



Kansas RTAP Fact Sheet

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Improving Relationships With Underrepresented Groups

By James Decker



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Community outreach is critical for the success of a transit service and is required by federal law. Public involvement has been shown to strengthen community relationships, create a sense of ownership, and provide a diverse forum for ideas that can improve transit services in the community.

Many agencies use traditional communication techniques that often fail to engage specific demographic groups due to varied cultural, attitudinal, and communicative barriers. The ability to fully engage in dialogue groups that use (or would like to use) your service will foster improved communication and a better appreciation of the service, and has the potential to improve efficiency and cost-effectiveness of operations. This article will highlight important research and best practices regarding the experiences of transit agencies in engaging underrepresented groups, and discuss best practices that lead to stronger relationships with these stakeholders.

The issue: Giving underrepresented communities a voice

Public involvement needs to be inclusive so the full range of community interests are considered in developing a transit service. This can be difficult to achieve, however, as some community groups encounter barriers that hinder participation. The U.S. Department of Transportation (USDOT) and Federal Highway Administration (FHWA) have identified these groups as “underrepresented.”

Lack of representation in public input processes may be related to cultural, disability, low-income or lack-of-education barriers. According to the USDOT, “Cultural differences sometimes hinder full participation in transportation planning and project development. People with disabilities find access to transportation difficult and their ability to participate in public involvement efforts constrained. People with low incomes often lack both access and time to participate. They may

be difficult to reach, distrustful of the public involvement process, or need to work rather than attend meetings and public hearings; thus eliminating themselves from the public awareness process. Poorly educated people often are not fully aware of what transportation services are available or of opportunities to help improve them.”¹

Beyond the traditional model

Transit agencies have traditionally used the, “decide, announce, and defend approach.”² This model for public participation uses one-way communication methods such as public notices, open house presentations, and various handouts to inform the public. This method may not attract underrepresented community groups and can hinder feedback.

It is important for transit agencies to look at community demographics. Who are you reaching now, and who do you need to reach? What you’ve done

in the past may not work in the future. Effective public participation requires being creative and proactive; you may need to work in new ways with groups and individuals that may not have been involved in the past.

Who do transit agencies engage now?

Reported in the TCRP Research Results Digest 107, Monica Simon of Simon and Simon Research Associates conducted a national survey of 80 transit agencies to document their experiences in reaching and engaging the participation of disability and underrepresented communities.³ Transit agency respondents indicated that they sought public input for all of their major decision-making activities, with 92 percent including people with disabilities and seniors. Approximately 60 percent included underrepresented minority groups. Agencies identified African Americans, Asian Americans, Hispanics, immigrants, Native Americans, persons with disabilities, and seniors as targeted underrepresented groups in their communities.

What were the identified barriers?

Cultural, attitudinal, and language barriers may limit or prevent involvement from certain community groups. The same survey asked transit agencies to identify the significance of barriers to engaging underrepresented community groups. Overall, 33 percent of the agencies responding to the survey indicated that a lack of public interest had a significant impact on engaging these groups. Additionally, 42 percent identified lack of trust and 32 percent identified a lack of understanding as somewhat significant barriers to participation.⁴

How are they being engaged?

Agencies reported using five primary strategies to overcome barriers and

engage community groups:⁵

- Outreach to disability organizations (92 percent)
- Partnering with community organizations that provide information and receive public input on transportation issues (90 percent)
- Partnering with advocacy organizations and the community to expand the communication network (85 percent)
- Implementing transit agency advisory councils or citizen advisory committees to increase two-way communication (82 percent).

These methods helped increase awareness of transit service, establish a more meaningful sense of ownership, develop familiarity with transit staff, and provide a forum to voice ideas and opinions. Other common strategies included asking elected and government officials to raise awareness of public participation options, a community newsletter, signs on buses, social media, targeted newspaper ads, direct mail, flyers and posters, and mass emails.

A closer look at best practices

We conducted interviews with two transit agencies and one private non-profit organization to gather information about developing partnerships with disability and minority communities:

Lane Transit District (LTD) in Eugene, Oregon, **CT Transit** in Hartford, Connecticut and **The Arc of Douglas County**, Lawrence, Kansas. These organizations place a high value on public involvement and believe that the first step to connecting with target markets is to develop relationships with the various organizations that serve underrepresented groups.

Collaborating with community organizations has allowed both LTD and CT Transit to better make service decisions regarding the needs and concerns of their underrepresented

groups. CT Transit has affectionately labeled their approach “BORPSAT,” short for a “bunch of the right people sitting around a table.”⁶ In-person events and a service-review committee have also been successful strategies for CT Transit.

Phil Fry, the CT Transit’s Assistant GM of Planning and Marketing, said that service improvements suggested at public meetings, or to a driver, through the phone, mail, or website are reviewed in-depth. Fry investigates and personally responds to a majority of the public comments CT Transit receives, from a community-wide issue to a particular bus arriving late. Providing direct and indirect public feedback opportunities and responding to service comments has reduced communication barriers and improved trust between CT transit and the community.

Since its inception in 1970, Eugene’s LTD has been partnering with nonprofits and social service agencies to create an environment built on trust and respect. According to Cosette Rees, Accessible and Customer Services Manager for LTD, the transit professionals at LTD acknowledge that they are not experts on every community issue. The agency reaches out to community organization leaders and their networks to gain expertise on various issues and to “break down silos.”

Rees defines a successful partnership with a community group as an effort that, “helps more people, does more good, and stretches resources and funding.” She believes that developing partnerships allows transit agencies to increase their ability to serve more community groups.

The Arc of Douglas County is an advocacy agency for individuals with disabilities and their families. A majority of their constituents are transit-dependent and rely on the local public transit service for access to employment. The Arc has worked with Lawrence Transit since its inception to accommodate the needs of the disabled community.

Barbara Bishop, Executive Director of the Arc, says that effective communication between transit agencies and community organizations serving underrepresented populations needs to be a top priority. Community organizations should be well informed about transit services,

¹Federal Highway Administration and Federal Transit Administration. 2002. Public Involvement Techniques for Transportation Decision-Making. U.S. Department of Transportation. Washington, D.C.

²Black, R. 2006. “Public Participation in Diverse Communities: Tools for Consensus Building,” Paper #06-2580, Transportation Research Board 85th Annual Meeting, Transportation Research Board, Washington, D.C.

³Simon, Monica. “Developing Partnerships Between Transportation Agencies and The Disability and Underrepresented Communities.” Research Results Digest 107 (2013), p14. Transit Cooperative Research Program, Apr. 2013. Web. 20 Oct. 2013.

⁴Ibid., p.15.

⁵Ibid., p.17.

⁶Ibid., p.31.

A Blueprint for Success in Engaging Underrepresented Groups

While there is no single strategy to engage the community and foster more meaningful public involvement, the TCRP Research Results Digest 107 included an eight step blueprint to increase public involvement from underrepresented groups. It establishes a baseline process that can be tailored to meet the needs and context of your community.

Step 1: Define goals and objectives. Update your goals and objectives to clarify the opportunities and challenges of developing relationships with underrepresented community groups. Goals should be broad reaching and include the needs of all stakeholders, and objectives need to be clear, realistic steps to reach these goals. It is vital for the agency to consider stakeholder's actual needs and goals as opposed to the agency's perception by seeking feedback from the public on a regular basis. This can be accomplished via face-to-face public participation events that encourage open discussion between stakeholders.

Step 2: Conduct a needs assessment. Gather information essential to developing partnerships. An accurate assessment will determine what underrepresented groups think and feel about issues and help guide collaboration. Common techniques include focus groups, interviews, surveys, and charrettes. According to Bishop, community organizations are eager to assist in the process and can often provide a meeting location, refreshments, and other resources.

Step 3: Identify leaders and stakeholders. Involve community leaders to receive expert input of needs and concerns without having to attract numerous individual members. Collaborating with a leader from a community group that is not well represented in the public input process instills confidence and helps build trust between the transit agency and the underrepresented group. Lane Transit relies on leaders to provide connections to community members who can later be included in public participation events. Community leaders can be identified through steering and advisory committees, working groups, surveys, newsletters, and personal meetings with important stakeholders.

Step 4: Build cultural competence. Create an environment that will allow the greatest diversity of individuals to participate. To accomplish this, develop a high level of cultural competence to overcome potential cultural or language barriers which may limit participation. Develop communication tools, on-going cross-cultural and diversity training, and a network of cultural and community experts to help bridge cultural gaps and encourage meaningful participation.

Step 5: Maintain open communication. Freely share information and develop solutions based on community input to establish a foundation of communication and trust, the most important factors identified by survey participants in establishing partnerships. CT Transit's procedures for responding to public comments builds trust and fosters improved communication between the agency and its consumers. Implementing similar two-way communication techniques may encourage more meaningful public participation.

Step 6: Engage underrepresented groups. Tailor public outreach based on the composition of your community. There is no one size fits all approach, so a combination of faith-based groups, social media, print and electronic media, community and human services agencies should be utilized. Rees suggests studying community demographics to identify who you are reaching now and who you need to reach. Engage with applicable community organizations to identify leaders and a network of community members.

Step 7: Organize meetings. Consider the needs of the community when planning the location, time, and accessibility of public meetings. Public meetings are a common, low-cost method to provide information and/or gather input from the community. The location should be convenient for stakeholders, occur on the weekend or evenings, avoid major religious holidays, and include childcare and refreshments if possible.

Step 8: Sustain partnerships. Maintain partnerships through strategic evaluation and persistence. Utilize performance management as a tool to determine the success of public involvement efforts. This evaluation will dictate whether public participation efforts need to be improved or can be maintained. Attendance at events and meetings and exit surveys are often used to monitor the performance of the relationship.

More in-depth information regarding the eight step blueprint can be found in TCRP Research Results Digest 107.

including what the agency can and cannot provide. By being up-front about service limitations, community agencies and its constituents will better understand service parameters and become an ally in overcoming these potential barriers to service. Knowledge of the transit service has helped Arc staff assist their constituents with route planning and to answer general questions and concerns about access.

Transit agencies should also look for opportunities to communicate directly with the populations they are trying to serve. Bishop said, “transit agencies often prefer to work with community organizations because they tend to offer solution-oriented feedback instead of problems.” However, it’s important that transit agencies also gather feedback directly from the users or potential users of the system. Public events and face-to-face discussions foster more meaningful public involvement, where “transit professionals can have open conversations, personally identify with specific community groups, and receive compliments, not just problems,” Bishop said.

There are many additional best practices across the nation, including from Wichita Transit in Wichita, Kansas. In the July 2011 edition of the *Kansas Trans Reporter*, we reported on a public engagement project in Wichita to reach the Hispanic community to improve mobility for Hispanic seniors. Project leaders in the Wichita region recognized that the Hispanic senior population had grown 67 percent from 2000 to 2010, and it was estimated to grow another 40 percent by 2020. Outreach strategies needed to be improved to overcome language and access barriers experienced by the Hispanic community.

The agency reached out to church leaders who are highly respected and known in the Hispanic community. Meetings were held in church facilities immediately following services, and

pastors encouraged the congregation to participate in the public participation opportunity. With help from church leaders, the project established a creative way to improve on traditional public meetings to better reach and connect with the Hispanic community.

Wichita Transit also held staff education programs in Hispanic sensitivity training and hired a Hispanic mobility manager to continually improve this partnership.

Moving forward

A successful transit service will only occur when all affected stakeholders work together to develop a consensus on a decision or service direction. Fully engaging groups and individuals in your community who use or would like to use your service in a dialogue fosters improved communication, a better appreciation of challenges and successes, and has the potential to improve efficiency and cost-effectiveness of operations. Assessing underrepresented groups in your community and using the eight step blueprint for engaging those groups (see page 5) will foster more meaningful public participation and develop strong, sustaining relationships between the transit agency and community stakeholders.

For additional information on this topic, consult the sources listed below. ●

Reprinted from the January 2014 issue of the *Kansas TransReporter*, a publication of the Kansas Rural Transit Assistance Program (RTAP) at the Kansas University Transportation Center.

Sources

- Arnstein, Sherry. “A Ladder of Citizen Participation.” *A Ladder of Citizen Participation*. JAIP, 1969. Web. 20 Oct. 2013.
- “Including People with Disabilities in Coordinated Transportation Plans.” Rep. Project ACTION, July 2009. Web.
- Phone Interview: Cosette Rees, Lane Transit District, October 11, 2013.
- Phone Interview: Phil Fry, CT Transit, October 14, 2013.
- Phone Interview: Barbara Bishop, The Arc of Douglas County, December 4, 2013.