question, it says we are a nonprofit Hands and Voices, that does IEP support for families who have children who are deaf and hard of hearing. Can you share anecdotally some of the issues that families with students who are deaf and hard of hearing face attending mediation. We get lots of those cases, Ashley, and we have a very nice partnership with ... Oh, we don't have a lot of time. We have a very nice partnership with the Massachusetts Commission for the Deaf and Hard of Hearing, and they are amazing at providing interpreters and really engaging with us to help keep us sort of so that we're really, truly, meaningfully engaging with families and students who are deaf and hard of hearing. So issues that we see, we see issues around placement, we see issues around families trying to have conversations with their district about what type of communication should be used, there are lots of ways that families communicate and they would like their school districts to use the same methods, and sometimes school districts say we just do it this way at our school, or perhaps a student is really young and maybe there hasn't been sort of a meeting of the minds even maybe within the family around how communication will happen, so we see a lot of communication issues, a lot of placement issues. Becca, can you think of other issues that often come up?

>> I think that the one that I would add in is accommodations. How accommodations are served, what kinds of accommodations are needed, the [Indistinct].

>> And peer groups. So having, because the deaf community is a very strong and vibrant community, that they have their own community that they love and is right for them, is the right match, so really making sure that students who are deaf and hard of hearing have a meaningful cohort and peer group to be a part of, so that's another piece that sometimes comes up.

>> Other questions that people might have, or comments ...

>> Yeah, or things that you're doing, we'd love to hear what you're doing in your state.

>> ... That you disagree with, or, yeah. Oh, and it looks like Kathleen wants to say something.
Welcome, Kathleen.

>> I missed it when you all said how many mediations you do a year, and so I wanted to just clarify. About how [Indistinct], because I'm in Texas. And we have a different model than you do because we've got a lot of territory to cover, but I was just curious how many mediations did y'all have each year on average.

>> So we average between 750 and 800 mediations a year, Kathleen, that comes and goes.

>> That is amazing.

>> Yeah. We get roughly 1,000 requests for mediation each year.

>> Wow. That's amazing. See, one thing that I'm noticing is the outreach ... I'm the mediation coordinator in Texas.

>> Oh, wonderful. Hi.

>> I like the idea that y'all do so much outreach, because I really would like to see mediation utilized a lot more than we do, but it's a little harder for us because like I said, we do have so much territory, but really loved the presentation.

>> Well we do ... Oh, go ahead, Becca.

>> I was just going to say, [Indistinct] ask you a question, which is how many mediations a year does Texas do?

>> We do between 300 and 400 maybe, sometimes a little less. It kind of dropped off during COVID, but I expect it's going to start increasing again. But I think part of it too is that since we don't have, I really think if we picked up our outreach we'd probably go way over that, and then the problem would be finding enough mediators.

>> That's right.

>> I was going to say that one of the ... The session's going to end in 2 minutes probably, but I was just going to say one of the interesting pieces in Massachusetts since we do not have the space that Texas has, however ...

>> Yeah.

>> The distance, right? The mediators do tend to live kind of smack in the middle of the region that they cover, and mediators obviously don't cover the town that they live in.

>> Yeah.

>> Or if they've got their child in the school district they might not cover that district, and so we'll cover a neighboring district. We also don't facilitate in towns that we mediate in, so it is interesting and it's not easy if you know you're going to have to drive 3 hours there and mediate and 3 hours back [Indistinct] long time, and that, for Massachusetts, is a long distance. I feel like 3 hours in Texas is ...

>> That's just a day trip to Dallas.

>> Reach out to us, we'd love to talk and do some [Indistinct]

>> I will, because I'd love to [Indistinct] a little.

>> Yeah, please do. Please do. Anybody reach out to us, I love it. So interesting to learn what y'all are doing.

>> Thank you very much. This has been my favorite session.

>> Oh, you're the best. Thank you so much. Thank you so much. Well, we are so grateful to have had the opportunity to talk with everybody today, and again, you have our contact information. Please reach out and we'd love for you to fill out that survey monkey again. We want your feedback, we want to know how we can be helpful, and we hope you have a fabulous weekend. We've got our first frost here in Massachusetts, I'm not thrilled about that. But I hope everybody has a wonderful, wonderful weekend, and thank you for being here. Did I go too quickly or did it end? I can't see.

>> No, thank you. I will be in touch.

>> All right, see you later. Bye, quick, quick, quick, [Indistinct].

>> Happy weekend.

>> Thank you.