

Trends Report 2020



Photo: Township of Schaumburg, Illinois





The National Aging and Disability Transportation Center (NADTC) is a program funded by the Federal Transit Administration and administered by Easterseals and the National Association of Area Agencies on Aging (n4a), with guidance from the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Community Living.

NADTC's Mission is to increase accessible transportation options for older adults, people with disabilities, and caregivers nationwide.

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Inclusive Planning for Older Adults and Persons with Disabilities

Introduction

Human services professionals have long advocated for increased inclusion and equity in transportation planning, management and service delivery. Utilizing an inclusive planning process encourages attentiveness to the needs of underrepresented communities. By consistently practicing inclusion, transportation programs may offer older adults and people with disabilities opportunities for authentic and effective engagement in policy development and program planning. Ultimately, the impact of inclusive and equitable practices is the creation of accessible mobility solutions that better meet the needs of the people who use those services.

Building an inclusive planning process with older adults and people with disabilities cultivates an environment of respect for different perspectives and greater understanding of how riders' personal experiences are impacted by program policies and practices. By introducing a diversity of opinions in the decision-making process, communities can begin to address, and also repair, a history of inequality that



has manifested in contemporary transit systems through the lack of accessible features, lack of designated bike or pedestrian lanes, disparities in transit access, and unequal cost burdens.

The COVID-19 pandemic has presented particular challenges as it relates to establishing and maintaining inclusive practices. Social distancing and other risk mitigation safety measures have made traditional in-person inclusive practices (e.g., focus groups, community meetings) unrealistic. Of necessity, engagement has shifted online or returned to the employment of more traditional phone or mail communications. At the same time, these challenges present opportunities for reflection and conversation around why inclusive practices and public participation are so vital to maintain and how we can do better.

Encouraging Inclusion



Many communities pursuing transportation improvements want input from users, but struggle with strategies to achieve this. Transit users may also grapple with how best to provide thoughtful input and ideas. This is where a commitment to, and experience with, inclusive planning can help. Communities seeking to identify what transportation services are working well, the gaps that may exist, and immediate future steps to better serve the community can address these issues by adopting some features of an inclusive planning process, such as:

- *Diverse participation*: Engaging with diverse community stakeholders, transportation users and potential riders representing the varying race, ethnicity, age, ability, and socioeconomic makeup of the whole community.
- *Valuing community input*, where first-hand perspectives are encouraged and respected.
- *Fostering trust* by creating authentic connections between agency leadership and participants learning from each other and working toward united goals.
- *Creating respected and valued participant roles*. Increasing opportunities for community members to be engaged, for example, soliciting meeting agenda recommendations, inviting users to speak at meetings or provide written accounts of their experiences, or creating dedicated small groups to seek specific user input.

Challenges and Opportunities

Inclusive planning creates enormous potential for civic engagement, transit service improvement, and equity among users, but these efforts are not without difficulty. Transportation agencies often balance tight budgets against an increasing demand for infrastructure improvements, increased service, and other amenities. The reality for many agencies is that dollars are simply not available to consider practices that go beyond the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA). While the ADA includes extensive federal requirements for transit systems to maintain accessibility, the ADA standards set a minimum threshold.

Additionally, lack of funding can limit an agency's ability to do community outreach and solicit feedback from riders. Outreach can be time-consuming. Without specific staff commitment to outreach and education, outreach activities may be put on the back burner or added to the responsibilities of staff who are already overcommitted.

It can also be challenging to ensure that inclusive practices yield expected results. Failure to do so can be a source of significant frustration for community members and professionals alike. A successful inclusive process may be in place, but the ability to implement change is sometimes limited, perhaps due to administrative, financial, or other circumstances. Unforeseen circumstances that shift resources (such as the current COVID-19 pandemic or natural disasters) or organizational leadership that fails to pursue or prioritize inclusion can add to the challenge. Without a shared understanding of how and why decisions are being made and funding is allocated, public input can feel unproductive.

While inclusive planning can be difficult, embracing equity and diversity often creates significant value. An initial dedication of staff time and resources can generate lasting accessibility, the impact of which is sometimes immeasurable. Public participation in a project can lead to wider transportation advocacy and dedication to long-term community improvements.

A dedicated effort to include older adults and people with disabilities in transportation planning creates a focus on the personal, firsthand experiences that are not typically represented in decision-making. Transportation professionals often want, and need, to hear from system users to better understand how and why accessibility improvements impact riders' lives. The system then must respond to the needs of the people who use it. Within an inclusive process, everyone's voice holds value.

Through inclusive practices, transportation planners and policy makers may confront personal biases and more critically review the current accessibility shortfalls. At the same time, the inclusive process increases the awareness of older adults and people with disabilities regarding how planning and policy decisions are made, with the result that community support for a connected and accessible system may increase. Lastly, underscoring all of these opportunities, is the understanding that inclusive practices and system accessibility don't just benefit older adults and people with disabilities, but is of benefit to everyone.

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A Local Example of Inclusive Practices and Virtual Engagement

[The Greater Portland Council of Governments](#) (GPCOG) in Portland, ME is the regional planning council in southern Maine and home to the area's Metropolitan Planning Organization (MPO). The GPCOG has put forth an extraordinary amount of effort to incorporate inclusive practices within transportation planning with the intent of elevating the voices of the underrepresented. This approach has allowed them to make meaningful decisions *with* vulnerable populations, building relationships with community members most impacted by changes in transportation services. Recently, the GPCOG has gained experience in pivoting in-person community engagement to virtual settings due to the gathering restrictions presented by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Virtual engagement follows many of the same inclusion principles that guide in-person meetings and for the GPCOG, technology tools have helped sustain inclusive practices during COVID-19 restrictions. However, the exclusive use of these platforms needs to be matched with an understanding of the potential obstacles that could lead to exclusion of older adults, people with disabilities, people with limited English proficiency, and those with limited access to technology.

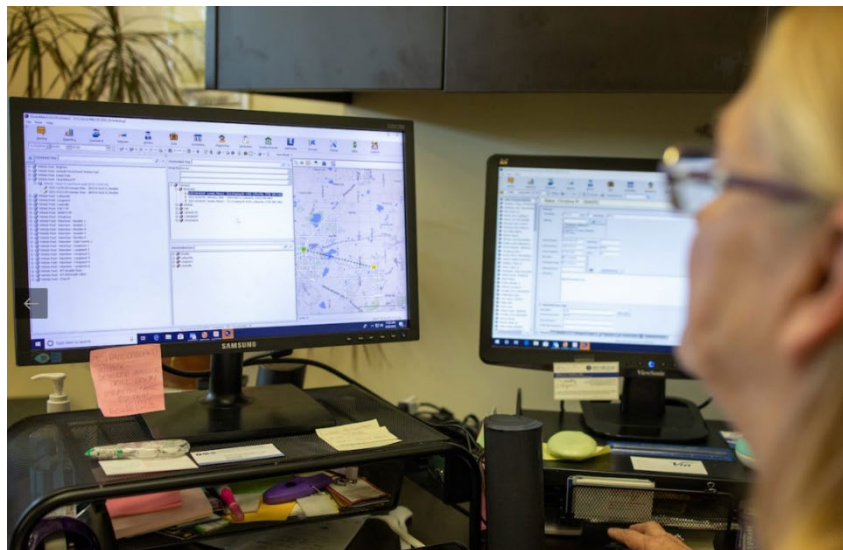
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To maximize engagement of vulnerable populations, it is important to understand the audience, ask questions, and choose options that work the best for the identified individual needs. Some considerations might include: Do the participants have confirmed internet access? Are the participants comfortable not only listening in, but engaging in the conversation via typed chat or voice options? Is there a language barrier that needs to be addressed? Are materials going to be distributed prior to the meeting and a summary distributed after?

Similar to in-person activities, it is important to create an environment that encourages diversity of opinion and participation from all attendees. GPCOG considers a variety of meeting platforms to allow for participants to engage in the manner they find most comfortable. For example, if the meeting is remote, it does not mean that the format must be a video meeting with a computer PowerPoint, it can include non-electronic platforms like joining via phone conference or utilizing a mailing to submit feedback in writing. Organizers should promote their meeting with an inclusivity statement and instructions on how to request accommodations if needed. Most of all, organizers must ensure that if virtual tools are used, they are ADA

compliant, and the tools have the capacity to integrate with assistive technologies such as captioning and screen readers.

In addition to the choice in meeting platform, GPCOG suggests methods of inclusive practice to incorporate throughout virtual conversations. This starts with providing upfront instruction as to how participants will engage in the discussion. For example, if running an online meeting, it may be beneficial to open the meeting 15 minutes early for tech troubleshooting and demonstrations of how to “raise your hand”, utilize the chat box to request speaking privileges, or explanation of the mute function to minimize distractions. This “early open” can also provide time to replicate the pre-meeting interactions that often happen at in person events, where people connect and chat more casually prior to the commencement of the meeting content. As a meeting begins (virtual or not), GPCOG suggests opening with a welcome statement that emphasizes the intent for inclusive practices and reminding folks how to be inclusive in their participation. This might include the instruction to use clear and loud verbal annunciation, ensure comments are spoken directly into a phone or computer microphone, remembering the verbal identification of name and affiliation when speaking, and providing a description of visuals if referencing slides. As the meeting concludes, it is important to provide open time at the end to welcome questions, thoughts, and reactions as an additional opportunity to engage.



A more equitable regional transportation system is only achievable by providing opportunities for users to participate in meaningful decision-making processes. Overall, GPCOG has had great success in encouraging inclusivity in transit planning and transitioning their practices to a virtual setting. Despite the challenges that COVID-19 has imposed on in person gathering, GPCOG has managed to maintain a comprehensive approach to inclusivity.

Summary

Inclusiveness is not implied and cannot be assumed; it must be cultivated. Incorporating values of community engagement can further equity in transportation planning, but the practice of inclusion is a continuous effort that requires ongoing learning and improvement. Doing so consistently means that every engagement provides an opportunity to encourage meaningful conversations, address barriers, and create positive and practical change within a community's transportation system. COVID-19 restrictions presented challenges not only in gathering feedback but magnified already existing inequalities within the transportation system. Confronting these injustices through an inclusive approach reinforces the necessity and value in pursuing equitable engagement practices that address the unmet needs of vulnerable populations.

Resources and References

Greater Portland Council of Governments. (2020). Inclusive and Accessible Virtual Engagement. Retrieved from: https://www.gpcog.org/DocumentCenter/View/1420/GPCOG_Virtual-Engagement-White-Paper_Final_102120-for-website-1?bidId=

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