

LESSONS LEARNED

for Engaging Priority Populations

The Statewide Pedestrian System Plan (SPSP) was completed between 2019-2021. The plan will help MnDOT understand the communities its trunk highway system serves and help prioritize future investment and policy to create a fully walkable system. As part of the SPSP, MnDOT prioritized reaching people across the state of Minnesota who face greater barriers to safe and desirable walking. These priority populations included people of color, people in small rural communities, children and youth, Native Americans, people with low incomes, older adults, and people with disabilities.

This handout summarizes insights and lessons learned throughout the course of the project and will be a guide for MnDOT as it works with priority populations in the future.

An Important Note About Reaching and Engaging Priority Populations

Priority populations and the organizations that serve or work with them have urgent and amplified needs to which to respond and upon which to focus. These needs were especially heightened during 2020 and are likely to continue into the future due to the COVID-19 pandemic, its economic effects, and the social and racial issues that impact priority populations very disproportionately. MnDOT staff must be mindful of these realities. Outreach and engagement calls for respect, patience, and a relational approach.



START EARLY

By starting early, it is easier to strategically plan for how to engage priority populations in your study area. This includes mapping where there are higher concentrations of priority populations, connecting and setting expectations with community-based organizations in these areas, and anticipating challenges and opportunities that may arise.



FOCUS ON RELATIONSHIPS & NETWORKS

Relationships with people who identify as members of a priority population are beneficial for engaging these residents in a meaningful way. Relationships with organizations and individuals can be enhanced through an existing MnDOT relationship, such as through the Tribal Liaison's office, by intentionally starting a new relationship between MnDOT and a community organization, or by connecting with priority populations through an organization that is rooted in the community. Relationships provide enhanced trust and improved communication. They have an impact that extends beyond the length of one particular project.



CLEARLY ARTICULATE WHAT MnDOT IS DOING & HOW THE COMMUNITY CAN IMPACT THE PROJECT

As part of setting expectations with communities, it is important to explain upfront what is being included in a project and what aspects of the project the community can influence. It is beneficial for people to understand how their feedback will have an impact on the project and their community as well as how their feedback will be incorporated into the project. This also means not asking people questions that won't have an impact and clearly articulating what elements of the project have constraints that limit options or have already been decided upon. An effective way to achieve this is to intentionally organize the project in a way where the public and community stakeholders have a clear and genuine opportunity to influence project outcomes and decisions.



COMMUNICATE IN PLAIN LANGUAGE

In order to engage people from a variety of backgrounds and of varying abilities, it is important to communicate in plain language. This includes explaining technical concepts in an easy-to-understand manner (avoiding technical jargon and acronyms) and keeping explanations concise. This also means asking minimal, concise questions on surveys to which people can relate and quickly respond. It is also important to pay attention to the languages that are predominantly spoken in your study area and to provide project materials and surveys in those languages.



ENGAGE PEOPLE THROUGH A VARIETY OF METHODS

It is important to engage the public and community leaders and organizations in a variety of ways. Different people and organizations respond to different types of engagement. This could include personal conversations, formal committee involvement, online involvement, or attending an open house. It is often beneficial to go to locations where priority populations are. Examples include intercept surveys on a busy pedestrian corridor, a market, a bus stop, or at a festival. Meeting people in the midst of their day-to-day life removes the barrier of them needing to know about the project or go out of their way to provide feedback. Offering different types of involvement will increase reach and engagement and will provide a broader base of feedback to advance the project.