ADA Live! Episode 158: ADA Transition Planning, Accessible Transportation, and Public Right-of-Way

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Archive, Bios, Description, and Transcripts for Episode 158: ADA Transition Planning, Accessible Transportation, and Public Right-of-Way

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Shauncey Battle
Hi, I'm Shauncey Battle, and you're listening to ADA Live.

4 Wheel City
Yo. Hi, let's roll. Let's go.

Stacey Kernisan
Hello, everyone. On behalf of the Southeast ADA Center, the Burton Blatt Institute at Syracuse University, and the ADA National Network, welcome to ADA Live. I'm Stacey Kernisan, Director of Training of the Southeast ADA Center. Listening audience, if you have questions about the Americans with Disabilities Act or ADA, you can use the online form anytime at adalive.org, or call the Southeast ADA Center at 404-541-9001. All calls are free and confidential.

According to the Federal Transit Administration, United States transit agencies provide over 7 billion trips in 2024, an increase of 17% from 2022. transportation agencies move passengers 35 billion miles-the equivalent of driving to Pluto and back four times. Now more than ever, transportation agencies must ensure passengers with disabilities arrive safely.

Today, we are joined by Shauncey Battle, a dedicated public servant who works is rooted in the belief that government should work for everyone. With over a decade of experience, she currently serves as the transportation compliance director for the City of Atlanta Department of Transportation and leads efforts to ensure compliance with the Americans with Disabilities Act. Her work focuses on turning complex requirements into practical solutions that improve how people with disabilities move through and experience their communities. Welcome to the show, Shanti.

Shauncey Battle
It is so wonderful to be here with you today. Thank you for having me.

Stacey Kernisan
So, Shauncey, can you start by telling our listeners a little bit about yourself and what led you to work in transportation accessibility and the ADA?

Shauncey Battle
So, as the ADA coordinator for the City of Atlanta's Department of Transportation, I get to lead our efforts around compliance and accessibility, a large part of my work is directly with our public infrastructure. What led me there was working in public works, providing those core services to everyday residents. One of those services is accessibility. So, what the work that I do now as a transportation agency, is ensuring that our right of way, those public facilities, those curb ramps are accessible not only for everyday residents but for visitors to the city of Atlanta.

Stacey Kernisan
So, what is a typical day for you in your role as the ADA coordinator with the City of Atlanta.

Shauncey Battle
So I would love to say that I have a typical day as the ADA coordinator, but every day looks a little bit different. My role as the ADA coordinator, I get to do organizational leadership, a little bit of operations, a little bit of policy, but most importantly, have that very human element to connect with those who most need our services within the city.

So, any given day, I could be reviewing a particular project. For example, we have private developers who may be coming into the city to build a new high-rise. So part of that component is right-of-way improvement. So making sure that our engineers are on board with accessibility guidelines, such as what's required in ProWag, which is the public right-of-way accessibility guideline, and making sure that we're working through any other accessibility concerns.

There's days where I'm directly in line with what the community needs. A typical day could also look like a community engagement session where members of the disability community have a seat at the table to talk about concerns from their everyday lived experiences within the city of Atlanta. So I see my role as both a compliance leader and a connector, making sure that the right people are at the table and that accessibility doesn't become an afterthought.

Stacey Kernisan
So it seems like each day brings you a little bit of different types of excitement, huh? So how does your background in communications, urban planning, and law influence the way you approach access? Accessibility and transportation.

Shauncey Battle
So having that legal background does help me to understand regulatory frameworks such as the why behind the requirements. There's a lot of rules, regulations, ordinances. I mean, the Americans with Disabilities Act, the ADA itself, is so robust. So having that legal background is

incredibly helpful. I have an operations and compliance background from urban planning, and that helps me to be able to operationalize those requirements across a large organization such as the City of Atlanta.

And overall, working in transportation has just taught me that accessibility has some real practical realities. So you go beyond just planning, beyond just engineering, beyond just construction, being able to have those intersections of joy and community, and continue to be an advocate. Those multiple disciplines give me multiple perspectives in being the best advocate and ADA coordinator that I can be.

Stacey Kernisan
So, being able to look at a situation from different angles, depending on which hat you have to put on in that moment, helps you to be able to take a situation and come at it from a holistic point of view instead of just one focus background. So, for our listeners who may not be familiar, let's talk a little bit about what is an ADA transition plan and why is it important for a city like Atlanta to have one.

Shauncey Battle
So, in the simplest form, an ADA transition plan is a roadmap for identifying and removing accessibility barriers in any given program, be it facilities such as a building or infrastructure such as sidewalks and curb ramps or streets. So for the public right of way, that means understeer where barriers exist on the sidewalk. So that's your self evaluation. You're quite frankly looking under the hood, poking around, seeing exactly what it looks like.

So for our sidewalks, we'll look at the condition of that infrastructure. Are there barriers such as missing sidewalks, gaps in sidewalks, displacement in sidewalks, or our curb ramps? Are they not meeting the appropriate slopes or grades? Are they missing those truncated domes that are necessary for effective and accessible crossings?

We'll look at things like the overall pedestrian route, making sure that it is clear and accessible, and then you move into that transition plan beyond the self-evaluation, where you can have a list of deficiencies. You can have a list of great things as well, but it helps you to better prioritize and generate a timeline for prioritizing the removal of those barriers. If you've determined in your self-evaluation that within your sidewalk network, let's say you have 10 miles of sidewalk, and there's about two miles that are concerning for ADA compliance. Your transition plan will document exactly what your approach should be in order to remove those concerns or barriers. It also assigns responsible parties and an overall strategy for removing those barriers, so your implementation strategy-it's a realistic approach.

So, in a city the size and age of Atlanta, you can't address everything at once. So, this plan is helpful to create a systemic and transparent approach, so that everyone knows, the public knows our thoughts around this and what our actual plan is, and understanding that there is a plan, which is incredibly important.

Stacey Kernisan
So, thank you for sharing a little bit more about how the actual transition plan is put into place. Since you've walked through that part of the process with us, can you walk through the process that Atlanta used to actually develop the plan. So, what was the thought process behind creating the plan for the public right of way ADA transition?

Shauncey Battle
So, the City of Atlanta Department of Transportation was tasked with updating this ADA transition plan specific to our pedestrian public right of way. So, we began with that self evaluation where we were understanding the existing conditions and identifying those barriers, so our right away infrastructure, our sidewalks had actual condition indexes where we were able to kind of scope and then create a grade, kind of an A, B, C, D during that self evaluation process. So we utilized technology and data to evaluate the massive amount of sidewalk infrastructure that we have in Atlanta's pedestrian network, and we paired that with a technical assessment as well as community engagement because the data alone could not tell us how people experience the system. So that was numbers, that was conditions, but what does it truly mean to leave your home and be able to get to work, to get to school, to get to that transit stop?

So, a significant part of what we did during the self-evaluation process was community engagement, and the community engagement for me was my favorite part. It's often tough as a public servant to go into. An environment where a community may not feel heard, they may not feel seen, and unfortunately, that happens a lot in the disability community working with local government.

And this was an opportunity for the city of Atlanta to bring the disability community to the table to directly influence that updated transition plan during the self-evaluation process, we reached out to advocacy organizations throughout the city of Atlanta, major organizations, as well as our smaller, cohesive neighborhood organizations, to truly get the members of the disability to come to these events. These events were accessible from beginning to end, they were in meeting locations where the facilities were accessible. There were American Sign Language interpreters, including deaf interpreters. There was CART captioning at the events. When I begin the event as the one who's giving this information during these engagement sessions, I ensure that everyone feels welcome and understands where they are, and I also stop to be able to provide a safety briefing, describe myself, and describe exactly what room we're in and what the program will look like moving forward. That's the community engagement portion.

So gathering all of our technical data, the community engagement, build this updated transition plan. The plan is not to fix every barrier overnight, but to provide a long-term, realistic approach that is data-driven and community-driven. Because we want to ensure that there is nothing about us without us. Ensuring that the community has a seat at the table to create this updated transition plan is the way that the city of Atlanta approached this particular plan.

Stacey Kernisan

I think a lot of times when people are creating plans, they forget to actually include the individuals in which they're creating the plan for. That's great that you incorporated actually speaking to individuals with different types of disabilities in order to make sure that you're covering as much as you can about their connection to be able to use the transit in the best way possible.

Shauncey Battle
Absolutely.

Stacey Kernisan
Speaking of all the great things that have come out of having this plan, when you were creating the plan and when you were doing the assessment, what were some of the most significant accessibility barriers identified during the self-evaluation process?

Shauncey Battle
So, some of the significant barriers that were identified included our ADA curb ramps. There were a ton of curb ramps that were absolutely missing, that were deficient or that did not meet current accessibility needs or guidelines.

The other thing that we found during that was sure you have your built environment, but there's also these internal procedures that needed to be a bit more robust, and that means having a dedicated ADA coordinator, making sure that that ADA coordinator is easy to find that they are accessible, that their location is accessible. For example, my office within Atlanta City Hall, I have a space that's accessible for anyone with varying mobility needs to be able to come to my office to reach me via phone, to reach me via email, whatever we need in order to break down that barrier.

So beyond just things like a missing curb ramp or sidewalk conditions that may not have met, there were also those internal policies and procedures that we needed to update, including overall effective communication, making sure that our websites met web accessibility guidelines, and we wanted to improve how residents interacted with city services. So those are some of the major barriers that were identified during that process.

Stacey Kernisan
That's great to hear. It's not just the actual physical things out in the community, but also be in a position where your services are accessible, and you're also making sure that you're connecting to what's happening in the community, as far as the needs is definitely important. So, as you talk about those findings, were there any findings during the assessment process that surprised you or changed how the city of Atlanta approached accessibility?

Shauncey Battle
Yeah, there were some surprising elements to what we found. So the overall scale and the interconnectedness of the work became very clear to everyone. There is nearly 1400 miles of sidewalk infrastructure within the city of Atlanta. It's an incredible distance of actual

infrastructure that's there, and that we all had to understand the connectedness to that particular infrastructure, and getting the public too to understand that the barrier removal process would take time, because we wanted to ensure that it's a prioritized, data-driven approach, and it's not just for who knows who.

And so the sidewalk barriers appear to be an isolated problem, but understanding that connectedness and overall accessibility needs help, and it really reinforces that we can't think about this as an individual asset. That's not enough. We can go out and pour concrete five feet, 10 feet, but when we talk about those transit networks as a transportation agency, accessible routes and connectivity is so important. Coordinating all of these efforts and ensuring that accessibility was at the top of how we approach this was so important.

Stacey Kernisan
Great to hear that kind of insight of how those things surprised you. Back to the community engagement. How were people with disabilities involved in actually developing or reviewing the City of Atlanta's ADA transition plan?

Shauncey Battle
We did have a number of community what we called listening sessions. We were intentional about calling them listening sessions because that was the goal. The goal was to listen, listen directly to the disability community regarding this one issue. We really wanted to hone in on what is your lived experience like on the city of Atlanta's public infrastructure. What does that mean to you? What does that look like? What does that feel like? Where is it working? Where is it not working?

So beyond those multiple community sessions, we also use surveys in multiple ways for people to provide feedback. So those sessions were hybrid; no one was forced to come in person. Community members could submit their feedback in advance during the sessions and even after.

The city of Atlanta also has an ADA advisory committee. They all came together monthly to help to support the creation and update of the transition plan. And so during that time, the advisory committees had subcommittees where they would work on tailored work specific to the transition plan. So one group worked on the community engagement portion. One group worked on what does it mean to remove a barrier, and the other group worked on different policies and procedures that needed to go into that updated transition plan. So we had a wide variety of members of the disability community who were part of that committee.

But most importantly, the feedback wasn't treated as just ceremonial. It absolutely helped to inform this overall planning process. So, from our listening sessions, as well as our advisory committees, and then my everyday role as the ADA coordinator, hearing back from the community was tantamount to creating and updating this transition plan.

Stacey Kernisan

You have to keep in mind that sometimes you can't get what you need just from the people who are in the position within the city, but actually having those individuals, that community engagement, to come out and share what their experiences are, so that you can actually have that firsthand account of what's happening or what's not happening within the city.

Shauncey Battle
In fact, we had our meetings at 10 a.m. which isn't traditional for a city hosting an event, generally after work. But listening to the disability community, we heard that it's sometimes difficult to traverse the city, especially at night. And so, to ensure safety overall, having those meetings in the morning, as well as having them hybrid, it gave us the opportunity to hear more voices. And sometimes it was challenging to hear. It's so important, and I never back down from being able to be that person in that space to hear what the community has to say about the work.

Stacey Kernisan
So, as you were creating the ADA transition plan, and we know that creating it is just one part of the overall process, but implementing it is totally different. What are some of the biggest challenges cities may face when turning an accessibility plan into an actual infrastructure improvement?

Shauncey Battle
Money, money, money. That's the biggest challenge, and I'm here to say it's possible. It is absolutely possible to do on a small budget.

We looked at this early on with our city leadership to determine what approach that we would take. We decided that we had the know-how, we had the smarts and the insight to do this in house, and so a lot of this was work that was supported by this ADA office, as well as our our engineering team, our communications team, our mobility planning team to put this together. So we didn't outsource nearly any of the work for for other cities that are similar, or those who are smaller in terms of their scale.

Starting with your approach, what's going to be your approach? If funding is an issue and resource allocation is an issue, you don't have to stop there. Start with understanding what do you want your plan to look like and feel like, and ensuring that. You hear directly from your community would be incredibly significant for this work.

So start with coordinating. Have your lead person, someone like your ADA coordinator, to lead this effort. That person will then coordinate with other departments. So for us, the transition plan focused on the pedestrian public right of way, but for a different agency, it may be their actual buildings. So looking at their doors, looking at their restrooms, looking at elevators, different elements of that facility. So once you have your ADA coordinator in place, make sure that they're able to connect with those other departments, those sister agencies, other contractors who may be doing the work. Have a central location, a repository for all of your information as you go through your self-evaluation to create that transition plan or update that

transition plan. You want to maintain accessibility, have that at the forefront of every single approach.

So, for the City of Atlanta's Department of Transportation, what we did was create internal workforce groups. We'll start at the very beginning with our strategy and planning, and they're the ones that are thinking through what this project could look like. And then it will move down to our other team, which is engineering, and they are going through the plans, ensuring that it's meeting engineering scope as well as accessibility. And from there, it would move to our capital delivery team, who will conduct our major or large-scale construction projects. And from there, it moves to our TIMS team, which is our traffic infrastructure and maintenance program, and they maintain the life of the project moving forward.

So again, having accessibility at the forefront of each of those different workforce groups and divisions, we were able to see how accessibility is approached at each level, and then really dive deep into those divisions to understand what does work look like for you every day. Where can we make accessibility changes or updates? And so it's almost like little self-evaluations within your own department. You have your large-scale transition plan, but really taking a look at what you do every day as an agency and seeing where accessibility is influenced in all of that.

Don't go it alone. I would advise. There's other ADA coordinators who are doing similar work. I did a lot of research online. I don't consider myself an expert at all, but I'm passionate and I'm an advocate for this work. There was a workshop about how to do a transition plan with $0. So finding your resources is important to move forward. A transition plan can't become a document that sits on the shelf. It is a living document. Don't be afraid to approach it. It's possible, and it can be possible with very little funds.

Stacey Kernisan
So we know a lot of times when it comes to those funds, there needs to be some kind of output or measurement of how well you're doing will determine whether or not you continue to get funds. So, how does the City of Atlanta measure whether the ADA transition plan is improving accessibility for its residents and visitors with disabilities?

Shauncey Battle
In two very specific ways, is the City of Atlanta making sure that we're measuring what we're doing through that plan. One is, as I mentioned previously, we had an ADA advisory committee. So we'll have an ADA advisory committee, and their job is to meet with the ADA coordinator on an identified basis to really work through that plan and to bring any questions or concerns or thoughts that they have about where the city is with that plan, and it'll also be the responsibility for the ADA coordinator at that time to provide some information to that group and to the public at large to show where we are with that plan.

On top of that, we also created a dashboard that is public facing to show exactly where we stand and what we look like in terms of our construction projects, and then there will be an

additional element where policies are updated that are placed online, and we'll have a graph that can show where we were and where we are. So in those two very tangible ways, we're able to measure exactly where we're going, and ultimately where we need to go with this transition plan.

Stacey Kernisan
So we know that there were probably a lot of improvements or changes to the infrastructure as you went through and created this plan and put it into practice. So how do you balance those long-term accessibility goals with barriers that residents with disabilities are experiencing right now?

Shauncey Battle
Yeah, this is incredibly important. We don't want to create any additional barriers as we work to remove them. We have a non-emergency. Line Atlanta 311, where we're able to get a better understanding of what the public is seeing and and what their concerns are about. As we work on one hand to continue to remove, we're also receiving feedback of any additional concerns that are existing while we continue that approach.

Also, we have updated policies and procedures in place. For example, during a construction project, we've made sure that project managers are connected with the ADA coordinators or any other lead engineers to make sure that when we have detours in place, when there's things that like sidewalks are closed down, ensuring genuine accessibility. It's not enough to just place a sign and have no other thought about it that says sidewalk closed. It's not enough. So having some updated training, some updated conversations, and connectedness about what it means for that one instance during an active construction project to close down a sidewalk.

Additional accessibility needs to be incorporated through our design and review. So we're making sure that when a plan comes online, that our engineering team, who is amazing at the work that they do when they are reviewing a project, if any concerns come up, that they are able to voice those concerns. And sometimes it happens in the field. It happens before the concrete is poured that we have to make those adjustments. So making sure that everyone's agile in those situations, that they all know who they can connect to for any accessibility-related concerns, is what we do to continue to work to make sure that accessibility is a normal, everyday component to how our transportation projects are designed, constructed, inspected, and ultimately accepted.

Stacey Kernisan
It's so great to hear. And you talked about other cities or local governments can reach out to their resources, reach out to the ADA centers, as well as maybe even reach out to you about more support as far as the advice or whatever they may need in order to develop or even update an ADA transition plan. So, with all of that, what would be one practice that the city of Atlanta has implemented that you think could serve as a model for other local governments or cities to improve their accessibility.

Shauncey Battle
So one particular practice that the city of Atlanta utilizes that could be a model is listening, having that community input to genuinely serve the public. It's you have to understand the public needs. There's a balancing act, and all of that. Having that data, listening directly to the community, really helps to support not only the work that we've done, but that any institution, any agency could utilize as they move forward through any approach, especially in ADA transition plan.

I think that everyone listening today can understand that for an agency that may be a challenging concept, I think starting small and making it real. Stacy, you asked about my background and my disciplines. My favorite thing to do is make it make sense and make it real, and so that's how I approach a lot of this work. And what works as kind of a small approach, but that gets a lot of understanding, is it's not enough for me to tell a project manager go out and make this ADA compliant. It falls. So if I make it real and make it make sense to them, then we can achieve genuine accessibility.

Not everyone's going to get it, but I think if you have a dedicated team or even a dedicated person who's an advocate for this work, it matters so much. So just having one again that community input, but two, just having someone there to advocate for genuine accessibility is going to matter beyond a blueprint, beyond a plan, a standard, an ordinance, or a regulation. But to make this work real, to make it human, matters so much.

Stacey Kernisan
I think that's like one of the core thought processes that a lot of people miss when they're trying to put things into practice is sometimes just go ask the individuals who use it every day, yes, and see what their thought process is and how that impacts their daily lives. To see what changes can be made in order to not just help them, but in the long run, help the community as a whole.

So, with all of the great work that you have done with the city of Atlanta, with all the accessibility improvements and the initiatives that you have underway in these next coming years, is there one thing that you're particularly excited about?

Shauncey Battle
Oh, yeah! I get really excited when someone calls and they, genuinely and rightfully upset, and by the end of our conversation, they feel heard, they feel seen, and we have a plan in place. So again, we have our overall transition plan for our pedestrian right of way. There's little pieces that mean so much in that plan, and for example, on page three of that plan, we list how you can contact the ADA coordinator. And the ADA coordinator shouldn't be hard to find, right? So that's really good that everyone can find me.

But when they have a concern and I can listen to their concern and understand their concern, I get really excited. I have the empathy to understand where they are, you know, with that

concern, and then put a plan in place, and oftentimes even that alone helps to break down that barrier that may be existing, the opportunity to be heard. And then icing on top of that is we can fix whatever their concern was. That always feels incredibly exciting. So you know, again, theoretically moving from that planning phase in that document to actual visible implementation and actual barrier removal is incredibly, incredibly exciting.

And then seeing our transition plan become a living operational tool rather than just a static document matters so much to me. So that plan is out there; it's available. But when staff, when other colleagues, when everyday residents can call, can stop by, and we can talk about that, we're doing something pretty exciting within the city of Atlanta. So that's always a plus.

Stacey Kernisan
Sounds good. So you spoke about those individuals being able to reach out to that ADA coordinator, and you say that that person shouldn't be hard to find. What should the community or individuals in the community know about the role of their local government's ADA coordinator when it comes to accessibility barriers within their community?

Shauncey Battle
So, an ADA coordinator, depending on their particular role again. I'm the Title II ADA coordinator with organizational wide responsibility, but there are other ADA coordinators within the city of Atlanta. We have an ADA coordinator who is in the mayor's office, an ADA coordinator who is in our Parks and Recreation Department, and we all do similar but different things, and I know our lead ADA coordinator, who's over disability advocacy and other rights within the city, she's kind of our starting point. So when people are able to locate her and find her, she can often connect them with the appropriate person.

I think as ADA coordinators, we joke that a lot of us came into this role accidentally, we were the last ones at the meeting, and then we were assigned the task of being the ADA coordinator. So for me, being appointed to this role was incredibly exciting because I get to show up as an advocate and wear that hat all day, every day.

But what's important for people to know is they are your resource. They are the persons that you can ask about anything. The biggest thing is to find any ADA coordinator because they're all gifted in being able to discern who does what and get you to the right place and genuinely advocate for what's needed. And it's just genuine customer service. I know when I call a one 800 number, I don't want to be given to this person and that person to figure out exactly who I need, so that's a genuine barrier, oftentimes for the disability community is finding who I need, and so your ADA coordinator shouldn't be hard to find, and that's definitely a plus for the city of Atlanta with our multiple coordinators being able to be accessible.

Stacey Kernisan
You've done great work within the city of Atlanta. So, as we wrap up, what would you like our ADA Live listeners to remember about the connection between accessibility, transportation, and being able to fully participate in community life?

Shauncey Battle
Sure, transportation is fundamentally about access-access to go to work, to be able to get to school, to be able to get to a doctor's appointment, recreation, government services, to connect with your family even or your community at large-and if someone can't safely and independently navigate the pedestrian environment; their ability to participate in community life is affected.

So, accessibility shouldn't be viewed simply as a compliance requirement. The ADA establishes our legal obligation, but the larger goal is participation and inclusion.

And so, for me, when we think about creating a transportation system that people with disabilities can navigate safely and independently. We're not simply removing physical barriers; we're removing barriers to participation and community life, and ultimately, that's what accessibility is all about.

Stacey Kernisan
Shauncey, thanks so much for sharing more about the plan you created for this. City of Atlanta and its impact for people with disabilities. Listeners, thank you for joining us for this episode.

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Ada Live is a program of the Southeast ADA Center, the Burton Blatt Institute at Syracuse University, and a collaboration with the Disability Employment Policy Rehabilitation Research and Training Center. Our producer is Celestia Ohrazda and Marsha Schwanke, Barry Whaley, Pam Williamson, and myself, Stacy Kernisan. Our music is from Four Wheel City, the movement for improvement. See you next episode.
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