

Diversity, Equity and Inclusion in Public Transportation



This National RTAP Best Practices Spotlight Article on Diversity, Equity and Inclusion in Public Transportation outlines the background, history, and issues around these related concepts that are critical to providing equal rights in transit workplaces and transit services for all. The article contains case studies showcasing best practices from rural and tribal transit agencies (such as rabbittransit, shown in the photo at left), a state-wide transit authority, and State RTAP programs throughout the country. The article also provides tips for transit agencies to get started with developing their own diversity, equity and inclusion programs.

Background

Diversity, equity and inclusion in public transportation has made great strides since civil rights leader Rosa Parks refused to give up her bus seat to a white man in 1955, paving the way for the desegregation of buses. Inequity in transportation was an issue long before then; as early as 1887, The Interstate Commerce Act forbade any interstate common carrier by motor vehicle to subject any person to unjust discrimination. Reaching back in time even further to 1866, the fourteenth amendment to the Constitution to the United States reads, “Everyone has the right to freedom of movement and residence within the borders of each state.” Fast forward to today, where a myriad of events, movements, and public protests have brought civil rights issues to the forefront and spurred rural and tribal transit agencies to rethink how they can deliver more equitable service to all.

The government has set forth laws that address discrimination, justice, and equity. Rural transit agencies are required to comply with the following regulations:

- [Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964](#) states that “No person in the United States shall, on the ground of race, color or national origin, be excluded from participation in, be denied the benefits of, or be subjected to discrimination under any program or activity receiving federal financial assistance.”
- The U.S. DOT [Disadvantaged Business Enterprise \(DBE\)](#) requirements are intended to create a level playing field for DBEs in competing for federally-funded contracts. A DBE is a for-profit small business owned and controlled by a socially and economically disadvantaged individual.

- [Executive Order 12898](#), Federal Actions to Address Environmental Justice in Minority Populations and Low-Income Populations, requires federal agencies to address “disproportionately high and adverse human health or environmental effects of their programs, policies and activities on minority populations and/or low-income populations.”
- The U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission published a [series of laws](#) that prohibit discrimination against a job applicant or an employee on the basis of race, color, religion, sex, pregnancy, gender identity, sexual orientation, national origin, age (40 or older), disability or genetic information.
- [Key regulations, standards, and guidance](#) that rural transit agencies must comply with to serve persons with disabilities are outlined in the National RTAP ADA Toolkit.

More and more, forward-thinking organizations are embracing inclusiveness and going beyond what is required by law. In addition to complying with federal regulations, taking steps toward diversity, equity and inclusiveness is easy, supports stronger transit services, and is the right thing to do. Transit workplaces should create strategies and policies to recruit talent from all backgrounds and provide equitable advancement opportunities. Transit agencies must work toward making sure that all riders whose primary language is not English, have disabilities or special needs, are low-income, or live in underserved areas, can access their services.

Benefits

Transit is a lifeline in rural and Tribal areas to jobs, education, healthcare, and leisure activities. For older Americans, persons with disabilities, and low-income individuals who may not own personal vehicles, it is often the only way for them to travel to the places they need to go. Creating environments where all transit staff feel included and valued, and where riders of all backgrounds and needs feel safe and welcomed, sets the stage for the best possible outcomes. Developing strong programs in diversity, equity and inclusion can lead to increased ridership, improved public health as more people can access care providers and revitalized communities with transit as a key participant.

Challenges

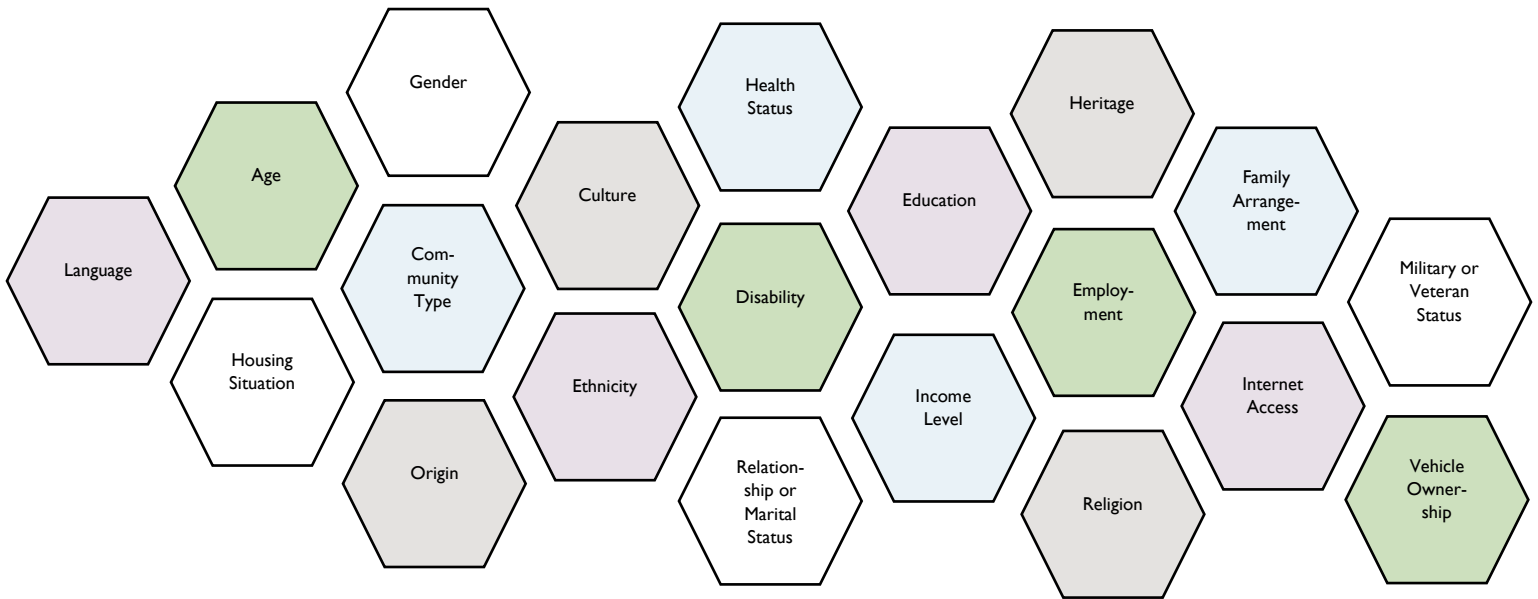
Data shows the need for improvements in the diversity of transit workplaces, as well as policies that address diverse rider needs. For example, according to the U.S. Census, women only make up about 14% of the transportation workforce. The Census also found that Spanish is the language spoken at home for about 13.5% of Americans and the National Center for Education Statistics reported that about 14% of adults in America lack basic reading literacy skills. It is difficult to provide transit service to riders who cannot read or understand information like schedules or rider guides.

Transit leadership may encounter barriers or resistance to diversification, equity and inclusion efforts, such as personal bias or prejudice, lack of knowledge, resistance to change, or even fear. The geography of rural areas may make it difficult to reach different minority groups easily. It takes

a lot of work and effort from all parties to create inclusive environments, and some organizations may just feel that they don't have the resources available.

So, where do you begin?

Start by acknowledging that there are many different populations that people could be considered a part of. However, individuals may have entirely different ideas of what populations they identify with or what traits they possess. Most importantly, a building block to true equality is to understand that everyone is a unique individual with important contributions to the community and the world, and no one is any more or less important or better because of their background. Here are just some of the ways to think of characteristics of people or groups, when planning for equal and equitable opportunities and services.



All people should be treated with dignity and respect, and feel like their input makes a difference and that they are being heard.

The following case studies provide best practices from transit agencies and RTAP programs around the country that share ideas on how to get started to provide more equitable and inclusive transit.

Transit Agency Case Studies

HIRTA Public Transit



Since 1981, the Heart of Iowa Regional Transit Agency (HIRTA) has served seven counties in central Iowa, covering many rural areas. The communities they serve represent a range of socioeconomic, ethnic, and cultural perspectives, including residents from low-income neighborhoods, ethnic communities, residents with limited English proficiency, and other traditionally underserved people. Their [Diversity web page](#) shows a statistical breakdown of how the region is home to many populations, including Latino, Asian, Black, Native American, and other groups. “It’s easy to just continue to serve the people you’re serving,” stated HIRTA Executive Director Julia Castillo, “but we need to pay more attention to the people that we are not serving and find out how to reach them and serve them best too.”

When HIRTA Outreach Coordinator Danny Schnathorst was hired in August 2020, taking an even stronger approach to transportation equity was one of the first projects he tackled. Schnathorst researched how other transit agencies approached inclusiveness and completed training on Developing an Inclusion Statement through Partners for Youth with Disabilities. He developed the agency’s inclusion statement that introduces their Diversity web page: “HIRTA is committed to creating a safe and inclusive experience for all riders. We will promote an environment reflective of our communities. Regardless of ability, background or personal circumstances, we will ensure all riders feel welcome and included with HIRTA. Come be yourself, ride together, and ride HIRTA.”

The agency’s Beyond the Bus annual symposium began in 2017. The free symposium provides a full day of training by industry experts and is open to all. Past events have focused on invisible disabilities and transportation employment. The 2021 Symposium focused on inclusion and the role public transit plays to ensure everyone has equal opportunities to access the services they need to have a productive life. The event included renowned regional and national speakers from Disability Rights Iowa, National Aging and Disability Transportation Center (NADTC), Community Transportation Association of America (CTAA) and others. The keynote speaker was Tamika Butler, a national expert on inequality, inequity, and social justice, as well as rural areas. Beyond the Bus 2021 tracked trends on a global level to show where there is inequality to help HIRTA (and others) determine how to fill unmet needs. Takeaways from this symposium will be used to identify areas where HIRTA can best reach and serve unmet populations. “We are constantly listening and constantly learning,” said Schnathorst. “We need to continue to educate ourselves so we can provide all our riders with the best possible service.”

HIRTA leadership believes that equal opportunity in employment extends far beyond having an EEO statement posted on their website, and all HIRTA staff are trained on Civil Rights, including how to use the Language Line interpretation and translation services. The agency also leverages a Transportation Advisory Group (TAG), a diverse group of community stakeholders and business representatives interested in the advancement and improvement of public transportation.

They are also tailoring marketing campaigns to reach specific demographic segments, such as persons with disabilities. 100% of the HIRTA vehicle fleet is ADA-accessible.

HIRTA makes every effort to match the cultural preferences of their community members. Special requests are heard and always acted upon. One county requested a brochure translated into Arabic, which was quickly accomplished. Agency leadership actively seeks out and considers the viewpoints of minority and low-income populations, as well as individuals who do not fluently speak English. They are seeking to target more of their area's Latino population, and are proactively translating their rider materials. Going one step further, they are looking at new ways to better meet this population's transportation needs. For example, they found that many of the Latino riders in their service area preferred not to have to call ahead for rides, so they structured their routes with more stops in neighborhoods with a higher percentage of that population. They are also looking to hire a native Spanish speaker to perform outreach and hire more Spanish-speaking drivers.

"HIRTA's services, by design, invite diversity," explained Castillo. "For example, you don't have to be able-bodied to ride, but you can be. English doesn't have to be your first language to ride, but it can be. You don't have to be 80 to ride, but you can be. We are truly committed to diversity, inclusion and equity in our services and employment and will continue to evolve ensuring everyone feels welcome with HIRTA."

rabbittransit

rabbittransit, a regional public transportation provider, offers a variety of transportation services to eleven counties in Pennsylvania, providing about 8,000 daily rides and covering many rural areas. Executive Director Richard Farr is passionate about diversity, equity and inclusion and looks for ways to incorporate it into rabbittransit's vision, strategic planning, and operations every step of the way. Management both shapes and leverages the agency's Civil Rights and Equal Opportunity Employment (EEO) policies to maximize the benefits of their efforts. "If you do a good job at equity," says Farr, "diversity and inclusion come naturally."

The transit agency has approached issues in many ways. Internally, they are currently looking at bias and working with a consultant to plan a full staff training on that topic. They want their board to reflect the diversity of their community and strive to include minorities and persons with disabilities. They also make accommodations available so that all staff, board members, and the public can easily participate in meetings. For example, they provided closed captioning for a board member with a hearing disability. A staff member with epilepsy had difficulty with screen-time, so they were able to structure his workday to limit the time he needed to work on a computer, as well as purchase screen filters to make screen viewing more comfortable.

At their regular staff meetings, the agency's EEO officer updates the team on progress and leads a discussion about how rabbittransit can fill gaps. One gap that was identified was a lack of women in administrative positions at the agency. That led to a job opening being posted on the Women in Transportation website. Another gap that was identified through customer feedback was a need for larger print materials for individuals with low vision. That gap was quickly addressed, both in print

and online. rabbittransit is also a founding member of the Welcoming Workplaces Council of the York County Economic Alliance, a community group that is working to create open and inviting workplaces and create equitable policies and procedures. rabbittransit even started their own non-profit organization – 3P Ride, whose mission is to advance affordable and convenient mobility solutions that allow all Central Pennsylvania’s residents to connect to their most basic needs. 3P Ride brings together many stakeholders with diverse perspectives and interests to hold focus groups and break down transportation barriers. Its very inception was based on the award of a grant for inclusion.

The agency’s focus on equity and inclusion translates to improvements in customer service. Their website can be viewed in many languages, and some webpages, such as Civil Rights, and ADA, have been professionally translated into Spanish. Their Ride Guides were rewritten to a 6th grade, plain-language level. Travel trainers present the information to riders who learn best in a one-to-one situation.



Farr stresses that diversity is more than just showing people of different backgrounds in photos. “A lot of it is common sense,” he says, “and it is always about being better.”

Samish Indian Nation

The Samish Indian Nation believes in creating a respectful, compassionate organization and community that mentors and nurtures individuals, values cooperation and harmony, and seeks to find balance, happiness, and grace. They are governed by a Tribal Council elected to oversee the welfare and resources of the Tribe, people, and justice.

The Samish Indian Nation was an early participant in the Island Transportation Equity Network (TEN). TEN’s *Transportation Equity-Island Style* report was developed to be a resource for Island Region communities to understand and address transportation barriers for those with limited options to manage them. Populations targeted in the project included Native Americans, older residents, persons with disabilities, veterans, low-income individuals and families, individuals with Limited English Proficiency (LEP), and disadvantaged and homeless youth.

Washington State’s Island Region is associated with four tribal nations; however, no tribal reservations are located within the region itself. The TEN project stressed that Tribal transportation options are important to consider both for Tribal members and others who reside in Island Region and travel to, or through, Tribal lands. Coordination, inclusion, and engagement were key goals.

Coordination efforts to close transportation gaps for vulnerable populations not served by transit were part of the TEN project, and the Samish Indian Nation contributed to that endeavor. The 2018 Samish Transportation Plan identified the need to work with Skagit Transit to expand or improve transit operations to meet the needs of the Nation's members. In particular, the plan identified the need to support the expansion of special needs transportation services currently provided by the Samish Indian Nation.

Transit Authority Case Study

Utah Transit Authority (UTA)

Kim Ulibarri was hired in 2017 as Utah Transit Authority's (UTA) first Chief People Officer, a deliberate title that the organization chose to focus on the staff, customers, and communities they serve. With around 2700 employees and a service area spanning 6 counties (including many rural areas), Kim's role involves improving the experience of a great many employees from diverse backgrounds. From early on, she wanted to move from focusing on statistics to taking a more holistic view of diversity that shapes a culture where staff want to stay and contribute. One of the projects she was involved in was developing "The UTA Way," which guides the agency in providing the best service to the public and within the agency as a whole. A key value in The UTA Way is Inclusion.

UTA believes in training at all levels. The Civil Rights Team hosted training for all management and leadership staff took a class focused on Unconscious Bias and all staff receive personal training during employee orientation from UTA's Manager of Civil Rights. Their leadership staffing reflects their commitment to diversity too; UTA hired their first female executive director in 2019 and their six-member executive leadership team now includes four women, including a woman of color. UTA's three-member board also includes a female trustee who was appointed by Utah's governor in 2018. UTA also has a strong Equal Employment Opportunity program to help the agency create aspirational goals on hiring that reflects the diversity of the community it serves.

A milestone occurred when UTA signed the [Utah Compact on Racial Equity, Diversity and Inclusion](#), which provides the foundation for advancing transit equity in the region, as well as developing engagement processes that provide communities with more equitable opportunities to participate in decisions essential to their mobility. Participating in the Compact at a time when there is so much unrest in the country and the world gave the agency time to pause and reflect, have important conversations about equity internally and in the community, and best define their goals.

They've added a section on diversity and inclusion to their annual employee engagement survey. Ulibarri is looking forward to receiving the first survey results this year to find out how staff feel about these issues. It's another way to give people a voice. UTA also has a disability expert in their civil rights department who has helped staff overcome issues like needing their work environment to

be a certain temperature. When someone came to HR and said, “I think that people don’t like me because of my race,” leadership worked together to talk to people in that staff member’s workgroup to help them all work on better ways of communicating.

UTA is looking both internally and externally to advance diversity, equity, and inclusion. Nichol Bourdeaux is UTA’s Chief Planning & Engagement Officer and has been a strong advocate for applying an equity lens to UTA’s external work, including Planning, Customer Experience, Innovative Mobility, Customer Service, and Community Engagement. Bourdeaux’s teams work to build partnerships to advance transportation equity and improve representation and inclusion in engagement efforts. It is important to UTA to elevate voices of traditionally underrepresented customers and community members, particularly those who need transit the most. The Planning & Engagement Office has been collaborating with partners to develop a transportation equity index to support planning and decision-making processes around service development and delivery. The department also created an Art in Transit Program, the theme being “Meet Your Neighbor” to highlight and celebrate diversity with student artwork on UTA’s system.

The authority created a citizen advisory group representing various disabilities and ages called the Committee on Accessible Transportation. Every effort is also made to include members from various ethnic, economic and geographic backgrounds. In addition to the Committee on Accessible Transportation, UTA hosts a Community Advisory Committee made up of diverse community members representing different sectors of the riding community. UTA also belongs to a regional Disabled Rights Action Committee (DRAC). UTA also joined the Government Alliance on Race and Equity (GARE), a national network of government working to achieve racial equity and advance opportunities for all, and regularly reaches out to local chambers of commerce on ways to reach diverse populations. A very special outreach program is when UTA Transit Police Department officers serve dinner at a facility that provides free lunch and dinner to Salt Lake’s homeless population. The entire UTA website can be translated into different languages, including Spanish and Vietnamese.

“We have so much more work to do,” said Ulibarri, “but it is gratifying to continue on our journey and reflect on where we’ve been and what we’ve done.”

State RTAP Case Studies

Louisiana RTAP

The mission of the Louisiana Public Transportation program is to improve public transit in all areas of the state so that all citizens may enjoy an adequate level of personal mobility regardless of geographical location, physical limitation, or economic status. Wil Giron became the Louisiana RTAP Manager in 2020 and set right to task to make diversity, equity and inclusion a key cornerstone of the state’s RTAP program and training offerings. He is eager to play a role in

shaping a culture that fosters innovative ideas and creates problem-solving solutions through equity. The 2021 RTAP Training Plan identified inclusion as a best practice. The program's newly appointed 8-member advisory committee, which meets twice a year to provide input on and approve RTAP training, is composed of more than 50% of people of minority backgrounds and includes many different age ranges. Louisiana RTAP feels that by having a diverse advisory committee, made up of women, minorities, and senior transit professionals, it can foster innovative ideas and problem-solving solutions by encouraging members to look at rural transit from different perspectives. "We want to elicit ideas about our RTAP training process from many different perspectives and experiences," stated Giron.

Louisiana RTAP works with their state's Department of Transportation and Development (DOTD) Program Compliance Division in its conversations about inclusion and diversity within RTAP's programming. The DOTD began providing presentations at advisory committee meetings this year (starting with the committee's very first meeting) to ensure that transit partners are aware of the need for diversity and inclusion within their respective operations.

The RTAP program has also instituted a "direct contact" strategy with local Disadvantaged Business Enterprise (DBE) vendors. Currently, it has contracted with 3 DBE vendors within its 1st and 2nd quarter training schedule.

Rural subrecipients work with the RTAP program on technical assistance issues. Giron assisted a transit agency that needed to advertise their job openings to minorities by referring them to the DOTD Compliance Division. This resulted in improvement in the transit agency's hiring practices, including more people of minority backgrounds being hired for managerial positions. He also works closely with regional managers to coordinate equity and inclusion initiatives.

Giron is very excited about planning a series of three statewide training programs on the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), Equal Opportunity Employment (EEO), and diversity in the upcoming year. The initial trainings will take place virtually, with PowerPoints, presenters, talking points, and print and online materials, but he is already thinking ahead of potential future in-person training sessions. Giron advises other programs interested in training on issues in diversity, equity and inclusion to "give it a try. Then adapt based on customer feedback. Then implement customer-friendly training. Then train, train, and retrain."

Washington RTAP

Washington RTAP is starting on its equity journey by having conversations. The Washington State Department of Transportation Public Transportation Division (WSDOT PTD) convened a Diversity, Equity and Inclusion Steering Committee to facilitate ongoing information, training and communication across the division, including WA RTAP. The committee discusses inclusion in public transportation and provides robust internal staff education around a myriad of issues. As they are still at the beginning of their efforts, they are painting super-broad strokes to develop the big picture. The committee acknowledges that saying that there has been a problem is an important first step, but there is much more work that needs to be done in this important area.

Some Diversity, Equity and Inclusion trainings are required for all WSDOT staff; however, the program goes well beyond requirements. State RTAP Manager Marianna Hanefeld is a part of the Community Liaison team that uses their bi-weekly staff meeting to focus on an equity issue at least once a month for 30 minutes. Each team member presents an article or book chapter, or has everyone view a video, culminating in a roundtable discussion about how it applies to the work they are doing.

WSDOT-PTD also has a book club where members read non-fiction books about equity. Hanefeld recommends one of the award-winning books *Indians in Unexpected Places* by Philip J. Deloria. “This book really talks about innovations that have come through indigenous people and how that has impacted our society,” said Hanefeld.

Some of the best practices that have arisen from these combined training sessions and discussions include:

- Hiring racially diverse staff
- Engaging with diverse internal and external stakeholders
- Measuring and tracking equity
- Instilling equity into long-range planning efforts
- Shining the equity lens into their rural communities. Providers in rural areas are trying to reach out to underrepresented populations and State RTAP and DOT Managers are poised to assist them.

Washington RTAP’s quarterly newsletter is the perfect platform to frame a conversation of inclusion, so look out for articles in future issues of the Washington RTAP newsletter filled with valuable resources, such as those from National RTAP.

“It’s all about bringing resources to the table. These are all steps in the right direction,” stated Hanefeld. “We have a group of people who are committed to educating themselves and identifying the core work of equity and inclusion that will make an impact in our communities.”

Tips and Guidance

Here are some tips for getting started or improving diversity, equity and inclusion.

Tips for inclusive workplaces:

- Transit leadership must embrace the concept of diversity, equity and inclusion, and instill these values throughout all facets of the service, including the agency’s vision, mission, and strategic plan.

- Diversity training should be provided to all staff upon hire and regularly throughout their careers.
- Attract a diverse pool of candidates for staff and board member openings. Advertise in news media that serves different ethnicities.
- Reach out to schools (even elementary schools) to spark an early interest in a career in transportation for underrepresented groups.
- Value the diversity of the workforce and leverage individuals' unique talents and differences.
- Provide opportunities for staff from many backgrounds to work and socialize together.
- Establish minority career opportunities, such as scholarships, internships, and awards.
- Develop clear succession plans for managerial positions to limit bias in promotional decision-making and give all staff the opportunity for advancement.
- Sometimes changes come in unexpected ways. Tamika L. Butler, a national expert on transportation equity, presented at HIRTA's Beyond the Bus: Inclusion Matters plenary session. One initiative that impressed her was an agency that changed their procurement model to make it easier for Disadvantaged Business Enterprise proposers to obtain contracts.

Tips for serving the public:

- Begin formal and informal conversations about equity, diversity and inclusion. Obtain input from the public through surveys, meetings, and walk-arounds.
- Reach out to the places that help people of diverse backgrounds, including social service agencies, faith-based organizations, senior centers, etc.
- When planning public meetings, take into account rider needs. Meetings can be streamed virtually in addition to being held in easy-to-access locations, such as schools or senior centers, especially if public transportation is provided. Provide translation services and sign-language interpreters.
- When writing for the public, use plain language. Use the easiest possible (for example, driver instead of operator), short sentences, bulleted lists, and include images whenever possible.
- Collaborate with local and regional businesses and organizations serving diverse communities to help develop transportation solutions for their customers.
- Prioritize bus stops and routes based on equity needs and vulnerable populations. Consider the area workplaces, healthcare providers, and stores that residents need to travel to.
- Use sensitive, person-first language in all public information. For example, use “persons with disabilities” rather than “the disabled.”
- Be aware that different cultures may have different norms. For example, in some cultures, individuals may not want to be touched. Drivers should be trained on how to deliver culturally sensitive and safe customer service.
- Plan for the affordability of transit for lower-income riders, such as discounts or vouchers.
- Mobility managers and travel trainers can reach out to underserved groups to find out their needs and plan services and travel training in ways that help riders feel confident and comfortable riding public transit.

- Transportation facilities and vehicles should reflect universal design to accommodate people with disabilities and other special needs. (Littman, 2020).
- Tamika L. Butler gave another example during HIRTA's Beyond the Bus: Inclusion Matters plenary session about how a transit agency enacted positive change. A heavily-used bus stop in a low-income area did not have a covered shelter. Many of the riders waited under a tree across the street for protection from the sun and heat. When the bus came, the riders often ran across the street to catch it, which was far from safe. The agency realized that this was an unfair situation, built a covered shelter for the bus stop, resulting in a more inclusive, and much safer, rider experience.

Definitions:

- Bias: non-objective personal judgement for or against a person, group, object, or idea, often based on prejudice.
- Civil Rights: the rights of citizens to political and social freedom and equality (Oxford English Dictionary)
- Diversity: includes an infinite range of individuals' unique characteristics (physical characteristics, age, language, experiences, and many other factors) (Simpson, 2003)
- Environmental Justice: efforts that avoid, lessen, or improve harmful health, environmental, social, or economic effects on minority or low-income populations
- Equal Opportunity: statutes and regulations that prohibit employment discrimination and provide employees and job applicants protections and remedies against employment discrimination
- Equity: the fairness with which impacts (such as benefits and costs) are distributed. (Littman, 2020)
- Inclusion: creating an environment where all people feel welcomed, valued, and respected
- Plain Language: simple communication someone can understand the first time they read or hear it
- Social Justice: efforts to provide everyone in a society with equal rights, opportunities, and treatment

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