

Advancing Equity Amidst COVID-19: Five Principles for Transit Service Allocation

Two months into the COVID-19 pandemic, millions of Black and Brown families in the nation's largest cities risk daily exposure to the virus as they travel to essential, and often poorly paid, jobs.

Below are a set of principles for transportation agencies to adopt in both the current crisis and in long-term transit planning:

1) Name the Problem: Racial Inequity & Systemic Racism

The COVID-19 pandemic has exposed the stark inequity inherent in so many of our nation's systems. Demographic data from across the country shows that Black and Brown people are more likely to die from exposure to the virus--- in some places, more than twice as likely as white people.

These disparities are the product of systemic racism that shapes social determinants of health and health outcomes. People of color and people with low incomes have worse access to health care and health insurance, often live in built environments which exacerbate respiratory illness, often live in areas without good access to fresh food, and consequently have higher rates of type II diabetes. They are more likely to have jobs that require working in crowded areas where social distancing is difficult to maintain. Systemic racism encompasses but reaches far beyond transit systems and individual decision makers BUT transit systems and transit leaders can do our part to unwind systemic racism.

2) Name the Solution: Equity not Equality

We have been seeking equity but implementing equality. Equal protection under the law and equal distribution of public services do not unwind systemic racism. Equity means fairness and justice - not the same treatment. For example, merely complying with Title VI of the Civil Rights Act does not yield equitable outcomes. Universal government systems alone are insufficient to address the barriers people face because of their race, class background, gender identity, or physical ability.

Unwinding systemic inequities requires targeting government systems to increase opportunity, often new or different services designed to overcome specific barriers. For example equity planning with residents of San Francisco's Bayview-Hunters Point neighborhood resulted in proposals for a community shuttle for grocery shopping and a subsidized mini-bus or carpooling to bring kids to school. Targeted solutions like these do not emerge through conventional planning.

3) Reject Defensiveness & Embrace New Solutions

Shifting from equality to equity requires leaders accept that anti-discrimination policies which they believed would create a more just society have not worked. COVID-19 health outcomes have exposed this failure at a massive scale. Change requires that leaders in government, advocacy and the workforce resist defending the rationale and design of failed policies as well as their personal contributions to those efforts. Leaders will need to re-evaluate failed policies, name mistakes and then identify and implement new solutions. Resisting wounded feelings and limiting defensive reactions takes work and attention, and merits being viewed as a principle in advancing equity.

4) Practical Service Adjustment for Equitable Transit

- Redistribute service in response to current travel patterns and trip volumes, rather than decreasing service equally across the board (i.e. following a weekend or holiday schedule).
- Prioritize connections to medical facilities, grocery stores, and other essential destinations.
- Actively dispatch more buses where operators report crowding or buses have reached physical distancing capacity.
- Make commuter rail fares more affordable and adjust schedules to serve high-demand urban areas.
- Shift resources from premium or express bus services to high ridership local routes
- Limit the maximum number of passengers on board to allow for physical distancing for rider and operator safety.

5) Replicate and expand equitable service reallocation in post COVID-19 long-term planning

Leaders should reject the likely scenario of restoring prior service levels and patterns, instead they should bring the “whys and hows” of more equitable service into what the transit system should look like post-crisis. Agencies should create and/or empower internal equity departments and personnel, making sure they are centrally involved in COVID19 response planning and in identifying patterns to shift post COVID19. Agencies should conduct truly grassroots engagement with trusted community based-organizations. Decision makers should reflect the communities they represent and racial justice hiring should be prioritized.