TRB Webinar: Transportation for People with Disabilities and Older Adults in COVID-19

January 30, 2024

2:00 – 3:30 PM

AICP Credit Information

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You must attend the entire webinar

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Purpose Statement

This webinar will provide actionable strategies for transportation organizations to use in emergency situations to ensure continuity of service for persons with disabilities and older adults. Presenters will discuss lessons learned from the COVID-19 pandemic and approaches to safely maintain services during a future emergency.

Learning Objectives

At the end of this webinar, you will be able to:

(1) Incorporate lessons learned on providing service for people with disabilities and older adults during emergencies

(2) Consider strategies that may address gaps in their service capabilities and more effectively respond to future hazards or pandemics

Questions and Answers

- Please type your questions into your webinar control panel

- We will read your questions out loud, and answer as many as time allows
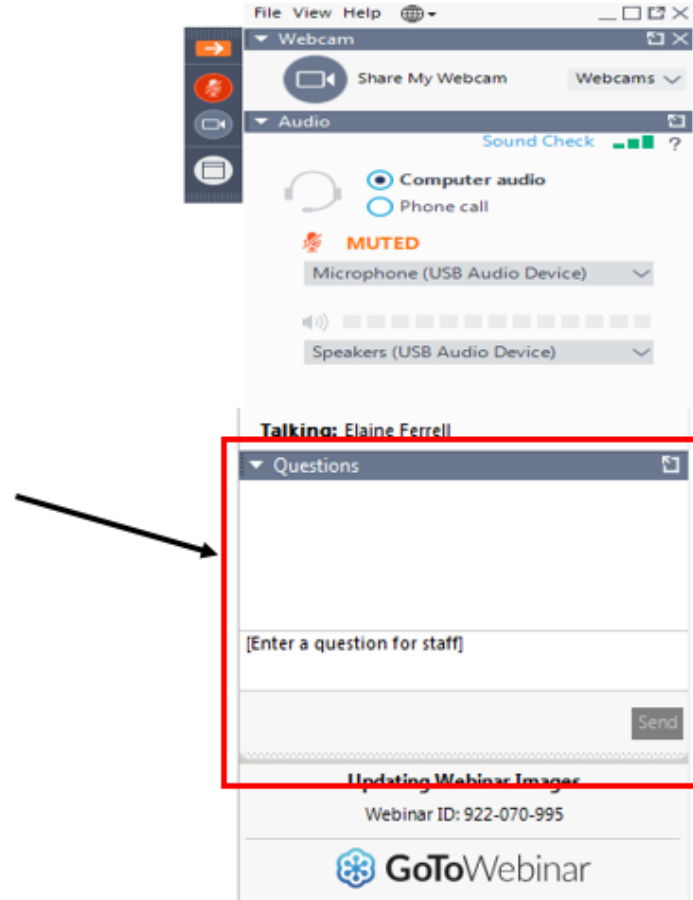
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Transportation for People with Disabilities and Older Adults in COVID-19

Todd Hansen

Patricia Bye

Zachary Elgart

Research Overview

- Available in TCRP Research Report 243 (in pre-publication)

- Transportation services need to remain available and accessible during emergency situations for all, including persons with disabilities and older adults

- Report includes actionable strategies for transportation organizations to use in emergency situations to ensure continuity of service

- Today's presentation will discuss lessons learned from the COVID-19 pandemic and approaches to safely maintain services during a future emergency

Learning Objectives

- Incorporate lessons learned on providing service for people with disabilities and older adults during emergencies

- Consider strategies that may address gaps in their service capabilities and more effectively respond to future hazards or pandemics

Agenda

- Transportation needs of persons with disabilities and older adults

- Emergency management transportation keys during COVID-19

- Actions and strategies for accessible emergency transportation

- Research conclusions

- Moderated Q&A

Transportation Needs of Persons with Disabilities and Older Adults

Todd Hansen

Service During COVID-19

- Transportation organizations faced unique circumstances of providing service safely while trying to prevent/reduce virus transmission

- These impacts can be particularly challenging for persons with disabilities and older adults needing to take trips

- As organizations respond to an emergency, accommodations and requirements needed can get lost in the shuffle while confronted with multiple challenges

- This includes service provision for all modes (not just ADA paratransit) as well as incidental uses (e.g., delivery programs)

Needs of Persons with Disabilities and Older Adults

- People may have different types of disabilities or impairments that affect their ability to access transportation

  - Including (but not limited to) impairments to mobility, vision, hearing, immune systems, cognitive capabilities, etc.

- People without reliable access to a vehicle in the household or who cannot drive may need assistance

  - E.g., Asking for a ride, Finding an available driver/vehicle, Securing their wheelchair or mobility device, Getting into and out of the vehicle

- Issues of social isolation are exacerbated when transportation service is reduced and/or businesses temporarily close

Personnel and Resources

- Broadly, important to maintain employment for organizational staff during an emergency event
  - Retaining staff through the emergency is preferrable to losing staff before service returns to more normal levels
- Finding work alternatives helps morale and maintaining organizational capacity during different phases
  - Remote work for call center and dispatch staff supporting
  - Staggered scheduling to reduce virus transmission
- Consider flexibility on rules in order to help retain staff and maintain the wellbeing
  - E.g., expanding access to sick leave, reducing red tape in employee rules, and compensating workers for time spent during quarantine periods
- From the customer perspective, riders notice when there is less service available and it is more difficult to complete their trip

Personnel Needs and Support

- Having employees doing productive work helps reduce concerns about the loss of staff

  - Meal delivery services not only helped meet a community need for access to food and goods but also helped keep drivers and maintain service overall

- Recognize that employees are likewise dealing with hardships during emergencies

  - Balancing demands between work schedules and needs at home that arise from the emergency.

- Providing assistance in helps morale and continued service delivery to customers

  - Be proactive in finding solutions that help sustain employees' family finances

  - Provide financial recognition for work hours above and beyond along risky tasks

- Engage in regular communication with the employee unions (if applicable) for transparency and trust between both parties; learn about employee needs

Safety for Personnel

- Prioritizing safety shows importance to employees

- Clear and consistent communication on measures
  - Includes changes over time

- Cleaning vehicles and facilities

- Distributing PPE equipment, protective barriers for employees

- Procedural changes in service

Technology and Tools

- During COVID-19, transportation organizations found creative ways to use their in-house tools to support existing and new services

  - Can be instrumental in adjusting to circumstances of transportation service during an emergency while meeting customer needs

- Technology used in communication is not a substitute for communication directly with the customer (in person or over the phone) or through community representatives

  - Also, physical media (e.g., mailers, posters)

- Technology could also play a role during health-related emergencies in the safety of riders and employees while maintaining service

Routing and Scheduling Tools

- Service parameters for adjustments due to reduced capacity or other changes are relatively straightforward
  - Able to execute new service schedules and seating limitations
  - Intended to maintain social distancing between riders rather than reduce available service
  - Scheduling additional runs close together can be facilitated by software
- For incidental uses, some scheduling systems were not as adept in this purpose
  - E.g., estimating the number of packages per delivery, delivering cold/frozen food items, lifting heavy packages
  - May be unable to provide notifications and updates to customers on order statuses or delivery times

Communications Tools

- Online websites were a key resource for many transportation organizations, such as FAQ pages or real-time dashboards
  - Caution: some customers may have limited access/comfort in using computers, smartphones, and/or email addresses
  - Online meetings are useful but may also limit participation
- For some, physical mailers supported by direct phone calls may be needed to reach them on key emergency information
- Application of existing phone and text messaging systems, mailing lists, email lists, and social media channels
  - E.g., Robocalls to customers, Recorded messages on reservation lines, Text message and email systems for automatically sending out information
- Health and safety information was often communicated at point of service
  - Recorded messages on annunciators, Digital signage on the vehicles, Drivers themselves informing customers

Other Technology Considerations

- Remote systems for some operations and administrative employees
  - E.g., reservationists, dispatchers, eligibility specialists

- Phone systems that accommodate call loads, using agency phone numbers
  - Calls to reservationists
  - Communication with drivers

- Clean vehicle and facility environments
  - Proper ventilation, air intake, filter systems
  - UV light cleaning, other disinfectants

Key Challenges

- In making the decisions on services to maintain, agencies prioritized core services and routes deemed necessary
    - E.g., dialysis routes, services used more by people with disabilities
    - Many agencies did not have a pre-existing prioritization in place
- Managing the fears of employees and riders about safety is a major challenge
    - Make it clear to staff and customers alike that safety is the priority through both messaging and actions is important to establish trust in the service
- Avoiding adverse impacts from safety-related policies can be difficult to anticipate

Solution to Safety Challenge

Rear-Door Boarding Begins Tuesday, March 24

ALL OTHER CUSTOMERS

ONLY customers who require ADA ramp or bus-kneeling

Fare payment waived - ESSENTIAL TRAVEL ONLY

Enforcement and Awareness

- Mask policies and other safety guidelines could provide confusion for when requirements for riders are not clear
    - E.g., whether masks were required to ride in the vehicles or strongly recommended
    - Some agencies chose strict enforcement, while others used an "inform and supply" approach to distribute masks to riders
- Can be challenging to effectively inform communities about new initiatives or changes to regular service
- Gaining public's trust can be difficult with initiatives outside of the transportation domain or potentially controversial
- Important to ensure that information being relayed is consistent, especially if multiple agencies and contractors are involved

Addressing Challenges

- Leveraging existing data and knowledge on customers can help identify the needs of persons with disabilities and older adults during the emergency.

- Partner with local organizations to learn about rider needs and develop targeted incidental use programs

- Proactively consult with in-house experts and key external stakeholders prior to implementing broad new policies in order to gather insights about potential unintended consequences

Emergency Management Transportation Keys During COVID-19

Patricia Bye

Emergency Management

"The managerial function charged with creating the framework within which communities reduce vulnerability to threats/hazards and cope with disasters."
International Association of Emergency Managers (IAEM)

- ✓ Minimizes impacts to the community
- ✓ Enhances safety of responders and others
- ✓ Reduces risk and economic cost
- ✓ Maintains awareness of events and their potential impacts
- ✓ Plans for a coordinated, multi-agency response
- ✓ Provides priorities and direction for implementation
- ✓ Learns from past events

Emergency Management

Major elements

Strategic

- Priorities and policies
- Relationships
- Measurements

Tactical

- Identifying critical tasks
- Developing approaches and procedures
- Obtaining resources

Support

- Information and data
- Communications and coordination

Emergency Management Phases

- **Mitigation & Preparedness (Pre-Disaster)**
  - Reduce the impacts of the future event
  - Reduce costs of response and recovery
- **Response**
  - Safely continue services to customers
  - Provide emergency operations
- **Recovery**
  - Return to normal service
 - Identify approaches/procedures for future events

Emergency Event Characteristics

- Distinct event or occurrence that lasts for a specific, short period of time

- Post-event response and recovery period that includes:
  - damage assessment
  - short-term response
  - longer term repair or restoration of service
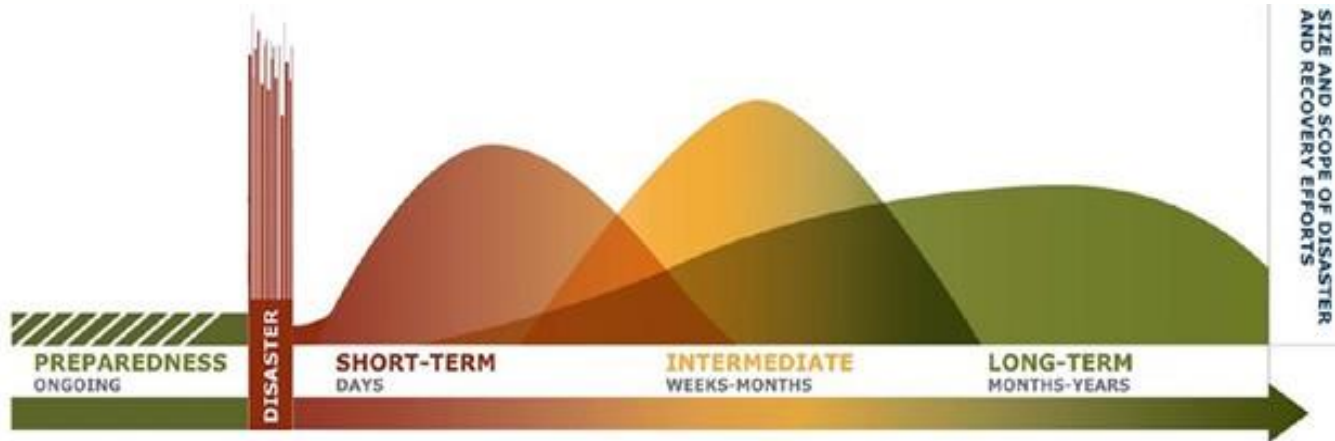
Pandemic Characteristics

- Initial onset with series of subsequent "events" or waves

- Extended and indeterminate length of event time

- May require different response and recovery strategy for each wave
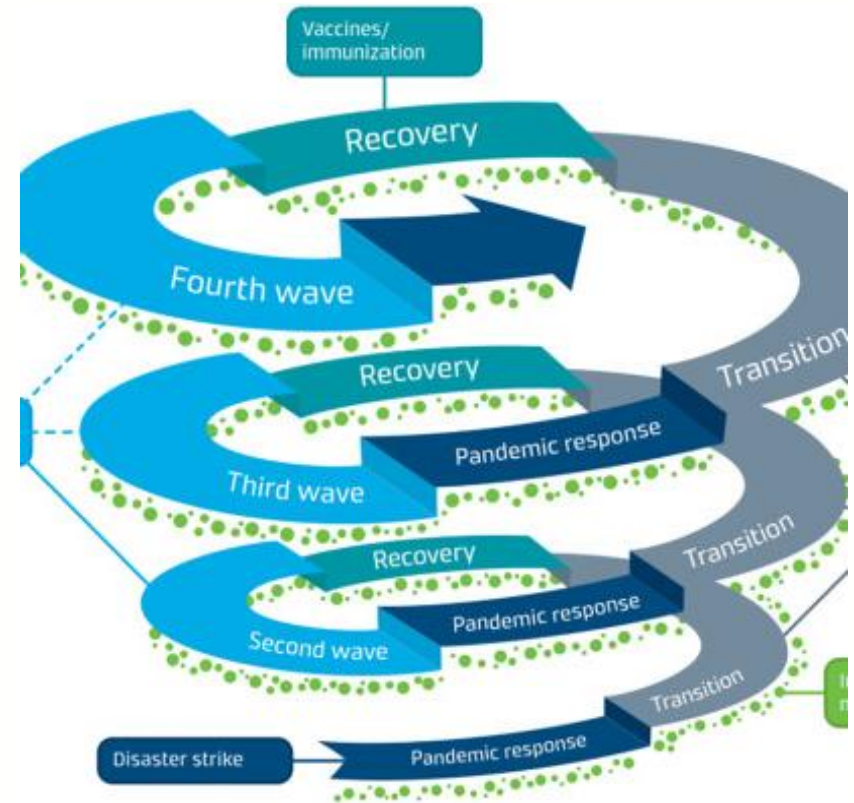
Key Questions and Decisions

Considerations

Policy and priority decisions that drive staffing and resource decisions

- Are policies and protocols in place?
- What are essential functions?
- Do changes need to be made?

Determining triggers/timing of actions to take

What are criteria for initiating actions?

- Are there different triggers for people with disability and older adults?
- Are phased approaches possible?

Addressing long-term impacts

- Are there budget issues to address?
- Are there opportunities available?

Key Questions by Phase

Decision Making

Preparedness/Mitigation

- What is severity?
- Are plans and resources in place?
- Are there protective measures available?

Response

- What are criteria for initiating actions?
- Are there challenges meeting accessibility requirements?
- What community needs are impacted?

Recovery

- What is needed to ensure confidence in the safety of the system and services?
- Are there long-term impacts or enduring changes?

Response
Coordination
Guidance
Impact

Internal Agency

- Accessibility Coordinator
- Service Planning
- Communications/Public Affairs

State/Local/Tribal/Regional/National

- Offices of Access and Functional Needs
- Department of Health and Human Services
- FEMA Accessibility

Community Organizations

- Accessibility/Disability Organizations
- Senior Centers
- Others

Planning

- Emergency response plans and continuity of operations (COOP) plans help establish what different departments and staff members during the different emergency phases

- Internal players key in coordination planning include in different areas of the organization, such as accessibility coordinators, service planners, and communications staff

- Remote systems for some staff positions are useful in some emergencies; planning can include needs for home office set-ups, data plans, network capacity, and key staff

- Agency recovery plans help determine indicators and decision criteria for re-establishing normal service

- Lessons learned should be documented in after action reports during the recovery phase

Utilize Existing Planning Processes

- Use existing plans as a starting point

- Recognize that plans for other emergencies may have relationships or processes that could be used in the current emergency

- Be prepared to make some adaptations

- Take advantage of existing processes and resources to have meetings and talk to colleagues

- Monitor ridership and the impacts of service changes to modify plans and determine options going forward

Establish Plans with Other Organizations

- Utilize pre-existing relationships to help with planning and coordinating organization

- Build on existing relationships

- Identify and participate in existing state and regional planning working groups

- Engage members of the community to encourage feedback and glean insights that might otherwise be missed

- Identify and collaborate with existing community-based groups and programs for people with disabilities and older adults

Defining Roles/Responsibilities in Agency

- Identify roles and tasks to address the emergency while allocating resources to accomplish those tasks

- Recognize that roles and responsibilities for staff members change during emergency events

- Realize that new roles may be necessary to address emergencies, especially health-related emergencies

Planning for Recovery

- Be prepared to take a phased approach to providing services and returning to normal

- Ensure that agency recovery plans contain indicators and decision criteria for each phase along with milestones to be reached

- Track the changes in ridership characteristics, including trip purposes, client demographics, the geographic distribution of trips, and reasons behind such changes as the pandemic progresses

- Recognize the key considerations for service recovery
  - Developing guidelines for future emergency events, examining alternative delivery methods, planning scenarios during the recovery period, and establishing partnerships with other transportation providers to increase resilience were found to be critical

Actions and Strategies for Accessible Emergency Transportation

Zachary Elgart

Continuity of Services

New and Temporary Services

Safety Procedures for Riders

Equity of Service Changes

Relationships and Partnerships

Communications and Engagement

Financial Sustainability

Continuity of Services

- Emergency situations will disrupt transportation service continuity – preserving service accessibility is of high importance

Key Points:

- Proactively determine the highest need areas in planning (e.g., dialysis centers, adult day care centers, and local community center services)

- Reductions in fixed-route service hours should not be a sole rationale for reducing paratransit service during an emergency

- Reserved capacity for customers with health risks (e.g., isolated trips) may be necessary

- Explore alternative methods to conduct eligibility assessments

Continuity of Services

Twin Transit—Lewis County, Washington

- Used a back-to-back busing model to facilitate ongoing needs for social distancing despite increasing ridership—under this scheme all fixed routes operated with a second bus entering shortly after the lead bus once it reached capacity.

King County Metro—Seattle, Washington

- Agency's phased recovery of service plan includes vehicle capacity rules for phased reopening.
  - Phases 1 and 2 have stricter capacity limits and wider distancing within vehicles
  - Phases 3 and 4 have slightly relaxed limits and distancing

New and Temporary Services

- During an emergency response new or temporary services can fill a service gap or community need and leverage underutilized resources

Key Points:

- Adjust incidental use services as new community needs are discovered

- Passenger trips and goods delivery should occur in separate vehicles to keep the rider prioritized

- Isolated vehicles for medical trips may also be a need but flexibility with vehicle assignment is important

New and Temporary Services

Choctaw Transit—Choctaw, Mississippi

- Augmented delivery program to address maintenance issues at customer locations (e.g., broken wheelchair ramps) after drivers reported the problems by working with the tribal maintenance department.

Charlevoix County Transit—Michigan

- Delivery service via demand response vehicles to give customers access to meals, prescriptions, mail, and packages.

- In one especially isolated area drivers collected customer's shopping list and food assistance program cards. Grocery stores then packaged the orders for delivery the next day.

Safety Procedures for Riders

- Transportation organizations need to protect employees and customers during emergencies while ensuring continuity of operations and resilience the system

Key Points:

- Social distancing or other safety requirements can create challenges for individuals who need assistance with boarding, wheelchair securement, or assistance to the front door

- Practices effective in fixed-route services may not be possible in paratransit and other services for people with disabilities and older adults

- Look out for unintended consequences of safety procedures or for protective measures that exacerbate existing problems

Safety Proc...s

King County Metro

- Launched Transpo... (TPR) to transport symptomatic or po... ...tine, and care
  - Dedicated fleet a...
  - Retrofitted vehicl... ...r compartment
  - Drivers volunteer... ...l routes
  - Seattle & King C... ...nd trained operators
  - Dedicated dispat...

Maryland Transpor... ...ore, Maryland

- Used an existing S... ...loyee safety phone line as a COVID-1... ...ee status

- Also used to gathe... ...ee working conditions and sug...

Safe to Ride

What we are doing to keep you safe

- All vehicles and vans are cleaned at minimum every 4 hours
- Passenger and Driver Face Mask Policy. Over 2,000 face masks distributed to passengers.
- Reduced passenger loads to allow for social distancing
- Daily driver temperature checks
- Plastic Screen Guard for Bus Operator and Passenger Safety
- Over 60% of passengers use our touchless fare technology

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Equity of Service Changes

- Temporary service changes may be necessary and must be done equitably to address the needs of those that rely on the service most

Key Points:

- Do not prioritize ADA paratransit trip requests based on trip purpose

- Proactively build in services used by high-need riders to core route networks and services used as the default during emergency situations

- Prioritize access to incidental use services for high-need customers in collaboration with local partner organizations

Equity of Service Changes

NYC Transit—New York, New York

- Paratransit eligibility processing was initially suspended when contracted assessment centers closed

- New applications were still considered and anyone meeting minimum criteria was eligible for 60 days

- Personal care attendants were automatically approved

Kansas City Area Transportation Authority—Kansas City, Missouri

- Worked with local medical system and housing authority organizations to improve access to free vaccination trips

Relationships and Partnerships

- Relationships and partnerships between public and private organizations are essential in the coordination of resources and strengths in all four phases of an emergency

Key Points:

- Identify partnerships to respond to the emergency with appropriate resources

- Transportation provision supports programs like meal delivery

- Facility and in-kind asset use can support pop-up sites like clinics

- Communication via partners can extend the broadcast range

Relationships and Partnerships

Santa Rosa Transit—Santa Rosa, California

- Leveraged an existing relationship with Catholic Charities
- Provides food delivery support to Catholic Charities' program to support food access for older adults

Monterey-Salinas Transit—Monterey County, California

- Donated two retired mini-buses to local non-profit clinic
- Clinic partnered with Grower-Shipper Association of Central CA
- Vehicles used to establish a mobile COVID-19 testing clinic for agricultural workers throughout the county

Communications and Engagement

- Communication and engagement are key activities during the planning and response stages of emergency management

Key Points:

- Important to maintain communication options/accessibility for persons with disabilities and older adult

- Phone calls to directly reach customers: recordings during hold times and pro-active calls to customers

- Communication through the web and social media is not as useful for some customers

- Communicate through community leaders and key individuals

- Word-of-mouth communication is effective

Communications and Engagement

Pierce Transit—Lakewood, Washington

- Used a system (GovDelivery) that was already in place to update customers but added emergency-related messaging

Massachusetts Bay Transportation Authority—Boston, Mass.

- Used data from automatic passenger counters to provide real-time information about the number of riders on a vehicle

SFMTA—San Francisco, California

- Paratransit staff contacted customers to let them know about the agency's Essential Trips Program and sign up interested riders

Financial Sustainability

- Financial support for service during an emergency could be a critical barrier

Key Points

- Organizations that serve older adults or people with disabilities could help provide partial funding support for incidental use services or continued service provision

- Existing agreements with local or state emergency management agencies can generate funding support

- MOUs to provide transportation service for persons with disabilities and older adults during emergencies, *established beforehand,* can help activate available funding from partners

Financial Sustainability

GCRTA—Cleveland, Ohio

- State grant funded support for a mass vaccination clinic
- Used transit vehicles to shuttle clinic attendees from ADA parking to vaccination entrance and later to run vaccination-specific trips
- Converted a transit vehicle to a mobile vaccination clinic

SFMTA—San Francisco, California

- Worked with state department of unemployment to learn that workers with reduced hours were eligible for unemployment benefits
- Assisted employees with applications so that their overall monthly pay wouldn't change despite SFMTA hour reductions

Sustaining Success

- Organizations have learned a great deal from the COVID-19 pandemic, finding ways to work smart, be innovative, and be flexible
- Institutionalizing changes and lessons learned means establishing and maintaining processes and practices beyond the emergency event and while providing continuity
- Formalizing lessons learned and thinking about similarities of critical elements during different types of emergencies
  - E.g., relationships, communication, flexibility
- Maintaining existing, established relationships can make a difference in the speed at which an organization can respond and adapt to an emergency

Key Conclusions

- Importance of Communication
  - to Employees and Partners, and to Riders
  - Presently, most transportation organizations do not have effective means of measuring the impact of communication to customers

- Flexibility in Service

- Leveraging Relationships

- Cultivating Stability

- Maintaining Service Availability

- Documentation in Planning

Q&A

Thank you!

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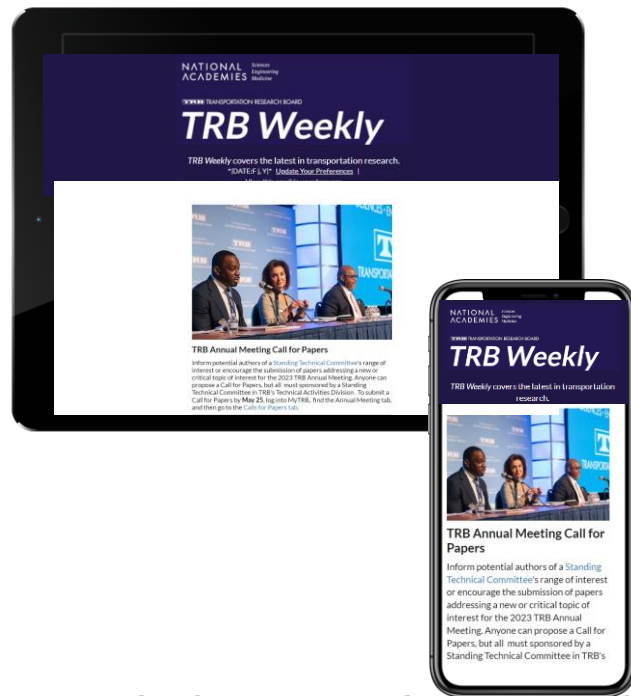
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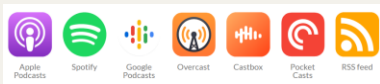
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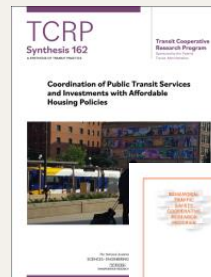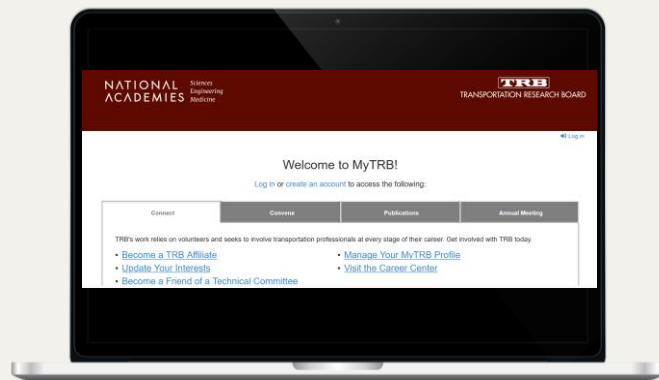- **Become a Friend of a Standing Technical Committee**
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