



*Transportation Diversity, Equity
and Inclusion (DEI) Initiative*

**LISTENING TO RIDERS AND PROVIDERS:
A Synthesis Report on NADTC's
Focus Groups and Stakeholder
Meetings**

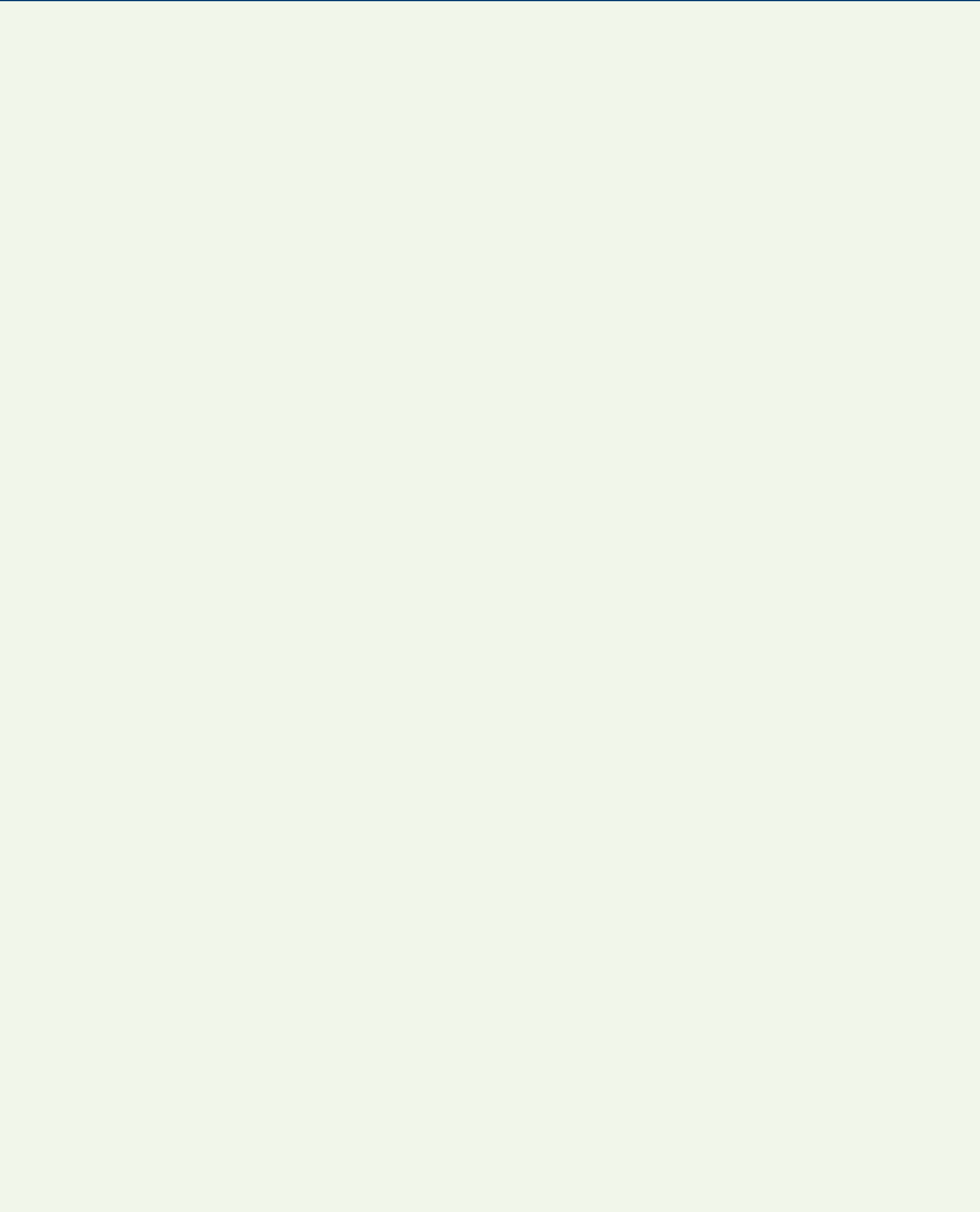
The mission of the National Aging and Disability Transportation Center (NADTC), a partnership of Easterseals, USAging and the Department of Transportation's Federal Transportation Administration, with guidance from the Administration for Community Living, is to increase the accessibility of transportation services for older adults, people with disabilities and caregivers in communities across the country.



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Synthesis Report

In the spring of 2022, NADTC convened a series of focus groups and stakeholder meetings to further explore transportation issues that emerged from our 2021 National Survey of Diverse Older Adults, Younger Adults with Disabilities and Caregivers. This report summarizes the findings from these events, offers NADTC's perspectives on what we heard and identifies next steps in our Transportation Diversity, Equity and Inclusion Action Agenda to guide our work in the coming year.

Introduction

The mission of the National Aging and Disability Transportation Center (NADTC), to promote the availability of accessible transportation for older adults, people with disabilities and caregivers, has made us keenly aware of the many transportation barriers facing these populations in communities throughout the U.S. Adding a focus on historically marginalized and underserved communities with the launch of our Transportation Diversity, Equity and Inclusion Initiative (DEI) in 2020, NADTC is working to both shine a light and increase our understanding of how transportation availability, affordability and accessibility impact the lives of diverse older adults, younger adults with disabilities and their caregivers. Until recently, only limited attention has been given to transportation DEI; however, the U.S. Department of Transportation's Equity Action Plan serves as a new call to action to "expand access and opportunity to all communities" with a focus on "underserved, overburdened and disadvantaged communities."¹

Guided by a National Advisory Committee on Transportation DEI, NADTC partnered with V&L Research and Consulting, Inc. to conduct a nationwide survey of older adults, younger adults with disabilities and caregivers in 2021. A total of 2,435 diverse individuals responded, including African Americans, Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders, Hispanics, Native Americans, multi-racial individuals, immigrants, and people who identify as LGBTQ+ from all 50 states and the District of Columbia. (The full report and additional information on our Transportation DEI Initiative may be accessed on the [NADTC website](#)).

In many ways, the survey results were not surprising and mirrored the findings of our 2018 National Poll: [Transportation Needs and Assessment](#). Nevertheless, the 2021 survey provided several important insights that require further exploration to better understand the transportation experiences of diverse older adults, younger adults with disabilities and caregivers, including:

- Both diverse older adults and younger adults with disabilities need transportation to get to the same critical destinations: medical/dental appointments, the supermarket/store, the pharmacy and to visit with family/friends.
- Most diverse caregivers are relatives or friends of the care recipient, and most provide transportation for their loved ones due to the difficulty of finding alternative means of transportation.
- The most common ways diverse older adults and younger adults with disabilities get around are riding with family and friends, walking, taking public transportation and riding a bike/electric bike.

¹ U.S. Department of Transportation, *Equity Action Plan* (January 2022), p.2.

- Diverse older adults and younger adults with disabilities face numerous transportation barriers, including the lack of family or friends to drive them, insufficient public transit and concerns about COVID-19.
 - Younger adults with disabilities also identify wait times as a barrier.
 - Older adults add concerns about a lack of community transportation options.
- Both diverse older adults and younger adults with disabilities say the impact of not having transportation is that they cannot get to the places they need to go, and they feel isolated, dependent on others and frustrated.
- The most prominent transportation changes diverse younger adults with disabilities and older adults want to see are more free or less expensive transportation options and better public transportation.

NADTC published the survey report on September 1, 2021, and simultaneously convened a virtual national meeting to share the findings. Based on discussion at that meeting, a second national meeting was held virtually on November 1, 2021 to explore urban and rural differences in the survey responses and transportation costs. Transportation stakeholders comprised the primary audience at both meetings.

To delve deeper into the issues raised by the survey, NADTC embarked on an environmental scan consisting of focus groups with diverse older adults, younger adults with disabilities and caregivers and meetings with transportation stakeholders.

NADTC intended to utilize the **focus groups** to gather the lived experiences of transportation users in different parts of the country and to explore perceptions of how these experiences might be impacted by race, ethnicity, culture, sexual orientation or other personal characteristics. NADTC partnered with five community organizations to convene virtual community focus groups with diverse older adults, younger adults with disabilities, and caregivers in Soldotna, AK; Augusta, GA; Wichita, KS; Sidney, OH; and Seattle, WA. Each site host was asked to recruit diverse participants for three separate focus groups—one each with older adults, younger adults with disabilities and caregivers. Each focus group was limited to 6-8 participants. An experienced facilitator led all 15 focus groups.

The **stakeholder meetings** provided an opportunity to identify the work transportation programs are doing to address DEI, to learn about the challenges faced in efforts to better serve marginalized and underserved communities and to hear perspectives on specific issues identified in the survey. NADTC convened two national stakeholder virtual meetings targeted to organizations involved in transportation at the state or local levels. The first meeting focused primarily on urban and suburban transportation, while the second focused on rural, tribal and frontier transportation. To maximize opportunities for exchange among participants, registration for each stakeholder meeting was limited to 100 attendees, all of whom were invited to join one of three small discussion groups.

Focus Groups

In preparation for the focus groups, NADTC held three virtual pilot groups in December 2021 in Seattle, WA planned in partnership with a local consultant, Kiana Parker. Ms. Parker possesses extensive knowledge of transportation, serves as co-lead of a Seattle DOT transportation initiative and is a younger person with a disability who uses public transportation. While Ms. Parker assumed the lead role in the pilot, Kristi McLaughlin, a consultant with Easterseals Transportation Group, facilitated three separate focus group discussions, one each with older adults, younger adults with disabilities and caregivers.

Lessons learned from the pilots provided crucial information on ways to adjust the approach and develop background materials to ensure a more structured process with clear instructions for site hosts. The pilot underscored the value of providing a stipend to all focus group participants in recognition of their willingness to share knowledge and experiences and contribute time to the NADTC project. Also learned was the

importance of providing funds upfront to the site host so the participants could be promptly paid their stipend following the focus group.

The five communities chosen as focus group site hosts were selected from among participants in NADTC's 2021 national virtual meetings who indicated a willingness to partner with the Center on DEI-related activities, recommendations from DEI Advisory Committee members and others identified by staff as having an interest in transportation equity. Site hosts and the areas from which focus group participants were recruited included:

- Frontier Community Services, Soldotna, AK (Kenai Peninsula)
- Central Plains Area Agency on Aging, Wichita, KS (Sedgwick County)
- Catholic Social Services of the Miami Valley, Sidney, OH (Shelby County)
- Statewide Independent Living Council of Georgia/Walton Options Resources for Independent Living, Augusta, GA (Greater Augusta Area)
- Hopelink, King County/Seattle, WA (King and Snohomish Counties)

Each site host received a stipend of \$7,000 for their work organizing the focus groups and each focus group participant received a stipend of \$100. The site hosts recruited 6-8 participants for each of the three focus groups, collected demographic questionnaires from participants and worked with the focus group facilitator to schedule the focus group. Site hosts compiled information about local transportation options so that any misunderstandings and lack of knowledge about the services available could be remedied following the focus group discussion. Site hosts shared the focus group questions and a brief written explanation of the reasons NADTC conducted the focus groups with all participants prior to the event in order to give participants an opportunity to think about the questions beforehand. Site hosts also developed a summary of the major issues that emerged from each focus group held in their community.

NADTC developed a brief overview of the purpose of the focus groups and the Transportation DEI Initiative for site hosts to use in recruitment efforts and as an introduction to the focus group discussion. Minor changes to the original questions used in the pilot focus groups ensured that the words used were clear, simple and easy to understand by all participants, especially by those for whom English is a second language. In particular, changes to the wording of Question 4, which asks about any experiences of being treated differently, were made to keep the wording of this question as neutral as possible with the hope to obtain responses that reflected real life experiences of perceived mistreatment.

Focus Group Questions

1. Where do you need and want to go?

- a. What transportation options are available to get you to the places you need and want to go?
- b. Are the options available to you sufficient to meet your needs?
- c. Are there any places you would like to go, but can't get to because of a lack of transportation?

2. How easily do you feel you are able to get around in your community? What makes getting around difficult?

3. How does the cost of transportation impact you and your ability to get where you need to go?

- a. Do you receive any assistance with transportation costs?
- b. Are you enrolled in any cost-saving programs like reduced fare transit passes?

4. Have you ever been in a situation where you felt you have been treated differently while using transportation?

- a. Do you feel this was because of your race or ethnicity? Because of your disability? Because of your age? Because of your sexual orientation?

5. What transportation changes, specific improvements or services would you like to see in your community?

6. Is there anything else you would like to share about your experiences using transportation in your community?

Summary of Findings from the Focus Groups

NADTC convened the focus groups via Zoom for four of the sites; Hopelink served as convenor on Zoom for their local focus groups. All were closed captioned and sign-language interpretation was provided as needed.

The expectation was that focus group participants would join on personal devices. However, given concerns about leaving out riders without internet access as well as those who felt uncomfortable using Zoom, some of the sites brought participants together in a central location. While this hybrid format presented some communication challenges, these local efforts to bring to the discussion those who would otherwise have been excluded were appreciated.

Kiana Parker (Parker Consulting Solutions), who helped organize the Seattle pilot, served as facilitator for all 15 of the focus group discussions. With sensitivity and intentionality, she introduced each focus group and before starting the discussion, made sure that all participants, especially those in the hybrid sessions, understood how to use the technology or signal that they had something to say. She made every effort to create a welcoming environment in which all participants felt comfortable contributing to the discussion.

Older Adults

Older adults said they want to be able to choose where and when they want to go. They need to go to medical and dental appointments, grocery stores and shopping centers and want to be able to attend social events or worship services. They expressed the desire to have transportation available in the evenings and on weekends. Older adults rely heavily on family and friends to get where they need to go. Some older adults reported they have their own vehicles but are hesitant to drive long distances or after dark. Depending on the options available to them and what they can afford, focus group participants said they use a variety of transportation services including public transit, paratransit and human service transportation. Older adults noted the need for greater availability of ADA-compliant, specialized, and demand-response transportation services. Overall, as one Georgia participant said: “I want to go everywhere...I don’t want to be limited....”

Access. Older adults expressed frustration with the lack of readily available transportation that does not require scheduling “a long time” in advance, including Medicaid NEMT (non-emergency medical transportation) rides. Recurring rides for dialysis or other essential medical appointments sometimes leave few openings for other rides. However, a participant in Georgia who gets dialysis three times per week pointed out that the bus in his zone “won’t

serve his street” and asked, “Why can’t they come when [I] live so close?” Older riders said they feel restricted by limited transportation hours, type of service available and service area boundaries that prohibit them from boarding transportation in their area or traveling to desired locations. As a Georgia rider said, “Augusta is right across the bridge, maybe five minutes, but for people like us, it could be 1,000 miles away.” Restricted times when transportation is available may, as one Ohio participant put it, make it “hard to get to and from an afternoon doctor appointment if you have to be done and back home by 4:00 p.m.” Older adults frequently said they would like extended hours for transportation so that they can attend activities with family and friends during the evenings or on weekends and particularly mentioned a desire to participate in worship services.

Older adults mentioned additional access issues, including difficulty walking to bus stops due to poor or no sidewalks, lack of bus shelters and unsafe bus stops, long wait times and a lack of courtesy “to call you and tell you the bus will be late.” One Kansas rider said, “You don’t want to buy ice cream if you have to wait too long.” Finally, older adults pointed out that taxis, TNCs (transportation network companies) and volunteer transportation programs are generally not prepared to accommodate individuals with mobility devices.

“Augusta is right across the bridge, maybe five minutes, but for people like us, it could be 1,000 miles away.”

– Older adult, Georgia

Cost. Fares or ride costs were mentioned as deterrents to accessing transportation. An older adult from Ohio noted: “Most people are on fixed incomes. It is hard to figure out how much you have to spend on transportation after you pay for your necessities.” Examples were given of some programs that offer reduced fares, but participants noted that the help is limited. Older adults said they frequently determine if, when and how often they ride by how the expense impacts their personal budgets. As one Alaska participant put it: The “cost to get out and socialize means less money to eat.”

“Most people are on fixed income. It is hard to figure out how much you have to spend on transportation after you pay for your necessities.”

– Older adult, Ohio

Treatment. Older adults in the Ohio focus group said they do not feel mistreated because of their race, ethnicity, disability or sexual orientation. A Georgia rider said she is not mistreated because of her race “but because of my service animal.” Another said, “We are not discriminated against because of our race but because of our disability.” Some older adults stated they experience positive treatment from drivers who are very helpful; however, one older adult noted that the drivers will help you get off the bus but “when you get home, they won’t help take your grocery bags off the bus.” An older adult from Washington said, “...they take off before you have a chance to sit down” and said she feels she is holding someone up. She further pointed out that it “doesn’t feel like they are thinking about older people when they make you get off the exit at the back of the bus - there is a big step down.” Others expressed frustration when drivers would not assist them as well as difficulty with ride services that expect them to be ready early, drop them off early, or wait too long to pick them up. Many older adults said they feel rushed. One older adult from Alaska said cab drivers don’t treat them well because of their scooters and that cabs are not equipped to serve anyone who has a disability. Non-native English speakers pointed out that language or culture was a barrier. One Washington participant expressed she has difficulty using transportation due to race but chose not to elaborate. Another indicated that equity is an issue because her transportation provider, who helps with school transportation during a bus driver shortage, is prioritizing rides for students rather than rides for older adults.

Recommendations. As a group, older adults said they feel they need far more accessibility to transportation. The options available are inadequate and often too costly. They would like expanded hours and weekend service. Holiday travel assistance and options to travel out of the county or to a neighboring state were also mentioned. A Kansas rider said when he cannot get the schedule he needs, it feels like his independence is being taken away.

Younger Adults with Disabilities

Younger adults with disabilities frequently expressed desire and determination to independently use transportation services, whether public, fixed route, paratransit or specialized, demand-response services. Like older adults, they said they need and want transportation services to take them to healthcare appointments, grocery stores and shopping centers, and social events, but they also proposed destinations like the library, parks, local fairs, and even the zoo.

Access. Younger adults with disabilities in one group said they may have to choose where they live according to available transportation options. Deteriorating sidewalks, lack of sidewalks, and inadequate shelter and safety at bus stops create major mobility issues and hinder their ability to independently access transportation. For example, younger adults with disabilities indicated people who use wheelchairs sometimes must wheel in the street, which feels unsafe. A rider in Alaska who has a brain injury

“We lose homeless in the snowbanks. They fall and are never seen.”

– Younger adult with a disability, Alaska

acknowledged she is afraid of falling and doesn't like to walk, especially on ice and snow. In fact, winter conditions in northern locales present added difficulty if sidewalks are not cleared of snow and other obstacles. As an Alaska participant said, "We lose homeless in the snowbanks. They fall and are never seen."

Limited transportation options impact where and when younger adults with disabilities can work. Younger adults with disabilities said if transit will not take them where they need to go, they may have to forgo accepting a job. If the job hours require them to work outside scheduled transportation services, again, they may be forced to decline or resign from a qualifying job. One Georgia rider said, "I work on weekends, and I have to hitchhike, and I am blind. It is so stressful. I live on hope and a prayer." Services that are limited by geographic boundaries and hours and days of operation also limit opportunities for social activities, visits with family and friends and worship. Some programs offer specialized transportation for older adults but not for younger adults with disabilities. Overall, access issues greatly impact younger adults with disabilities and make them feel they are treated differently. One Ohio rider commented that she wants to be able to party with her friends past midnight, but she has difficulty arranging transportation. She said, "If ... the last public transportation is over at 12, I'm going to miss two hours I had left to party. I would rather see a shared ride accessible with a lift. I want a full inclusion life."

Younger adults with disabilities explained that, depending on health conditions, it can be difficult to wait 30 minutes or more for a return trip from the doctor. Some programs penalize riders if they or their appointments run late and may even deny future service. One Kansas rider said he takes county transit to the doctor and grocery shopping, but otherwise he is not able to leave his home; he would get out more if he had the choice. Younger adults with disabilities also conveyed that service animals can be a challenge: Uber and Lyft services alert riders as they approach, and riders with service animals can tell when drivers fail to stop for them and drive on. When they board with service animals, they do not always feel comfortable or welcome. "I have been cussed out because of my service dog," said a Georgia rider.

Cost. The cost of transportation hits this population hard, particularly if they need to use it daily for employment. One Alaska participant expressed that she pays \$40 per day for transportation, but she only earns \$50 to \$100 per day. An Ohio participant said, "I work from home now and save money on paratransit; before COVID it felt like I was working to pay for transportation." Younger adults with disabilities indicated they need reliable transportation that provides door-to-door service, but this service can adversely impact their monthly budgets. Reduced fare programs were mentioned rarely by younger adults with disabilities. Some riders qualify for non-emergency medical transportation (NEMT), a Medicaid benefit, but taxis that offer NEMT as a supplemental service, as mentioned by one rider, have an incentive to accept full-fare rides with tips over an NEMT ride.

Treatment. While Ohio younger adults with disabilities consistently praised their drivers, some riders with disabilities said they feel open hostility from drivers simply because they are different, whether because of their disability, race, ethnicity, immigrant status, gender or sexual identity. One participant stated she felt judged for being young and female, another for being gay. One rider said, "People treat you and look at you differently. Very frustrating." One younger adult with disabilities from Seattle told of an incident when a driver called dispatch and said, "I have an 'ADA' who wants to get on the bus, and I don't have room." The rider added, "No courtesy to even ask my name. I don't think that it is appropriate to refer to someone as their label." Another Seattle rider has been mocked because he is unable to speak.

"I work on weekends, and I have to hitchhike, and I am blind. It is so stressful. I live on a hope and a prayer."

– Younger adult with a disability, Georgia

"If...the last public transportation is over at 12, I'm going to miss two hours I had left to party. I would rather see a shared ride accessible with a lift. I want a full inclusion life."

– Young adult with a disability, Ohio

Younger adults with disabilities reported that they feel they are treated poorly by drivers primarily because of their disability. They cited examples of drivers who dislike handling tiedowns for wheelchairs, remain silent instead of verbally reminding a blind rider that their stop is approaching or refuse to exit the bus or vehicle to provide needed assistance. Participants who use public, fixed route transit reported being frustrated that drivers will not deviate, at times leaving them to traverse unsafe roads and intersections.

Recommendations. As a group, younger adults with disabilities would like to have regular fixed routes. Focus group participants in Alaska suggested a specific route for a circulator bus that could stop at all major preferred destinations, including shopping. Overall, they articulated a need for greater accessibility, better sidewalks, helpful technology (e.g., audible signals in crosswalks) and accessible vehicles.

Caregivers

Caregivers are often the only option or a critical link to transportation for older adults and younger adults with disabilities. As an Ohio caregiver said, “I am the transportation to grocery and doctors’ appointments for my aunt and brother. It is an issue with gas prices. I don’t get a break; I change my schedule to meet theirs.” As reported by many of the caregivers in the focus groups, without the rides they provide, the people for whom they care would not be able to leave their homes. Caregivers commented that they recognize that getting to essential destinations such as medical appointments is the priority, but they are aware of other places, like the park, the movies or other social activities where the people for whom they care also want to go. Caregivers may be unpaid or paid family members or work for organizations that provide support services. Their responses to questions in the focus groups closely mirrored comments from older adults and younger adults with disabilities regarding where the people they care for need and want to go, access issues and cost.

Access. Caregivers said they frequently juggle responsibilities to help those they care for get to the places they need to go and provide assistance with navigating public, paratransit and specialized transportation. They recognized that often they and the people for whom they care are not fully aware of all available transportation options. “There was an event last week,” said a Georgia caregiver, “and only one [person from the group home where she works] could go because there was no transportation.” Caregiving can be particularly challenging if the caregiver also has a disability. A participant in Georgia, who is blind and a caregiver for three children, said she does not qualify for paratransit because she lives outside the service area. A caregiver from Washington pointed out the access issues involved in transporting someone with disabilities: sometimes the vehicles are too small and “drivers don’t know how to fold wheelchairs or walkers.” Some caregivers drive but expressed concerns about road rage, other safety issues, and complications initiated by COVID-19 that have made it even more challenging to go out.

Cost. Caregivers said some transportation services require caregivers to accompany older adults, and they typically are not charged for ride-along services. More often, caregivers indicated they are providing transportation and covering the cost out of their own pockets. Because of service boundaries that limit where public transportation will go, some caregivers said they must handle travel outside the jurisdiction if that is where the person needing care must go for medical care or shopping. For example, one Georgia caregiver reported she transports the person she cares for on a long trip to Atlanta every five months. A paid caregiver in Seattle mentioned that she is limited to being reimbursed for just 100 miles per month, but sometimes needs to transport the person she cares for much farther for a doctor’s visit. “Sometimes you just do it,” she said. An Alaska caregiver expressed, “Essentially, if it were not for the heart of the caregivers, taking money out of their own pockets, these individuals would be institutionalized—no questions asked—or they would be dead.”

“Sometimes you just do it.”

— Caregiver, Washington, responding to paying for transportation out of her own pocket

Treatment. Caregivers discussed their own experiences as well as the experiences of those for whom they care. One said her mother fears anti-Asian violence. Another caregiver, who is white, said he was asked why he was helping a black man. A caregiver who is a naturalized citizen frequently accompanies the people in his care on the bus, but commented that other riders react in negative ways to him. “People think you smell. They hold their nose and move away,” he said.

The Stakeholder Meetings

Like the focus groups, the stakeholder meetings were planned to address issues that emerged from NADTC’s DEI survey. NADTC’s previous national meetings, held in 2021, were opportunities to gather initial reactions to the survey findings and explore top of mind issues that stakeholders said they wanted to know more about, specifically rural/urban differences and transportation costs. While including time for discussion, these meetings with stakeholders were designed primarily as forums for NADTC to share survey findings.

In planning the stakeholder meetings, NADTC placed greater emphasis on providing stakeholders an opportunity to talk with each other. Much of the meeting included small group discussion organized as breakouts on the Zoom platform. Considering the well-known differences in transportation resources typically found in urban versus rural areas, the stakeholder meetings occurred as separate events, one for stakeholders in urban/suburban areas, the other for stakeholders in rural/frontier/tribal areas.

NADTC utilized email to announce the stakeholder meetings, set for June 21 and 23 and encouraged public transit and human services transportation providers and other stakeholders, including aging, disability and diversity professionals and advocates to attend. Registration was limited to 100 participants in each meeting. Limiting attendance supported NADTC’s plan to organize three breakout discussions of no more than 34 participants in both stakeholder meetings.

The stakeholder meetings offered an opportunity to learn more about on-the-ground efforts to address transportation equity and explore three specific survey findings, namely:

- Transportation cost issues in relation to providing rides to underserved and marginalized communities;
- Walking and bicycles/e-bikes as primary modes of transportation used by diverse older adults and caregivers;
- Caregivers’ involvement in providing transportation and supporting those for whom they care to use transportation services.

NADTC asked registrants to identify their first and second topic choice and organized the groups to accommodate one of those choices for all participants in both meetings. NADTC also requested registrants to complete a brief survey about their involvement in DEI and work in three topic areas.

Most participants indicated in the survey that they have been involved to varying degrees with DEI efforts, notably with outreach and communication, surveys and collecting demographic data. Almost all indicated the presence of access barriers for both walking and cycling in their areas, including in neighborhoods traditionally populated by individuals who have been historically marginalized or underserved.

Summary of Findings from the Stakeholder Meetings

Urban/Suburban

Urban and suburban stakeholders who provide transportation services said they sometimes partner with Uber, Lyft, taxis, and less often, volunteer transportation programs to meet the needs of older adults, younger adults with disabilities and caregivers. Such partnerships make it possible to offer services beyond regular hours of operation or in areas beyond the usual service areas, including areas that are more difficult to reach.

When asked how they address transportation DEI, stakeholders indicated they conduct listening sessions and travel training both in-person and online. A participant from Austin, TX mentioned that local officials work directly with younger adults with disabilities to address access to public transportation. Other participants said they share information about their services with social service and community-based groups that serve diverse populations. They noted that language can be a barrier when working with some groups. As stated by an Ohio stakeholder, “We are transportation social workers. We work to find solutions.”

One participant suggested that NADTC provide assistance on DEI issues, pointing out the difference between outreach to underserved populations and actual engagement with these groups on local transportation issues. Another suggested that travel training might better serve diverse populations by including training on using apps and other technologies and how to use TNCs and taxis. A third participant said, “We need to dive into what is truly diversity, equity and inclusion, not just scratching the surface.” It was also suggested that NADTC choose an annual timeframe for a national marketing campaign using its Every Ride Counts promotional materials.

Cost. Transportation providers said they generally offer reduced fare programs for older adults and individuals with disabilities, and typically do not charge caregivers who accompany the person for whom they provide care. Two stakeholders shared they offer services free of charge to older adults and younger adults with disabilities although they request donations. Nonprofit providers reported they seek grant funding to cover the cost of bus tickets, gas cards, and other types of transportation for their clients. An Area Agency on Aging representative from Colorado mentioned FTA restrictions on spending for certain expenses such as marketing and promotion and underscored the need for flexibility in transportation programs as well as a desire for additional guidance on diversity, equity, and inclusion. Another participant, noting that infrastructure can present barriers to equity, mentioned a Hispanic community in the area that is difficult to reach because of its location on “the other side of the freeway.” Overall, transportation providers indicated they struggle with rising fuel costs, the increasing cost of labor and a lack of replacement vehicles to keep fleets in good working order.

**“We are transportation social workers.
We work to find solutions.”**

– Urban stakeholder, Ohio

Bikes and Pedestrians. Participants in the bike and pedestrian breakout acknowledged that major roads sometimes lack sidewalks and bike lanes. A Missouri participant said his state has implemented a series of listening sessions to address barriers to healthy communities, including walkability, because there is fear of biking, walking and rolling, particularly in areas where cars drive at high speeds. Another stakeholder mentioned that her organization, located in an area that lacks public transit with demand-response options, is working to promote biking and walking. One transportation provider suggested that NADTC might consider promoting access to public transportation via biking or walking.

Caregivers. Several transportation providers mentioned that their travel training programs include family members and pointed out that caregivers may serve as a conduit to someone who needs to learn and use

transportation. One transportation provider relayed that family caregivers often have jobs but not enough money to pay for the transportation options that are available. Another stakeholder has recruited volunteer chaperones to help with riders who need extra support when they use transportation. Providers indicated that they do not charge caregivers when they ride with the care receiver. One provider said his outreach includes working with the local Area Agency on Aging and attending the local farmers market where caregivers are encouraged to pick up information on transportation options and discuss discounted fares.

Rural/Tribal/Frontier

In working to address transportation DEI, a rural stakeholder mentioned the importance of community relationships, not just with individuals but also with social service agencies and community organizations. A mobility manager said that while she works closely with older adults and younger adults with disabilities, she has not yet reached out to marginalized populations, an action she is open to getting started. Another stakeholder encouraged her and other transportation providers to track demographic data so they can more clearly identify where there is a need for services. He said, “Equity comes from what you learn.”

Cost. Transportation providers frequently mentioned that they must braid different funding sources to cover costs. As fuel costs rise, ridership is increasing due to people choosing cheaper, more cost-effective transit options. Another provider added that rural transportation tries to find population centers for efficiency, but since that is not where the needs are, he said he has a hard time reconciling the two.

Bikes and Pedestrians. The 2021 NADTC survey results showed that biking and walking were among the four top modes of transportation used by rural residents. One stakeholder mentioned starting a bike share program and piloting the program in a low-income area. Another said that he believes that while diversity is sparse in his rural area, his organization could be reaching out more where diverse populations live. Ideas presented for rural community engagement included local churches, county periodicals, the farmer’s markets, libraries, and surveys, although a participant pointed out that many rural residents remain hesitant to fill out surveys.

Caregivers. Rural stakeholders said family and family caregivers are critical for transportation because there may not be another option for helping older adults and people with disabilities reach needed destinations. Stakeholders pointed out that it might sometimes be easier to locate rural, diverse older adults because they may live in senior housing communities. They also said transit providers may have some difficulty working with caregivers due to communication inconsistencies. For example, a caregiver schedules a ride for the care recipient, the transit agency arrives to provide the service, but the rider appears unaware of the ride or refuses the ride. Providers concluded that such no shows are very expensive for transit agencies that must travel long distances to provide rural rides.

“Equity comes from what you learn.”

– Rural stakeholder, New York

Lessons Learned

The focus groups and stakeholder meetings provide a snapshot in time of both the lived experiences of diverse older adults, younger adults with disabilities and caregivers and the work of transportation stakeholders to address transportation DEI in communities across the U.S. The information fills in gaps and enlarges our knowledge of transportation DEI, but more work remains to be done.

- Discussions revealed that not everyone has the same understanding of transportation DEI. While the focus groups met our expectations for including older adults, younger adults with disabilities and caregivers,

not all of the groups were fully representative of racial, ethnic, immigrant and LGBTQ+ communities. Some of the transportation providers indicated a continued struggle with recognizing the growing diversity in communities across the country. Public transportation services are meant to serve everyone, but “serving everyone” does not necessarily mean that everyone is able to access and use the services. The importance of paying special attention to the travel needs of older adults and people with disabilities is generally recognized; however, increased attention to the consideration of DEI issues remains paramount.

Although participants in both events exhibited feeling more comfortable talking about transportation barriers related to age or disability, the same did not hold true with disclosing how race, ethnicity or culture impacts transportation access. Further discussion of DEI as these terms apply to transportation is needed in order to succeed in building the broadest possible engagement in this critical work.

- Stakeholders clearly expressed a desire to know more about transportation DEI and expressed readiness to borrow ideas from others. However, most of the transportation stakeholders who participated in these meetings acknowledged that they are still at the beginning stages of working to address these issues. They seemed to find it easier to discuss details about how their programs work than ways in which they address equity and diversity in their programs.
- Overall, focus group participants identified few instances of transportation inequities related to race, ethnicity or sexual orientation. Participants appeared reluctant to disclose specific instances of disparate treatment by providers. Nevertheless, they offered a few important insights, including:
 - A non-native English speaker spoke of being unable to access transportation information in her own language.
 - One participant felt demeaned when referred to as an “ADA.”
 - A caregiver noted her mother’s fear of anti-Asian violence.
 - A naturalized citizen spoke of feeling that he is treated differently and sensing that others move away from him.
 - A participant who identifies as LGBTQ+ said she felt judged for being gay.
 - Participants in one focus group mentioned disparity in one part of town that has nice sidewalks and bus stops while another part of town does not.
 - Several focus group participants expressed frustration that adjoining counties or areas have different transportation options and transportation costs.
- The focus groups provided personal stories and important insights regarding the impact of disability on individuals’ use of transportation. Despite the ADA’s 32-year-history and the transportation industry’s efforts to accommodate people with disabilities, the conditions that impact people with disabilities and older adults when they try to travel around their communities are personal and varied and cannot be addressed in any one way. For example, younger adults with disabilities have seen their shared ride drive past them because of their mobility equipment or service animal. These personal situations impact not only on an individual’s ability to physically use transportation to get around, but also have a profound, often negative impact on people’s perceptions of how they—as people with disabilities or older adults—are viewed by others.
- From their lived experience, focus group participants were not only able to describe their struggles in using transportation, but they also offered good ideas for fixing the problems they encountered. The inclusion of riders and potential users of transportation in the development of new programs could reduce complaints, but more importantly, could enable more people to use these important services and live fuller lives.

- Other important lessons from the focus groups and stakeholder meetings are worth consideration:
 - Transportation access is not limited to accessible vehicles but includes distance from bus stops, sidewalk and bus stop conditions, ride scheduling, wait times, and any circumstance that creates barriers to being able to get a ride when it is needed.
 - When asked what transportation improvements they would like to see, many older adults and younger adults with disabilities identified simple, social connections like the ability to visit friends or attend worship services during an evening or on a weekend.
 - Younger adults with disabilities may have to forgo employment or quit a job because of lack of transportation options.
- Finally, holding focus groups virtually has both advantages and disadvantages. A major benefit is that people who would not be able or willing to travel to a central location can participate. However, those without connectivity or a level of comfort with virtual technology will be left out of such gatherings. Some participating focus group site hosts addressed this challenge head-on by organizing a hybrid focus group with participants convening in a central location and the facilitator attending virtually. Although challenges existed, our facilitator and site hosts worked hard to engage everyone in these hybrid group conversations. Perhaps the biggest disadvantage is that the level of intimacy and comfort that are easier to facilitate at an in-person meeting is difficult, if not impossible, to replicate on-line. Whether focus group participants might have shared more information about their personal experiences if they had met in-person is not known.

Next Steps

Initial indicators of this important work reveal the need to learn more about transportation DEI. The National Aging and Disability Transportation Center is building a Diversity, Equity and Inclusion Action Agenda to guide this work. In September 2022, we convened an annual meeting in Washington, DC, where this paper was presented, providing a forum for discussion with the experts and stakeholders who attended. In addition, NADTC's 2022 customer survey, which sought to identify issues that impact transportation for older adults, people with disabilities and caregivers, included questions about efforts to address DEI. A report on the survey findings is in development.

The following additional steps are planned as part of our DEI Action Agenda:

- Develop four equity briefs that address topics derived from the focus groups and stakeholder meetings.
- Identify and share promising work in transportation DEI through Lunch and Learns, Office Hours, and the National Transportation DEI Advisory Committee.
- Expand our current list of Transportation DEI Experts.
- Continue to expand our knowledge and widely disseminate reports, articles and other publications on transportation DEI.

Appendix

Focus Group Sites

SITE HOST: Catholic Social Services of the Miami Valley, Sidney, OH

Catholic Social Services of the Miami Valley (CSSMV) serves Sidney, OH, a city of more than 20,000, with mobility management services. CSSMV provides transportation services throughout Shelby County plus the counties of Champaign, Darke, Logan, Miami, and Preble Counties, all in west central OH. Through its RideLink call center, riders connect with transportation options. RideConnect provides transportation to school, work, shopping, or appointments. Shelby Public Transit provides demand-response rides in Sidney and throughout Shelby County. Ride fare is \$2.50 in the city and \$5 in the county. Older adults and younger adults with disabilities receive discounted fares of \$1 in the city and \$2.50 in the county. Dial-A-Ride, a paratransit service, and Medicaid non-emergency medical transportation (NEMT) options are available.

19 individuals participated in focus groups.

| | |
|-----|---|
| 95% | African American |
| 5% | Multi-racial |
| 79% | Female |
| 58% | Low income |
| 60% | Mobility restricted (older adults and younger adults with disabilities) |

SITE HOST: Central Plains Area Agency on Aging, Wichita, KS

Central Plains Area Agency on Aging offers a variety of programs and services and links older adults, caregivers and persons with disabilities to community resources and information. Sedgwick County Transportation operates Monday-Friday, 8:00 AM to 5:00 PM, serving older adults, people with disabilities, caregivers and the general public in rural areas. Rides are scheduled at least 24 hours in advance; the fare is \$3 one way. Transportation is generally curb to curb, but door-to-door assistance is available. Riders who need assistance must have caregivers or others help them ride. Sedgwick County has nearly 524,000 residents, making it the second-most populous county in KS. Neighboring Kingman County residents also participated in the focus group. They have access to curb-to-curb, demand-response service. Buses are accessible and rides are scheduled 24 hours in advance. A one-way trip is \$1.

18 individuals participated three focus groups.

| | |
|-----|---|
| 17% | Hispanic |
| 72% | Female |
| 67% | Low income |
| 67% | Mobility restricted (older adults and younger adults with disabilities) |

SITE HOST: Frontier Community Services, Soldotna, AK

Frontier Community Services (FCS), located on the Kenai Peninsula, is a non-profit organization that served as Site Host for the Focus Groups. FCS provides services to help people with disabilities of all ages remain in their own homes and stay connected to the community. Public transit in Soldotna is offered through CARTS (Central Area Rural Transit System), an on-demand shuttle system. There is no public, fixed-route system. Rides are charged by zone, so the cost of trips is based on distance traveled and number of zones crossed. CARTS does not operate evenings or weekends. Taxis in the area cannot accommodate scooters or wheelchairs.

28 individuals participated in three focus groups.

- 4% Native American
- 7% Multi-racial
- 79% Female
- 64% Mobility restricted

SITE HOST: Hopelink, Seattle, WA

Hopelink serves homeless and low-income families, children, seniors and people with disabilities in King and Snohomish counties. Its network of social services includes housing, transportation, financial assistance and employment services. King County is the largest and most populous county in Washington, with an estimated population of 2,326,040 residents. Roughly half of residents have specialized transportation needs. Two public transit agencies serve the county: King County Metro, which operates within and between cities, and Sound Transit, which operates the region’s light rail system and the cross-county bus routes. Fares range from \$0 to \$2.75 on Metro and \$0 to \$3.50 on Sound Transit. Riders 65 years or older and individuals with a qualifying disability pay \$1. Riders who are at or below 200 percent of the poverty level pay \$1.50. Metro Access is available for curb-to-curb, door-to-door, and hand-to-hand services. Rides are scheduled at least 24 hours in advance. Fare for Metro Access is \$1.75; personal care attendants ride free. Many nonprofit and volunteer-based transportation options to meet the needs of specialized transportation riders also are available. Many of these services are free with an optional donation.

30 individuals participated in focus groups in Seattle.

- 40% African American
- 17% Hispanic/multi-racial
- 17% Asian or Pacific Islander
- 3% Middle Eastern
- 47% Female
- 23% LGBTQ+
- 40% Low income
- 52% Mobility restricted (older adults and younger adults with disabilities)

SITE HOST: Statewide Independent Living Council of Georgia

The Statewide Independent Living Council of Georgia (SILCGA) works to improve mobility and expand consumer access to transit. SILCGA worked closely with Walton Options Resources for Independent Living in Augusta, GA, to recruit focus group participants, schedule, and host the focus groups. Walton Options provides services and resources to help people with all types of disabilities live independently in the community through a variety of federal, state and community partners. The City of Augusta is part of a larger metropolitan area that comprises seven counties. Public transportation is currently available mainly in Richmond and Columbia counties offering nine bus routes. Non-emergency medical transportation is available through Southeastrans. Paratransit systems exist within the counties, but not all are wheelchair accessible. Fares are \$1.25 each way.

29 individuals participated in focus groups.

- 86% African American
- 14% Multi-racial
- 76% Female
- 35% Low income
- 69% Mobility restricted (older adults and younger adults with disabilities)





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Who We Are

Established in 2015, the NADTC is a federally funded technical assistance center administered by Easterseals and USAging based in Washington, DC.

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USAging is the 501(c)(3) national association representing and supporting the network of Area Agencies on Aging and advocating for the Title VI Native American Aging Programs. Our members help older adults and people with disabilities throughout the United States live with optimal health, well-being, independence and dignity in their homes and communities. USAging is dedicated to supporting the success of our members through advancing public policy, sparking innovation, strengthening the capacity of our members, raising their visibility and working to drive excellence in the fields of aging and home and community-based services. www.usaging.org

Easterseals is the leading non-profit provider of services for individuals with autism, developmental disabilities, physical disabilities and other special needs. For nearly 100 years, we have been offering help, hope, and answers to children and adults living with disabilities, and to the families who love them. Through therapy, training, education and support services, Easterseals creates life-changing solutions so that people with disabilities can live, learn, work and play. www.easterseals.com