

## INSide the OUTcomes: A Rehabilitation Research Podcast

### Episode 14: Accessible Transportation in the Windy City

#### **SHARON PARMET, HOST:**

Welcome to INSide the OUTcomes: A Rehabilitation Research Podcast. I'm your host, Sharon Parmet. On this episode, we'll be talking about public transportation accessibility and the challenges people disabilities can face when using public transit. I'll be speaking with Dr. Jacqueline Kish, a postdoctoral fellow here in the Center for Rehabilitation Outcomes Research. Jacqueline works in our Rehabilitation Research and Training Center on Home and Community-Based Services. Her previous research and her current interests focus on transportation. I'll also be speaking with Kira O'Bradovich, a disability and community advocate who serves as the treasurer and advocacy committee chair for the Chicago chapter of the National Federation of the Blind of Illinois. She is also a data dissemination specialist for the US Census Bureau. Here's current advocacy work focuses on improving the accessibility of public transit here in Chicago. Welcome to the podcast, Jacqueline and Kira.

I want to start with you, Jacqueline. Can you tell us a little bit about how you became interested in transportation?

#### **JACQUELINE:**

Yes, sure. So I started my career working as an occupational therapist, primarily in an outpatient setting.

I was working with patients over a number of months of fairly long period of time, when considering rehabilitation. And I consistently saw patients having trouble getting to their appointments, getting to them on time. And the hospital that I worked at was in a location that had a bus stop directly outside the front door of the facility. So I started thinking about the robust transportation system that we have in Chicago. And it really pointed me in that direction that there's something going on. Because it wasn't a single patient, it was multiple patients having this challenge. And so this led me then to my PhD in disability studies.

Just for some background, disability studies is an interdisciplinary field, looking at policies and practices of societies to understand social, rather than physical or psychological determinants of the experience of disability. So this is sort of the lens that I began looking at transportation, asking that question of, you know, why people are having a hard time getting to their appointments, and what we might do about it.

#### **SHARON:**

So it was with that kind of observation in mind that kind of took you into your research on transportation in Chicago, using public transit?

#### **JACQUELINE:**

Yeah. So it was with my sort of with that experience and that lens in mind that I moved forward with looking at public transportation access for people with disabilities in Chicago.

#### **SHARON:**

Can you talk about that research a little bit?

#### **JACQUELINE:**

Yeah, sure. So I, my research centered around access and equity in the Chicago public transportation system. And so before I begin, I just want to provide some context about the transit system. I did my research in Chicago because I live here. I really love this city. And because I know that it has a long history, a very strong history of transportation activism by the disability community. They fought hard and long for bus accessibility. And Chicago is a place where people with disabilities continue to advocate for an improved accessible system.

So the transportation system here in Chicago is unique. We have a robust bus service across the city, and that also goes into the suburbs as well. And we also have a subway system, the CTA, or Chicago Transit Authority, is the operator of the mass transit here in Chicago. They started operating in 1947. So it's a legacy system, meaning that it was built before 1975. I think the point there is that the you know, the Chicago Transit Authority is quite old. The infrastructure that we have in Chicago has been there a long time. And so when it comes to accessibility, the most recent legislation for transportation was title two of the Americans with Disabilities Act signed in 1990. And it provided civil rights to people with disabilities, and ensured that people cannot be excluded from transportation based solely on their disability.

The current state of Chicago accessibility is that 100% of the buses and rail cars are accessible. And 103 of the 145 subway stations are also accessible. So that's more than 70%. The CTA have developed a roadmap to improve those systems, and increase accessibility to 100% by 2038, with their All Stations Accessibility program, and so Chicago is truly ahead of the game in many ways. New York subway is around 30% accessible at present. But there's some other places doing better as well, like San Francisco's BART and Washington, DC Metro, which are 100% accessible, meaning that they're completely in compliance with the ADA requirements.

The reason that I'm interested in looking at transportation is because it's such a great connector. Many people use it in order to get to where they need to go. People use it to commute to their jobs, they use it to get to doctor's appointments, they use it to get to social events with friends, family, and loved ones. I think it's especially important for those who don't have access to personal vehicles, because of cost and accessibility of individual cars or other vehicles.

So really, what we know is that many people with disabilities rely on public transportation more than people who don't have disabilities. And we also know that people with disabilities have more barriers to participation in their community in general. So this is really what makes transit so important.

So just to segue into my research and the findings there, in my research project, I focused on fixed route transportation, which included bus and subway primarily. And I really wanted to think about access for people with disabilities, beyond the ADA. The impetus for doing this research in the first place was that people weren't getting to their medical appointments on time. And so I wanted to look at what else in the system was causing difficulty for them. And so I looked at the entire transportation system, through the experiences of 10 people with diverse disabilities.

My PhD really trained me in participatory research methods. And so what I did is I wrote along with participants to places that they already were going to, and I asked them to take pictures of the things that influenced their rides, this could be things that helped them, hindered them, or just impacted the way that they experienced public transportation. So this approach is called Photovoice. And it can give a really nice visual picture alongside a description that can be really powerful in aiding people's understanding of what people's experiences are like.

#### **SHARON:**

So you rode together with folks as they took the train the bus, the sit the CTA, and kind of saw what they saw, saw what their challenges were, what was working, what wasn't working.

#### **JACQUELINE:**

Yeah, so and then I asked them to describe it to me, why it was important and how it impacted their lives. And so the key findings really revealed that the built environment is indeed very important. This is the space that ADA really dictates what it looks like what is required. Accessibility features are important elevators, ramps, auditory announcements, were all vitally, vitally important to not only have but also be in good and good functions. So to to maintain, to repair any sort of broken elevators or address any escalators that were not working was a really important factor for accessibility. I also saw that the social environment on public transportation really impacted when how, why somebody decided to use transportation, things like interactions with other riders, conflicts with bus drivers, attitudes of other folks in the transportation, environment, and rude behaviors. An example is people not clearing the path for someone who used a wheelchair. Those were hugely impactful and really affected people's emotional capacity

when taking the bus or train. I also found that safety and security were important as people with disabilities, risk slips, falls trips, and sometimes collisions with other sort of environmental elements or other people often, they also talked a lot about crime and violence and how those impacted, the choices that they made and the places that they were able to go.

So, I just talked about three environmental contexts that really affected people with disabilities taking transportation. And interestingly, all of these challenges occurred alongside each other, or sometimes in sequence. This made travel very time-consuming, sometimes very challenging, and oftentimes very difficult for people with disabilities. I will say in light of these challenges, I saw some really innovative ways that folks problem solve challenges in the moment, how they made decisions was very complex around their ability to manage a personal risk related to safety and security.

An additional finding related to this project was to identify priorities by the participants themselves, not influenced by me, to improve and brainstorm ways that all of those barriers and all of those environmental contexts might be addressed in advocacy efforts of the disability community. So some of the things that were identified were accessible infrastructure, alternatives to fixed route transportation that were affordable, like more affordable Lyft, or Uber services, and improved disability awareness and a social campaign to address people's attitudes on public transportation. Another thing that would be important was improved information exchange. So getting better notifications when the elevator or escalator were out of service, so that they can make different decisions that would be safer or more convenient for them and their needs.

Ultimately, many of the people that engaged in this research were strong advocates for improved transportation, which is part of what made them willing to ride with me, especially at a time while everyone was still at some risk of COVID-19 during the pandemic. So this is actually how I met Kira, and we've been closely following each other's work to improve transportation ever since.

#### **SHARON:**

So yeah, we talked earlier, in our pre call for this podcast episode about how you met Kira, during your research, she was one of the participants in your research, who rode the CTA along with you. And Kira, I know you live here in Chicago, you take public transportation, and you're somebody that has a disability, which is low vision. Can you talk about some of the challenges that people with disabilities face as they ride the CTA and some of your own challenges when it comes to Chicago public transit?

#### **KIRA:**

Yeah, thank you so much, Sharon, I really appreciate being on here today. And thank you, Jacqueline, for getting me involved with your research project. And I think that many people with disabilities, especially those of us that want to travel independently, inevitably become staunch advocates, because it is such a such a critical thing for us.

So I just want to make you all aware to let you know about some of our census data so you do have a little bit of a picture of what the city looks like specifically when it comes to those living in Chicago who are disabled. And so according to our most recent American Community Survey, one year data estimates, it's estimated that about 12.5% of people that are living in Chicago are disabled, and nearly 72,000 of them have a vision difficulty or have said that they have one. And since you know, vision is essential to driving, public transit is truly essential for our like day to day life for work for fun for any reason, public transit is what we need.

So I'd love to share, as you mentioned a few of my own challenges, but then also some of the challenges of those that are part of my organization. I'm a member of the National Federation of the Blind of Illinois. As you mentioned, nationally, we are the nation's largest organization by have and for blind people, and blind encompasses low vision, that encompasses totally blind, there's a whole spectrum of blindness. And so we welcome everyone who is interested in learning more about our organization. For the purposes of the rest of podcasts, they will refer to them as the NFB for me with transit just in general. Part of my low vision really includes my double vision. And that can be a huge issue. As I know Jacqueline was aware as we were going through with boarding and deboarding the buses and especially be a being able to access transportation information. So being able to find out what bus I'm getting on,

being able to find out what direction it's going in, being able to know how many minutes I have to get to the L before it departs, being able to know what line is stopping next. So a lot of those things are really critical for us. And so that information is something that we need to have access to. So we've done a lot of work in my legislative and advocacy committee as a part of the chapter in getting feedback from members of the NFB many of whom have in the past, or still currently, many of whom frequently use the CTA to get around, we even actually have students that are a part of one of our summer programs, our belt program, actually utilizing and coming to Chicago wherever they are, and learning how to use the L and learning how to use the bus.

So it's really important for us that we can make sure everyone is independent. And when we're on those buses, when we're on those trains, we need to have announcements. And that's something that I see just across the spectrum for everyone. That is helpful it is there's so much intersectionality between the needs of the abled and the needs of the disabled. And I think there's so many things that prior to being visually impaired, I didn't realize were helping me already. I loved them, but didn't realize they were also helping other people. And so like, say you're going to another country, and you're on a bus. And I remember one time I was in Luxembourg, and I don't understand Luxembourgish. And I'm trying to find this bee farm that I'm couch surfing on. And I have no idea what's going on. But I know what the stop sounds like, right? So I'm listening, listening, listening, I can't see the signs outside because they're too far away in general. But hearing you know that stuff that I need, I'm able to get off at the right stop in the middle of nowhere farmland. And so it can be so important that if you do rely on audible sounds to get around that you have that or if you are an able bodied person, it can be really helpful in a lot of different situations. And we get we are a global city. So just increasing information in as many ways as possible can often benefit everyone.

And that's one of the things that I think is exciting about the new digital signage that the CTA has put up at L stops just completely across the city. They're providing real time. So they're telling you, you know, they're six minutes until the next red line arrives, they've installed those in multiple areas of the L stop. So they've installed them in, you know, the main area where you walk in. And then they've also installed a lot of them on the tracks themselves. Our chapter has worked a long time with the city with the CTA, and in one of our former meetings discussing this. We did ask regarding those, those signs if they had plans to add an audio option. So if they were going to turn on the speaker system, to allow people in the station to also hear what's being put on the signs because according to the ADA, that is information that we are supposed to be able to have access to. So we were informed that yes, indeed, they have audio built into them. But they have not yet turned that audio on. So that's one of the things that we're working towards. But I know that if you're on that those stairs and you're trying to get to the top, and you hear that there's one minute you know until the train arrives, then you know you need to run right. And that's really helpful because sometimes you might not hear it. And so that would be great information, I think for everybody to have.

**SHARON:**

If I heard that there was one minute to my train, I don't know if I would run or if I would just sigh and realize that I have to wait for the next train because my cardiovascular fitness isn't there yet.

**KIRA:**

But then you get to make the decision.

**SHARON:**

Right, exactly. So Kira, I know that you're currently working with the CTA to improve their efforts to make the CTA more accessible and easier to use for people with low vision. Can you tell us a little bit about how the CTA is working to improve accessibility and your involvement in those efforts?

**KIRA:**

Yeah, so I think sort of as Jacqueline mentioned, Chicago is unique in its work to focus on accessibility within the CTA. And we're fortunate enough to actually have an ADA advisory committee that is a part of the CTA. And that is comprised of disabled Chicagoans you can apply to be on it, and they choose people. And there's different terms that they serve. And sometimes they've expanded. So that's ever changing. But I definitely encourage anyone interested to look into joining. And we are as an organization or just in general as the public, you are able to interact with

this advisory committee by submitting what's called a public comment. So they're on their website, you're able to email or you're able to call and submit a public comment regarding any issues with accessibility. So if you're having issues with by as we've been talking about, you know, with audio announcements, for instance, at the at the L stops, you are able to submit that and so we've submitted a number of those public statements over the years, and it's really a way for us to advocate for those improvements.

And one of the big things that we've been working on lately has been the need and the requirement that under the ADA at a stop where there is more than one line that stops there. Those at the stop are required to have information as to what line is currently stopping what line is arriving. And that way you don't get on, for instance, you remember I got on the line one time when I did not mean to. And that's when I was able bodied, I just walked on, because I thought it was the Red Line. So having that information posted somewhere, knowing that it's a multiple bus or L stop is really essential.

So we are, we've been working on trying to get them to give more information more accessibly on that information on that topic. And if you think about the Loop, for instance, you have a ton of bus stops that just have, you know, four or five, six buses. So it's really important that blind people are able to identify them. And that's something that we felt we needed to have addressed. And we were really excited. Because while addressing this, we learned that actually the CTA advisory committee had received a grant. And it was specifically focused on installing better signage at bus stops. So they have begun their process of installing tactile signs that are about four by six in size. And they're supposed to be centered on the bus stop pole. And they're also supposed to be lower down. So kind of at your I'm about five two, are kind of at my at my neck level, and they say Bus Stop in both Braille and raised typeface.

So one of the things I do want to point out about the NFB about my organization is that we're focused on allowing everyone to be independent. And we adore technological advancements, we love accessible technology, we are all about the new app, AI, all these different things that are happening. But we know that not everyone has access to this technology. And that's really critical at the end of the day, because sometimes technology fails, right? Sometimes you're in lower Wacker and your GPS does not work, right? There are so many spaces throughout our city that that might not necessarily work or you don't have a smartphone to look at Google, you don't have the ability to find out where you are that way. So we were really excited when they announced these signs, because we really hope that they were going to provide some information about the stop itself. We specifically assumed that there would be a bus number and a direction included. And that's helpful for everyone, right, because if you know the bus system, you know that if it's 49 North that you're on Western, and that you are, you know, on a certain side of the street. And so that can help not just navigate if you're going to use the bus, but if you're blind, and you're walking somewhere, and you do pass that 72 And you know that you're on North Avenue, or that you're not, you're on 70, and oh no, I'm on Division, right, I need to walk up north to get to, you know, it's such a great tool to have.

So this is something that we really were hoping would be on the sidelines. But unfortunately, after they rolled out and announced them, and we found out only the word Bus Stop was included. And while we do understand that the reason for this was most likely because they wanted to make these in mass, right, they wanted to use the money to put as many signs up as possible, finding bus stops, has not been a common complaint among our members lately, and it has not been currently something that we hear people complaining about. However, knowing what bus stop they're at, has been. And part of that actually goes back to those auditory issues where there are a lot of buses aren't even announcing audibly, what bus they are when they stop. So not only do you not know what bus you're getting on, you have to ask which we shouldn't have to do. And you also have to, you have to rely on a sign that you're unable to see. So it was a great first step in putting these signs there. And we definitely think that there's a next step that can be taken.

So we've met with the CTA advisory committee chair, we've met with the commissioner. And we've worked to advocate for that change. And while you know, many have expressed support, have that idea of adding information. Unfortunately, now that they've received a second grant, they still have not taken up any conversation or moves to change their plan. So at the end of last year, in 2023, the NFB began a letter writing campaign, we created a template and we sent in those letters to the public statement, email address, and we had dozens and dozens of letters. We invited partners across the community, so not just NFB. We invited Access Living, lots of other organizations to participate. And thanks to those efforts, we did find out that there will be some discussion regarding our concerns.

And so we really are excited that they are willing to consider this now. And we really hope that there could be an easier solution.

So for instance, attaching something to that sign that would give that information. We absolutely understand that it might be cheaper, as we said to do the whole thing at once. But some of the other solutions that they had were things like QR codes and I think that kind of takes us back again to we want this to be accessible for everyone. And that also it goes beyond disability. Right? Right. It also goes beyond that. And even if you are disabled and you do have a smartphone, you might not know how to use the technology to make it accessible. So, we're really hopeful. And we're going to keep working and sending in public statements and advocating that, that this gets taken care of, among many other issues. But that's one of our key things right now.

**SHARON:**

I look forward to seeing those changes at the bus stops and other places. Because yeah, as you said, just naming that it's a bus stop seems to be just not enough. A great start. And as a pilot project, maybe it proves that they can be attached to the bus stop, but they need to have more information to be really useful. Kira, can you talk a little bit about how people can get involved in your advocacy if they'd like to if they're interested in accessibility and public transportation in Chicago?

**KIRA:**

Absolutely. So even though our letter writing campaign has ended, if you do want to send a public comment and you'd like a template to look at, to kind of know what we're advocating for, and please feel free to personalize it is you know, your, your advocacy, you can definitely reach out to the NFB, you can reach out at info at NFB OF Illinois dor org. And that, that will take us to our main admin email which I can actually access. So I'm happy to send that to you. And then of course, if you want to get involved at doing your own public comment, as I noted on the CTA website, they have a form you can fill out. They also have the email and phone number of the people that you would need to reach out to submit a public comment on your own.

So we also would love if you're ever interested in joining the NFB of Illinois or working with us or working on our committee, we definitely welcome you to check out our website, which is [www dot NFB of illinois.org](http://www.dot.NFBofillinois.org)

**SHARON:**

Thank you so much Kira, and also Jacqueline for being on INside the OUTcomes. It's been great having you here.

**KIRA:**

Thank you so much.

**JACQUELINE:**

Thank you, Sharon.

**SHARON:**

This has been INside the OUTcomes: A Rehabilitation Research Podcast. This podcast is supported by the National Institute on Disability, Independent Living and Rehabilitation Research. This is your host Sharon Parmet, signing off.