

Building Trust Through Partnerships: MDOT MTA's Inclusive Transportation Planning Program in Baltimore

By Grayson Lee

"It's worth the struggle. Trust is not built overnight," observed former MTA transportation planner Jaime McKay on the importance of inclusive planning. McKay led the [Maryland Transit Administration's](#) (MTA) Inclusive Transportation Planning Program in Baltimore, which was funded through a grant from Transit Planning 4 All.

[Transit Planning 4 All](#) (TP4A) funds pilot projects across the country to promote the practice of inclusive transit planning. TP4A defines inclusive planning as "active and meaningful involvement of older adults and people with disabilities in transit planning and operations." Through the grant period, MTA held events, walking audits, and steering committee meetings with the goal of prioritizing the perspectives of people with disabilities, older adults, and other underserved populations in transit planning.

Teddy Krolik, the co-lead on the project from MTA, said that the project changed the way that MTA relates to the disability community because it gave them the opportunity to build trust through repeated interactions in good faith. Every stakeholder interviewed emphasized the importance of the partnerships that were created through the grant and continue to this day. The tangible, concrete planning was essential to the project's success, but the process of building trust was just as essential. From the outset, MTA prioritized their partnerships, from the application, to the direction of the project, to collaborating beyond the original grant.

Background

The MTA Department of Planning applied for the grant in 2018 with the Maryland Department of Disabilities and the Maryland Department of Aging. According to McKay, the grant was smaller than ones for which MTA typically applies. "Large agencies often go for really big projects, but we saw this as an opportunity to try something, to build our community, to better understand the lived experiences of people with disabilities and older adults and how we can incorporate their decision-making into ours to make it better," said McKay.

The other partner organizations were the [National Federation of the Blind](#) (NFB) and two Centers for Independent Living (CILs): [the Image Center](#) and [Accessible Resources for](#)



[Independence](#) (ARI). Michael Bullis, Executive Director of the Image Center, speculated that, “We had advocated loudly and noisily ... MTA looked around and said, ‘Who are the noisiest people we have out there that we could talk to? We’ll work with them.’” The NFB and the two CILS participated in the project’s steering committee and spearheaded outreach to the community.

The grant was structured in two phases, the first phase focused on planning and the second on implementation. Krolik said that one of the nice aspects to the grant was that since the goal was just to get everyone in the room talking, there were no preconceived ideas about what the project would have to achieve. According to McKay, early meetings of the steering committee focused on basics. “A lot of our very preliminary discussions were just a very base level: ‘This is how I use the system, these are the challenges I face, and this is what I wish MTA knew or I wish other passengers knew.’ Those discussions were very fruitful, and they began to formulate challenges and strategies to address,” said McKay.

From those discussions grew the decision to focus on wayfinding in transit stations. Krolik explained that they knew MTA was looking at redesigning wayfinding in rail stations and saw this as an opportunity for the project to produce concrete changes, instead of theoretical ones. “How can our smaller effort intersect and potentially inform the larger effort? That was the opening for us,” said Krolik.

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Wayfinding and Accessible Signage

The wayfinding project included outreach, walking audits, prototype creation, and public events for the community to give feedback. On the walking audits, people with disabilities from the steering committee and the community worked with the project planners to identify where signs needed to be changed and updated in Baltimore Metro stations.

Unreadable or confusing signage can make navigating transit stations and systems unmanageable for anyone, but when accessibility requirements are not met, it can become impossible. The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) includes [requirements for signs](#), and having Braille or verbal signals are just the beginning of accessibility. Iconography, type, font, colors, and location all play a role as well. Including people with disabilities in the walking audits allowed the project to understand where the actual needs were. Teddy Krolik explained that one of the major priorities identified in the walking audits was navigating to elevators. "That's not a surprise when you think about it, but for someone that is not in that world day-to-day, it might not have been a top priority," said Krolik.

Audrey Sellers, formerly at Accessible Resources for Independence and the grant lead for the Centers for Independent Living involved in the project, led one of the walk audits through the Metro. "We decided that we needed the input of people with disabilities if we were going to make any significant changes," Sellers said. Sellers, along with colleagues at the Image Center and National Federation of the Blind, found people to participate in the long walk audits or join the steering committee. For one walk audit, Sellers led community members for 9-10 hours through Metro stations to provide their input.

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Participants were compensated for their time. Michael Bullis emphasized the importance of compensation. "The reason that that grant worked is because we were able to give people gift cards and things if they would come to these events a \$50 gift card is a big motivator. Especially given that most of our population are very low income." TP4A has found in other projects that compensating participants not only allows some people to participate who may not be able to otherwise, but also shows respect for their time and knowledge, which are invaluable to the success of a project. Anil Lewis, an executive director for NFB, also commended MTA for compensating participants. "Someone with an engineering degree is fine, but if they don't have a lived experience as a person with



a disability, they're not going to know about placement of braille or color contrast. ... I think that was also a really good best practice, making sure that the people with the lived expertise are equally compensated for their contribution to the project," said Lewis.

After the walking audits, MTA created prototypes and held events where they invited the public to provide input. They put up signage display prototypes at Charles Center Metro SubwayLink Station with striking color contrasts, tactile signage, Braille labels, QR-codes, and more. Through these public events, the prototypes were refined further. Although the accessible signage is still in the planning phase and has not yet gone up at Charles Center Station, MTA was able to build connections with the community and raise awareness through these public events. Karl Belanger from the National Federation of the Blind said that in his view, one of the biggest successes of the project was raising public awareness. Additionally, the MTA employees working on the project were able to pass on recommendations based on the priorities of people with disabilities to the larger MTA to incorporate into their wayfinding project.

Braille Flipbooks

Another wayfinding aspect was the creation of Braille flipbooks that included transit system information. MTA worked with the National Federation of the Blind (NFB) to develop physical copies of Braille flipbooks that can be used to navigate the Baltimore bus system. Belanger explained that the project wanted to create Braille flipbooks with tactile maps for bus lines, citing other transit systems as inspiration. However, the laminated, graphics-heavy books that the project originally wanted to procure were so expensive, they could only afford a few dozen. Instead, they went back to the drawing board, got more feedback from blind community members, and realized that they could communicate everything necessary through regular Braille text. This eliminated the need for a tactile graphics embosser and reduced the price significantly.

Anil Lewis appreciated that the project focused on physical resources, as most tend to revolve around web accessibility. "Everyone is really optimistic about access to electronic data, and that information is really moving the needle, but there's the need for the tangible because everyone doesn't have access to an iPhone or smartphone." After printing, the flipbooks were passed out by NFB and MTA, although according to the stakeholders interviewed, the flipbooks have not been updated since.

Housing and Transit-Oriented Development

The project also explored the intersection of accessible housing and transit, working with the CILs and the Department of Disabilities to gather data. Audrey Sellers recalls doing outreach at affordable housing complexes that had units set aside for housing for people with disabilities. As part of this outreach, the project did a survey on transit and pedestrian accessibility in the locations of the disability housing they had chosen or were in the process of choosing. Stakeholders involved in the project also visited these locations to determine the accessibility of surrounding features such as pathways and bus stops.

Chelsea Hayman, Director of Housing at the Department of Disability and a stakeholder on the steering committee, explained that the goal was for MTA to use this information in creating better transit design policies. Unfortunately, housing was too far outside the scope of the project to do much with the data. Jaime McKay commented that “accessible housing is critical to the success of a transportation system...but it seemed to be outside the confines of the original scope of our project. We tabled it in the hopes that someday, someone can pick up the work we began.”

As a housing advocate, Hayman lamented that the project was not able to make a meaningful difference on housing policy or allocation. However, she applauded the project for building awareness among housing advocates in the state government. She stated that from her perspective, the Department of Housing and Community Development is “not as aware of the transportation needs of people with disabilities” and hopes that they work towards implementing “policies to create more Transit-Oriented Development that has accessibility features built in.”

[MDOT MTA defines Transit-Oriented Development \(TOD\)](#) as “a place of relatively higher density that includes a mix of residential, employment, shopping, and civic uses designed to encourage multi-modal access to the station area.” TOD can [increase access to transit for people with disabilities](#), especially when it includes affordable and accessible housing. MTA has long included TOD in transit plans for the city, but as [a new proposed housing development in Lutherville has highlighted](#), there are many difficulties to integrating housing and transit policies, including lack of coordination between regional and local planning agencies. Hayman hopes that housing officials could become more involved in an inclusive transportation planning project in the future.



Baltimore's Transportation Accessibility

Building good faith between government offices and communities takes work, usually due, at least in part, to a history of not accommodating for accessibility needs in transit or in pedestrian pathways that feed into transit systems. Like many cities around the US, Baltimore often fails to meet the ADA standards required by law. An [article from the Baltimore Banner](#) in May 2023 wrote that fixing Baltimore's accessibility problems would cost over \$650 million, citing a 2021 report in which city officials stated that "more than 98% of public curb ramps and median treatments, 66% of sidewalk miles, 80% of driveway aprons, 16% of crosswalks and 33% of pedestrian signals citywide do not comply with Americans with Disabilities Act standards." This article also reported on a class action lawsuit against MTA over ADA violations.

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MTA's [Regional Transit Plan](#) calls for "Full ADA accessibility of all bus stops and rail stations," with a current baseline of 19% of all stops and stations meeting ADA accessibility requirements. Their stated goals are 30% by 2025 and 100% by 2045. Katie Collins-Ihrke, formerly the Executive Director for Accessible Resources for Independence, served on the commission for the Regional Transit Plan during her tenure at ARI. She was brought on to be an advocate for people with disabilities when the plan was being created, and said that people with disabilities were included in reviewing the plan. Collins-Ihrke was also hopeful about the future inclusion of people with disabilities and older adults in planning processes at MTA, saying that their intention and vision is inclusion.

Several stakeholders mentioned their desire for improvements to paratransit service. Audrey Sellers said that while she considers the project a success in terms of including people with disabilities and older adults in fixed-route projects, she thinks that MTA is not where it needs to be in terms of paratransit service. Michael Bullis said that he had heard stories of people waiting [3-4 hours for rides to show up](#) or not being able to schedule rides at all. In 2017, [MTA reached a settlement](#) over alleged ADA violations of MobilityLink, MTA's paratransit service, including hours-long wait times and the inability



to schedule rides. However, Bullis explained that in the past six months, it seems that the paratransit service has improved, as he has not been hearing complaints from consumers on these issues.

Continuing Inclusion & Partnerships

Although stakeholders may have expressed frustrations with MTA as a whole, they noted that the people from MTA were what made the Baltimore project a success. Anil Lewis commended McKay's creativity and genuineness, and said that he respected that MTA prioritized collaboration and wanted authentic input from people with disabilities, instead of doing what they thought was right first and asking for input after the project concluded, as many other projects do. Sellers expressed that the inclusion and partnerships of the project were a success, as the project brought together many voices and organizations that had not worked together before, like MTA and the Centers for Independent Living. She also spoke about how she still works with one of the steering committee members in the advocacy group Consumers for Accessible Ride Services.

Many of the other partnerships between organizations continue to this day outside of the TP4A grant. Because those relationships have been established and inclusion defined as a priority, MTA still goes to the CILs and NFB for their input on new designs. For example, when testing barriers between Metro cars, MTA reached out to the NFB and the CILs for their help. Krolik explained that the language from the grant around inclusive planning has also continued to be used. "I wouldn't say that it's become a brand, but it includes any initiative where we are actively trying to incorporate people with disabilities and older adults into our project planning. So, for example, it was an 'Inclusive Transportation Planning' effort to do the Metro between-car barriers workshop," said Krolik.

Krolik also described a project where MTA explored the creation of a transit hub as a multimodal connection point. Even though this was funded by a different grant, focused on improving infrastructure in areas of persistent poverty, MTA was able to use inclusive planning and talk with not only residents and public officials, but also people from the disability community. As part of the project, MTA set up prototypes for a bus shelter and invited NFB and the CILs to give their input. Belanger from National Federation of the Blind recalls that the bus shelter was 20-30 feet back from the stop, and gave MTA the feedback that the gap between the shelter and the bus may impede the driver from seeing the passenger or the passenger from hearing the verbal announcement.

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Belanger and Krolik both spoke about a company that brought a new product to NFB, [Spin To Be Seen](#), which consists of a reflective disk that can be spun mounted to a bus pole. When the disk is spun by a passenger waiting in the dark, the headlights of the incoming bus reflect in the disk and alert bus drivers that a passenger is waiting. The disk also has Braille as a tactile indicator for the location of the bus stop. When NFB was approached by the company, they were able to bring the product to MTA, which has been researching the product to see if it could be used in a pilot project.

"All of the things that we have yet to do together"

Every stakeholder interviewed viewed the project as a success in building inclusion and partnerships. Bong Delrosario, Director of Transportation Policy for the Maryland Department of Disabilities, praised the "above and beyond effort that MTA put forth to try to cater to people with disabilities' needs," and mentioned that he feels like communities have been more welcoming and more willing to speak up about their transportation needs as a result of MTA's engagement and outreach.

Collins-Ihrke wants projects like this to revolutionize transit planning. She thinks that the project "provided a model for other states or other transit agencies to look at and see how they could really make planning inclusive." For the future, Lewis hopes that funding for inclusive planning can be absorbed into MTA's budget. Just this year, [a bill was passed by the Maryland General Assembly requiring the MTA](#) to "perform a series of reviews before announcing major transit changes, including conducting an equity analysis. The agency must also complete a cost-benefit analysis and meet with affected communities." After being vetoed by Governor Larry Hogan last year, [it was approved](#) by current Governor Wes Moore in May.

McKay expressed that she views the project as successful both in the partnerships built and in showing MTA how much more can be done. "The partnerships that we built were an incredible success. I think if anything, this grant showed us how much can be improved," said McKay. "While it was a success in bringing us together and putting us to



work on a shared goal, it also highlighted and illuminated all of the things that we have yet to do together.”

Watch [TP4A's video on the project](#).

Thanks to Karl Belanger, Michael Bullis, Katie Collins-Ihrke, Bong Delrosario, Chelsea Hayman, Teddy Krolik, Cookie Lockley, Anil Lewis, Jaime McKay, and Audrey Sellers.

Transit Planning 4 All is a transportation planning project focused on promoting inclusive planning. TP4A is a partnership between the Administration for Community Living, the Community Transportation Association of America, USAgging, the Institute for Community Inclusion at UMass Boston, and DJB Evaluation Consulting.

