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Town Halls on Transportation Accessibility

May 9, 2023 · Detailed Summary

OVERVIEW

At [Transit Planning 4 All](#)'s Town Halls on Transportation Accessibility on May 9, 2023, participants shared their experiences with inclusion and advocacy in transportation planning. The two virtual town halls built on five "Listening Sessions" held in-person at the end of 2022 and early 2023 in Boston, Massachusetts; Chicago, Illinois; Washington, DC; Durant, Oklahoma; and Reno, Nevada. These in-person listening sessions consisted of 10-15 questions posed to a small group of individuals over the course of a few hours.

While these smaller listening sessions allowed participants and staff to engage deeply with issues around accessibility and inclusion, there was a need for a broader view. With the virtual format of the town halls, TP4A was able to receive participation from around the country, from Maine to Hawaii.

When registering for the event, attendees were asked to answer 5 questions in a few words or sentences. TP4A received over 545 registrants, with a response rate between 70% and 87% for each question. TP4A staff analyzed the response data to find the top three answers.

At the town halls, attendance was over 125 in the morning session and over 50 in the evening session. After being presented with the top three answers to the questions, attendees were asked to share examples from their lived experience. Below, you will find a summary of registrant responses and registrant demographic data, followed by a more in-depth look at attendee responses at the town halls.

Transit Planning 4 All defines inclusion as "active and meaningful participation in transit planning and operations," and attendees were asked to use this definition in responding to the questions.

TOP ANSWERS FROM REGISTRANTS

Question 1: What word or phrase comes to mind when you think about public transit?

- Accessibility
- Limited/lacking
- Buses

Other common answers included: insufficient, unreliable, and freedom.

Question 2: What word or phrase comes to mind when you think about inclusion of people with disabilities and older adults in transit planning and operations?

- Minimal / not included
- Essential / necessary
- Difficult.

Other common answers included: left out, non-existent, underserved, needs improvement, and "nothing about us without us."

Question 3: What are the barriers facing older adults, people with disabilities, and caregivers when they are asked to be a part of transit planning? This can include barriers in participating in transit planning meetings and public hearings.

- Transportation
- Not informed about meetings/events
- Technology.

Other answers included: location, timing, and not being heard.

Question 4: What are some solutions/ways to overcome these barriers?

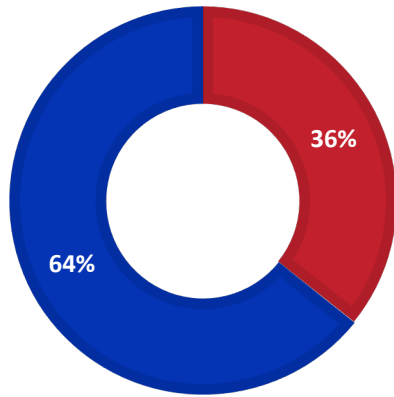
- Timely, dependable transportation with options outside regular hours
- Both in-person and virtual meetings with multiple time options
- Better communication / advertise in places to reach people with disabilities and older adults

Question 5: Can you provide an example of how you or other older adults, people with disabilities, and caregivers have been involved in decision making or leading transit and mobility programs in your community?

- Advisory committees
- Public meetings and surveys
- No / unsure



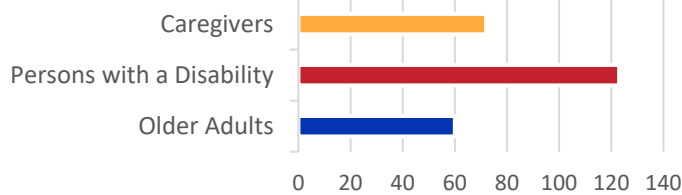
REGISTRANT DEMOGRAPHICS



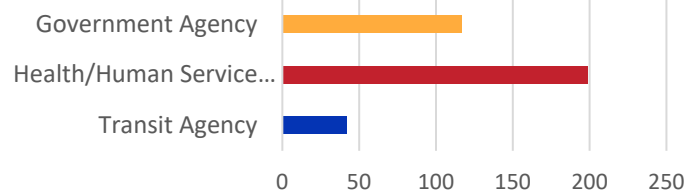
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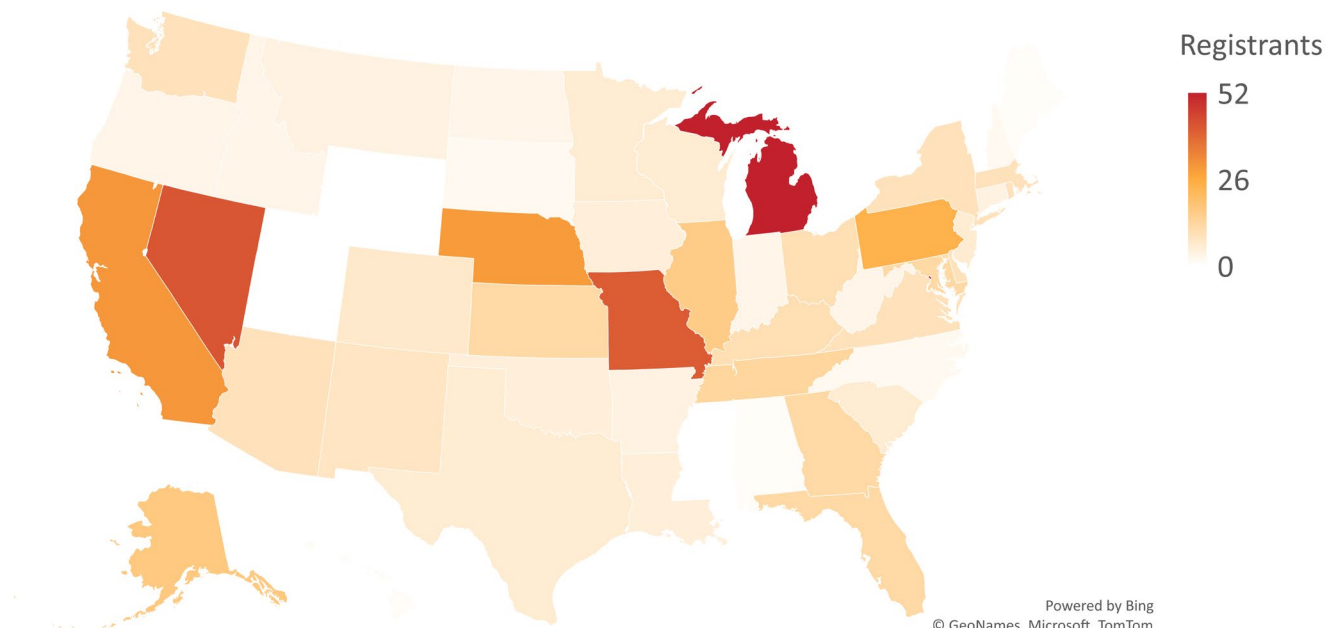
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REGISTRANT LOCATIONS



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ATTENDEE RESPONSES

Note: The labels “consumer” and “agency” are self-identified. “Agency” can refer to transit, health/human services, or government agencies.

Question 1: What word or phrase comes to mind when you think about public transit?

The top three responses on the registration form for this question were accessibility, limited/lacking, and buses. Other common answers were insufficient, unreliable, and freedom/independence. At the town halls, the attendees echoed these responses and offered examples.

Consumers brought up the unreliability of public transit and paratransit, the lack of accessible options for transportation on nights or weekends, and the need to schedule rides far in advance for paratransit, which prevents any sort of spontaneity. Many consumers brought up difficulties with scheduling rides, while others noted a lack in both fixed-route bus routes and paratransit options. In the chat, attendees noted that the inability to cross county lines and inaccessibility of bus stops and vehicles prevents consumers from getting to their destinations. Attendees also mentioned a lack in training for drivers and a lack of training for consumers with disabilities.

“We have Dial-A-Ride on Sunday, but it only runs from 8 to 5, and it fills up pretty fast, so there's no buses on Sunday. It's ironic that 2 hours away in the Tahoe region, they have buses on Sunday in the tourist area, but they don't have it in the local city where I live. So public transit on Sunday would be an awesome addition.” (Consumer, Roseville, California)

“If I were to want to go to say, the eight o'clock movie, which was always a habit as a teenager, I wouldn't feel comfortable doing that, because the transit in my area stops ... at 10:30.” (Consumer, Delaware)

“I am a consumer in the Washington DC metropolitan area, and we have Metro Access paratransit. It does run 24-hours and it goes kind of far and wide, but



they're not reliable. First of all, you have to schedule a day in advance, so if you need to go somewhere today, you're out of luck....If they're supposed to pick you up at two o'clock in the afternoon, they can decide, we don't have anything until six o'clock, so you're sitting from two o'clock in the afternoon to six o'clock." (Consumer, DC Metro Area)

"Timing and reliability is a huge issue for our clients. For example, if it takes someone 15-20 mins at MOST to drive to work, how is it fair for the same route to take over an hour and a half when using public transit?" (Agency, St. Louis, Missouri)

One transportation provider from California noted that they wished they could provide spontaneous rides in their agency, but that it's not possible for them right now.

"We really do need at least 1 or 2 business days' notice in advance, so we can schedule a volunteer driver and give them a schedule in advance. I wish we could just provide rides on the spur of the moment, but it's just impossible." (Transportation Provider, California)

Some attendees noted in the chat that the cost and unreliability of paratransit can make it difficult for consumers to reach businesses or services.

"Some members of the community (ie, employers) don't seem to understand ADA and door to door services. This has been difficult with getting some of my individuals to work when there is restricted access on the premises." (Agency, Location Unknown)

"I can't volunteer evenings or weekends. Uber was \$68 for 3.5 miles one way. I can't work for pay because they want weekends or right away." (Consumer, Location Unknown)

"There are no buses that come down to our area of businesses. And our clients have to walk a 1/2 mile to get to our business for help. Also been trying to work with the city transportation division and they just ignore us." (Center for Independent Living Agency, Nevada)



Other attendees noted prohibitive costs for transit agencies and transportation providers.

“Public transportation needs more funding. Wages, fuel, vehicles, repairs, are all more expensive, but the funding has been the same. Anything more requires more money. Federal funds, state funds, local match.” (Mobility Manager, Kansas)

“Available funding is not sufficient to hire enough drivers and maintain the fleet. The supply chain issues for life equipped vans are affecting the ability to have enough vans on the roads. The result is that we are unable to meet demand for service.” (Agency, Location Unknown)

Another concern was that inaccessible sidewalks made it even more difficult to access transit services. One blind individual from Hawaii noted that tents and pallets from homeless populations made it difficult to navigate sidewalks. A consumer from Missouri explained that there are many areas near their house that are not able to be navigated in a wheelchair, but that affordable housing tends to be in these areas. They also brought up a piece of legislation being debated in St. Louis that proposed to make walking in the street illegal.

“If we only have sidewalks on one side of the street, or sidewalks that are inadequate for someone in a power chair, or if I'm pushing my husband in his manual chair, because he no longer has the strength to go up and down slopes, and I'm trying to manage with my guide dog and my husband's chair... The sidewalk stops for 20 or 30 feet, and I have to get him into the street and walk in the gutter. And that's illegal. I mean, there are just so many things that make it very difficult for people to age in place.” (Consumer, Missouri)

One attendee mentioned that the inaccessibility on public transit can lead to impoliteness and impatience by passengers towards people with disabilities and older adults.

“I'm a senior, and Metro here in Washington, DC. is only accessible to some. One of the complaints I put on there is that the doors open and close too quickly for



anybody who's senior, who is handicapped, who can access the metro. In the metro you have to take an elevator to get down to the train and then get to where the stop is...There is no consideration, and there's no staff to enforce the clear way of a senior or a handicapped person to get on and off the train. There needs to be personnel to make sure that nobody gets hurt, that everybody has time to get on an escalator. These things are more critical than people think. If you've never had to use a walker, never been in a wheelchair, you have no idea what is the experience." (Consumer, DC)

Question 2: What word or phrase comes to mind when you think about inclusion of people with disabilities and older adults in transit planning and operations?

The top three answers for this question were minimal / not included, essential / necessary, and difficult. Respondents also answered left out, non-existent, underserved, needs improvement, and "nothing about us without us." At the town halls, consumers and agency personnel starting by explaining ways that people with disabilities and older adults are excluded from transit planning and operations.

"They gave maybe 3 weeks' notice and it was clear they had already made a decision before announcing the townhall. It was only a formality." (Agency, Illinois)

"My center for independent living had to try for years to get on our local accessible transit advisory committee. We finally have an agency rep on there." (Agency, Location Unknown)

"When Transit Agency changes routes of Bus services they do not include input or consider input from riders, PWD, and the older population." (Consumer, Iowa)

"The needs of people with disabilities are an afterthought. Particularly in this age where we have so many other options for people who are non-disabled." (Consumer, Florida)



Attendees also gave examples of barriers to participation that make attending meetings difficult.

"Many times, the meetings are held in areas that are inaccessible. Many people with disabilities would attend the meetings to speak of lack of transportation but that very lack of transportation is why they can't get to the meetings. (Center for Independent Living, Illinois)

"Infrastructure problems - No reliable or accessible public transportation. Town Halls are not accessible due to lack transportation and limited to no access to internet for virtual town halls." (Agency, Location Unknown)

"I went to the city council meeting because I could get there with paratransit, but I had no way home. I did go and I said, look, I used the rest of my retirement funding to buy this house because it was within the paratransit district and there was a market that I could reach on foot. But it was the best I could afford, and now you're moving my bus, which means you're changing the outline for the paratransit district. What am I expected to do? And so, they decided that they would grandfather those of us in that were already in those areas and keep us on the paratransit, but it didn't help other people that may be forced to look for housing in areas like mine, because it's what they can afford. So that was one of the things that really upset me because they make it so hard for you even to talk to them when they hold their meetings and ask for public input at times when you don't have a way to get there." (Consumer, Missouri)

For many attendees, even when inclusion occurs in transit planning, the inclusion is not meaningful. One consumer with a disability explained that when they were on their city's transportation commission as an individual, they felt like they weren't taken seriously, but now that they work at an Independent Living Center, they feel like their concerns are being listened to.

"Sometimes we, as people with disabilities, get a seat at the table, but we're not actually included. It's patronizing.... Heads are nodding, but we're really not part of the solution." (Consumer, Atlanta, Georgia)



"I think that the involvement with transit agencies is part of planning, like the previous caller said, is obligatory. They have somebody at the table because they have to, but it looks they're not really having authentic dialogue. They're not really because they gotta ask tough questions. And those tough questions need answering. So I feel like there is inclusion, but it's not inclusion of perspective. It's just inclusion by numbers in transit organizations." (Consumer & Agency, Location Unknown)

"It's obligatory to include public opinion and to include a diverse set of public opinion, but many planners do not allow those opinions to be drivers. They don't allow that information to drive decisions." (Mobility Manager, Virginia)

"I use a power wheelchair. Can't just fold it up. I have been working to update busses with ramps instead of lifts and even accessibility into government buildings for the past 20 years. It's a constant battle." (Consumer, DC Metro Area)

In the chat, several attendees typed the slogan, "Nothing about us without us." Attendees agreed that while inclusion was lacking in most places, it is vital for effective transit planning.

"As a public servant you serve the whole public, and people with disabilities must be included in absolutely anything that that impacts us, which is most things, because we're part of the community. If you are a public servant and you're not serving the whole public, you're doing it wrong." (Consumer and ADA Coordinator, Cambridge, Massachusetts)

"To move towards a person-centered transit system, it is absolutely necessary and essential to have older adults and people with disabilities at the planning table. It is imperative to find a way to get them/their participation. (Agency, Location Unknown)

Some attendees explained that they don't feel included because they are not treated well by drivers. David Bernstein, TP4A staff, noted that inclusion begins on the vehicle, and "the way that drivers treat people is a reflection of the way that people feel included or not included."



"[Inclusion] is necessary because drivers don't always understand that I have a disability because I don't use a cane as a person with a vision impairment."
(Consumer, Location Unknown)

"Undignified ... uneducated. The drivers seem to be uneducated about being a person with disability." (Consumer, Virginia)

One transit agency explained that they work to include people with disabilities and older adults, but they face a lack of resources to address the issues that are brought up in these meetings, which leads to a lack of trust.

"I am proud of the way that my agency includes seniors and people with disabilities in our program design. I have also observed our State reach out and provide opportunities for consumers to be included in the process. However, there never seems to be sufficient resources to address the needs, especially for additional services, expanded hours of operation, or travel outside of the service area. Often providers are facing regulatory restrictions that make change difficult and, sometimes, impossible. When providers can't make requested change, it creates frustration and lack of trust between the consumers and the providers."
(Agency, Location Unknown)

Question 3: What are the barriers facing older adults, people with disabilities, and caregivers when they are asked to be a part of transit planning? This can include barriers in participating in transit planning meetings and public hearings.

For the third question, respondents indicated that the top three barriers were lack of transportation, not being informed about meetings/events, and technology. Other answers included location, timing, and not being heard. At the town halls, attendees reaffirmed these responses and added that apathy, disillusionment, lack of education, and lack of drivers were barriers to participation.



One consumer from Ohio explained that despite their efforts to mobilize a group around accessible transportation with other consumers in the same position, they found that getting people to join them was a barrier. Other consumers said a barrier was apathy from legislators.

“A lot of times it's apathy. They don't care about your issue because they don't have any relatives or any one that in their family that is in your position, so it isn't real to them, even though you're standing right there in front of them and telling them. A lot of times ... change, it goes very slowly. It takes sometimes three or four years to get a piece of legislation through the state government and maybe even longer through Congress. So, you're going back year after year to say the same thing.” (Consumer, Missouri)

This consumer went on to tell the story of how they lobbied for legislation to make information on pharmacy bottles accessible.

“We actually took in pharmacy bottles with no labels on them and said, ‘I'm supposed to take my heart pill, but I'm not sure this is the right one.’ And, you know, they'd look at it and go, ‘Well, there's no label.’ And that's the point, you know, without access to the label, I could be taking my dogs meds or taking something that that is for some other condition in the wrong amount Sometimes you feel like you're using a snow shovel to shovel water, and people get burned out and get tired. I'll be 75 in September. And I don't know if I could make another 15 legislative visits in a day, much longer. I mean, you know, I came home and crashed for two days. But I still had to take care of my husband, because I'm a 24/7 caregiver. You know, so that's part of it, is people have to choose their battles. And sometimes it just seems there are too many things.” (Consumer, Missouri)

Other attendees also expressed that frustration from past experiences could act as a barrier to participation by people with disabilities and older adults.

“The state agencies do not provide the information as to what needs to take place, what they need to do and follow up. We are currently dealing with this



right now. The frustration comes from lack of communication and information. And I seem to be a problem for voicing my concerns." (Consumer, Location Unknown)

"Disillusioned and frustrated with "the system" - burned once, twice..."

One consumer from Maryland explained that after being on a transportation commission board, they felt like nothing was actually getting done, so they started attending staff meetings for the county's bus transportation system.

"You just have to keep pushing them. You have to go up in the front of the meetings and say things that they don't want to hear. But you got to do it often, loud, strong, lots of people doing it. And they kind of break down after a while. Believe it or not, I'm still working on a telephone pole that sits in the handicap cutout so I can get across the street, in the county seat. Why do you put your telephone pole in the middle of a wheelchair cut out? But they act like well, I mean, I don't know what are we supposed to do?" (Consumer, Maryland)

Many attendees brought up examples of communication barriers, both in informing people about meetings and at the meetings themselves. Attendees noted the need for materials that are accessible to screen readers, ASL interpretation, interpretation for other languages, and the need to use plain language in large print.

"If somebody hands me something in small print and thinks that I'm supposed to get information from it, I figure they don't actually want me to have the information that bad." (Consumer and ADA Coordinator, Cambridge, Massachusetts)

"They aren't considered in terms of the planning environment where planning meetings are held. Plain language isn't used when online forms or online meetings are held. Events/meetings don't include descriptions of anticipated accommodations or planning sessions for individuals to improve the familiarity with tech or meeting space. All of the meetings move too fast with too many



people to really include a diversity of processing speeds and cognitive needs.”
(Consumer & Agency, Location Unknown)

Technology was a major theme, with some advocating for more virtual options in the face of difficulties getting to physical meetings, while others remarked on difficulties in using or learning new technologies.

“In the past, I would have said the greatest barrier would have been transportation. However, as many agencies have moved to virtual platforms, I would say that technology now leads in the ability to participate for many seniors and persons with disabilities.” (Agency, Location Unknown)

Several attendees advocated for going to consumers, instead of trying to bring them to transit meetings.

“You have to meet the potential clientele in a one-on-one environment... Our transit system is trying to do more meetings, but I think actually having smaller groups or actually coming into the senior complexes and being able to go door-to-door and coming and meeting with these potential clients one-on-one and actually assessing their needs.” (Consumer, Roseville, California)

“As we collect surveys and hold focus meetings to discover gaps in services provided to these demographics, it's important that we go TO them where they are. Utilizing the meeting times already occurring is just one way to encourage inclusion in planning, we can't expect everyone to always know about our agenda but we can find events/meetings where we should be reliably present.” (Agency, Location Unknown)

Lack of knowledge/education also came up as a barrier, both in learning about transit systems and learning about being an advocate.

“Transit systems are so complicated that in order for you as the end consumer to understand where the pressure points are in the system that need improvement can be a challenge in and of itself.” (Consumer, Miami, Florida)



"And the answers and all of the questions are always the same. The barriers are still the same, the barriers are still pathways, barriers are still time, the barriers still funding, and so I find that that's been consistent. And someone said earlier, and I agree with this wholeheartedly, is that people with disabilities and elder adults have to be more educated so that we can be better advocates." (Consumer, Atlanta, Georgia)

Another attendee, who works for an Independent Living Center in Rhode Island, explained their recent success being on an advisory committee and urged other attendees to look for advisory committees and board to join. One consumer talked about their experience being an advocate for paratransit at their state legislature. They gave advice to other attendees:

"Be a strong advocate and get to know your politicians and have meetings with the public. Just get it out there." (Consumer, Hawaii)

Question 4: What are some solutions/ways to overcome these barriers?

The top three answers for the fourth question were timely, dependable transportation with options outside regular hours, hosting both in-person and virtual meetings with multiple time options, and better communication / advertise in places to reach people with disabilities and older adults.

In addressing technological barriers, attendees were split about whether Zoom was a good option.

"Let's try to get beyond virtual meetings on zoom. Not everyone knows how to use it. I have three other consumers with me, [and] they didn't know how to use zoom. I had to teach them." (Consumer, Location Unknown)

"And remembering for models like Zoom, offering support and training. Partnering with local libraries and other spaces to get people support in



participating including actual access to PCs, internet, mics, cameras etc.”
(Location Unknown)

Some attendees remarked that some older adults prefer to stay at home due to health concerns, so virtual options are great. One attendee suggested “mask requirements at in-person meetings so you don't endanger folks who are immunocompromised.” Attendees emphasized the importance of Zoom for reaching more people.

“I prefer Zoom, I feel like it opens up the meetings to many more people. One of my advocacy groups died even before the pandemic, less and less in-person attendance. I do agree with at least some in-person options, but Zoom is crucial to reaching a LOT of folks.” (Consumer, Location Unknown)

Another solution raised was providing transportation. An employee of a Center for Independent Living in Michigan described their efforts to develop a program to reimburse personal drivers of people with disabilities through vouchers from the state. Several attendees mentioned the importance of voting and a mischaracterization of disabilities.

“We have a paternalistic system We'll give them a little bit of bread crumbs so that they will go away and not make too much noise. But we won't ever really try to solve the problem, because they're not a threat to us. And so, my call to action, I guess, to everybody on this call is we need to find a way to make ourselves known as a formidable voting presence so that people pay attention to us.”
(Consumer, Florida)

“...There's still that old mindset that disabled people don't live full and active lives. ... I think a big part of solving this problem is getting people to understand that not every disabled person works in supported employment, not every disabled person goes to an agency. That we are out there, as consumers, we go out to restaurants, we go to businesses, we work in regular mainstream jobs. And I think until we can get agencies and transportation providers to understand this, things are not going to change that quickly.” (Agency & Consumer, St. Louis, Missouri)



Persistence was another solution raised by attendees.

“Dedication from the disability and older adult community consistently coming to meetings with agencies. This has been a problem in area. People give up and stop coming. Also educating yourself on the rules and regulations that affect these agencies before attending the meetings.” (Agency & Consumer, St. Louis, Missouri)

Question 5: Can you provide an example of how you or other older adults, people with disabilities, and caregivers have been involved in decision making or leading transit and mobility programs in your community?

The top three answers to this question were advisory committees, public meetings and surveys, and no / unsure. In the town halls, most comments reflected these responses. Several attendees had served on advisory committees or filled out surveys. David Bernstein, TP4A staff, noted that TP4A makes a distinction between advisory committees, which advise agencies on what to do, and steering committees, which steer agencies in their goals. Attendees emphasized that compensating consumers for participating in meetings or committees increases attendance and shows appreciation for valuable time and expertise, especially when it feels like nothing is being done in response to their concerns.

“This is something I've heard from our consumers who go to these meetings and give their advice, and then have it just amount to nothing. So as much as possible if funders can compensate folks for their time, even if it's just a gift card, something like that is super, super, super important for meaningful engagement. Otherwise, as the results of my most recent focus group show, you don't get the turnout that you'd like.” (Agency, Location Unknown)

Several attendees told anecdotes about how they had been involved in leading transit and mobility programs through their own advocacy.



"I started a peer-led organization called Concerned Transit Riders for Equal Access, where the members have worked out to the State of Georgia to educate consumers on their rights and benefits of public transportation and work with independent living to distribute information on what they can do in their particular neighborhoods for local transportation." (Consumer, Atlanta, Georgia)

"We have to make ourselves visible, we have to demand to be heard. ... I had a situation where my nearest bus stop was a 20-minute walk. I couldn't get there on foot, and I couldn't get to the bus stop because it was between an off-ramp and an on-ramp, and no sidewalk. There was a way to get there if you went through a cut in the fence and walked across to a culvert drainage thing and came up from one angle, but it was very hard to teach my guide dog to do that. So, I went to the bus company and I said, 'Look, your bus stop has to be moved. It's not accessible to people with disabilities. I happen to be fairly determined and agile and have a smart dog who will help me figure it out. But, I know there are other people in my neighborhood would also like to catch your bus.' And he said, 'Well, yeah, we did have a complaint about that bus stop from a man in a wheelchair ... But they didn't do anything when he complained, so I don't know if they'll do anything when you complain.' And I said, 'Okay, just tell them that if I don't hear something back, within a week, I'll take my brand-new guide dog because I'm new to the area, and I'll go door to door and meet my neighbors and ask them to sign a petition if they also would like to take the bus, but can't get there.' And they moved the bus stop within a week. Sometimes you actually have to push harder than you're comfortable pushing." (Consumer, Missouri)

"I'd just like to let you folks know what I tried to do for our paratransit [service] Handi-van. ... There were concerns for safety ... so we put in 3-point shoulder strap seatbelts. The people in the cities said no way, no how you can make a shoulder seatbelt -- only a lap belt. But that's not very safe when you're blind and the driver has to slam the brakes So we got that made and we just changed the floorplan and it was amazing what the vendor did to present that to the city's transportation department. And now we have 3-point shoulder strap seatbelts in our paratransit Handi-vans, which is a safety thing for us. People complain about the shoulder strap but I feel very comfortable having a shoulder strap holding me



in place, especially when I can't see what's going on in front of me when the impact is happening or something's going to happen to me." (Consumer, Hawaii)

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, USAging, the Institute for Community Inclusion at UMass Boston, and DJB Evaluation Consulting.

