



Principles for Equitable Public Outreach & Engagement During COVID-19 & Beyond

The COVID-19 pandemic and resulting social distancing have reshaped the transportation landscape: transit ridership has plummeted; normally congested highways have emptied; and some micromobility companies are pulling out of cities as demand has bottomed out.

The pandemic, as well as our response measures, have not impacted all communities equally, and in many ways reflect and deepen pre-existing racial and social inequities in our communities. Transit dependent populations—predominantly people of color and people with low incomes—are often unable to work from home as they continue to provide the essential, front-line services that we all rely on.

Our work in the transportation and planning sector is critical, perhaps now more than ever, to respond and adapt to changing travel demand during the pandemic as well as to help communities recover after it has passed. It is equally critical that we ensure inclusive, equitable, and diverse public outreach and engagement as part of the important decision-making processes ahead—whether for real-time responses to the pandemic, existing projects, or future transportation funding and planning scenarios.

The following guidance is intended to provide fellow transportation sector practitioners and partners with a set of principles for inclusive engagement, including baseline equity criteria to consider when selecting an engagement strategy and accompanying tools whether analogue and/or digital.

Principles for Equitable Public Outreach & Engagement



Identify project goals, resources, and accountability measures for inclusive public outreach and engagement. It is important to know and to clearly articulate the intended purpose of the process, including defining an equitable vision and goals, understanding key needs and priorities, developing key indicators metrics, and determining scenarios. To support this, make sure your project budget allocates stipends for focus groups and/or community champions or ambassadors, digital tools or other non-traditional or analogue methods, facilitators and language translations, and ADA accommodations (e.g., closed captioning for people with hearing impairments). Finally, be clear and transparent about how the input gathered will affect decision-making and what the follow-up will be.



Identify who the most vulnerable communities are that the project will potentially impact. Knowing who to reach, especially historically marginalized populations, by leading with a racial and social lens will help you identify the institutions and organizations to reach out to. These groups will provide insight into how best to reach vulnerable communities and what tools will be appropriate.



Design outreach and engagement methods—and set equity criteria for accompanying tools—around the project's most vulnerable communities. Creating a process that centers and reaches the populations most at risk of experiencing impacts, adverse or otherwise, will ensure that the methods and tools employed work well for the broader community. Appropriate tools should be selected by setting and assessing key criteria that—at minimum—meet the following equity baseline thresholds for engaging in and with vulnerable communities:

- » Community penetration: The level of traction and reach it will have
- » Accessibility: ADA, language, and cultural relevancy
- » User-friendliness/User-legibility: How universally understood the tool is without a lot of explanation



Pay representative organizations and community leaders to provide focused input on methods and tools as well as test methods and tools before deploying. Allocate budget for community groups, leaders, and organizations from and serving vulnerable populations for their time and input on the design of outreach and engagement as well as their assessment of the tools to ensure key equity criteria before deploying.



Analog strategies and tools can be just as innovative and effective as digital tools. Political, social, and mutual-aid organizers have long relied on tried-and-true methods for outreach and engagement, particularly to reach vulnerable communities, including but not limited to:

- » Phone banking (like tabling but reaching out by phone)
- » Mail postage paid flyers and mailers (e.g., on utility bills) with numbers and/or website with a clearly stated project title and engagement ask
- » Print signage and posters with key project information and clear direction or “ask” about how to engage and distribute to human service providers, so that front-line workers can share the information with communities they are serving
- » Hosting phone and video conferences for focus groups, meetings, voting, and engaging with groups on issues
- » Push ADA- and language-accessible information about project and engagement opportunities for those that opt-in via other outreach methods

Many useful digital tools exist to augment analog ones; though, it’s important to assess the possible barriers that vulnerable communities may experience, particularly if digital and online platforms are the only means to engage in a process. These tools can yield a less diverse audience, often excluding non-native English speakers, people who are less comfortable with technology, people living with disabilities, and people without access to reliable internet services. Therefore, it’s recommended that a mix of tools be assessed for effectiveness and appropriateness. Unfortunately, there isn’t a one-size-fits-all approach.



Weight and prioritize input and criteria provided by vulnerable communities. To ensure equitable project outcomes, prioritize applicable project needs and input from and by historically marginalized communities, especially when and where themes emerge.



Be consistent with your messaging and tools. Regardless of the community and the method of engagement, especially if/when using a mix of methods and tools, it is important to share the same information and provide the same context. This will ensure the information you obtain can be weighted and prioritized across different sources and communities.



Be creative! Engagement and outreach can take on many forms. There are lots of ways to obtain valuable information, including but not limited to, using closed captioned visuals to obtain input on preferences. Don’t be afraid to stray from traditional surveys, which are less engaging. Consult with local community groups, leaders, and champions, including youth and local artists, for culturally relevant ideas that will have community traction and penetration.



Build trust by following up. Whatever outreach and engagement methods or tools are used, it is critical to be responsive to questions, provide timely responses, and to follow up after engagement processes have been completed. People and their time should be valued, and that value is demonstrated by being updated on how their input informed the decision-making process. Equity is both process and outcomes, and trust-building is critical to the process. While projects have fixed timelines, equity and trust—as well as inequity and distrust—are legacies that live on long after a project.



Acknowledge, document, and forgive mistakes. Engagement is complex. Mistakes and missteps will happen. This is okay and to be expected. When it happens, note them; be transparent about them, and then correct them. Finally, document and learn from them. Lessons learned are what propel us forward—and what will evolve our understanding of equity, diversity, and inclusion in this work and our sector—during and after this crisis.

We hope these principles help you develop equitable and inclusive engagement processes. At Nelson\Nygaard, we’re grounded in and guided by our values of equity and putting people first. During and after Covid-19, these values will be especially critical in our sector and among the many communities we serve and live in collectively. Feel free to reach out with questions or if you’d like any help thinking through a project or effort.

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