

Inclusive Transportation Planning: Engaging Marginalized and Underserved Communities

NADTC’s Transportation Diversity, Equity and Inclusion (DEI) Initiative began in 2020 and collected information to identify transportation needs of older adults, younger adults with disabilities from historically marginalized and underserved communities and their caregivers; identify promising practices and education; and provide guidance and support for communities and providers. This Equity Brief centers on learnings derived from the DEI Initiative about the role of caregivers from marginalized communities, gathered as part of the 2021 Transportation DEI Survey as well as focus groups and stakeholder meetings held in 2022.



Inclusive planning is an integral step in creating and providing transportation services that meet the needs of the community. Transportation providers must consciously make efforts to engage with people who represent all neighborhoods in the community, particularly those who are traditionally underserved. The goal is to understand how transportation services can improve the quality of life of that community and the people who live there. By taking a comprehensive, inclusive approach to community engagement, a strategy can be designed that reaches people from marginalized communities.

NADTC gained experience with inclusive planning when holding a series of focus groups in 2022. The purpose of the groups was to expand the understanding of how transportation availability, affordability and accessibility affects the lives of individuals from marginalized and underserved communities. The information obtained from the participants and the facilitator, and the strategy used to organize and host the groups provide best practices on inclusive engagement strategies, including learning about the community, making meaningful connections, and choosing the right engagement strategy.

Learn About the Community

Inclusive planning involves more than extending an open invitation to the community at large. There must be intentional efforts to learn about the community, connect with people from all neighborhoods, especially those who have historically been overlooked or ignored, and to invite and *encourage* them to participate in the planning of a project that will ultimately affect their lives.

When planning the 2022 focus groups, NADTC worked with agencies in five communities to recruit participants. Establishing partnerships with local agencies was necessary as these agencies were immersed in the culture of their communities and could connect with individuals that characterized the unique make-up of their own community. While engaging with the whole community can take time and effort, Kiana Parker, transportation advocate and facilitator for each of the five focus group sites, suggested the following approaches to engage with individuals from marginalized communities.

- Define the target audience(s). Narrow the focus to a specific neighborhood or demographic area where your services are not fully utilized. NADTC staff developed specific parameters that defined the types of individuals to be invited to each focus group. Community partners used these parameters when recruiting participants.
- Go to where the people in your target population live, work, and socialize. Do not expect them to come to you. For the NADTC focus groups, participants could join virtually or at a central location.
- Ride the bus/public transportation in those communities if the service exists. Both riders and drivers may have important input to share.
- Read the newspaper. Look for issues that impact the underserved communities you plan to target, then find related events and show up.
- Find the influencers in the community. Make connections with trusted community leaders. They can help you find people to participate and support the importance of the project. Michelle Caserta from Catholic Services of the Miami Valley, host of focus groups held in Ohio, shared how she found participants: "I relied on individuals from the Senior Centers who I work with to help me recruit. Once I found one person who was interested, they in turn knew someone else and that led me to filling up the group."

Make Meaningful Connections

In order to truly connect with people from the marginalized communities you intend to serve, it is vital to build trust. The people with whom you wish to engage need to believe that you will take their ideas, frustrations, and suggestions to heart and will use that information to make changes that will benefit them. Building trust takes time but will result in a long-lasting relationship that will be mutually beneficial.

- Spend time with community members in advance of the project. Get to know them before you ask for their help.

- Learn about the unique culture of the target group and show respect and interest in the way they do things.
- Show that you value their input, that their ideas and lived experience are important. For example, get back to the group with a summary of what you heard and check back on a regular basis to report progress and to check how things are going.

Recognizing the importance of building trust, NADTC hired a facilitator who uses public transportation, has a disability herself, and has experience connecting with diverse individuals. Her welcoming manner and sincere interest in each participant created an open atmosphere that provided a safe space to share thoughts and ideas. One focus group participant in Ohio noted that “the facilitator was great. She was very professional and gave everyone a chance to comment.”

Choose the Best Engagement Technique

There are many ways to engage with community members. Each community will have its own unique characteristics which will help determine the most appropriate and most effective engagement techniques. Appendix B in the USDOT document, [Promising Practices for Meaningful Public Involvement in Transportation Decision-Making](#) offers a myriad of techniques for engaging with diverse communities. Considerations when choosing the best engagement techniques include the amount of time and money designated for engagement, audience size and language needs. The following strategies might be considered.

- **Focus Groups** are small group conversations led by a skilled facilitator to listen to concerns, needs, and expectations.
- **Non-Traditional Events** are held at locations where community members would typically go and allow for informal interaction between the agency and community members.
- **Interactive Displays and Kiosks** are stand-alone displays that deliver information to the user and elicit responses without in-person contact.
- **Telephone Outreach** is a method that can reach individuals who may not be willing or able to attend a group meeting and can be used to inform the public as well as gather opinions.

What is Meaningful Public Involvement?

USDOT defines meaningful public involvement as a process that proactively seeks full representation from the community, considers public comments and feedback, and incorporates that feedback into a project, program, or plan when possible.

— from *Promising Practices for Meaningful Public Involvement in Transportation Decision Making*

Whichever engagement techniques are chosen, the goal is to allow and encourage individuals throughout the whole community to participate in the decision-making process.

Tips for Successful Inclusive Engagement

Successful inclusive engagement means being open to new ways of doing things. Be ready to move beyond the status quo and let go of the “how we’ve always done it” approach. Below are ideas that will lead to successful community engagement.

- Connect with the community from the beginning of a project and plan ongoing engagement efforts throughout the life of the project.
- Plan engagement activities during times that work best for the intended participants, not based on what is most convenient for the agency.
- Hold engagement events at locations that are accessible to all people, including those with mobility, visual and audio impairments, and can be reached using public transportation. For the NADTC focus groups, participants were offered transportation to a central location or could choose to participate virtually.
- Create materials and plan activities that can be understood by people who are not native English speakers, have limited education or cognitive challenges. Translate materials into braille or languages other than English as needed and make a plan for those who are blind or cannot read. Provide captioning or sign language during meetings when needed. It is important to reach out before the event to identify any communication needs.
- Limit or avoid paperwork or other requirements for participating that might be seen as intimidating. For the NADTC focus groups, participants were asked to sign a simple release form to have their photo, video image or comments used without their name. An anonymous demographic survey was helpful for NADTC to know who was participating.

Facilitating a Hybrid Focus Group

The NADTC focus groups were conducted in a hybrid manner; some participants were gathered in a central location while other participants, as well as the facilitator, were attending virtually on Zoom. The facilitator began each session by teaching the virtual participants how to mute and unmute themselves and how to virtually raise their hand. Each participant practiced using the features to ensure everyone was able to participate. The facilitator also made clear in which order she would take feedback from those gathered in one location and those who joined individually online.

Why commit to inclusive planning? During a 2021 NADTC webinar about transportation diversity, equity and inclusion Julia Castillo, Executive Director at HIRTA Public Transit, shared that she has made a personal and organizational commitment to diversity and to intentionally engage the community. She emphasized that there must be a clear understanding of the value people will bring so that efforts toward engagement are perceived as sincere.

- It is important to ensure you have enough money in the budget to allow adequate staff time to prepare and facilitate engagement activities and to provide transportation to participants as needed. NADTC provided a stipend to the community organizations to compensate them for their time recruiting and organizing the on-site locations as well as to provide stipends to all focus group participants.
- Utilize a team that reflects the demographic makeup of your community, including multilingual individuals who can work with people from a wide range of audiences. If possible, find community members to lead the group.
- Consider giving participants stipends to compensate them for their time and knowledge. Stipends help build trust and show participants that their input is valued. NADTC Focus Group participants received a stipend from the host agency to participate in the focus groups. Heather Robison from Catholic Services of the Miami Valley, a community partner for the focus groups in Ohio, said that the gift cards offered for participation definitely helped with the recruitment process: “It was something the community partners could share with their clients who have experience with public transportation and successes/challenges.”

Closing

Inclusive planning is at the heart of transportation diversity, equity and inclusion work, and engaging with community members is a key element for successful inclusive planning. NADTC’s experience coordinating focus groups in collaboration with key community partners led to a greater understanding and expanded our knowledge of the lived experiences of transportation users from marginalized and underserved communities in different parts of the country. This increased knowledge is valuable in helping transportation programs develop strategies and solutions that can better serve the transportation needs of people from all walks of life.

Transit professionals cannot do their work well without community expertise, particularly if their work is, indeed, in service to the community.

— Kiana Parker
Transportation Advocate

Resources

Promising Practices for Meaningful Public Involvement in Transportation Decision Making, U.S. Department of Transportation [chrome-extension://efaidnbmnnnibpcajpcglclefindmkaj/https://www.transportation.gov/sites/dot.gov/files/2022-10/Promising Practices for Meaningful Public Involvement in Transportation Decision-making.pdf](https://www.transportation.gov/sites/dot.gov/files/2022-10/Promising%20Practices%20for%20Meaningful%20Public%20Involvement%20in%20Transportation%20Decision-making.pdf)<https://www.transportation.gov/grants/dot-navigator/promising-practices-meaningful-public-involvement-transportation-decision>

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Who We Are

Established in 2015, the NADTC is a federally funded technical assistance center administered by Easterseals and USAging based in Washington, DC.

The **National Aging and Disability Transportation Center** is funded through a cooperative agreement of Easterseals, USAging, and the U.S. Department of Transportation, Federal Transit Administration, with guidance from the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Community Living.

USAging is the national association representing and supporting the network of Area Agencies on Aging and advocating for the Title VI Native American Aging Programs. Our members help older adults and people with disabilities live with optimal health, well-being, independence and dignity in their homes and communities. USAging and our members work to improve the quality of life and health of older adults and people with disabilities, including supporting people with chronic illness, people living with dementia, family caregivers and others who want to age well at home and in the community. Together, we are ensuring that all people can age well. Our members are the local leaders that develop, coordinate and deliver a wide range of home and community-based services, including information and referral/assistance, case management, home-delivered and congregate meals, in-home services, caregiver supports, transportation, evidence-based health and wellness programs, long-term care ombudsman programs and more. www.usaging.org

Easterseals is leading the way to full equity, inclusion, and access through life-changing disability and community services. For more than 100 years, we have worked tirelessly with our partners to enhance quality of life and expand local access to healthcare, education, and employment opportunities. And we won't rest until every one of us is valued, respected, and accepted. Through our national network of affiliates, Easterseals provides essential services and on-the-ground supports to more than 1.5 million people each year — from early childhood programs for the critical first five years, to autism services, to medical rehabilitation and employment programs, to veterans' services, and more. Our public education, policy, and advocacy initiatives positively shape perceptions and address the urgent and evolving needs of the one in four Americans living with disabilities today. Together, we're empowering people with disabilities, families and communities to be full and equal participants in society. www.easterseals.com