



INCLUSIVE TRANSIT PLANNING LESSONS LEARNED: PARTNERING WITH PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES AND OLDER ADULTS

Issue Number Five

By DeBrittany Mitchell, Darren Bates, & David Hoff

People with disabilities and older adults face multiple barriers to accessing transportation. We can improve accessible transportation by designing accessible transit options using inclusive transit planning. The [Transit Planning for All project](#) (TP4A) highlights the important work being done to meaningfully include and amplify the voices of older adults and people with disabilities in transit planning. From 2013 to 2022, TP4A funded a series of [pilot transit planning projects](#) across the nation that used inclusive planning processes to improve local transit services in their communities. Among the findings from these projects, was that partnerships with older adults and people with disabilities are key to the success of inclusive transit planning initiatives. The [Pathway to Inclusion](#) was used to guide and measure the level of inclusiveness of the planning processes. These partnerships ultimately lead to improvements in transit program planning, operations, and services for people with disabilities and older adults.

Background

In May 2022, TP4A launched a virtual roundtable series with representatives from its demonstration projects to discuss lessons learned to date. [Roundtable #1: Lessons Learned on Partnerships for Inclusive Transit Planning](#) featured Joe Bellil of Easterseals Massachusetts and Jaime McKay of TransIT Services of Frederick County, Maryland. In his role as Vice President for Public Affairs at Easterseals Massachusetts, Joe Bellil has built and led a strong partnership that has been highly engaged with transportation agencies and officials in central Massachusetts on planning efforts to improve the availability of transportation for people with disabilities and older adults. Jaime McKay is the Deputy Director for the Transit Services Division for Frederick County (MD) Government and was previously a Transportation Planner for the Maryland Transportation Administration. As a transportation professional, Ms. McKay has led efforts to improve inclusive transit planning through stronger partnerships with older adults and the disability community. We reference excerpts from the roundtable discussion as examples throughout this brief.

This brief is a part of *Inclusive Transportation Planning Lessons Learned*, a 4-part brief series sponsored by the Transit Planning 4 All project. The briefs present key tips for enhancing inclusion through partnering with people with disabilities and older adults throughout the transit planning process. [Read other briefs in this series on the Transit Planning 4 All website, including:](#)

- » [Communication](#)
- » [Engagement](#)
- » [Measuring Success](#)



The transportation forum the Transportation Advocacy Coalition held in Worcester in 2018 at the AC Hotel.

Establishing Individuals with Disabilities & Older Adults as Partners

To address equity and inclusion challenges in transportation, we must involve older adults and people with disabilities from diverse communities in transportation planning so their needs are recognized and their voices are heard. Transportation planning and services co-created and informed by diverse older adults and disabled people acknowledges the value of social inclusion and makes “Nothing About Us Without Us” actualized in practice. Transit agencies found it effective to engage with individuals with disabilities

and older adults early in the planning and brainstorming stages of transit initiatives, during the implementation phases, and after the services had taken effect. An evaluation of TP4A former grantees highlighted building and maintaining partnerships as key to sustaining inclusion throughout transit planning projects.

How do you define a partner?

“I think a partner is anyone who’s involved in the process who’s willing to help. And it could be riders. For us, we want riders, paratransit riders, fixed bus riders, people from the area. Legislators and legislative staff. We consider partners anyone who wants to engage with us and work with us on different priorities.”

–Joe Bellil, Easterseals Massachusetts

Collaborating with Community Organizations & Transit Agencies

Transit agencies that prioritize meaningful relationships with diverse older adults and people with disabilities through collaborative partnerships with nonprofit groups, social service providers, and community-based organizations produce more accessible and inclusive transportation programs and services. When choosing group and organizational partners, make sure they are led by and have deep connections with the aging and disability community. They know what works, what doesn’t, and why.

Potential partners may include, but are not limited to:

- Centers for Independent Living
- State Councils on Developmental Disabilities
- Traumatic Brain Injury State Partnership Programs
- Tribes and Tribal Organizations
- Area Agencies on Aging
- Self-advocacy programs
- Senior centers and supportive services for older adults
- Aging and Disability Resource Centers
- Social service providers for underserved groups
- Aging and disability advocates and service providers

Transit agencies may want to draw from a broad range of collaborative partners to improve the opportunities for success.

“So, starting at the very beginning, having partners who can inform you, who can educate you, and who can pull you out of that comfort zone can really benefit the outcomes of projects. And you can have a better understanding of riders’ needs much earlier in the process than coming in later with a developed project and having to think through it again.”

–Jaime McKay, TransIT Services Frederick County

What are the benefits of collaborating with community partners?

“The centers for independent living were critical to us. Our Department of Aging, our Department of Health, and our Department of Disabilities were also really important. Engaging these folks gave us an actual person inside these agencies to contact with questions or concerns about transit. Someone I can reach out who can help.”

–Jaime McKay, TransIT Services Frederick County

Key Lessons in Partnerships for Inclusive Transit Planning

Strong partnerships were key to the success of the pilot projects in Massachusetts and Maryland. The full range of projects funded by TP4A also identified a number of keys to strong partnerships:

- Building partnerships and allies with other groups creates a stronger voice to advocate for change. Diverse partnerships also provide new windows into community opportunities. ([PEAC](#))
- Partnerships with key stakeholders, especially local government agencies, are critical. ([Jewish Council for the Aging of Greater Washington](#))
- Partnership is more than just getting people to the table. It requires giving them substantive roles. Once empowered, partners can take ownership of many action items. ([Central Pennsylvania Transportation Authority – Rabbit Transit](#))
- Sustaining partnerships is more time intensive than creating them. ([Central Pennsylvania Transportation Authority – Rabbit Transit](#))
- In planning partnerships, consider the contributions that partners can offer a project, and balance this with the time and resources it takes to establish these partnerships. ([The Arc of Connecticut](#))
- Know your community and which organizations are most critical for moving issues forward. ([Jewish Council for the Aging of Greater Washington](#))
- When meeting with potential partners, know why they are willing to meet. How can a project or system's activities affect them? ([Ride Connection](#))
- It is necessary to have a realistic understanding of local bureaucracies so that all participants have an appreciation for competing priorities and timing of issues (such as funding cycles), which can slow progress. ([Helena Area Transit System, Lewis and Clark County](#))
- It is important to understand, as completely as possible, the political background of the community in which work is being done. This is vital to building and maintaining support among the various providers and organizations. ([Area Agency on Aging 1-B, Southfield, MI](#))
- Don't assume that new partners completely understand inclusive planning processes. Be careful to explain inclusionary process techniques. Almost everyone has an "advisory" group that is their inclusionary committee. ([Ride Connection](#))



An outdoor conversation at the Transportation Advocacy Coalition (TAC) on the Worcester Common in 2019 where the TAC shared information on its activities.

Approach community members in a listening rather than an “asking” mode: less “What can you do for us?” and more “Where is your pain? How can we help in addressing your challenges?”

Inclusive transit planning involves interaction between individuals with disabilities, older adults, community providers, and transit organizations that results in measurable improvement in desired outcomes for all. Partnerships can range from purely advisory interactions to long-term strategic partnerships. Engaging individuals with disabilities and older adults as high-impact strategic partners means looking beyond the immediate needs of a program and seeking ways to make transit options more inclusive and responsive. It requires building ongoing opportunities for problem-solving and program development. Approach community members in a listening rather than an “asking” mode: less “What can you do for us?” and more “Where is your pain? How can we help in addressing your challenges?”

References

GPCOG, P. A. (2019). INCLUSIVE TRANSPORTATION PLANNING TOOLKIT. Retrieved from <https://transitplanning4all.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/PACTS-Inclusive-Transportation-Planning-Toolkit-2019-1.pdf>



A transportation meeting that the Transportation Advocacy Coalition held at the Mass Audubon's Broad Meadow Brook Wildlife Sanctuary in Worcester where members rode a public bus to the event.



A photo of riders at the Transportation Advocacy Coalition (TAC) on the Worcester Common in 2019 where the TAC shared information on its activities.



Transit Planning 4 All is an inclusive and coordinated transportation-planning project that has funded a series of pilot projects across the nation, each seeking to increase inclusion in transportation planning and services for people with disabilities and older adults.

The project is a partnership of the Administration for Community Living (ACL), the Community Transportation Association of America (CTAA), the National Association of Area Agencies on Aging, the Institute for Community Inclusion at UMass Boston, and DJB Evaluation Consulting Group.

The project is sponsored by the Department of Health and Human Services' Administration for Community Living.