December 17, 2021

U.S. Department of Transportation

1200 New Jersey Ave., SE

Washington D.C. 20590

Dear Secretary Pete Buttigieg:

The National Disability Rights Network (NDRN) thanks the U.S. Department of Transportation (DOT) for the opportunity to submit comments to the Request for Public Comments (RPC) concerning the Draft DOT Strategic Framework for FY2022-2026. Transportation is an issue especially impactful to the disability community, and NDRN is excited to see what advancements can be made.

NDRN is the non-profit membership association of Protection and Advocacy (P&A) agencies that are located in all 50 States, the District of Columbia, Puerto Rico, and the United States Territories. In addition, there is a P&A affiliated with the Native American Consortium which includes the Hopi, Navajo and San Juan Southern Paiute Nations in the Four Corners region of the Southwest. P&A agencies are authorized under various federal statutes to provide legal representation and related advocacy services, and to investigate abuse and neglect of individuals with disabilities in a variety of settings.

The P&A Network comprises the nation’s largest provider of legally-based advocacy services for persons with disabilities, including advocacy on accessible transportation to ensure people with disabilities who want to live in the community can do so. NDRN supports the goals that the DOT has highlighted in this draft and appreciates the chance comment on the following sections.

1. What strategies or priorities should the U.S. DOT adopt to achieve the Department's strategic goals and objectives?

DOT should place a priority on access to transportation for persons with disabilities. The strategic goals emphasize three components that can positively benefit the lives of persons with disabilities: equity, safety, and future design. However, in order to maximize the positive impacts on the lives of persons with disabilities, accessibility and the needs of persons with disabilities must be knit into the priorities of DOT.

First, equity cannot be fully achieved unless access to people with disabilities is accomplished. People with disabilities include members of all ages, races and ethnicities, genders, and sexual orientations; any person can become disabled at any time. As a result, equity in transportation must include access to Americans with disabilities; it then intersects with many other communities of people. Also, the disability community is the largest minority group in the United States. Statistics often state that one out of every six, or one out of every five Americans has a disability. To attain true equity, the needs of people with disabilities in the transportation space must be addressed.

Next, when implementing new safety goals, DOT must prioritize travelers with disabilities. People with disabilities generally use public transit more than others; many people with disabilities cannot drive a personal vehicle. As a result, DOT must consider safety implications on public transit for this community. Furthermore, because people with disabilities use public transit in different ways than the general population. For instance, a height or width of a doorway may generally be designed for an ambulatory passenger, not a wheelchair user. Consequently, to ensure safety, DOT must prioritize the needs of people with disabilities to prevent accidents.

One example of this concern has come up with the development of autonomous vehicles and their interaction with people on the road. The vehicles themselves need to accommodate wheelchair users as well as people with other disabilities. Sensors on the vehicles may be able to detect a pedestrian walking across the street, but many are concerned that the sensors are not designed to detect pedestrians who use wheelchairs and are consequently lower to the ground.

Finally, DOT must keep in mind the needs of people with disabilities when prioritizing future design. For instance, the advent of autonomous vehicles is exciting and may open many doors for persons with disabilities who cannot drive a traditional automobile. However, if accessibility features, such as accessible human machine interface (HMI) is not included, this exciting new form of transportation may leave the entire disability community behind inadvertently.

3. What emerging challenges or opportunities in transportation warrant additional U.S. DOT activities or investments?

Emerging technology in transportation warrants ongoing work by DOT to open new opportunities for people with disabilities. The world of autonomous vehicles and other twenty-first century technology can open up many doors for persons who traditionally cannot drive a car. For instance, a truly autonomous car will enable a blind person to travel independently without the assistance of another human being. This could have significant positive implications for the American economy. For instance, a significant portion of Americans with disabilities are unemployed and one of the main reasons for this is lack of access to transportation to get to the workplace. If people with disabilities suddenly had an accessible form of transportation to get to work, more people would be employed. It is easy to see how a higher number of employed people would have a positive impact on the nation’s economy. Therefore, DOT should continue work in this area to assist in improving the country’s unemployment rate and growth in the economy.

But, to ensure that such technology is accessible to people with disabilities, they need to design the transportation with accessibility features in mind. As a result, DOT must continue to research and design such projects. It is important that accessibility is baked into the design of technology; going back and retrofitting technology with accessibility features is often clunky and less effective.

4. How can U.S. DOT best coordinate its activities with Federal, State, local, tribal, labor, private sector, academic, non-profit, international and other stakeholders?

As is routinely stated, DOT should work directly with people with disabilities. Only members of the disability community can accurately describe the needs and experiences of those with disabilities; scientists or engineers can unintentionally make wrong assumptions about the lived experiences of people with disabilities. Therefore, a first-hand experience is greatly necessary. Additionally, the lived experiences of people with disabilities also varies widely depending on the socio-economic and geographic background of the person.

For instance, Native American persons with disabilities who live in tribal nations have a different experience with traffic infrastructure; they often have to walk for miles on rural roads to get to necessary resources. As a result, the transportation experiences of these individuals are different than people with disabilities who may live in a densely populated city with major public transit options. Consequently, DOT must do more than just talk to a person with a disability, but instead must talk to people with disabilities from a whole spectrum of backgrounds. Often, the most marginalized communities are left out of the conversation. However, these are the communities that need to be included the most in major transportation conversations. DOT should make a greater effort to reach out to underserved communities.

5. How can U.S. DOT best utilize additional programs and authorities in the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act to accomplish the goals laid out in the strategic plan?

When allocating funds from the infrastructure bill, DOT must ensure that state and local governments who acquire the funding think broadly about how the funding will be used and its overall impact on the community. For instance, when improving upon transportation, it is common for states and counties to want to improve upon streets and highways. Although this is an important form of transit in the United States, many Americans utilize other forms of transportation. People with disabilities need access to frequent, and of course, accessible bus and rail systems. Consequently, as counties and states apply for grants and receive funding under the infrastructure bill, it is imperative that governments think broadly about the needs of all residents, not just a narrow view of what transportation is.

Thank you again for the opportunity to comment on this RPC. If you have any follow-up inquiries, please contact Claire Stanley, public policy analyst, at 202 567-3501, or Claire.stanley@ndrn.org.

Sincerely,



Curtis L. Decker

Executive Director