AGING + TRANSIT

America is going gray. By 2030, nearly 20 percent of Americans will be 65 or older, an increase of 6 percentage points from 2015. As we age, we're less likely to drive, necessitating an increased reliance on public transit services. However, from the federal government to transit agencies to cities, we're failing to provide and prepare for the needs of older riders. Lack of viable transportation options denies seniors the ability to fully participate in society, leading to isolation and declining health.

This has material consequences as well. Shifting older transit riders onto paratransit services is pricey, costing agencies $29.30 per trip compared to the average fixed-route trip cost of $8.15. Unreliable transit also means seniors are more likely to miss appointments, costing hospitals millions every year in revenue and productivity loss.

Instead of providing a subpar customer experience at a high cost to the public, agencies should improve the performance and accessibility of core transit service and create feeder services. Costly and inconvenient paratransit service must also be reformed through through improved trip-planning and dispatch systems. By adopting these fixes, agencies can help older residents use transit for many of their needs.

Many of the upgrades that benefit older riders also benefit transit riders as a whole. And while some, like adding elevators and improving maintenance procedures, require capital investments, lessening the paratransit burden ultimately ends up saving agencies money.

Some cities across the country are taking steps to address these issues, but given the magnitude of the current disconnect between aging riders and transportation options, a greater sense of urgency is needed.

What should your transit agency do to prepare for the onset of aging riders?

1. Improve the performance and accessibility of fixed-route transit.

- All-door boarding, transit signal priority, and dedicated bus lanes can dramatically and inexpensively improve the speed and reliability of a city's bus system. San Francisco's Muni Forward program has implemented all three, growing ridership as a result. Providing bus shelters with benches is also especially important to older transit riders.

- Broken sidewalks and missing curb cuts make accessing transit a challenge for seniors in many cities. Denver, Nashville, and Los Angeles Metro have established 'walk to transit' funding programs aimed at accelerating sidewalk construction near important transit stops.

- Older subway and light-rail systems must be made fully compliant with the Americans with Disablities Act. The Chicago Transit Authority has a policy to add elevators whenever it renovates a station, and a plan to reach 100% accessibility. This is in stark contrast to New York City's Metropolitan Transportation Authority (MTA) which has neither.

2. Implement services that cater to riders with varying mobility needs.

- Improving transit walkability is a first step but it doesn't serve everyone - some riders aren't able to walk to stations. Vancouver's TransLink service provides paratransit "feeder trips" whereby customers are picked up at their location and driven to the nearest transit stop. The trips are less than half the cost of door-to-door paratransit trips.

- In Tacoma, Washington, Pierce Transit operates a route deviation service that runs a fixed route between transit nodes, but can leave its route temporarily to pick up or drop off riders by request. This bus is open to the public and is used by commuters and young people as well as older riders.

- In suburban Minneapolis, Southwest Transit provides a fully on-demand service using twelve-passenger vans, with similar farebox recovery to its fixed-route lines.

3. Improve the performance of paratransit through technology & contract oversight.

- Many agencies take paratransit reservations only by phone, and require 24 hour advance notice. Digitization can make the paratransit reservation process more user-friendly. Jacksonville Transit Authority, Dallas Area Rapid Transit and Pinellas-County Transit Authority have all incorporated paratransit booking into trip planning websites.

- Technology can improve dispatch and trip planning, which is often still done manually. Routing software should include traffic data and access APIs to receive real-time information on transit delays and elevator outages.

- 75% of paratransit service is contracted out to private firms, which means service quality depends on contract oversight. A 2016 report from the New York City Comptroller found that the MTA had not effectively monitored contractor performance or penalized the contractors for not meeting on-time performance goals. This problem, however is not unique to New York.