- So I think we'll go
ahead and get started,

since we are a little bit late.

I want to introduce
the Illinois Department

of Public Health Director.

We appreciate so much for him to be here

and supporting this effort.

Like I said, it was a long time
in the coming - over a year,

year and a half that we've
been working on this,

and we're so glad that it's here

and we're hoping to continue this effort.

So his support is important to us.

So I'd like you to walk,

welcome, Dr. Vohra, Vohra.

Sorry.

To give a brief welcome.

(people clapping)

- Well, thank you so
much, Cyndi and Shaylin.

I'm Sameer, and I have the great pleasure

of being the Director

of the Illinois Department
of Public Health.

The Illinois Department of Public Health

has long focused on planning, preparing,

and responding,

responding to

deep challenging public
health emergencies.

And as all of you know,
it took on a new urgency

during and after the COVID-19
public health emergency.

We saw firsthand the need
for advanced planning

and effective communication,

but we also saw

that it was at times far from perfect.

That we needed to engage better in efforts

that would be including

absolutely everyone.

Public health and natural
disasters can pose

enormous challenges

for different people

at all walks of life.

And those challenges
even more for individuals

that have access and functional needs.

And our role in a disaster response

is to alleviate those challenges
and give people the tools

and information they need to recover.

But if we are not reaching

those individuals on their own terms

and in their hour of need,

then we as a state agency,

we in government, are not
living up to the commitment

and obligation that we hold to promote

and protect the public health
and safety of our residents.

That's why we need critical
summits like this one

and making sure that our
plans take into account those

with access and functional needs.

We must provide information

that everyone can receive
quickly and easily,

that they can understand and act upon.

This is a matter of simple fairness,

but it's also a matter of justice.

It's also recognition of the fact

that helping any individual

or group recover from a crisis

helps everybody recover from that crisis.

And the more we can do to help
people get back to normal,

the better off we will all be.

So what does that take?

It takes first an awareness of the issues.

Issues like barriers to
communication, language gaps,

incorporating the needs of individuals

with physical disabilities

that may require
additional accommodations,

and overcoming at times the stigma

or biases directed against certain groups.

It's not that

anyone

or at times society is actively,

intentionally ignoring or
disregarding these issues,

but we know in the past
that it's just been

often convenient,

maybe sometimes easy

to overlook the issues

in the heat

of the moment during
the time of the crisis.

And now,

we need to say out loud

that we just don't have the luxury

or the right to leave
anyone out in the cold.

Including everyone in our
emergency response helps those

with access and functional needs.

But it also allows

the state

and it's partners to have
the type of effective

and comprehensive response.

One that takes into account a variety

of perspectives and experiences.

We all benefit from that inclusivity

through better and
smarter decision making,

and a greater sense of community fairness

and justice for all.

As with everyone else,

and everything else we
do to improve the reach

and effectiveness of public
health and emergency response,

this is far from easy.

We can't snap our fingers
and make it happen.

We have a lot more to do,

a lot more to learn and making
sure that we understand.

And as the title of this conference shows,

that we're actively seeking
to build the relationships,

to earn the trust that's necessary

during quieter times.

So when the crisis comes,

we can build the kind

of response that we need.

And so I thank you for your participation

over the next few days,
allowing this group,

allowing us here

at the Illinois Department
of Public Health

take the next steps to guarantee

that our preparedness
and response are reaching

and helping everyone.

This event through the hard work of

all of you, through our leaders,

and the Illinois Department
of Public Health Office

of Preparedness and Response,

is an incredible example

of the partnerships that
we build across the state

with our sister state agencies,

with local health departments,

with the healthcare community,

with non-governmental organizations,

and a growing group of advocates
who are working every day

to protect and support
vulnerable populations.

I have often spoke of in

many settings across the state that

what we need post COVID-19 pandemic

is a unified vision for health.

One that brings all of
our groups together,

working together, talking actively,

pushing each other,

so that we can make sure
that the public health

and safety programs in
the state are as effective

and as functional as possible.

And I think that's
reflected in our involvement

in the State Access and Functional
Needs Advisory Committee.

Now, this committee was
created by statute in 2021,

and it's another example of state

and local agencies,
non-governmental organizations,

and advocates all working

to address issues head on.

Early on in its

inception,

the committee identified
the need for more training

and collaboration on inclusive planning.

And as Cyndi mentioned,

it did take some work to get here,

but the conference supports
the work of that committee.

I also want to thank,

and we saw Shaylin sort

of introduce our partners
in this conference,

The Partnership for Inclusive
Disaster Strategies.

The Partnership works
around the country to ensure

that everyone is taken into
account in disaster planning,

and we are so grateful

for their efforts and their partnership.

So I'll close by thanking
all of you again,

leaders, partners, in this great effort.

Thank you for sharing your expertise.

Thank you for your deep
compassion in this work,

and thank you for

your leadership in

pushing this sense of justice,

these goals of equity,

so that we can work together

to achieve the necessary
goal of making sure

that we have an inclusive
emergency response system

that works for everyone.