

Exemplar Congregation Application: Temple Sinai

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Temple Sinai is a Reform congregation in Atlanta, (Sandy Springs) Georgia that values lifelong Jewish learning, a spirit of community, a sense of inclusivity and active participation in Jewish life. Our community serves as a center of Jewish life and as an extended, caring family for whom we provide a Jewish context for life experiences. Sinai's lay leadership, staff and clergy encourage active participation of its approximately 1200 member families and the community at-large and promotes the inclusion of people with disabilities in all aspects of community life.

The focal point for Sinai's accessibility and inclusion work is the inclusivity and accessibility committee, named "Hineini" which means *here I am*. The foundation for the success of the Hineini Committee is that members serving on the committee include: people with disabilities; people with family members with disabilities; experts on disability issues; and staff and clergy with a passion for innovation and inclusion. The Hineini Committee began over a decade ago in an effort to ensure that capital improvements to the facility were completed in the most inclusive manner possible. The committee's work was informed by a young man in a wheelchair, Ross Cooper, Ross' mother, Marilyn Arkin, Jan Epstein who has a grandson with several disabilities and Sari Earl whose father was paralyzed and in a wheelchair for twenty years. The group crafted a "wish list" for the construction and expansion occurring at Temple Sinai at that time and

lobbied for major adjustments in the construction to address accessibility issues. Most concerns and adjustments were successfully implemented at that time.

Thereafter, representatives of the Hineini committee joined the Interfaith Disabilities Network, a community program, and worked with churches, synagogues and mosques to advance and share best practices of inclusivity efforts. This collective networking led the Hineini Committee to focus on creating a *culture of inclusion* for all who wish to be part of Sinai through innovative programming and creative physical plant efforts that provide accessibility beyond ADA or code.

Over ten years later, the Hineini Committee has grown to about fifteen members serving on this standing committee, including a combination of lay leaders and staff. Stuart Levenson has been a wonderful contributor to the committee as he brings his experiences of becoming sight-impaired and his welcome sense of humor. Additionally, education specialists joined the Hineini committee, as well as the coordinating lay leader in charge of an autism support group at Sinai. A new initiative of the Hineini Committee is to provide welcoming access to Sinai through two “Accessibility Concierges” and to communicate with the membership about how to take advantage of all that Sinai has to offer. This communications effort includes Sinai’s commitment to inclusion and all that is available to members and guests through articles and information on Sinai’s website, in its printed newsletter, the D’Var Sinai, and in Sabbath and special email blasts to members.

Finally, after a Board of Trustees Inclusivity Awareness Training, the board unanimously voted to create The Hineini Accessibility and Inclusivity Fund to support inclusivity efforts. This fund

is being used for new initiatives, including a special parking assistance pilot program being implemented this summer for anyone with mobility issues in accessing our buildings.

For The Exemplar Congregation purposes, we have included two major efforts detailed below: 1) Sinai's process for building a handicapped accessible unisex family restroom; and 2) Services and Programs.

Physical Plant Efforts that Provide Accessibility Beyond ADA or Code

A husband and wife approached our Hineini Committee with a challenge they faced involving privacy and dignity when using Temple Sinai's restrooms. The wife utilized a wheelchair and the husband was her primary caregiver and Sinai did not have a unisex handicapped accessible restroom in which he was able to aid his wife in addressing her needs. The couple was forced to knock on the Women's Restroom door and wait for people to vacate the space. Thereafter, they would enter and bar the door so no others entered while they were inside together.

The Hineini Committee assumed the task of designing, constructing and finding funding for a functional, fully accessible place for a person with disabilities to use a restroom with privacy and dignity, with room for a caregiver to assist, no matter that person's sex. Our process was time-consuming and challenging and proceeded as detailed below.

- The Hineini committee started this process by doing their homework. The Committee Chairs and members:
 - Toured the William Breman Jewish Home for innovations and standards for accessibility and got the recommendations of good suppliers for accessibility equipment like automated doors;
 - Conferred with non-Jewish contractors who had made accessibility renovations at churches to gain insight into best practices in accessibility construction.

- Met with an expert in disability and accessibility at Georgia Institute of Technology who had experience working with veterans.
- A major challenge was educating the staff and lay leadership to gain support for this effort.
 - In seeking a good location for situating the Accessible Restroom, we found administrative staff at that time resistant to give up any space for the construction. We found ourselves in frustrating negotiations over storage rooms and tiny back-area bathrooms.
 - Funding became the next challenge. We asked to be put on the agenda of the House Committee meeting following proper protocol for any renovations at Sinai. After presenting our pursuit to create the accessible family unisex restroom, we were informed that the House Committee had other priorities that would need funding before consideration of this renovation.
- Everything transformed once the rabbis and the President of the congregation became advocates of our efforts. The rabbis deemed this project an imperative for the Hineini Committee and a necessary space at Temple Sinai for us to be inclusive and accessible.
 - The rabbis and president agree to help us find additional funds for the construction and brought the effort to the attention of the entire congregation via sermons, articles in the D'var Sinai and in e-blasts. This campaign of awareness brought in additional contributions.
 - The rabbis and president ensured that the staff at that time did whatever necessary to help the project move forward, whether it meant giving up storage space or working with contractors.
 - With this new cooperation, we were invited to secure a better, more centrally located space for constructing the restroom.
- Our design process was innovative and inclusive.
 - We solicited the advice of our committee membership for any challenges they or a family member had faced in utilizing restrooms. This advice was proved enlightening. For example:
 - Stuart gave great perspective regarding the tile flooring being a different color from the toilet to aid anyone with sight issues.
 - We learned that everything should be placed in “reasonable and usual” locations, like the location of the toilet paper so to make it easy to use for someone who is blind or has limited mobility.
 - We learned the benefits to having everything automated from the door opening automatically, to the towel dispensers, to the toilet flushing, to the soap dispenser, to the water in the sink, etc.
 - We added a movable cushion for placing a bag, or providing a seat that could be relocated anywhere in the restroom.
 - We installing a baby changing table, for multi-family use.

- We learned the hard way that architectural rendering that followed code don't always perform how the space is meant to be used. This lesson is detailed by Hineini Co-Chair, Sari Earl, below.

My father had Amyotrophic Lateral Sclerosis (Lou Gehrig's disease) and was paralyzed and in a wheelchair for almost twenty years. It didn't matter that he could not walk or talk, he remained to his last day, a master problem solver. He carried a toolkit in his wheelchair so if he found a space inaccessible, he would direct his aids in how to help him access wherever he wanted to go. He used that toolkit to take a door off of its hinges when a handicapped restroom door swung the wrong way so a wheelchair couldn't get through. He used portable ramps to get him up stairs that didn't have a ramp. He learned to find privacy when restrooms weren't large enough for him and his caregiver. My father renovated the dining room of our 1930's era house to create a handicapped accessible master suite on the main floor. He built a ramp and created a new back door wide enough for a wheelchair. He had a special kitchen table designed to be narrower so his wheelchair could pass through the space more easily. My dad modeled how to work with the tools you have, but also how space could be so much more functional if the planner considered how it would be used, especially for someone facing a mobility challenge.

So when I reviewed the architect's plans for Sinai's new handicapped accessible restroom, I took a page from my father's experiences. I took a tape measure and pencils and marked out on the floor of my office the outline of the physical space of the drafted plan for the restroom. My heart dropped to my knees when I

realized that the restroom might be up to building code but it would not be large enough for the turn-radius of a wheelchair. The restroom design failed to address the very purpose for its being built. I grabbed my papers and tape measure, jumped in my car and tested my results in the actual space at Sinai. My findings were correct: the restroom couldn't fit a wheelchair and caregiver and allow for transfer from chair to toilet.

Standing in Sinai's hallways that day, I thought about what my father would do. My father had taught me about relocating doors to provide different points of entry. My father had taught me to walk through space to envision its potential. My father had modeled for me that the will into making something happen often made it so. I started from scratch, reviewing every possible location of the restroom and measuring out the parameters. In following in my father's model, I was able to find a solution. By appropriating unused space in a restroom that currently had a couch, relocating an existing restroom stall, and cutting a new door to a hallway, Sinai would be able to construct a restroom that was more-centrally located and met every one of our accessibility criteria. I sketched a design on a piece of paper and emailed it to the architect. The architect made some additional improvements and redrafted the plan and it all came together. Now we had a plan to send out to contractors to bid. I feel a personal gratitude for the lessons my father taught me, and know that because with him and the incredible person he was, Sinai is more accessible and inclusive today.

Temple Sinai built a centrally located, fully accessible, unisex family restroom *designed by* Hineini Committee members. This accessibly-functional restroom was crafted with input by a Sinai member with vision loss, by members with personal experience dealing with wheelchair transfer. This concerted effort addressed issues well beyond required building code. The feedback on this effort has been overwhelmingly positive. This centrally situated space is used by all members and visitors who want more privacy or require more room when addressing their needs. The finishing touch was appropriate signage directing people to the restroom and publicizing it in our communications.

Periodically the Hineini Committee has a member of the clergy or lay leadership do a “ride-through” the facilities while in a wheelchair, to identify and rectify any areas of inaccessibility.

Below are some of the results of these efforts:

1. A handicapped stall fulfilling ADA Code did not allow for a person in a wheelchair to transfer to the toilet. The Hineini Committee worked with the House Committee to cut a long panel to allow for the handicapped stall to actually function for someone in a wheelchair.
2. Sinai dedicated a mezuzah at wheelchair level at the main entrance to the synagogue.
3. Sinai built ramps in both the main sanctuary and the chapel for all to be able to participate in services and in the honors on the bima during services.
4. Sinai has a zero-grade curb for easy access to the synagogue.
5. Sinai has automatic doors on closest-to-the-sanctuary restrooms and in front for easy admission into the building, as well as several other locations.

6. Sinai's room signage is in Braille.

Temple Sinai and its Hineini Committee continually work to create a culture of inclusion. The approach is multi-dimensional and recognizes the importance of a truly accessible plant, proactive programming and innovative partnerships to manifest a welcoming, fair and flourishing community.

Inclusivity Programming and Building Awareness

Temple Sinai has services and programming aimed at raising awareness and encouraging sensitivity to those living with special needs.

Inclusivity and Awareness in Sinai Services

Example one: The World's First Mishkan Tefilah in Braille

Our congregation commissioned three copies of an abridged Mishkan Tefilah Siddur in Braille of Shabbat morning and evening services. These siddurim include our most commonly used liturgical selections.

Example two: Sensory Sensitive Magila Reading

This Purim, Temple Sinai offered an alternative Magila reading in the Chapel for children with sensory issues (i.e. those who have a difficult time with loud noises), a Sensory Sensitive Magila reading. It was promoted in the parent email/ teacher email and certain families were reached out to for special inclusion. The alternative service included a sensory sensitive puppet show

depicting the story of Esther without noise makers; allowing participants to stomp on Hamen instead of making noise, and streamers were used instead of groggers.

Additional examples include Sinai has moveable seating to accommodate wheelchairs as to not assign those members necessarily to the back the sanctuary. We live-stream many services and programs so those unable to physically attend can virtually attend by way of the internet. Finally, we have training for all high holiday ushers to be aware of how to best assist anyone who needs accommodation. New to the program is a valet service which assists congregants and guests from their cars to the front of the Synagogue and return.

Accessibility and Inclusivity Awareness Training

Temple Sinai has successfully provided inclusivity training for staff, eighth grade educational experience and board inclusivity and awareness programming (which resulted in the creation of the Accessibility and Inclusivity Fund).

Lifelong Jewish Inclusion and Engagement Programs

In addition to staff learning specialists in all religious school education and individualized educational curricula and B'nai mitzvah experiences, this year Sinai created engagement opportunities for post-b'nai mitzvah Sinai teens with special needs.

Specially trained teen mentors, staff and individuals coordinated so that Sinai teens dealing with any challenges could participate for the first time in NFTY events. At the regional HaTikvah

Kallah for 6th-8th graders, five of our teens were able to participate because they had trained teen mentors accompanying them throughout the experience. Teens helped teens navigate the first time NFTY Shabbat Kallah experience. These five teens with special needs would never have attended otherwise and the culture and system are now in place for future participation as they move into NFTY in high school. The teen mentors gained specialized leadership experience and awareness in inclusion for our youth programs (see quote from teen mentor below).

We expanded our staff so that a learning specialist is now present in the teen education programs allowing three teenage students with special needs to participate in our post-Bnai mitzvah learning experiences with support. This inclusion is particularly impactful when we have our annual partnership with the MJCCA and the Blonder Department of Special Needs inclusivity and sensitivity training for all 8th and 9th grade students.

Jewish Adult Educational Journey Opportunities

This year the Hineini Committee initiated a new service-oriented program, The Sinai Accessibility Concierge. Two specially trained volunteers serve as points of contact for our congregants with any special needs to provide resources and guidance on accessing programs, the physical synagogue, Shabbat services and educational and social opportunities for people of all ages. These concierges have the latest information on Sinai's hearing loop, its braille mishkan tefillah, and all innovations and support for people dealing with special needs.

Sinai T'micha is a support group for family members of children who learn differently, need behavioral support or have special needs. We have informal, open-ended discussions about our kids, as well as ideas for schools, services, camps, activities, etc. Families leave our sessions with new ideas and connections to other families facing similar challenges. For further information, email T'micha@templesinaiatlanta.org

Our R'fuat HaNefesh committee was created to provide support and reduce the stigma surrounding mental illness in the Jewish Community and for one another. No one has to be alone when faced with these challenges. If you or someone you love is in need, please contact one of our Rabbis or nefesh@templesinaiatlanta.org to discuss how we can help.

We conduct continuing education and train staff, Board Members, our youth and our general congregation on inclusion, accessibility and the differences and uniqueness that embody our membership and make our community stronger.

Innovative Partnerships

Temple Sinai participates actively in yearly Jewish Disability Month activities as well as actively as a partner to the Jewish Federation of Greater Atlanta's Disability Task Force. Temple Sinai supported and partnered with a community program, The Interfaith Disabilities Taskforce, which, sadly, is no longer in operation.

Beginning last year, Temple Sinai launched a partnership with the MJCCA and the Blonder Department of Special Needs that transformed our programming calendar and raised awareness

of the support that our community offers for those with, and for family members of, individuals living with developmental special needs.

- a. The Blonder Department led sessions of sensitivity training to those living with physical or developmental special needs: one session with our 8th graders, one session with our 9th graders, a session of sensitivity training to the entire professional staff of our congregation; and a session with the board of trustees.
- b. Blonder Department clients participated in a hands-on social action project, alongside and mentored by nondisabled Sinai members.
- c. Temple Sinai purchased a block of tickets to support an evening of the annual performance sponsored by the Blonder Department where a musical show is performed starring only clients of the program. Sinai advertised the event, sold tickets, and hosted a dinner prior to the performance. Two of Sinai's rabbis, a representative from The Blonder Department and Sinai members engaged in conversation around the importance of supporting programs that serve those living with special needs.

Hope for Inclusion Effort in the Future

The Interfaith Disability Network previously provided a seminar with interfaith institutions on inclusion and accessibility. At Sinai, we have a vision for sharing the above-described inclusivity and accessibility efforts and exchanging best practices with other faith institutions by hosting a forum for exchange. We would welcome the opportunity to bring together the vibrant Atlanta faith community and create dialogue around these important inclusivity and accessibility issues.