



## Inclusive Engagement – Approaches for Meaningful Connection

Engaging with people from diverse communities is an important step in your transportation diversity, equity, and inclusion work. Making that happen is not always simple or obvious. At the NADTC Grantee All-Projects meeting on November 16, 2022, Kiana Parker, Transportation & Disability Advocate, shared insights, and strategies to help plan for and obtain meaningful connections to inform your transportation planning.

### Strategies for finding diverse people and getting them to engage

Where do you go to find the people you want to connect with? You know the geographical area that you want to serve, but how do you connect with the individuals who need your services the most?

One common approach is to connect with the community organizations who typically serve the people you are targeting. These organizations already have connections to many of the people who could benefit from your service. Not everyone in your target group is connected to an agency. To engage broadly with the community you wish to serve requires additional efforts and Kiana offers the follow suggestions:

- **Be very specific about the people you are trying to reach.** “People with disabilities and older adults” is too broad.
- **Spend time “people-watching.”** Go to where people gather to find the people you want to engage with. Imbed yourself in the community to get a feel for what goes on there and to find the challenges people have.
- **Ride the bus.** Engage with people on the bus, both riders and drivers. Drivers know their customers and can give you suggestions on who you could connect with in your target audience.
- **Read the newspaper.** Look for issues that impact diverse communities, then find the events related to those issues and show up to meet and engage with them. This is a good way to expand your network and find the people you wish to connect with in the future.
- **Spend time with the people you want to engage with.** Get to know the people to help build trust. Help them understand and believe they will be listened to. Build your “Street Cred” before asking them to get involved in the work that you do.
- **Build your network.** Find someone who is facing challenges with the issue you are addressing. Once they agree to participate and have a firm understanding of the project, ask them if they know of others who also might be a good fit.

- **Find the influencers.** There are people in every community who are trusted and listened to. They can help you identify people to connect with and can help persuade people to get involved in what you are doing.
- **The overall message about your project matters.** How you frame your message is very important. There is typically a lack of trust between transportation agencies and the community. Your message needs to build trust by ensuring that their voices matter.
- **Set up engagement to be an inclusive planning space** rather than just eliciting input. People are more likely to get involved if they understand **what** you are trying to do and **why** you are trying to do it. Show them you value what they are bringing to the table and that this is their opportunity to use their lived experience to shape something that will benefit them.
- **Use low-barrier approaches.** Make it easy for them to engage. Do away with applications and any other logistical barriers to participation.

### How to improve making connections with diverse people

- Take small steps to build street cred in your community before you ask them to participate in your project.
- People want attention, so the more attention you can give them, the more likely they are to participate. This takes time and you have to earn it.
- If your community has public transportation, ride it!
- Demonstrate that you care about them and that the goal is to make things easier and better for them.
- Go beyond “tell us what you think” or “tell us what you want.” Community members can be good thought partners to help solve problems. Community members have access to knowledge that you may not have. Don't be afraid to ask them critical questions as you are moving through your project.
- Language access can be a challenge – community leaders can help reach people who are not native English speakers and assist in getting their feedback.
- Try as hard as you can to diversify your workforce in terms of who is doing the engagement work.
- Define what you mean by partnership. If the community understands how the partnership works or is defined, they are more likely to participate if it resonates with them.
- In meetings with community members, include icebreaker questions to allow people to get to know each other.

### Final Message

Thoughtful community engagement requires patience and involves letting go of an emphasis on efficiency in order to prioritize community members in your work.