A ROAD MAP:

MAKING TRANSPORTATION EVACUATIONS REAL FOR PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES

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Background

This roadmap is a concise yet clear summary of reflections, report outs, and recommendations shared throughout two Transportation Evacuation Think Tank sessions held in February 2025. Over 225 pages of transcribed material/nine hours of cumulative recorded discussions with nearly two dozen participants, were rigorously analyzed, synthesized, and summarized to create this document. Navigational notes, which are context clues provided by session attendees, are also embedded for your convenience and comprehension.

Disclaimer: To encourage candid contributions while preserving the privacy of Think Tank participants, no names or other identifiable information are disclosed in this document. The roadmap is also meant to serve as a situational snapshot and an actionable tool to assist with on the ground advocacy efforts. It is not a research paper or policy brief, but rather a robust resource that will surely continue to evolve over time.

Legend: Executive Summary

Buckle up, the Roadmap you are about to read boldly positions people with disabilities in the driver seat! Throughout this informative resource you will discover creative emergency approaches and eyewitness accounts from some of the nation's leading thinkers, attorneys, advocates, and researchers. The Roadmap is for anyone ready to explore new routes for equitable evacuations. It is written in honor of the progress people with disabilities have led and in hope of the dignified future we all deserve.

The Roadmap includes a clear view of the current landscape of inclusive evacuations. It reviews current data concerns and assesses pervasive problems peppered throughout evacuation plans and practices.

Readers will find extensive examples from Think Tank attendees regarding considerations that are consistently absent or insufficient within emergency evacuation plans. The Roadmap also highlights four thematic landmarks that were identified throughout attendee discussions. Perspectives on paratransit, facilities, public engagement/communication, and monitoring/evaluation are thus summarized in later sections.

Roadside reports and descriptive insights that reflect promising/replicable practices are perhaps some of the most enlightening sections of the Roadmap. Each abbreviated account offers examples of state, local, and community-based inclusive evacuation efforts. Furthermore, they offer stunning snapshots of disaster-oriented disability leadership, innovative thinking, and the efficacy of years-long advocacy strategies.

With the future we deserve always top of mind, the Roadmap is intentionally imbued with desired changes/challenges, recommendations for disability advocates, and calls to action for governing authorities. For instance, readers will find advocacy avenues that contain recommended actions directed toward disability advocates working on local, state, territory, Tribal, regional, and national levels. A review of roadblocks (challenges) and calls to action are included as well for governing authorities involved with emergency management, transportation, and urban planning.

Lastly, the Roadmap concludes with even more to explore. The final two sections contain research questions proposed by attendees and general questions raised during discussions.

The Landscape

The two sections below offer a vibrant view of the current landscape of inclusive evacuations. They review data concerns and assess pervasive problems peppered throughout evacuation plans/practices.

Driving Through Data Dilemmas

The following section summarizes the state of disability-related disaster data as explained by attendees.

Disability data is commonly sourced from the Center for Disease Control and Prevention

(CDC), Census Bureau, electricity agencies, or perhaps via outreach efforts from non-profit organizations. The challenge with relying solely on these sources of data in preparedness conversations is that not everyone responds to traditional collection methods or identifies as being disabled. Others could also be temporarily disabled during an emergent event or acquire a new disability as a direct result of being injured/impacted by a disaster. There is also a data gap regarding those with and without disabilities in need of evacuation assistance. Consequently, communities often rely on interpersonal relationships when government coordinated resources are lacking or /completely unavailable.

Better data is needed on all levels concerning available evacuation resources. While many emergency plans identify a need for resources, they don't necessarily have reliable data associated with those needs. If those plans include actual agreements with

transportation providers, they don't usually include projected needs/numbers or available assets. More often than not, there is an identified need and perhaps a partner who could support those needs. The absence of data also speaks volumes about priorities and meaningful engagement with disability communities.

There is undoubtedly an outstanding need to make data available and reliably applied. The successful likelihood of achieving this goal can also be attributed to human resources. One of the greatest challenges is knowing whether the staff, with the training and credentials to effectively operate evacuation vehicles, are available or reachable during a disaster. At present, there is no unified system across various transportation systems/networks for collecting and communicating such capacity levels in real time.

A bright spot concerning data has, however, emerged over recent years around aging populations. Advocates note having reviewed transportation plans inclusive of inventory/asset accumulation specific to older adults. Unfortunately, there is frequently a lack of coordination between transportation services and broader emergency management services. So even when transportation agencies have details on accessible vehicles, various types of available vehicles, and scheduling specifics, that vital information sometimes isn't comprehensively shared with emergency management officials.

There is even a stronger connection being made between transportation and sustainability/climate efforts in some areas. This has resulted in urban planners working to incorporate transit into green infrastructure projects/resilience strategies. These plans must however be clearly communicated across agencies and throughout the communities most impacted.

Plans Full of Potholes

Attendees noted that emergency management plans repeatedly lack the following:

- Transportation assets (i.e. public transportation vehicles, paratransit vans, school buses, bus operators/drivers, etc.).
- Accessible, understandable, plain language public communications on response efforts in the community and what the community can do to both prepare and take action.
- Evacuation request lines.
- Contacts for transportation contractors alongside any information about available vehicles, designated usage, relevant response times, etc.

- Templates on how to establish effective/enforceable Memorandums of Understanding (MOUs) that are signed and circulated to all relevant parties. Agreements should also include specifications for relevant trainings/exercises.

- Institutional knowledge held within the experience/expertise of agency staffers. The information might be present within individual people but is lacking on the pages of official emergency plans. Officials cite maximum flexibility as the reason for this gap, which poses an ever-present challenge for disability communities and is exacerbated by high turnover rates within some agencies.

- Accountability mechanisms. Advocates note that some emergency managers believe if too many details are written in official plans, then the agency may face legal repercussions if they are unable to fully comply with/execute said plans. Therefore, a lack of guidance for emergency managers regarding liability is a continuous challenge.

- Access details on working with tech transit/on-demand services like rideshare companies and other micromobility options, including electric scooters and bicycles. Plans should also include information on the availability of accessible vehicles known and utilized in a given area.

- Guidance on rapid support for large-scale events with a high number of out-of-town attendees who are unfamiliar or not registered with local accessible transportation services. Spontaneous transportation providers have proven useful when evacuating during such events (i.e. active shooters, fire events, etc.).

- Transparency related to emergency transportation thresholds. More specifically, when accessible evacuations will end, and which conditions/benchmarks trigger full suspension of transit services.

- Signed agreements with school districts, airports, and universities to utilize accessible vehicles/buses/vans during an emergency event. Agreements should also include the response capacity for certified operators/drivers of those vehicles and how they can be reached.

- Clear directions on how to transport evacuees back home. Detail is also lacking around how transit to and from homes will be provided during recovery periods where evacuees are residing in a shelter or temporary location while trying to repair their homes/communities.

- Information on how support staff will be made available aboard emergency response/recovery transportation vehicles to assist individuals with varying disabilities.

- Detailed frameworks for how public transportation assets will be repurposed for evacuations, and how this may impact individuals who rely on public transportation as their primary means of transit. There is also a lack of information provided on how road closures impact the flow of evacuation in certain areas particularly throughout high populated areas, rural communities, or other low resourced neighborhoods.

- Guidance on how to prevent transportation assets from being double or triple booked during emergency responses or long-term recovery as well as what to do when this problem occurs.

- Signed mutual aid agreements between governing bodies that specify accessibility considerations, especially when individuals are transported from a high-capacity area to a low-capacity area with fewer available disability supports.

- Emergency exercises that include various disabled people serving in various roles, not just that of a disabled community member, to showcase the need for different accessible practices and programming.

Important Landmarks

The following section contains four thematic landmarks identified throughout attendee discussions. Perspectives on paratransit, facilities, public engagement/communication, and monitoring/evaluation are summarized below.

Paratransit

When paratransit is mentioned in evacuation plans, seldom are there any details concerning MOUs or plausible response times. Often, internal paratransit systems must be cleared of current transit trips before new emergency evacuation requests can be processed. Inefficient information concerning driver availability/contact details also poses a challenge.
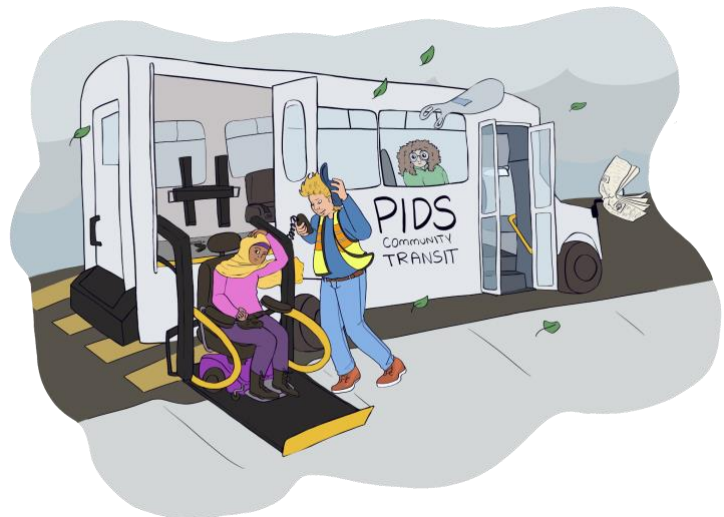
Some individuals rely on a personal support network for transportation or may have another accessible transportation option. During evacuations, paratransit systems commonly don't have a mechanism for reaching disabled individuals who typically use their own personal networks for non-emergent transportation. Nor is there a consistent procedure for providing the clearance

needed for personal care networks to enter evacuation zones to offer emergency transit when first responders are unavailable.

Paratransit companies can be limited as well by jurisdictional boundaries imposed by their insurance policies which may not allow them to operate outside of particular areas without jeopardizing their coverage. This is a major factor for many companies during emergency events as risks of vehicles being damaged or individuals being injured tend to rise during an emergency event. Irrespective of this concern, attendees noted that it would be helpful if more plans included very clear directives on how paratransit services will adhere to their obligations regardless of the challenges noted above.

Facilities/Institutional Settings

Facilities/institutional settings commonly refer to nursing homes, rehabilitation centers, psychiatric centers, juvenile detention centers, group homes, jails/prisons, and immigration detention centers.

- Facilities can be used as a way to empty/close evacuation shelters. Due to an extreme shortage of affordable, accessible, integrated, and available housing options nationwide, people with disabilities are often the last population to leave a shelter after a disaster. As a result, they are sometimes pressured or coerced into being moved to a congregate care facility setting. As further explained in upcoming sections, this inequitable treatment is directly connected to transportation as evacuees often want to assure they won't be involuntarily transported to an institution with no way back home.

- Plans for long-term care facilities and nursing facilities typically have transportation contract agreements as is legally required. Nevertheless, despite such agreements, one attendee recalled that the shortest facility evacuation response time for a facility they've ever observed was still three days after the event.

- Childcare facilities may know the number of children they are allowed to house or hold at any given time, but that may not reflect the number of transportation needs/assets nor the number of identified safe spaces where the children can be evacuated. Facilities should examine and exercise the timeline of no notice events versus advance notice events (events that have no advanced time to put assets in place versus those that do.)

Engagement and Communications

Inclusive evacuations must be more than plans that only emergency officials know about; the public must be kept up to date. The public must be well informed about the range of vehicles and options available and their potential locations. They should also

be made aware of accountability structures regarding roles and responsibilities for assigned personnel in advance of a disaster and afterwards as situations/staff shift.

Sharing plans in accessible formats is critical to improving future communications and public engagement. Attendees suggest shorter documents in plain language that are specific to the neighborhood/city whereby residents can focus on the emergency evacuation details most relevant to them and their loved ones. For example, which pick-up/drop-off sites are accessible? Which shelters are accessible? Where can people go to access a pop-up shelter to charge Durable Medical Equipment (DME) and other devices? Where should folks in rural areas go? Where should people go who need transportation, including accessible transit? A contacts sheet of helpline numbers and ways to reach various emergency officials would be beneficial as well.

If at all possible, the same organization/agency responsible for evacuations should also be responsible for returns. Communicating such critical information about both evacuation and return plans can directly impact a person's ability to make informed decisions related to transit during emergencies. Attendees note that sometimes people will not evacuate without a clear plan for how/when they will return home.

Consolidation of shelters without clear communication to evacuees is a transit problem. When transportation is brought in to move individuals to another shelter further away, it can pose a real challenge for people with disabilities. It also causes many to return home prematurely in an effort to prevent the problem of becoming stuck in a shelter far away from their home/support systems without any information on the status of continued transit assistance. Consequently, clear communication in advance should be a consistent component of preparedness measures for counties/states. Additionally, transportation plans back to one's home, or an area of return, should incorporate the potential need for volunteers to assist people with disabilities during long journeys and transfers.

Effective communication must include guidance on how to coordinate community response when known limitations exist for government notifications and evacuations. Notifications and alerts must be improved for mountainous regions and areas with unreliable power and communication sources. Too often alerts are delayed due to power outages, and evacuations are stalled due to high traffic or debris blockages on single lane roads. Better integration of community members into the notification/alert process could be one way forward. The ability to secure budgets and funding each fiscal year for community based issued emergency equipment such as solar-powered National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) radios, was raised as an example of how governing authorities could improve community access to notification systems during power outages. A more fluid check-in system rather than a static

registry could potentially be another community-driven method of improving communication and notification while protecting other privacy concerns.

With privacy considerations in mind, attendees acknowledged that increased aggression from the United States Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) officials will likely have a direct impact on people with disabilities. Migrants may decide not to use public evacuation options even if they were available due to increased uncertainty concerning migrant safety/privacy protections. Attendees suggested that accessible Know Your Rights campaigns are thus critically important.

Many Centers for Independent Living (CILs) successfully model planning integration by including questions around emergency preparedness within new consumer surveys. Other disability advocates have created emergency guidebooks in accessible formats that aid in thinking through personal and collective preparedness. Disability organizations and government agencies can replicate such practices in the future. However, it is not enough to simply ask the questions. Support must then be provided to ensure that people with disabilities are equipped with the information and resources needed to make informed decisions and receive appropriate assistance throughout all phases of a disaster. Interagency communication and direct public engagement, as well as communication, are thus vital to coordinating information and support in advance. Advanced notice is yet another key focal point amongst attendees who noted that it provides people with disabilities the opportunity to leave early/arrange accessible transportation out of impacted areas.

If more disability-led organizations can get included into statewide comprehensive emergency management plans as service providers, that may significantly enhance their access to decision making tables. The road back home is impassable for many disabled disaster survivors without transit that can transport their DMEs. Disability organizations with accessible vehicles and certified drivers can therefore be a major source of transit access, and can also serve as charging stations and help coordinate meal drop offs. The future of emergency planning must proactively and meaningfully engage people with disabilities, not just tangentially ask them for feedback after important decisions have already been made.

Monitoring and Evaluations (M&E)

Quarterly standing meetings are essential to M&E. Regular meetings allow officials and community members to assess the plan, examine needed resources, adopt after action recommendations, and discuss integrated coordination. Live exercises with all relevant parties should occur at least once a year. Planning staff should be present during all meetings and exercises to identify red flags, catch any miscommunications, fact check

misinformation, and offer real-time feedback on compliance with newly agreed changes or long-held directives.

Liability concerns can also be a major limitation that impedes effective monitoring and evaluation practices. An advocate noted that one county was rather resistant to learning more about emergency transportation gaps for fear that once problems were known and documented, they would then be obligated to make necessary changes.

After Action Reports (AARs) are a critical monitoring and evaluation tool. To maximize their usefulness, Emergency Management Directors should be committed to ensuring plans are updated, training/exercises are executed, and that lessons learned are embedded into institutional memory/well documented. Post-disaster summits and conferences can foster stronger coalitions by bringing together multiple stakeholders to assess emergency events from diverse perspectives (geographic, social, etc.). Statewide or regional assessments such as this allow for a panoramic view of the event while also amplifying the direct lived experiences of those involved. People with disabilities must be included in these gatherings for any resulting decisions and documentation to be realistic and rooted in the needs of those most impacted. Gatherings should also occur immediately or shortly after an event, not years later when key details may have been forgotten, or essential staff/collaborators have moved on professionally.

Furthermore, rural communities with part-time emergency management staff may struggle to sustain M&E efforts due to a lack of resources or personnel capacity. A Comprehensive Preparedness Guide (CPG) that focuses on the unique challenges faced by rural communities is thus needed to devise strategies not only to support communities before an emergency but during and after as well. Plans made for rural and frontier communities sometimes comprise transportation assets that are available during blue sky times but are not readily available during no notice events. Consequently, planning must factor in the time required to receive external transportation assets for both small- and large-scale emergencies.

The use of personal vehicles as a means of evacuation must also be assessed. Evaluating this strategy could assist planners with better understanding when practices of interdependence are most effective and when they are not.

Corrective action plans are yet another avenue for M&E. Corrective action plans should expressly acknowledge the consequences of not adhering to disability laws and inclusive policies. The plans should review whether or not specific recommendations relating to disability and requisite actions were followed.

Staff capacity levels are a major determinant of M&E in general and state and federal oversight of local jurisdictions in particular. Advocates acknowledge that many states

and local jurisdictions are understaffed and overburdened when managing concurrent events from large counties with several impacted cities. Monitoring compliance in real time, or over an extended period of time (long-term recovery), can thus be a significant challenge.

Roadside Reports

The descriptive insights below were shared by attendees and reflect promising/replicable practices. Each abbreviated account offers examples of different geographic areas based inclusive evacuation efforts.

Florida

In Florida, local transportation services are available to move people to and from shelters. Counties tend to work closely to coordinate evacuation efforts. Nevertheless, assuring paratransit services are consistently operational during various disaster events is an ongoing challenge. Evacuation protocols are often determined by the scope and scale of a disaster. For example, the goal might be to move people out of harm's way and to the closest shelter. However, that shelter may be outside of their home county.

Support from Fish, Wildlife, and Agriculture departments is also utilized in Florida during evacuations, specifically for rescue operations via boat. Disability advocates strive to coordinate between various county departments and local disability organizations to assure DMEs and other essential supports are transported alongside individuals.

Meeting with counties prior to a disaster helps to identify the counties that are not able to confirm the safe and efficient evacuation of disabled residents. There is a provision in Florida for the state to assist when such needs are identified. Those communications are done well in advance of a disaster and offer a safety net for emergency transportation. Concerns have been raised, however, around how state-sponsored evacuation support contributes to a culture of "freedom to fail."

The Florida Independent Living Council (FILC) has championed disability integration across government agencies and volunteer organizations. Their advocacy has resulted in material benefits such as satellite phones for CILs on the ground serving disaster impacted communities, as well as staff access to free fuel from state gas stations. These negotiated resources are critical during disasters and have noticeably distinguished CILs amongst other partner organizations. Attendees stress the

importance of securing such benefits prior to an emergency event, and the necessity of showing up consistently to meetings on a statewide level.

Colorado

In Colorado, eight out of 64 counties currently don't have the capability to offer public transit as a means of evacuation. Out of those eight counties, seven of them only have non-medical transportation resources available. One county has no accessible evacuation options at all for disabled residents. Unfortunately, there is missing data on many counties who have yet to reply/comply with requests for information regarding evacuation capacity levels.

Local housing authorities in Colorado have been encouraged to have transportation plans for residents as well. Advocates have warned that transportation plans for housing authorities must not be to simply call the Emergency Operations Center (EOC) during an evacuation requesting that transportation be arranged. Concrete plans with a paratransit company in a neighboring county are more likely to result in expedited evacuations since in-county resources coordinated at the EOC are typically inundated/stretched thin with requests. With such strategies applied, advocates report having had success with the Boulder Housing Authority and Boulder Housing Partners in getting them to take action and develop their own plans.

New York

In New York City, where there are several wheelchair accessible taxis, there was a lawsuit related to private companies and driver mandates during an emergency. Consequently, you can't require private drivers to perform an emergency function during an emergency event. Especially throughout no notice events, by city law, drivers can't be required to perform those services. There is now a coordinated effort across state transportation agency divisions to provide emergency transit services.

California

In California, advocates have successfully solidified agreements with local transportation providers. Partnerships with paratransit services in one county have resulted in companies immediately pivoting on-duty drivers to emergency evacuation requests. A designated helpline, with a permanent number, has also been established and well promoted amongst disability organizations. Callers can utilize this helpline to directly request emergency transit assistance.

The following points outline pertinent advice for replication:

- Emergency management officials shouldn't just have agreements in place with providers who offer accessible resources within their jurisdiction. Officials should

also have agreements in place with accessible transportation providers in surrounding jurisdictions. That's how they can get surge capacity.

- It's not enough to have an agreement that's only verbal; it must be a contract. The contract must be executable 24/7.

- Contracts with transit providers must waive any advance notice requirement.

- Emergency transit services must be free for the end user.

- Contracts should also provide on demand or taxi-like services.

- Create agreements, have appropriate disability inclusive provisions, set them up internally, work with external partners both within designated jurisdictions/surrounding areas, and realize that this all takes time and continued commitment from every person/agency involved.

California is also a home-ruled state, but the funding is tied to the things that local officials do. A planning matrix is now baked into state code, requiring 10 counties, selected annually based on recent disasters, to complete it. The matrix includes accessibility considerations and evacuations. Counties are not fined for failure to comply, but future funding may be directly impacted.

Washington D.C.

Several years ago, the city of Washington D.C. was sued and as a result was required to revise its emergency management plans to better serve people with disabilities. Included in the revamp was the need to create a more effective evacuation plan for the entire district, including schools with majority disabled students and kids with high support needs. The action plans did not include student or parental involvement. Majority of the school's involvement in planning for more accessible and effective evacuation plans came from the principal and a few teachers. Local government agencies, an outside contractor, and disability advocates within the Mayor's office were also involved with the process. Although an exercise of the plan was implemented, it was done with adults, not actual students, which actually highlighted several areas of concern for both administrators and planners. It was then realized that parents and students must be at the planning table and on the scene of every exercise moving forward. No current status update for the school was available at the time of this writing.

Alaska

In the fall of 2024, a small Arctic community in Alaska experienced a massive flooding event in a town of 2,000 people. Everyone was fine, even those who lived right on the coast because they knew that when the rain came, it would cause flooding. Everyone mobilized to help the elders and get everyone safely into sheltered spaces. This is an

example of how small or rural communities successfully practice a strategy of neighbors helping neighbors.

Louisiana

In Louisiana, there is a strong and active network of mutual aid, particularly amongst very small, very rural Indigenous communities, some of whom are non-federally recognized tribes that are down the bayou. These communities know each other and help each other. Unfortunately, this type of interdependence gets turned into a reason for emergency management officials to ignore them. This community-driven help is important, but it is equally as important to hold governing authorities accountable for mutual aid because sometimes neighbors are doing the best they can, and it isn't always enough to meet the needs of everyone impacted.

Germany

In Germany, the government has committed millions of dollars for selected local communities around the world to make their development plans more accessible. Attendees suggest that this approach should be replicated widely by other funders. More specifically, the goal of working directly with identified communities long-term to prototype accessible emergency management solutions, and work under the leadership of disabled experts in a range of areas including transportation. Chosen communities should also represent geographic diversity such as city, coastal, rural, frontier, mountain, and island. A robust funding apparatus will be needed to launch an endeavor of this magnitude. Nevertheless, advocates could create working groups in the meantime to model the desired objectives, sketch out interim steps, and mock-up inclusive transportation plans to be implemented once funding is secured.

Ready to Ride: Challenges and Desired Changes

The following three sections contain desired changes/challenges, recommendations for disability advocates, and calls to action for governing authorities.

Street Smart: Changes and Challenges

The points below outline desired changes to inclusive evacuation/emergency planning shared by attendees. Each point is accompanied by challenges that could be raised by oppositional actors. Awareness of these challenges will ideally support advocates to mobilize more effectively.

- Desired Change: Better regulatory clarity and enforcement regarding integration of paratransit emergency requirements.

- ○ The Challenge: Every state is different and there is a lack of standards on a jurisdictional level. Integrating new regulatory standards will require legislative processes.

  Rural communities who are underfunded/underserved may also struggle to adhere to any new regulatory obligations if not sufficiently supported/funded to do so. Any policy advocacy must therefore be done **with** rural communities and not for them.

- Desired Change: Cities/counties to strategically store/stage emergency equipment in areas with a high concentration of disabled individuals.

  - ○ The Challenge: Disconnect between emergency management and organizations that serve people with disabilities. There is a real need for new methods of identifying needs in impacted areas without creating a registry system. Flexibility is also needed for the free flow of disabled folks who may very well be visiting the area or away from home during an emergency event.

- Desired Change: Paratransit services to obtain insurance waivers or more flexible insurance policies inclusive of emergency events. The goal is for them to remain operational and transport passengers to safe zones/shelters outside of their standard transit areas. If waivers are granted by the state or a federal entity, they should become active as soon as a disaster declaration is made.

  - ○ The Challenge: Paratransit might be unavailable to transport more people via shorter trips to designated evacuation pick-up areas if they are tied up actively transporting fewer evacuees to further distances. Advocates should also beware of any attempts to use such a waiver to keep individuals institutionalized or separated from support systems as a measure of transit convenience for cities/counties. Portability agreements for private providers may entail regulatory/reimbursement processes as well.

- Desired Change: Information gathered during post-event listening sessions to be integrated into actionable agreements/operations plans.

  - ○ The Challenge: Promises of better integration/inclusivity improvements are often made to placate communities post-disaster. High vigilance and verification check-ins are required to ensure suggested/necessary changes are instituted.

- Desired Change: Counties stop registering disabled people and start recording all available emergency assets/resources (human and material).

    - The Challenge: Not every person with a disability opposes registries and it may be difficult to get municipalities to change course. Alternatively, registries do indeed pose privacy/surveillance/profiling concerns for many people with disabilities in general and people of color with disabilities in particular.

- Desired Change: Explore how emergency management software such as Genesis Protect, Watch Duty, and Zone Haven can be used to more specifically outline resource availability for disability supports during events with low/high access to electric power. Integrated mobile location services that can be toggled on and off could also better support more flexible/accurate evacuation efforts. Furthermore, technology such as those listed above may support family and friends to offer transit while tracking important real-time details about evacuation zones/no-travel areas.

    - The Challenge: Technology is always changing, and EM software isn't always designed with accessibility in mind. Software may also differ from state to state or county to county.

- Desired Change: Government officials no longer using neighbors helping neighbors as a convenient means of abdicating responsibility for inclusive planning, resource distribution, and long-term recovery efforts.

    - The Challenge: Neighbors helping neighbors is often the only available option for low-resourced communities. Calls to action will likely be needed to persuade state and federal funding sources to better equip rural areas throughout all phases of a disaster.

- Desired Change: Including other vehicles (church vans, hotel shuttle buses, etc.) in the National Transit Database or within a state equivalent database. At present, these databases are primarily oriented toward public transit vehicles.

    - The Challenge: Opposition from governing officials who proclaim that such lists can't be kept up to date without dedicated staff to maintain and check the data regarding private/accessible transportation assets statewide. Consequently, it is imperative that advocates implement strategies that preemptively address this type of justification for non-compliance with requests for better data.

- Desired Change: Home-rule no longer used as a means of avoiding federal civil rights obligations.

    ○ The Challenge: State and local officials who evoke home rule to argue for less oversight or adherence to disability laws. There may also be contention between state and local actors whereby local officials declare that state authorities can't enforce them to complete certain actions because of home rule. Beware of states who say they can only **suggest** compliance from local officials. It is highly likely that those local jurisdictions still receive some form of state funding and the legal obligations that accompany such fiscal support.

- Desired Change: More funding funneled into legal aid services so that additional opportunities are available for people with disabilities to file post-disaster lawsuits regarding discrimination.

    ○ The Challenge: Managing multiple funding priorities related to disaster and non-disaster needs.

- Desired Change: The public be informed of mutual aid agreements or MOUs as a transparency practice. People deserve to know who is responsible for various aspects of emergency response and recovery.

    ○ The Challenge: Governing authorities may cite staff shortages or resource restrictions as a reason why wide scale public engagement/informational campaigns are unrealistic.

Recommendations: Advocacy Avenues

The following recommended actions are directed toward disability advocates working on local, state, territory, Tribal, regional, and national levels.

Attendees suggest advocating for:

- Policies that allow people with disabilities and transit providers who wish to evacuate early to do so without penalty. Attendees note instances where people with disabilities have been prevented from accessible transit for early evacuations because they live outside of a mandatory evacuation zone. This challenge also impacts those who choose to self-evacuate in advance and later discover their communities were not impacted by the disaster. Although they have incurred disaster-related costs associated with evacuating, they may be ineligible to receive emergency funding solely earmarked for evacuees in designated areas. Transportation vouchers, reimbursement, or rebates connected to emergency evacuations could be a way of providing financial

support in advance, or at the very least, a way of clarifying how to obtain financial supports at a later date.

- Honesty in response. More specifically, for the removal of numbers such as 211, 311, and even 911 within disaster plans if officials know in advance they won't be fully operational. Suggest that new hotlines be established that are staffed and capable of providing up-to-date information/rapid response and up-to-date resources. This could be useful in no notice/short notice events. Alternatively, insist that trained volunteers be activated remotely during disasters to assist with answering disaster related calls via 211, 311, and 911. Most importantly, all operators should be equipped with accurate information.

- Disability organizations to engage their local emergency management agencies, and to request community meetings that examine transit evacuation plans. This could help the community feel more included in plan development and to cultivate a greater sense of ownership.

- Transportation to congregate sites and pick-up points. Public transit and paratransit should be available/routed to transport people to these evacuation hubs. When public/paratransit is suspended during disasters, it can impede people's ability to get to the designated area where mass transit evacuations are staged. This is particularly problematic for individuals who are carless and who rely on public transit/paratransit. When at all possible, essential transportation services should not be shut down when people rely on them to get out. Safety is often raised as the main concern for shutting down public transit so that emergency vehicles can have access to all crucial roadways, such as during a snowstorm. Nevertheless, attendees advocate for a better balance of safety considerations and transit evacuation support for those in need.

- Adequate support for essential workers including hazard/emergency pay, health insurance, and other worker protections. This can help to ensure that emergency systems remain operational. Workers should also be able to contact their families and to include their families during evacuations as well.

- Reimagined paratransit regulations to incorporate more flexible emergency plans/protocols. At present, some emergency plans acknowledge paratransit as a possible transportation asset. However, paratransit regulations seldom acknowledge synchronicity with those emergency plans.

- All transit subcontracts include clauses about drivers/operators working during emergencies. Workers should be informed of what they will be asked to do during a disaster and how to do it. They should also be informed about how their safety will be prioritized.

- The National Academy of Science, Engineering & Medicine, be tasked with the Transportation Research Board (TRB), to update documents on the role of transit in emergency evacuations, especially related to disability. The TRB should also look into transportation insurance issues. More specifically, insurance limitations that prevent transit vehicles from operating outside of their original jurisdiction. This has an impact on how communities are able to effectively evacuate and return back home. Any suggested waivers to assist with this insurance issue must include provisions for preventing the transportation of people with disabilities into institutional settings that they do not consent to or that they can't get out of when striving to return home.

- Universal design approaches in emergency plans, annexes, field operation guides, and job aids. Attendees note that if preparedness plans are effectively designed for rural, mountain, and frontier communities, it is more likely that they can also be applicable to city/urban areas.

- Transportation tech companies such as Uber and Lyft to be better integrated into evacuation plans. This should include regulatory stipulations regarding emergencies as well.

- Ensure micromobility options like scooters and bicycles are better integrated into evacuation plans. Advocate that they be available during evacuation so that anyone can easily access them. This can help reduce the need to rely on accessible public transit that others with disabilities may need as a priority.

- More flexible waivers during disasters that are activated on local/territorial/tribal levels. This might be immensely helpful for the territories with specific needs that differ from states.

- The Secretary of the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) should issue an automatic Jones Act cabotage waiver whenever the President declares a major disaster, much as the Secretary of Health and Human Services routinely issues public-health emergency declarations alongside Stafford Act declarations. A standing waiver would let foreign-flag vessels carry relief cargo from U.S. ports to Puerto Rico and Guam — --the only territories still fully subject to the Jones Act — -and would have prevented the three-day delay that left a diesel tanker idling offshore after Hurricane Fiona in 2022.
    - Navigational Note: The Merchant Marine Act of 1920 "Jones Act": The Jones Act is a cabotage maritime law where in Puerto Rico specifically, any shipment, any supply going to Puerto Rico moving between U.S. ports must sail on a U.S.-built, U.S.-flagged, and U.S.-crewed vessel. Cargo is then taxed and then permitted to enter Puerto Rico. In disasters, such laws add layers of complication onto an already tenuous situation.

> Furthermore, Durable Medical Equipment, consumable medical supplies, and fuel are held up for protracted periods of time.

- Better transparency to the public related to service area limitations and mitigate those challenges with more regional support.

- Annual assessments of transportation contractors in order to maintain up-to-date information on fleets, certifications, staff, integrated exercises/trainings, and disaster protocols. Contract language could also restrict subcontractors from double booking with neighboring jurisdictions. Contractors should be forthcoming about any plans that will render their fleets unavailable rather than overpromising across multiple service areas with evacuation vehicles they are unable to fully provide during disasters.

- Risk assessments to include interagency responsibilities, disability metrics, and the timeline for executing designated deliverables.

- A shift away from theoretical language throughout emergency plans to more actionable language with assigned deliverables and a robust structure of accountability.

- People with lived disability experiences to be hired as planners, emergency managers, dispatchers, drivers/operators, coordinators, trainers, organizers, etc.

- Disability-led organizations to be equitably reimbursed by local, state, territorial, Tribal, and federal authorities for their essential services during disasters.

- An expanded understanding of portability across state lines concerning emergency evacuation. Attendees note that portability should be considered when analyzing access to medications, DMEs, transportation, worker protections, paid time off, housing/shelter, personal attendant services, etc.

- The Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) to require airlines to have more than a "good neighbor" plan for evacuating people with disabilities off an airplane. At present, airlines must have their evacuation plans approved by the FAA, and the "good neighbor" plan is what the FAA has approved for most airlines. The "good neighbor" plan means if you're taken from your personal wheelchair and placed in an airplane seat, and you can't get out of the plane on your own, then the plan is to rely on somebody sitting next to you to help you get off the plane. The flight attendants are not tasked with this duty because it is assumed that they will be too busy assisting everyone else during the evacuation.

Calls To Action: Removing Roadblocks

The following calls to action are for governing authorities involved with emergency management, transportation, and urban planning.

- Inclusive exercises should be done at inopportune times. Only executing drills or exercises during optimal blue-sky conditions does not effectively allow planners to 'break through various threats/risks.' However, conducting exercises at night, across multiple types of transportation systems, and under different weather circumstances could reveal new information about the realistic application of plans. Ensure that disabled actors take on various roles and not just that of a disaster-impacted disabled person.

- Plan for disabled people to join drills as logistics/planning support not just as actors/general participants. In doing so, teams should be compelled to proactively make their processes, communications and execution more accessible and be prepared to also make access adjustments in real time.

- Pay disabled people to join drills and offer feedback.
Disabled folks should not be the only people at the planning tables who aren't being paid to be there/provide expert input. Whenever possible, include such payments/reimbursements in plans and within agreements with subcontractors charged with coordinating emergency exercises.

- Enforcement measures are needed. Attendees report that state and federal authorities periodically provide guidance and recommendations but seldom proceed with concrete consequences for failures to incorporate disability considerations throughout EM plans. Conversely, the enforcement mechanisms that have emerged in recent years were due to lawsuits raised by disability advocacy organizations and disaster survivors with disabilities.

- Hazard mitigation funds should be used to secure custom accessible transportation/infrastructure.
  - Navigational Note: If states receive federal assistance post-disaster, then 6% of those funds must be earmarked for hazard mitigation.

- Identify bottleneck areas that are likely to emerge during evacuations. Try to assess how those zones can be made safer, and what it would take to establish areas of refuge nearby for folks who get trapped while trying to evacuate. This is a major point of consideration for people with disabilities who may need more

assistance with evacuating or who can't simply exit their vehicle and run to safety.

- Get people with disabilities out in advance and change the messaging/culture around evacuations. Attendees advise that people may become disinterested in evacuating, especially if their communities are repeatedly not impacted. Nevertheless, a concerted effort should be made to convince the public that it only takes one time for a disaster to hit and have deadly ramifications. By evacuating consistently, communities can essentially practice their strategies and continue to build on successes while addressing unanticipated problems/failures. Every evacuation is a chance to get it right, save lives, and make actionable improvements.

- Plan for evacuations after an emergency event. Communities that lose power for an extended period, or areas that deal with environmental barriers that linger over time may be faced with additional evacuation support needs. For example, people who choose to shelter-in-place during a storm may not be able to sustain for weeks in an area without power, running water, or other vital resources. Planners must consider what extended evacuations mean for different geographic areas in general, and people with disabilities in particular.

- Provide daily transportation updates via calls with community partners. Calls should convey pertinent details on road/bridge closures, access points for emergency vehicles, gas/fueling stations, pick-up sites, service areas, transportation hubs, etc. Governing authorities should also work alongside disability partners to share updates via social media, email blasts, robo-calls, etc.

- Make sure disabled people are not involuntarily institutionalized. Attendees report that evacuees often fear being transported to mega shelters or institutions and may prematurely return home as a result irrespective of safety conditions.

- Remember that sometimes trust, not transportation, is the problem. Attendees report that some people will not evacuate if they don't trust the systems or agencies managing the evacuation. Or, if they don't trust that those groups will return them home.

- Specify the diversity of need within plans. It is insufficient to use the broad categorization of disability without subsequent data/action points that acknowledge needs specific to different types of disabilities.

- Communicate transportation or shelter plans for farm animals as well as personal pets, emotional support animals, and service animals. Failure to do so can result in individuals choosing not to evacuate even if vehicles/services are available.

- Build trust with disability communities through long-term relationship development. Access and Functional Needs Coordinators should be full-time and fully funded positions within state and county emergency management to aid in accomplishing this goal. With that said, accessibility is also everyone's responsibility. Each department or division involved in evacuations should thus plan with disability access at the forefront.

- Communicate in advance the necessary compromises involved with evacuations. The public should be made aware of shelter limitations, availability of point-to-point transit, travel restrictions, capacity shortages, etc. Officials must not continue to operate with a 'we know best' mentality that mostly ignores the lived experience and expertise of those they serve. Consequently, they too must make concessions when more effective and efficient solutions are suggested by civilians/communities.

- Assess transfer/staging points/drop-off points. Ensure these areas are accessible (e.g., accessible parking, signage, directional signs). This can also include logistical considerations for picking up large groups from points around the community, such as children from schools, or people in institutionalized settings.

- Make sure individuals are not separated from assistive devices during evacuation and transportation. Assistive devices include the iPhone, iPad, Netbook, wheelchair, scooter, hearing aids, etc. Technology provides communication for many individuals. Separation from any assistive device can jeopardize the health, safety, and independence of survivors with disabilities.

- Service Animals: Federal law states service animals must always stay with their owner. Some jurisdictions have animal shelters near human shelters. An operator may ask if an animal is a service animal or ask what tasks the animal has been trained to perform, but cannot require special ID cards or harnesses for the animal, or ask about a person's disability. Other passengers' allergies and fear of animals are not valid reasons to deny access or refuse service to people with service animals.
  - Emotional Support Animals are permitted in emergency shelters and should stay with their owner.

- Avoid heavy reliance on volunteers or on government employees who are classified as emergency workers but may not in fact be able to support.

- Take into account that some persons who require transportation assistance may also be caregivers for others, including minors.

- Plan for re-entry. Establish temporary routes to help with operations and communications with re-entry transportation alternatives.

- Conduct an infrastructure assessment. Individuals with access and functional needs may have a higher need for infrastructure services. Power, water, and accessibility to and within their residence are essential. This includes accessibility to impacted neighborhoods.

- Secure sufficient staff. All vehicles should have a driver and a driver's helper. This speeds up loading and unloading, securing mobility devices, assisting passengers with access and functional needs, and answering customer questions and concerns.

- Ensure appropriate interpretation and translation services are available to aid with effective communication.

- Obtain destination signs/indicators. Display the vehicle's route number and destination, or the route number and name on transit systems using route names. Ensure accessible signage is placed in the front of the vehicle, as well as the windows.

- Account for people with disabilities when arranging transit back and forth from shelters to impacted communities. Some people with disabilities will also need to travel back to document damages in their homes which may not yet be habitable.

- Egos can be the enemy of effective evacuations. Attendees report experiencing many difficulties when attempting to plan with government partners due to ego-driven barriers that impede progress. Problems persist and solutions are stalled when governing authorities value long tenures in service over the lived experience and expertise of civilians with disabilities.

- Understand that political climates can have a direct influence on a person's comfort with evacuating from an area where they feel safe. This is especially important for disabled folks with intersecting identities. Information on safety protocols at shelters and on evacuation vehicles could help people make more informed decisions.

- Explore using evacuation planning areas to support more relevant community and personal preparedness initiatives.
    - Navigational Note: Evacuation Planning Areas (EPAs) are a practice based on using geographic territories to help determine where people are and where they plan to go. The process is more fluid than the rigidity associated with planning based on evacuation zones. Some states/counties can have hundreds of designated zones. Instead, this process encourages folks to focus in and plan within identified areas.

- When identifying potential transportation providers to partner with, jurisdictions should be innovative and think beyond traditional resources. Most communities have more transportation resources than one might initially think.

  Examples of potential transportation partners include:
  - Adult day health care (ADHC), airport rental cars, airport shuttle buses, amusement parks, Area Agencies on Aging, casino shuttles, churches/religious institutions, county fairgrounds shuttles, disability service providers, healthcare centers, hotel shuttles, Centers fo for Independent, private rideshare companies, recreation centers, regional centers, school districts, transportation systems, senior centers, taxi services, tour bus companies, tour companies, etc.
  - It is vitally important to have MOUs or memorandums of agreement (MOAs) in place and to exercise/train with these partners.

More to Explore

The following two sections list research questions proposed by attendees and general questions raised during discussions.

Research Questions

- Is there any research that contains correlation, co-effective, or coefficient markers between jurisdictions that have pre-position contracts with third-party providers?

- Is there any research related to Transportation Network Companies (TNCs)? More specifically, is there a statutory requirement for those TNCs to be accessible and available in disaster evacuations?

- How are micromobility options, such as scooters, e-bikes, etc., being used during disasters?

- What current proof exists that can confirm registries actually work and that they could be a viable resource during a disaster?

- What research exists about the effectiveness of early warning/alert systems for people with disabilities?

- What happens to people with disabilities when emergency plans fail? How are the failures tracked, and how are people with disabilities directly involved in defining what those failures are?

- What happens to aging populations long-term after the evacuations? What prevents them from returning home? How are we monitoring recovery for older adults both within and outside of institutional settings?

- How are emergency and evacuation plans flexed to fit back-to-back disasters that vary in intensity? How frequently is this a problem?

- Is the ability to accurately project a population's need a pervasive problem for governing officials? Or, are we projecting a problem that doesn't exist?

- Are there any good practices for paratransit being used as a successful quick-response evacuation provider?

- How are states providing rapid evacuation support when county plans fail or reach the limit of their internal capacity?

- How can the successful practice of neighbor helping neighbors in rural areas be replicated in urban cities?

- Are emergency managers transparently reporting gaps in response times during and after a disaster event?

- How can emergency management officials better communicate with communities about the raw realities of response capacities as well as the importance of developing an evacuation strategy that is not entirely reliant on emergency services? How often does this messaging need to be repeated and through which communication channel?

- How often are drones with geothermal capabilities used during search and rescue? Are there any successful examples involving disability or access?

- What is the average proportional expansion of transportation needs that happen in the case of different kinds of disasters? More specifically, during events that prohibit the use of designated vehicles (both personal and institutional)?

- How are people with disabilities triaged/prioritized for transportation assistance during an active disaster (i.e., in the community, group homes, nursing homes, jails/prisons, ICE detention centers, etc.)?

- What gender considerations exist for displaced individuals who may have to reside at an emergency shelter indicated for the sole use of women or men?

- How do people with disabilities get alternative DMEs if they are evacuated in a vehicle that forces them to leave their personal devices behind? How soon can a loaner device or replacement be secured?

- What type of decontamination protocols exist to assist people who use mobility devices when navigating through disaster areas with debris, sewage, and other toxins?

- How can we replicate local strategies like carpooling, details on where to find vehicle keys, or skilled operators of those evacuation vehicles?

- How are people with mobility disabilities instructed to evacuate when stuck in traffic and everyone else is perhaps directed to leave their vehicles and walk/run to safety?

- Can we adapt pre-existing resources like the Standardized Emergency Management System (SEMS) to enhance mutual aid efforts between local governments so that in addition to tracking fire and medical resources, the systems can also include accessibility/disability supports?

- Do state and local officials believe they don't need to comply with federal civil rights laws because of home rule?

- Attendees report that organizations like the Association of State Floodplain Managers have been really effective at doing trainings that summarize case law. They also help planners understand where liabilities exist, the risk of failing to plan for people with disabilities as well as where protections are present. Nevertheless, this type of support requires research and continuous investment as new cases arise.

Additional Critical Questions

- Are there ways to deal with the volunteer liability issues in situations that can be dangerous?

- How can we evolve our use of evacuation to consider the process as a round trip rather than a one-way journey?

- Are plans composed primarily using math and assumptions? How often are points of assumption tested and verified as much as possible?

- How can we build fundraising alliances that sustainably support community-led emergency efforts? Particularly rural and other low resourced areas?

- Where do transportation responsibilities sit under emergency support functions? Who has ultimate responsibility within incident management systems of transportation efforts?

- How can we better prepare for short and no-notice evacuation scenarios?

Appendices and Attachments

Appendix A: Discussion Questions

The following questions and facilitator notes were used to help generate and guide Think Tank discussions.

Think Tank attendees were also asked to review and provide feedback on "Transit Evacuation Plans for People with Disabilities: Key Integration Details" found here.

Session 1: Where We Are

1. How much disability-specific detail is currently available and reliably applied in transportation plans and agreements? (projected needs, numbers, available assets, etc.)

2. What paratransit emergency requirements must be integrated into regulations, and how?

3. How detailed are transportation evacuation elements of mutual aid across counties and states? What is missing, needed?

4. How does and would the "home rule" state status affect the State's monitoring of local jurisdictions' abilities?

5. What examples of good practice can you share from a local, state, or regional level about effective monitoring/evaluations of plans?

6. What are the current outstanding research questions related to accessible transit evacuations?

Additional Prompts:

- Can you share more about the experience you mentioned earlier?

- What would you say worked well in the case you just described? What could or should have been done differently?

- What haven't we touched on yet related to these questions?

- Where can we find the resource you referenced? Can you drop it in the chat?

- Does anyone have a story they'd like to share connected to this discussion?

Prompt sentences:

_____ is a prime example of a process that needs to be replicated
_____ is the biggest obstacle that impedes equitable/inclusive transportation evacuations.

Session 2: Where We're Going

What short-, mid-, and long-term advocacy actions are recommended to strengthen inclusive transit evacuations?

Facilitator Notes:

- How can people who need transit evacuation ask for help (using consistent instructions that do not change (phone, text, email) and include two-way communication to share updates and timing?

- Advocate for State (or external) reviews of local plans for agreed-upon specifics. These reviews could involve issuing and monitoring corrective action plans tied to funding.

- Advocate for the development of effective and specific plans that counteract emergency managers' assumption that long-term care facilities and other institutions such as schools, daycare facilities, and correctional facilities have adequate emergency plans simply because state licensing regulations require them. State audits of emergency plans are often cursory and superficial.

- Advocate for strengthening specific and explicit planning guidance such as FEMA's *Developing and Maintaining Emergency Operations Plans, Comprehensive Preparedness Guide (CPG) 101,* Ver. 3, from 2021

What can be done to replace theoretical transit evacuation plans with specific plans?

Facilitator Notes:

- Details to plan safe and accessible transportation evacuations from disaster zones (geographic areas) are often missing in emergency operation plans and annexes, as well as within government departments and agencies.

- Plans tend to be more theoretical than operational, lacking implementation specifics, with numerous instances of vague "plan-to-plan" language (such as could, may, might, will consider, under-development," along with references to vague agreements and contracts), undefined accountability, and unclear distinctions between existing and planned capabilities.

- When asked about these missing details, some emergency managers and planners report:

     o   Concerns and fears about perceived liability and lawsuits if plans are not implemented exactly as written.

     o   Need for operational flexibility.

     o   They know what to do and have detailed plans, even if they are not written

What are specific examples of good transit evacuation practices (formal and informal)?

Facilitator Notes:

- Agreements, contracts, and MOUs with community-based organizations and private sector resources that define specific evacuation responsibilities and processes for payment.

- Specific agreements for reliance on paratransit, school transit, and other transportation assets.

- Strategies for helping the public understand that in large disasters, there is often a long wait (response gap) between when you need help and when police, fire, and other first responders arrive. No matter how strong the local government's disaster evacuation planning is, people need a personal emergency evacuation plan. Government response capacity is limited and rarely speedy, especially during short and no-warning events.