

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

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.



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 was 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

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