

# Transportation Outreach Planner

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## Public Outreach Strategies

### Drop-In Centers

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#### Recommended Target Groups

##### Education

College Education  
High School Diploma  
No High School Diploma

##### Language

Creole  
Other  
Spanish

##### Disability

Hearing Impaired  
Other  
Physically Challenged  
Sight Impaired

##### Income

Low Income  
Middle to Affluent

##### Vehicle Ownership

Non-vehicle Owner  
Vehicle Owner

##### Race and Ethnicity

Race and Ethnicity

**Age**  
Seniors  
Working Age Adults  
Youth

## Strategy Class

- General

## Strategy Types

- Educational

## Description

A drop-in center (also known as a field office or site office) is a site within a neighborhood or community where people may go to obtain and exchange information related to transportation issues and projects. It is generally located in an area that is visible to the community, such as a storefront, or it can be mobile (i.e. a van or a trailer) in order to maximize contact with residents. <sup>1</sup>

## Special Uses

A drop-in center has the potential of becoming a community epicenter of activities for public involvement. It can serve as a:

- Clearinghouse of information
- Community planning center
- Location for public meetings and charettes
- Outreach or district office for long-term projects
- On-site mitigation/crisis management office for controversial projects

## When to Use

A drop-in center provides agencies with a way to establish continuing informal contact with the community. Such centers are usually created for a designated period of time, either during the planning, or construction phase of a project. However, they can also be long-term or permanent sites. Drop-in centers can be effectively used during project development to obtain public comments and feedback. They can also be used during the construction phase of a project to inform people of the process. When there is controversy or there are project related issues, drop-in centers can help address community concerns.

## Cost

### **\* \* \* High (\$10000 to \$50000)**

The cost to establish and maintain a drop-in center can be high, depending on the length of time of the center's existence. Expenses include rental space, staff time, telephone service, utilities, office equipment and resource material. The cost of operating a drop-in-center should be explored before an agency makes a commitment. Expenses should be reviewed carefully to ensure there are enough resources to make the center successful. One way to reduce costs is to open the drop-in center only during peak periods when residents are more likely to visit the center, such as evenings and weekends. Another way to reduce costs is to utilize public involvement volunteers to help staff the center. To lower rental expenses, an agency may be able to obtain donated space in the community or share the space with another organization. <sup>3</sup>

Low (up to \$999)	*
Moderate (\$1,000 to \$9,999)	**
High (\$10,000 to \$50,000)	***
Very High (Above \$50,000)	****

*Disclaimer:* The cost estimates provided are intended to be a guide. Project costs will vary depending on the size and nature of the project.

## Time

## \* 1 to 3 months

Drop-in-centers can be established relatively quickly, depending on the availability of space and staff. The length of time the center remains open is dependent on the intent of the drop-in center. It should be noted that set up time can be prolonged when leasing a space due to issues related to contractual agreements and financial authorization. Agencies may be able to avoid any such delays by obtaining donated space.

1 to 3 months  
6 months to a year  
Multiyear

\*  
\*\*  
\*\*\*

*Disclaimer:* The time estimates are approximations. The duration of a project may vary depending on various factors, including size and budget.

## Implementation Guidelines and Suggestions

The following serve as recommended guidelines and suggestions for establishing a drop-in center: <sup>2</sup>

- **Locate the drop-in center in an area that is easy to find and visible from the street.** A drop-in center should be located in an area that has high visibility and foot traffic, such as a storefront. A mobile drop-in center, such as a trailer, also provides a highly visible option.
- **Create an inviting space that welcomes the community.** The space should be well organized and have adequate space for exhibits, reading tables, and a project library. It should also have sufficient space and furniture to hold meetings.
- **Determine the level of staffing for the drop-in-center based on the scale and the anticipated use of the facility.** While drop-in centers that are created to address complicated or controversial projects may require several staff members to serve the public, other drop-in centers may only need one person to operate. Although some drop-in centers primarily serve as exhibit space and have no personnel, most agencies opt to have drop-in centers that are staffed with professionals in order to encourage interaction between agency representatives and residents.
- **Select staff for the drop-in center who are knowledgeable of the area, the project and related technical issues.** The staff members of a drop-in-center generally serve as liaison between the community and agency officials. As such, they must be able to answer the public's questions and be able to communicate the community's concerns to project personnel. If the community includes residents who are non-English speaking, special consideration should be given to assign staff who can speak the language. At a minimum, staff should be able to refer residents to someone with whom the non-English speaking residents can communicate.
- **Establish the hours of operation during times that are convenient to the public, such as evenings and weekends.** The hours of operation should not be confined to regular working hours (9:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m.), as most people are not able to visit during that time. Agencies should focus on operating during evening and weekend hours in order to maximize the potential for visits. Although the drop-in center does not need to be staffed all the time, the hours of operation should be clearly posted so that the public knows when the center will be open. Agencies may also consider having a space where the public can view displays and information, even when the center is not staffed.
- **Make sure the drop-in center is well-stocked with plans, and other materials explaining the various aspects of the project or program.** An agency needs to be prepared to receive requests for different types of information. Information includes reports, brochures, flyers, posters, etc. Since a drop-in center generally serves as a library/resource center where people review documents and seek information, it is important to have multiple copies of documents.
- **Prepare well for opening day and ensure the date is well publicized.** The opening of a drop-in center should be publicized at least 15 to 30 days prior to the event. The information should be advertised in community publications and posted/disseminated in local stores and establishments. Before opening day, all equipment should be operational and all supplies and publications should be organized. On the day of the event, the drop-in center needs to be adequately staffed with persons who have been trained to answer the public's frequently asked questions (FAQs). The FAQs should also be posted on the agency's website.
- **Encourage community groups to use the drop-in-center for meetings and events in order to attract people to the center and introduce them to its resources.** Such actions can attract community residents, representatives from other government agencies, elected officials, and interest groups.
- **Use technology to enhance access to information.** The drop-in center can provide interactive kiosks and host a website or blog in order to encourage community comments. If resources are available, drop-in centers can also provide a teleconferencing station to allow visitors to communicate with the main office.

## Recommended Target Demographics

Drop-in centers give agencies the ability to provide direct outreach to specific communities and are particularly useful for reaching out to underserved communities or hard to reach populations. By bringing the information directly to the target areas, the drop-in center gives residents accessibility and opportunities to participate. Mobile drop-in centers offer greater flexibility. Mobile units enable agencies to target demographic groups that may be located in scattered geographic areas and allow for the agencies to tailor the information to each target group. For example, a mobile drop-in center can visit multiple schools if the target demographic is youth and distribute information specifically geared to youth interests.

## Lessons Learned/Challenges

Below are key points to keep in mind when establishing a drop-in center: <sup>4</sup>

- **Drop-in centers should have set hours of operation that are posted on site.** A set schedule for operating hours establishes consistency and lets the public know when they can access agency staff.
- **The target community should be consulted on the location of the drop-in center to avoid any issues that may arise due to poor placement.** The community can provide agency officials with information on the best areas to locate the drop-in center and areas to avoid.
- **The way a drop-in center is managed can impact public involvement efforts and the perception of the agency in the community.** A drop-in center that is understaffed, unattractive, poorly stocked with resource material, or staffed by uninformed personnel can have a negative impact on public outreach and on a project. Agencies need to ensure that drop-in sites are managed well and are welcoming to the community.
- **Staff at the drop-in centers should have sufficient authority to provide information to the public without having to obtain formal permission from agency management.** Restrictions to information or long delays in meeting information requests can affect the public's perception of the drop-in center and the agency's credibility.

## Case Studies

In Washington, DC, the Washington Council of Governments (WashCOG) created a "vision van" that traveled through the region's underserved neighborhoods to provide information on the visioning process. The vision vans went to community events, shopping centers, transit stations, soup kitchens, and other key locations. Using the Washington DC vision van as a model, the Richmond MPO also considered the use of a mobile field office for outreach to underserved populations ([http://www.modot.org/central/Rte63DEIS\\_Chapter4.pdf](http://www.modot.org/central/Rte63DEIS_Chapter4.pdf)). <sup>6</sup>

The Missouri Department of Transportation established a drop-in center for its Route 63 project in order to gather information and obtain feedback from the public. Open house meetings were held at the drop-in center and the public was invited to attend any time during the advertised hours of operation. ([http://www.modot.org/central/Rte63DEIS\\_Chapter4.pdf](http://www.modot.org/central/Rte63DEIS_Chapter4.pdf)). <sup>5</sup>

## For Further Information

**Municipal Research Service Center (MRSC) of Washington:** The site provides a collection of articles and links to information on public involvement strategies and community outreach that can be applied to drop-in centers. (<http://www.mrsc.org/subjects/governance/participation/effective.aspx#Convenient>). <sup>7</sup>

## Sources

<sup>1</sup> U.S. Department of Transportation, Federal Highway Administration (FHWA), "USDOT FHWA/FTA Public Involvement Techniques for Transportation Decision-Making: Drop-In Center," August 2002, 29, FHWA, 17 August 2011 < <http://www.fhwa.dot.gov/reports/pittd/contents.htm> > .

<sup>2</sup> FHWA, "Drop-In Center. "

<sup>3</sup> FHWA, "Drop-In Center. "

<sup>4</sup> FHWA, "Drop-In Center. "

<sup>5</sup> Howard/Stein-Hudson Associates, Inc., "Best Practices, Policies and Procedures Recommendations for Richmond Area Metropolitan Planning Organization (MPO) Citizen Participation Program," 13 June 2001, Richmond MPO, 31 August 2011, < [http://www.modot.org/central/Rte63DEIS\\_Chapter4.pdf.pdf](http://www.modot.org/central/Rte63DEIS_Chapter4.pdf.pdf) > .

<sup>6</sup> Missouri Department of Transportation (MoDOT). "MoDOT, Route 63 Environmental Impact Statement (EIS), Chapter 4," 31 August 2011, < [http://www.modot.org/central/Rte63DEIS\\_Chapter4.pdf.pdf](http://www.modot.org/central/Rte63DEIS_Chapter4.pdf.pdf) > .

<sup>7</sup> Municipal Research Service Center (MRSC) of Washington, "Effective Approaches for Informing Citizens," 10 August 2010, MRSC, 31 August 2011. < <http://www.mrsc.org/subjects/governance/participation/effective.aspx#Convenient> > .