

Engaging Community Perspectives: N4's Inclusive Design Team

By Grayson Lee

The whole of inclusive planning is made up of many parts – small practices that often have an outsized impact on fostering inclusivity and engagement. Even something like a simple introduction can influence the course of a meeting.

Amy Dewitt-Smith, the founder and executive director of the [Neighbor Network of Northern Nevada \(N4\)](#), explained that changing the structure of their introductions during their design team meetings helped engage community members during their [Transit Planning 4 All](#) project.

N4, headquartered in Reno, Nev., received funding from Transit Planning 4 All (TP4A) from 2018-2020 to identify barriers and solutions to transportation through an inclusive planning process. TP4A defines inclusive planning as “active and meaningful involvement of older adults and people with disabilities [and other underserved populations] in transit planning and operations.” A key element of each TP4A project was promoting active and meaningful engagement through stakeholder meetings.

At the beginning of the project, Dewitt-Smith explained, participants at design team meetings would introduce themselves with their name, organization, and position. Many community members who were not representing an organization would instead follow their name with something like “I don’t really do anything” or “I’m not really with anything.” “You could tell that they almost felt like their participation wasn't as valued or valid as somebody who was representing an organization in a professional role,” said Dewitt-Smith.

N4 decided to change how they did introductions: all members would introduce themselves with their name and the answer to an icebreaker question only. “We were just a person with our name contributing to the project,” said Dewitt-Smith, “and that really helped engage community members further.” Changing their introduction

structure wasn't the only thing N4 did to promote engagement. Since its inception, N4 had been implementing inclusive planning practices in its design process.



N4, a nonprofit that administers volunteer opportunities, provides Lyft vouchers, and connects Nevadans to transportation, was started in 2015 through a [Rides to Wellness Grant](#) through [the National Center for Mobility Management](#). Their Rides to Wellness project used a human-centered design approach, and Dewitt-Smith explained that her familiarity with that process

drew her to the TP4A grant. "I liked that the activities included setting up opportunities for community engagement and incorporating a variety of stakeholders – not just funders and other transit operators and state agencies, but actual community members. It's not often that you can utilize grant funds for those types of activities." The TP4A funded-project had two rounds. The first focused on gathering data and identifying themes, while the second round focused on creating and implementing action items based on the themes.

Round One: Inclusive Engagement

In Round 1, N4 used a variety of community engagement methods to gather data on transportation issues: surveys, peer interviews, focus groups, and large gatherings. During Round 1, they welcomed all ideas and perspectives. "We weren't really worrying about resources and capacity at that point, it was more just figuring out what was important to the people who we were getting information from," said Dewitt-Smith.



The community outreach was led by the design team, a diverse group that included partnering organizations and people with disabilities and older adults. N4 focused on making their meetings inclusive, and held them in neutral, public spaces like coffee shops. They offered free transportation to and from the meetings, refreshments, and

materials to take home, and made space for community members to talk and volunteer for opportunities.

The local transit agency also sent representatives to the meetings. Kathy Price-Toby, a community member who participated in the project, valued the presence of these partners in transit. "The involvement of representatives from state and local/regional transportation authorities really helped move things along because they were giving us information that we didn't have," said Price-Toby.



**N4 TRANSIT PLANNING 4 ALL
DESIGN TEAM MEETINGS**



WHEN/WHERE

Every 4th Thursday
4:15 - 5:45 p.m.
Swill Coffee and Wine
3366 Lakeside Ct.
Reno, NV 89509

EVERY VOICE HEARD!

N4 TP4A design team meetings are a chance for community members to come together, have a little fun, and discuss the TP4A project. We want every voice to be heard!

TRANSIT PLANNING 4 ALL (TP4A)

The purpose of the N4 TP4A project is to increase inclusion in transportation planning and services for people with disabilities, older adults and their care partners.

Refreshments will be provided. If you would like to attend but need transportation, contact our office using the information below and we will help connect you to transportation resources. The nearest bus stop to Swill is West Moana and Lakeside.

Please RSVP by the Monday before each meeting

(775) 453-4774 NeighborNV.org People@NeighborNV.org

At the end of Round 1, the design team did a theme analysis, then ranked the themes from the highest priority to the lowest priority. Dewitt-Smith noticed that some of the items ranked lower than she expected: "You have to be willing to pivot," said Dewitt-Smith. "There were things that I thought would rate higher, and then when we were actually having a discussion with stakeholders and community members, the ones that rated higher were not what I would have guessed."

Round 2: Inclusive Action

The top priority from the theme analysis was developing a state transportation association. N4 researched every existing state transportation association and came up with a report that included mission, activities, and structure. Inclusivity was essential to their idea of a Nevada iteration. “We wanted to make sure that it wasn't just state agencies and transit operators getting together and talking about transit, but really engaging community members,” said Dewitt-Smith. She also emphasized the need for an association without membership fees, stating that transit operators in Nevada wouldn't have the budget for big membership fees. While the state association idea originally picked up steam at the state level, personnel changes impacted priorities and it is currently not going forward.

Another priority that emerged from the theme analysis was updating the information highway. Participants expressed that they wanted a central information hub to explore transit programs and their eligibility. During the project, the design team created training materials and a distribution plan for these materials. After Round 2 of the TP4A project had concluded,

N4 was able to use state funds to create an app called [N4Connect](#). The app lists every participating transit operator in Nevada, including urban and rural public transit, tribal transit, volunteer, and specialty transportation providers. Users can check their eligibility for different programs and book and plan their trip. As part of the app release, N4 held community workshops to train users on the app.

Through community outreach, the team also identified a theme of transit anxiety. After digging deeper into why using transit might be causing anxiety, N4 found that the security officers who patrolled transit hubs didn't always have sensitivity training and didn't know how to support people with disabilities or older adults. They purchased [Passenger Assistance, Safety and Sensitivity \(PASS\) training](#) for these security officers, which is a training course on safely and sensitivity transporting passengers. Another priority that emerged to help ease transit anxiety was creating a peer-to-peer support



Hello!

Are you an older adult, person with a disability, or care partner? Are you concerned about transportation in Washoe County?

The Neighbor Network of Northern Nevada (N4) and the Regional Transportation Commission (RTC) are holding an Open House on **Wednesday, September 19th, from 5-7p.m. at The Discovery Museum in Reno**. Come learn about RTC's ADA Transition Plan and the N4 Transit Planning 4 All project.

Refreshments will be provided.

Need transportation assistance? Contact N4 to coordinate your transportation needs!



network, so N4 developed an inclusive curriculum and began implementing a peer-to-peer travel training program.

Community Perspectives Matter

Dewitt-Smith noted that the biggest outcome from the project was engaging so many different stakeholders in the community. "The project helped us engage a broader scope of stakeholders. Everyone from representatives from state agencies (so potential funding) to additional community members. It really levelled the playing field," said Dewitt-Smith.

Through the project, inclusiveness remained the most important factor. "Previous outreach or town hall meetings or surveys that community members would take, they would express that nothing they said would ever change anything or would ever matter," said Dewitt-Smith. She explained that throughout the process, community members said that they felt like their perspectives were heard. "They could see that what they were saying mattered and turned into actual things that were being done for them and with them."

Thanks to Amy Dewitt-Smith and Kathy Price-Toby.

Learn more about the [N4 Transit Planning 4 All Project](#).

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

