

Elevating equity in Vision Zero communications:

A white paper framing the challenges & opportunities

November 2016

Prepared by
Vision Zero Network

Acknowledgments

The Vision Zero Network would like to thank the tireless city staff, community advocates, police officers, elected officials and social justice thought leaders who have helped to elevate conversations around equity and traffic safety in communities across the country. In particular, we're grateful to the following experts who provided thoughtful guidance and review in the preparation of this document: Tamika Butler, Marco Conner, Naomi Doerner, Adonia Lugo, Anand Subramanian, and Megan Weir.

Elevating equity in Vision Zero communications: A white paper framing the challenges & opportunities

Summary

Vision Zero is an approach to traffic safety that is gaining momentum across the U.S. Showing impressive results since it was started in the early 1990s in Sweden, Vision Zero holds that we, as a society, have an ethical responsibility to do all that we can to keep people safe as they move about their communities. Vision Zero sets the goal of zero traffic fatalities and severe injuries among all road users and calls for greater collaboration among diverse stakeholders to design and implement strategies to achieve this goal.

In terms of advancing equity in our transportation systems, the Vision Zero approach presents both opportunities and challenges. The goals of this white paper are to help the San Francisco Municipal Transportation Agency and its local partners, as well as peer agencies across the U.S., both to communicate effectively about their Vision Zero efforts as they relate to equity and social justice and to utilize communications strategies to help ensure an equitable approach and outcomes in their efforts. The considerations and suggestions here are intended to help stakeholders participating in internal (within and between city agencies) and external Vision Zero conversations frame and share ideas effectively as they work to advance safe, equitable mobility.

Social, racial, and economic inequality in the U.S. are deeply embedded systemic and institutional problems that reach far deeper than the realms of transportation and traffic safety. Yet it is well documented that residents of low-income neighborhoods and communities of color are injured and killed by traffic violence at higher rates than residents of other communities. Furthermore, we are witnessing increasingly urgent

awareness and attention from community members, civic leaders, and the media to the issue of traffic safety as a social justice and civil rights issue. Cities have an obligation to address this fact in their traffic safety work. This is particularly true for burgeoning Vision Zero efforts, given recent, highly-publicized violence that has shone a spotlight on systemic inequities in traffic law enforcement and racial tensions across the country.

In addition to economic and racial justice implications, there is an equity consideration around vulnerable road users. Research shows that children, seniors, people with disabilities, and people walking and riding bikes also suffer disproportionately from unsafe traffic conditions. Most of the discussion in this report is focused on racial inequity and traffic safety in communities of color, but it is important to acknowledge that equity is not only an issue tied to race or income.

Elevating and framing equity issues effectively and strategically is key to advancing Vision Zero – and conversely, ignoring or mishandling these issues could impede efforts to improve traffic safety.

Elevating and framing equity issues effectively and strategically is key to advancing Vision Zero – and conversely, ignoring or mishandling these issues could impede efforts to improve traffic safety. There are a number of promising developments relating to equity and Vision Zero. The initiative’s core principle of data-driven decision making helps direct traffic safety interventions where they can have the

greatest positive effect, and can also shine a brighter light on existing inequities in our transportation systems. So far, in U.S. cities, this spotlight has helped to better prioritize design solutions and resources at locations that disproportionately experience traffic safety problems, which are more likely to be in vulnerable and underserved communities. Vision Zero has been very effective at galvanizing new advocates and partnerships across disciplines that bring more resources and urgency to the effort of prioritizing mobility equity. Today, more and more people in U.S. cities (including policymakers, community leaders, and media) are talking about safe mobility as a right.

But Vision Zero’s same data-driven approach can also be misapplied to justify inequitable traffic law enforcement. While data may inform focused enforcement in specific neighborhoods that disproportionately experience traffic safety problems, research and experience show that focused geographic enforcement without sufficient public trust can result in degradation of police and community relationships. Understanding and acknowledging that traffic safety stops, which allow for a higher-than-average level of officer discretion, can be a slippery slope for more aggressive police action – especially in light of recent, high-profile cases and reports that have

highlighted this practice and its impact on communities of color – is one of the greatest challenges to communicating about and effectively implementing Vision Zero. There is significant data now available (including recent reports from San Francisco and Oakland - see the Resources section) that raises serious questions about equity in routine traffic stops.

Vision Zero is still a new concept in the United States. Its strategies and messages are still evolving. Accordingly, this white paper does not claim to offer easy solutions, but rather aims to provoke awareness and suggest approaches to help San Francisco and other Vision Zero cities acknowledge and communicate effectively about critically important equity issues that are integral to advancing Vision Zero. We hope this document can be a catalyst for helpful conversations among city leaders and others implementing Vision Zero, as well as the communities they serve.

To shape a multi-disciplinary understanding and framing of the equity issues around Vision Zero, we interviewed experts in public health, social justice, community advocacy, city government, and media. We also reviewed Vision Zero planning and strategy documents from early-adopter U.S. cities, paying particular attention to communication and outreach strategies.

While the organizational structures, levels of commitment to Vision Zero, and equity issues vary by city, the communications themes around equity as they relate to traffic safety are largely shared. We also believe that each U.S. Vision Zero city has the potential to learn from others, as well as from other disciplines, particularly other public health-related efforts. For this paper, we separate our ideas, questions, and suggestions into the following six issue areas:

- 1) **Building equity into internal communications:** Bringing everyone within the city bureaucracy onto the same page.
- 2) **The importance of using the right language:** Word choices matter.
- 3) **Emphasizing the safe systems approach:** Designing & communicating about a more forgiving road system that acknowledges human fallibility.
- 4) **Communicating about the need for equitable law enforcement:** Building trust between police and the community and using data to improve safety.
- 5) **Facilitating meaningful community engagement:** Finding the right community partners and moving beyond traditional public process.

- 6) **Aligning the message with the messenger:** It's not just what is said, but who's saying it.

Each of these areas presents both opportunities and challenges to creating a more equitable safety culture in our transportation systems and our communities. While implementation in a communications context will vary, it should be a useful exercise for any city's communications strategy team to ask how it plans to address each of the issue areas in its Vision Zero efforts.

Of course, leaders in the Vision Zero and broader traffic safety movements are by no means the only professionals wrestling with how to integrate equity into public policy. Public health, urban planning, architecture, housing, and social services are all related fields where tools for advancing equity outcomes are being developed and integrated into practice. Some of these resources are included at the end of this report.

1) Building equity into internal communications

More than many citywide initiatives, Vision Zero demands deep and meaningful collaboration and coordination across multiple city departments to reach a shared goal. Buoyed by public mayoral leadership, most cities that have had success building internal support around Vision Zero have some kind of organized committee or task force with senior-level staff representation from key departments, including leadership from the Transportation/Public Works, Mayor's Office, Public Health and Police agencies, and in some cases other key agencies as well. Aligning different organizational cultures within the city bureaucracy and sustaining Vision Zero leadership beyond the initial public announcement is as important a communications task as external marketing and should be taken as seriously in terms of planning, strategy, and budget. Integrating equity awareness, needs and prioritization into this foundational and ongoing work amongst city leaders and implementers is critical.

The city's Vision Zero leadership committee should prioritize early awareness of equity considerations by collecting, analyzing, and sharing the data that reflects on the local traffic safety and equity situations. This data may yield deeper insight into how current conditions, policies, and programs affect certain communities, such as seniors, children, communities of color, low-income populations, people with disabilities, people walking, or people bicycling. Having a clear grasp — from the start, as a group united to work toward Vision Zero — of how these more vulnerable or traditionally underserved

communities are impacted by the transportation system and choices made about related issues will help set a common level of understanding as efforts move forward.

This discussion may bring some uncomfortable truths to light. It will be important to frame this work not as a finger-pointing opportunity, but rather a chance to internally shape Vision Zero conversations with a shared awareness of circumstances and areas with room to improve. It will also help to prepare these city leaders with the facts and build their confidence in their own level of knowledge as they turn toward engaging the community, not to mention their own internal teams.

Strategy: Crafting an internal communications guide that emphasizes equity concerns

“Being on the same page” internally and communicating that message consistently can be two different and challenging things, particularly since each of the city departments with a Vision Zero role may have separate communications departments within them, each with distinct personnel, work styles, and goals. To address this challenge, we recommend that, ideally in the early stages of the Vision Zero process, communications staff lead the creation of an internal communications guide with all of the agencies involved in implementation. This guide should not only include language and branding standards, but should also educate Vision Zero team members about the local traffic safety situation and how it impacts vulnerable and traditionally underserved communities and build a shared language around that issue. This is a critical opportunity to build communications capacity by combining data and storytelling to create a common understanding of Vision Zero needs among city stakeholders across departments and at all levels.

A city should expect to spend a significant amount of time promoting the internal Vision Zero communications guide, including through brown bag presentations, citywide staff email blasts, and direct one-on-one conversations with key change agents in each of the relevant departments. Unifying the language and message (delivered from diverse voices and based on clear data) internally across departments will help to build internal, and ultimately public, understanding of and confidence in Vision Zero and its relationship to equity concerns.

“The internal culture shift was something we didn’t quite take seriously enough, at first,” recalls Megan McClaire, who helped launch Boston’s Vision Zero program as part of the City’s Public Health Commission, reflecting on the common challenges of building rapport and buy-in across the many departments tasked with Vision Zero implementation. “The bureaucratic process takes a lot of time and energy, but in the end it helped us do a better job of standardizing (public) outreach across departments.”

If equity considerations are raised early and often within the city’s leadership committee and their respective staff teams, they can be more seamlessly integrated into regular, ongoing conversations and

VISION ZERO NETWORK

efforts. It is also important that the key individuals on the Vision Zero leadership team – ideally the Mayor and her/his designee – are aware of and are actively communicating about equity considerations and priorities for the city. This leadership will set the tone for all to follow.

For communities like San Francisco that are relatively far along in their Vision Zero goal-setting work, it will be important to set up the opportunity for regular check-ins and discussions of how the work is or is not addressing the key areas of concern regarding equity. For many cities, the public health department may be best situated to lead these conversations, as it is likely to have the most detailed safety data as well as a deeper understanding of the social determinants of health and safety. Regardless of which agency is designated to lead regular conversations and check-ins regarding Vision Zero equity goals, it is most important that all participating agencies (and senior staff involved) participate and that there is a shared understanding of the challenges and opportunities. The “one message, many voices” approach from city department staff and political leaders makes for stronger communications and community engagement, which all interview subjects agreed are key to advancing equity in our transportation systems.

It will be helpful for the internal task force to set ambitious metrics for self-evaluation. Having specific goals related to Vision Zero and equity — and reporting on them regularly — will provide accountability and help define success around equity priorities in a tangible way. Include both qualitative and quantitative metrics in self-reporting. The narrative experiences of community residents should be highlighted alongside traffic and safety data.

In summary, if City leaders prioritize building equity awareness and goals into their Vision Zero efforts, then that work must begin with – and be repeatedly emphasized amongst – the internal city staff leading the planning, programmatic, and policy work. These internal communications should come from the top with strong directives and be sustained throughout the Vision Zero efforts with clear internal communications to build buy-in across the city.

Portland: Placing Equity Front and Center

An example of placing equity front and center in Vision Zero planning and communications is Portland, Oregon’s explicit and recurring inclusion of equity goals within its Vision Zero planning documents and commitment statements. In late 2016, Portland’s City Council adopted a Vision Zero Action Plan that places an unprecedented emphasis on equity in its vision and principles. Some of the highlights:

1) The Plan puts equity front and center in its vision statement and top-level guiding principles:

- *Portland’s Vision Zero vision statement:* “Working together, we will take equitable and data-driven actions that will eliminate serious injuries and deaths for all who share Portland streets by 2025.”
- *From Portland’s Vision Zero Action Plan guiding principles:* The plan will be equitable:
 - It will address the disproportionate burden of traffic fatalities and serious injuries on communities of concern, including people of color, low-income households, older adults and youth, people with disabilities, people with limited English proficiency, and households with limited vehicle access;
 - It will prioritize filling gaps in infrastructure where those gaps contribute to fatalities and serious injuries, or limit the transportation options of communities of concern;
 - It will not result in racial profiling.

2) The Plan emphasizes collecting equity data to address the factors that lead to serious injury and death on Portland’s roadways:

- Equity data – including demographic data and infrastructure gaps – will be used to ensure the plan prioritizes the needs of underserved communities.

3) The Plan will be accountable, setting out clear equity-related objectives and measuring performance against them:

- Progress will be communicated in annual reports and in an easily accessible dashboard;
- Success will be measured by the level of investment in underserved communities, equity outcomes and safety metrics.

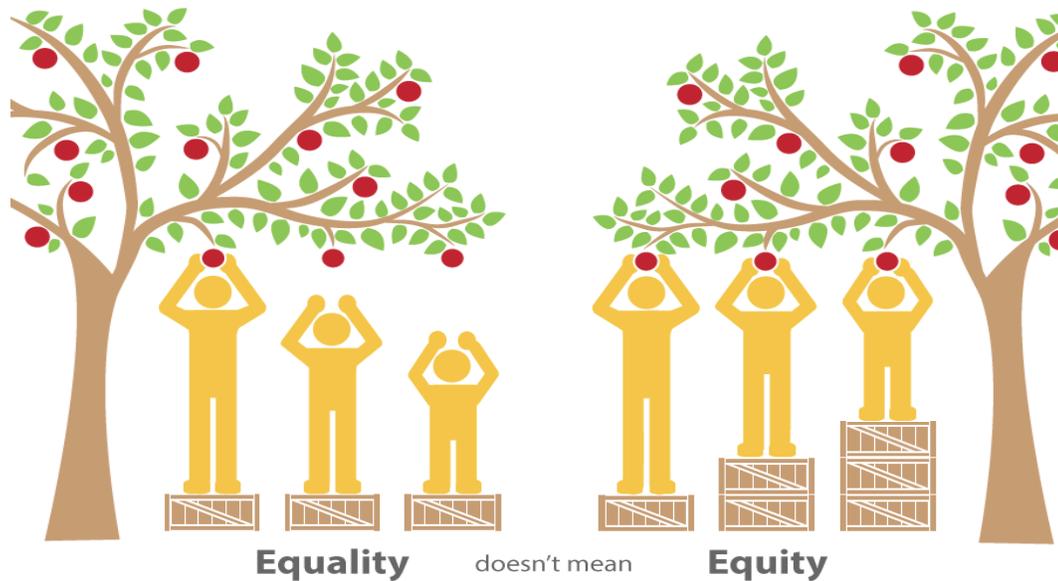
In addition, the Action Plan reinforces the commitment established in Portland’s 2015 Vision Zero Council Resolution to develop assurances against racial profiling. The resolution directs the Vision Zero Safety Committee to implement tools that “ensure that communities of color, police bureau and community leadership are included in the decision-making and development of enforcement plans or policies.”

2) The importance of using the right language

Word choice is one of the most powerful ways to frame a conversation and influence culture, both internally (among city staff members and influential policymakers) and externally (among the public). The Vision Zero movement itself has grappled with language issues in its campaign to use the word “crash” instead of “accident” to describe a collision between road users. This campaign is emerging as a promising effort to change the public mindset around the inevitability of traffic deaths and severe injuries. Similarly, the initiative encourages the use of words that emphasize the humanity of road users (preferring “a man driving a car” rather than “a driver” or “a car”) to help shape a narrative that includes real people with agency instead of reinforcing a disempowering sense of inevitability around traffic violence.

Equity presents another wording conundrum. It can be a challenging topic to talk about: not only are equity discussions fraught with complex and sensitive subjects such as racial bias, poverty, justice, and entitlement, but there is often not even a shared understanding of what the word means. Of course, that doesn't mean Vision Zero advocates should avoid the topic; instead, communications strategies should be designed to be conscious and specific with word choices and should not make assumptions about how any given audience understands equity as it relates to Vision Zero. That clarity should extend up the city's leadership ladder, laying out a consistent way for city staff and public officials to contribute to productive conversations around traffic safety with a range of audiences, including the media.

As Vision Zero plans in a city unfold, it's important to talk with key internal and external stakeholders about the definitions of and distinctions between equity and equality. Both have “fairness” as a goal. But while equality means treating everyone the same regardless of starting points, equity can be understood as treating people deliberately in order to ensure the fairest possible outcomes. For the purposes of this paper, we find this well-circulated graphic to be a useful way to understand the differences between equity and equality:



Community View Collaboration, Saskatoon,

Vision Zero efforts should be clear and explicit about what kind of equity it is prioritizing. Traditionally, in many cities, there's a de facto expectation of geographic equity when it comes to allocating transportation resources or implementing programs. The reality, though, is that while this approach may be more appealing to a sense of political equality (i.e. each City Council district getting “equal” attention and resources), it does not address the fact that data show that not all geographic areas are starting at the same place. For instance, some neighborhoods have historically less traffic safety infrastructure investments over time, and/or carry far more auto trips and related impacts, so they experience higher rates of traffic violence and deserve more than “equal” attention and resources to address problems. Vision Zero's data-driven approach is a useful way to address this potential lack of equity in local transportation systems.

Another challenging language issue is even more basic: how to talk about the different communities who have a stake in traffic safety conversations. Word choice relating to race and ethnicity can be confusing and intimidating to some, sometimes to the point where important discussions are avoided for fear of causing offense. As a result, much-needed productive and direct conversations about how to advance traffic safety for all, particularly those who may have been traditionally underserved in the past, may not happen.

In Vision Zero communications, as in other areas, the best practice is to acknowledge and deal with this challenge openly and directly, starting with building a common language around equity challenges and opportunities. Developing and sharing common language via the Vision Zero communications guide (see above) is a way to approach this.

Vision Zero community partners working in related fields (such as the areas of social justice; civil rights; disability rights; advocacy for seniors, children, people bicycling and walking) should have a role in developing word choice relating to equity considerations. These partners can share insight on the most appropriate and culturally-sensitive language, tone, and general means of delivery (for instance, consideration of the most effective messengers). Take the time to reach out to equity advocates (even if they're not explicitly working on transportation issues) in your region to invite them into conversations and to understand their recommendations for language in Vision Zero efforts. For more information about how to talk about race in constructive and productive ways, see the "Race Matters" resource linked at the end of this report.

3) Emphasizing the safe systems approach

Vision Zero represents a fundamental shift in how we approach traffic safety. While traditional approaches emphasize crash prevention and individual responsibility and de-emphasize the underlying causes of crashes and degree of human suffering, Vision Zero is a people-centered *Safe System approach*. That means it acknowledges and factors in human fallibility and vulnerability and aims

Strategy: Framing speed management with local media

Vision Zero leaders, ideally a mix of city staff and community members, should set up meetings with the editorial boards of local media to explain the safe systems approach. This is important, in part, because it will be advantageous for these influencers to understand and be able to communicate about this approach as Vision Zero communities embark on controversial policies, such as speed management strategies that are proven to save lives (including the use of automated speed enforcement and lowering speed limits). Without the basic understanding of why effective speed management is critical to advancing Vision Zero, these strategies are likely to be dismissed as heavy-handed and unfair. Yet, if they are properly framed as well-tested means to save lives and improve the quality of the user's experience on the street, they are more likely to garner support. The same can be said of changes to roadway designs and other policy and programmatic efforts.

to create a more forgiving road system. It also looks more directly “upstream,” taking a public health approach to emphasize the system designers’ responsibilities (including policymakers, traffic planners and engineers, police officers, etc.) over individuals’ behaviors and choices.

The Vision Zero systems approach moves us away from unintentional but harmful “victim-blaming” to instead look at the fundamental systems and policies in place (or lacking) that encourage (or discourage) certain behaviors. This is particularly relevant as it relates to traditionally underserved and vulnerable populations. For instance, because data often shows people biking or walking being disproportionately harmed in traffic, one could draw the conclusion that more people biking and walking are not behaving safely. But a deeper-dive into the built environment and policies that show who is being affected and where (based on data) will likely show some underlying systemic problems that require higher-level solutions, such as a roadway redesign or a policy change in speed management.

It is imperative that those leading Vision Zero efforts understand these distinctions and be able to communicate them appropriately to both internal and external audiences to build buy-in for the changes needed to be successful.

One specific way that leaders in early-adopter Vision Zero cities are straying from these principles is in communicating about their overall goals. Vision Zero is not (and cannot be) about eliminating all crashes, but rather reducing the severity of crashes so that people are not severely injured or killed. The differences in setting strategies to reach those two very different goals are significant. Vision Zero acknowledges that people make mistakes and that some crashes are inevitable; strategies are then set to prioritize reducing the impact on human life of crashes. This elevates some strategies above others, such as speed management and designating physically separated space for people biking and walking from those driving. This is an important shift from a traditional engineering-centered perspective to a public health perspective and is communicated differently both internally and externally.

4) Communicating about the need for equitable law enforcement

Well-implemented enforcement of traffic laws can save lives and encourage safe conditions. For example, the decline in drunk driving-related deaths from the 1980s onward resulted, in part, from stepped-up and more visible enforcement.

Yet, it is fair to say that law enforcement — particularly as it relates to racial equity — is in a tremendously challenging place in the U.S. today. Public awareness of a problem of racial bias in law enforcement has risen significantly due to a series of high-profile, well-documented incidents of police mistreatment and from strong advocacy from community social justice groups. These instances and perceptions of bias are not only racial issues. While less visible in the public eye, vulnerable road users such as people walking and bicycling also have the potential to suffer from inequitable enforcement.

First, separate from the current public conversation about equitable enforcement, it is important that city stakeholders and other Vision Zero messengers acknowledge — and be able to communicate — that enforcement is not intended to be the chief tenet of Vision Zero. Enforcement should be a supporting component of Vision Zero, with the primary emphasis on influencing the physical conditions on the streets (roadway design) and policies that influence individual behavior and culture on the front end (such as setting and encouraging appropriate speeds). Enforcement is just one of many tools employed to encourage safe behavior, but it should be a secondary tool relative to the other traditional “E’s” of traffic safety, particularly engineering and education. The goal of enforcement (as in the other areas) is to influence behavior; where possible, and it should be combined with educational efforts. This should be communicated clearly.

Still, any emphasis on traffic enforcement will need to be carefully considered, implemented, and messaged. That consideration should be grounded in acknowledgement that evidence of biases in U.S. law enforcement has contributed to a decay in trust between police and community members, particularly in communities of color. This has led to an unfortunate, but understandable, skepticism about policing that presents challenges to the Vision Zero model. This skepticism and its historical roots should be acknowledged in Vision Zero communications. In fact, given the high-profile attention on this issue across the nation, it would be wise for local Vision Zero leaders to preemptively acknowledge and discuss this challenge with local stakeholders. Even if the community has not been at the center of a public controversy about this issue, these conversations are vital because they acknowledge the reality of the larger context in which every Vision Zero effort in the U.S. exists.

Based on interviews and research for this paper, we suggest that robust and transparent enforcement data (both qualitative and quantitative) is a powerful tool to ensure equitable traffic enforcement and to build (or re-build) public trust in Vision Zero enforcement efforts. City leaders should meet with relevant community constituencies most affected by traffic violence and those most skeptical of law enforcement to build

agreement on what kinds of data will be collected and how it will be used and shared. Vision Zero's emphasis on using data to identify locations and behaviors that are most dangerous can help alleviate concerns about the "broken windows" approach to policing.

Discussions should be held about various law enforcement strategies that have proven effective and involve less officer discretion and are less resource-intensive, such as automated enforcement. Another area to explore and to show Vision Zero's commitment to equity is to hold public conversations about community policing, which is increasingly called for by communities of color and leaders within the social justice movements to end police violence. Further, for higher risk behaviors involving vehicular infractions, where no injury or fatality occurs, there should be honest discussion about the appropriate levels of enforcement consequences. Diversion programs that allow first-time offenders to take safe driving courses in lieu of regressive fines are a possible answer to equity concerns around fine-based penalties, which can be devastating for low-income people. These actions can help lead to more equitable Vision Zero outcomes and strategies. And having open, honest discussions about the pros and cons of these kinds of approaches to traffic enforcement and prioritizing equity can help a community be transparent about opportunities and challenges and build greater trust with the community, particularly those most severely impacted by unsafe traffic conditions.

Of course, including law enforcement – both the leadership and rank-and-file officers – in early and ongoing conversations about the opportunities and challenges in this area is also important to building a shared understanding. Collaborative and trusting relationships between law enforcement agencies and other departments within city government and the communities they serve are a prerequisite for good communications efforts — invest in building those cross-departmental relationships before a communications crisis forces it.

Similarly, communicating with the public about the challenges and demands placed on law enforcement will help build trust and a shared narrative around collective problem solving. Most law enforcement agencies, like many branches of civil service, are facing reduced budgets and mounting pressure to address a growing number of public safety issues. Increasingly, law enforcement is called on to address fundamental societal problems beyond simply enforcing laws — such as homelessness and mental illness — that stretch resources. Acknowledging the pressure that agencies and rank-and-file officers face each day in their work to ensure public safety can help develop empathy and set the stage for productive public conversations around equity and enforcement.

City leaders should be clear with the public about the power of data to help focus limited enforcement resources in the locations and on the behaviors where they can do the most good. For example, discouraging the enforcement of minor violations that rarely cause bodily harm and instead focusing on the most statistically dangerous behaviors that cause death and severe injuries, like excessive speed. Collecting and sharing granular demographic and geographic data on where injury crashes happen and why and where traffic stops are made will be important to backing up safety-focused enforcement efforts that back up Vision Zero priorities. Ensuring solid data collection, analysis and usage can be a challenge for the police, who may be dealing with outdated technology and limited resources; still, given the urgent need to build trust between police and community members, this work must be prioritized, and qualitative data culled from impacted communities must be valued and legitimized as much as quantitative traffic data and be made available to the public.

The issue of racial profiling in law enforcement is also being addressed at the State level. In 2015 the California Legislature signed into law AB-953, or the Racial and Identity Profiling Act. The law requires local agencies to collect race information and other data in all traffic stops, and to make that data available to the public. It also mandates the creation of a State Advisory Board with the goal of eliminating racial profiling in policing. It is important for local communications strategies to be informed by larger policy actions and the movement toward greater transparency in law enforcement, which helps to broaden the context.

And as new enforcement-related strategies are planned and employed, consideration should be given to thoughtful communications to shape impressions and to build openness to new approaches. A prime example is around Automated Speed Enforcement, a program proven to improve safety, but which still suffers from notable perception problems. These perceptions include beliefs that these safety cameras are intended primarily for revenue generation, as well as the impression that they are a threat to privacy. This may be an opportunity to carefully select appropriate and compelling messengers for the message (see section below); for instance, victims of speed-related crashes or people who have lost loved ones may be able to help humanize the problem. In addition, clear and consistent communications about why the program is being implemented and where funding will go is important; for instance, if the ticket revenue is being dedicated back to traffic safety efforts directly, don't be shy about that point.

5) Facilitating meaningful community engagement

Including and elevating the voices of local residents — particularly those who are not as readily heard in traditional public processes — are vital ways that Vision Zero communications efforts can advance equity input and outcomes. Cities are developing new, more modern, interactive ways of doing public outreach as a way to have a dialogue with residents. This welcome evolution is not specifically tied to equity or transportation concerns — all forms of public process can benefit from more meaningful ways of involving the community — but should certainly be prioritized in Vision Zero outreach and engagement.

Direct one-on-one conversations with community leaders, really listening to the needs of the community and relationship building over time are the surest ways to build trust and more inclusive, representative efforts.

Effective outreach begins with identifying stakeholders, opinion leaders and willing partners in the affected community — these may be within schools, faith organizations, community development organizations, businesses; wherever the leadership is found — and building relationships to understand what issues are important. In most cases, there is no shortcut to

meaningful community engagement. Direct one-on-one conversations with community leaders, really listening to the needs of the community and relationship building over time are the surest ways to build trust and more inclusive, representative efforts. Cities often rely on non-profits and other community partners to help with this. Involving the right partners from the beginning and acknowledging equity concerns will help frame traffic safety conversations in a context that residents can relate to.

The most effective cities have cooperative and trusting relationships with local community groups. Advocacy groups can be powerful allies for good communication and community engagement — look for established, professional organizations with relationships and the ability to mobilize grassroots support. Budget for strong community outreach services in Vision Zero work. And, make space for community members and leaders to broaden the conversation to include issues that may not be considered traditional transportation-specific issues but which are being increasingly understood to relate, such as housing and economic concerns. For example, along with engineering and policy solutions, Vision Zero efforts may need to coordinate with anti-displacement strategies. Safety improvements to the built environment, while desired and needed, can also trigger concerns about gentrification to residents of low-income and communities of color.

On a logistical level, good community engagement is culturally competent and linguistically appropriate. In communities with significant numbers of non-English speakers, this means, at minimum, that materials and outreach should be available in the spoken language of the community. But good engagement depends on more than translation. Information must be placed in a context that is culturally relevant and understandable to the audience. Furthermore, experts stress the need to go beyond traditional public meetings as part of the formal outreach process, since these meetings tend to invite input only from a small and self-selected segment of the population that is not representative of the community as a whole.

The goals and means of community engagement around equity issues are not different from community engagement around any planning process. While engagement strategies will be tailored from place to place (even neighborhood to neighborhood), the basic traits of successful engagement efforts are fairly universal. Successful outreach should:

- Inform and educate about the risks, potential benefits and trade-offs of the issue at hand;
- Invite community members to contribute their ideas in a wide variety of formats and venues, from traditional public meetings to surveys to on-site demonstrations projects;
- Identify conflicts and incorporate different perspectives and priorities early in the process;
- Provide data and information on a variety of metrics that help contextualize the situation (and sometimes invites the community to participate in data collection and analysis);
- Offer transparency of process;
- Maximize the potential for implementation through consensus and acceptance.

Source: Beyond the Basics, Center for Sustainable Community Design

One promising new strategy for communications and public engagement takes the form of community-led demonstration projects and temporary street transformations. Popularized by the Tactical Urbanism movement but formalized in many different ways and using different names, the idea is to make fast, inexpensive transformations to streets and public spaces to collect data and introduce the community to change in a non-threatening, non-permanent way. Ranging from quick, weekend street makeovers carried out by community volunteers — popularized by the Better Blocks Project — to 6-month to 1-year pilot projects, these tactical demonstrations are powerful ways to build community ownership of change and have a public conversation about the street based on real-life experience, rather than abstract drawings and renderings.

6) Aligning the message with the messenger

A recurring theme in our research is the importance of reaching out to and partnering with appropriate individuals and organizations to help convey Vision Zero messages, particularly those who represent and reflect the communities being most impacted by traffic violence. Interviewees from multiple disciplines and backgrounds elevated the importance of breaking tradition with past communication about traffic safety to better integrate community and partner voices directly and visibly into Vision Zero communications work.

City and community leaders should prioritize listening to and learning about community needs before crafting and sharing local traffic safety messaging. And be prepared for those conversations to be more far-reaching than the traditional transportation safety approach. Ultimately, we cannot put a box around “Vision Zero-only” issues because traffic safety issues are linked to many others.

Listening to the concerns of constituents and framing Vision Zero issues in a way that acknowledges and addresses those concerns is key, even if not everything shared is a transportation-only issue. “Be willing to talk about more than just Vision Zero, or walking, or biking, or whatever your focus issue is,” advises Tamika Butler, Executive Director of the Los Angeles County Bicycle Coalition and a leader of the L.A. Vision Zero Alliance. “If gentrification is a local concern, talk with housing/displacement experts in the community first.”

If there is to be deep engagement and meaningful participation in developing Vision Zero strategies that people trust and are effective, Vision Zero leaders will need to be open to non-traditional messages and to non-traditional messengers as partners. Formal programs that empower and prepare community leaders to be spokespeople are potentially helpful ways to shape the message and equip and empower new messengers. Trained volunteers or professionals that are themselves trusted members of a target population can be a bridge between policy and individual buy-in.

The ‘promotora’ model from public health, for example, trains community health workers to provide mentoring and communications to Hispanic communities (see The Effectiveness of the Promotora Health Education Model in the Resources section for more). While not a direct analog to Vision Zero, providing training and materials that allow for grassroots community champions to speak about Vision Zero to their peers can help ensure Vision Zero messages reach populations that may not be traditionally reached through standard city communications channels.

Another potentially powerful group of messengers is individuals who have personally, directly been touched by traffic violence, such as survivors of crashes and people who have lost loved ones in crashes. The advocacy of Families for Safe Streets is a strong model of effective messengers who share tremendously personal and compelling experiences that others (city staff, politicians, other advocates) just can't do.

Policymakers can also be effective spokespeople for Vision Zero efforts and can give powerful voice to equity considerations. It can be challenging to find the time or opportunity to try to shape the thinking and language of certain influential people, particularly if these are elected officials or otherwise prominent figures. This is another place to lean on Vision Zero's emphasis on both data and personal stories from community members. Rather than setting up a situation in which people feel awkward or intimidated about trying to educate a superior or someone in a position of power, Vision Zero offers the opportunity to use the facts and personal experiences to inform the work and communications of key influencers. This opportunity should emphasize the ways that equity considerations are deeply ingrained in Vision Zero work.

Expanding the field of messages and messengers for Vision Zero takes time and energy and may even cause some levels of discomfort or awkwardness among participants who are not, for example, used to working with colleagues outside the traditional transportation realm. Ultimately, however, a broader, more diverse base of Vision Zero messengers will help build engagement and buy-in, particularly from communities that may not traditionally be involved, and will help advance the goal of prioritizing equitable input and outcomes into Vision Zero work.

Conclusions

At a fundamental level, communicating about Vision Zero is about communicating the realities of how traffic safety issues affect all populations within a community, particularly those that are most vulnerable and those that are traditionally underserved. To that end, it is imperative that along with their other communications tasks, city and community leaders prioritize equity early and consistently in internal and external communications. In practice, that means including residents and leaders representing those communities impacted most directly by traffic safety problems. It means thinking carefully about language and enlisting the help of key stakeholders (both internal and external; traditional and non-traditional) to frame and shape conversations to be clear and inclusive. It means building commitment to consistent and thoughtful messaging

VISION ZERO NETWORK

that acknowledges equity considerations, even when uncomfortable, starting with the internal leadership team and including elected officials and policymakers. It means acknowledging places where historic mistrust may be slowing down progress toward traffic safety, then engaging ways to break down barriers. It means investing more time and energy into meaningful engagement, and making space for conversations that may seem outside the realm of traditional transportation efforts but are directly related in people's everyday lives.

Vision Zero is, at its core, all about equity. It is about safe transportation options for everyone. This will be achieved only when equity considerations and conversations are placed front and center in our Vision Zero work and how we communicate about it.

References

The Vision Zero Network

<http://www.visionzeronetwork.org>

Crash, not Accident

<http://crashnotaccident.com/>

Race Matters: How to Talk About Race

<http://www.aecf.org/m/resourcedoc/AECF-racemattershowtotalkaboutrace-2006.pdf>

Portland, Oregon's Vision Zero Action Plan

<https://www.portlandoregon.gov/transportation/71730><http://www.aecf.org/m/resourcedoc/AECF-racemattershowtotalkaboutrace-2006.pdf>

7 Things To Know When Communicating About Health Equity

<http://www.bmsg.org/blog/7-things-advocates-should-know-when-communicating-about-health-equity>

Stanford University Big Data Study on racial disparities in policing, with data recommendations

<http://news.stanford.edu/2016/06/15/stanford-big-data-study-finds-racial-disparities-oakland-calif-police-behavior-offers-solutions/>

Vision Zero Cities: International Journal of Traffic Safety Innovation Chapter

Racial Inequity in Traffic Enforcement, p. 12, Marco Conner

<http://visionzerocities.org>

California Law AB-953 (racial profiling)

https://leginfo.legislature.ca.gov/faces/billNavClient.xhtml?bill_id=201520160AB953
<http://visionzerocities.org>

San Francisco Report of the Blue Ribbon Panel on Transparency, Accountability, and Fairness in Law Enforcement

<http://sfblueribbonpanel.com/>

MADD History of Drunk Driving

<http://www.madd.org/drunk-driving/about/history.html?referrer=https://www.google.com/>

NYPD Report Card: Year 1 of Vision Zero Traffic Enforcement

https://www.transalt.org/sites/default/files/news/reports/2015/2014_NYPD_Report_Card-Year_One_of_Vision_Zero_Traffic_Enforcement.pdf

Beyond Confrontation: Community-Centered Policing Tools

<http://www.policylink.org/equity-tools/beyond-confrontation-community-centered-policing-tools>

Transportation Equity: Improved Quality of Life and Reduced Health Disparities for Los Angelenos

<http://advancementprojectca.org/transportation-equity-improved-quality-life-reduced-health-disparities/>

How Urban Design Perpetuates Racial Inequality

<http://www.fastcodesign.com/3061873/slicker-city/how-urban-design-perpetuates-racial-inequality-and-what-we-can-do-about-it>

The Effectiveness of the Promotora Health Education Model

<https://www.fresnostate.edu/chhs/cvhpi/documents/cms-final-report.pdf>

Health in all Policies: A Guide for State and Local Governments

http://www.phi.org/uploads/files/Health_in_All_Policies-A_Guide_for_State_and_Local_Governments.pdf

Federal Highways Administration: Pursuing Equity in Pedestrian and Bicycle Planning

http://www.fhwa.dot.gov/environment/bicycle_pedestrian/resources/equity_paper/index.cfm