



Achieving Equitable Transportation: How Diversity, Equity and Inclusion (DEI) Transportation Forums Bring Communities Together

Overview

In December 2023, the National Aging and Disability Transportation Center (NADTC) partnered with two transportation providers, the Detroit Area Agency on Aging (DAAA) and Heart of Iowa Regional Transit Agency (HIRTA), to host regional transportation forums on partnerships and practices in advancing equitable transportation. Both sites were selected based on their impressive work integrating DEI into transportation planning and programs in their communities. The Metro Detroit forum focused on urban transportation, and the Iowa forum focused on transportation in rural America.



The format of each forum was decided locally. Both consisted of a 30-minute keynote presentation followed by a panel discussion to create meaningful dialogue through questions and discussion with attendees. Detroit chose an in-person event, while HIRTA's forum was hybrid, allowing participants to join either in-person or online.

Photo Credit: Metro Detroit AAA

The forums were designed to engage key transportation providers, community stakeholders and public transportation users in conversations about transportation diversity, equity, inclusion (DEI) in their respective service areas. Survey data following the event indicated that the forums were well received, with attendees looking forward to future discussions. HIRTA and DAAA emphasized that key takeaways and recommendations regarding issues impacting DEI and service delivery will enhance efforts to improve transportation services for older adults,

people with disabilities, caregivers, and historically underserved or marginalized communities.

Detroit Area Agency on Aging (DAAA) - Metro Detroit

The keynote address was provided by Dr. Allanté Whitmore, director of the Coalition for Reimagined Mobility (ReMo) at SAFE, a nonpartisan organization dedicated to advancing secure, resilient and sustainable transportation and energy policy solutions. Whitmore emphasized that 197 million Americans are without adequate transportation, 25.5 million adults have travel-limiting disabilities, and 3.6 million people miss medical appointments annually due to transportation issues.

Inadequate transportation for older adults, people with disabilities, caregivers and veterans leads to poor access to services, especially to health care. In response to these statistics, the speaker noted that shared autonomous vehicles can address transportation gaps and diminish transportation inequity through such services as robotaxis (i.e., autonomous vehicles); first-mile, last-mile transportation; fixed route transportation; and goods delivery.

The keynote speaker was followed by a panel discussion. Panelists represented Detroit Department of Transportation (DDOT), the Suburban Mobility Authority for Regional Transportation (SMART) and Transportation Riders United (TRU). They addressed questions about how their organizations advance transportation and DEI, partnerships they have formed for their DEI work, outreach activities in historically marginalized or vulnerable communities, and challenges and barriers in accomplishing their transportation DEI goals.

Attendees included riders, advocates, policymakers and service providers. The demographic makeup of attendees consisted of 45 percent African American, 45 percent white, and 10 percent multicultural individuals from five communities in the tri-county area of Southeast Michigan.

Heart of Iowa Regional Transit Agency (HIRTA) – Rural Iowa

The keynote speaker for HIRTA's forum, Lisa Heddens, is a HIRTA board member, county supervisor, former state legislator and parent of an adult child with a disability who relies on HIRTA for transportation services. Heddens shared her own journey from running for office to advocating for transportation equity, offering valuable perspectives and inspiration for effecting change. She discussed the importance of equity in transportation, highlighting its role in ensuring equitable access to essential services like healthcare, work and social activities for all community members. Throughout her address, Heddens shared personal insights on implementing inclusive practices in transportation, emphasizing the need to overcome barriers to accessibility and promote diversity within transportation systems. She also discussed strategies for educating local and state leaders on the significance of diversity, equity, and inclusion in transportation, along with successful community engagement efforts that have improved transportation access and equity. Heddens concluded with a call to action, urging attendees to take

proactive steps in their communities to create an inclusive and accessible transportation system.

The panel discussion encompassed diverse perspectives with a healthcare representative from Dallas County Public Health, a county supervisor and advocate, a low-income population advocate representing United Way of Story County, and a HIRTA rider with a disability who is also a resource coach for a disability advocacy group. The audience was comprised of nearly 50 individuals, both in person and online.



Photo Credit: HIRTA

Key Challenges and Issues Addressed

Both forums collected valuable feedback from participants about DEI. Most of the feedback pertained to universal concerns applicable to all riders, irrespective of their demographic characteristics and geographic differences. Key points included:

- Increase frequency of transportation to better address the needs of the community, which may involve extending operational hours. HIRTA's advocate on the panel spoke about notification of schedules and having some way of finding out when there are delays in rides.
- Broaden first mile/last mile options for riders in urban areas.
- Explore how to provide equal access to all areas. This is a particular challenge in rural areas.
- Focus attention on people who are still driving in rural areas, especially when they have never used transit and are not aware of resources.
- Expand and enhance the level of service offered to older people, people with disabilities, and people who are vulnerable.
- Examine strategies for recruiting, hiring, training, and compensating bus drivers and other transit staff with the objective of advancing diversity, equity, and inclusion within the workforce.
- Leverage the essential role of all transportation providers through expanded collaboration, strengthening community partnerships, particularly with hospitals and healthcare facilities, local officials and community leaders.
- Continue to educate the community through outreach programs, travel training, and campaigns to bridge awareness gaps.
- Expand ways to intentionally listen to constituents/riders. Meet them where they are as opposed to expecting them to travel to centralized meeting locations. Develop targeted outreach programs in underserved communities.

- Increase accountability to riders from transportation and organization leaders, as well as drivers and other personnel.
- Make customer service personal.
- Explore the use of safe, autonomous vehicles across Southeast Michigan and their potential contribution in reducing environmental and noise pollution to eliminate chronic disease. (DAAA)

Moving Forward

Both forums highlighted important takeaways that will shape their efforts toward achieving equitable transportation in their respective regions.

- Transportation directly impacts rider health, financial stability and access to community resources.
- Inclusive transportation planning and equitable transportation are essential if we are to address the unique needs of all segments of the community.
- DEI starts at the top within organizations. Entire organizations need to be engaged, approaching DEI with humility.
- Equitable transportation involves both policy and funding considerations. Transportation providers need to secure additional and/or adequate funding to address the needs of all potential riders.
- Innovative mobility services such as autonomous vehicles present unique opportunities to enhance affordability and access for older adults and people with disabilities, prioritizing their safety while addressing their transportation needs. It is important to address DEI in the beginning rather than after new service designs are completed.
- Knowledge gaps among transportation providers are real; engagement with underserved communities can bring understanding through intentional listening.
- Transportation is an economic engine, and communities need to recognize how transportation affects health care, school, work, play and social connectedness for everyone.
- Partnerships with community groups, such as healthcare providers, schools, local Chambers of Commerce and businesses, are essential to work toward solutions that advance transportation equity.

Conclusion

As NADTC continues to support local community transportation DEI efforts, two additional forums are slated for 2024. The forums are intended to shine a spotlight on promising DEI practices and facilitate discussion of local challenges and potential solutions. Lessons learned from these forums and other DEI activities will inform future DEI program development and discussions to ensure that transportation services are available and accessible to all older adults, people with disabilities and caregivers, especially those from historically marginalized and underserved communities.



USAgging 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. USAgging 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

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