



Metropolitan planning organizations (MPOs) are regional transportation planning agencies for urban areas. MPOs are responsible for planning for metropolitan regions' future land use and transportation systems, and have the duty of coordinating among local jurisdictions to ensure coordinated and collaborative regional decision making on transportation. Under federal law, states must establish MPOs for any urbanized area with a population of over 50,000 people. There are more than 400 MPOs across the United States, and more than 70 percent of people in the United States live within the jurisdiction of an MPO. MPOs play essential roles in planning for their regions' futures and in making determinations regarding investments of transportation funds to achieve those plans.

Why Do MPOs Matter for Health?

MPOs are deeply influential regional actors that steer billions of dollars in federal and state transportation funding, making decisions that shape our region's transportation systems, economies, access to opportunity, and health for decades. While MPOs have been required to consider air quality-related health impacts, they have not traditionally placed much emphasis on other health effects of their actions.

As a result, their transportation investments have prioritized speed and free flow of cars on highways and arterials over other goals, generating the transportation system that we have today: few safe and appealing networks for walking, bicycling, and scootering; 40,000 people a year dying in traffic collisions, including disproportionate numbers of people walking or bicycling; inequitable streets in communities of color and low-income communities leading to high rates of collisions and traffic fatalities; the transportation sector as the largest US source of greenhouse gas emissions; and large challenges for anyone trying to access basic needs without owning a vehicle.

How Can MPOs Advance Health and Health Equity?

Increasingly, MPOs are taking steps to support health and health equity, and engaging in actions to invest in active transportation and prioritize health in decision making.

MPOs can advance health by:

- Directing significant amounts of federal and state transportation dollars toward large-scale meaningful active transportation projects.
- Prioritizing health in goals, objectives, performance measures, and project lists in regional transportation plans and transportation improvement programs.
- Developing regional active transportation plans that include transformative projects and are structured to create a safe, comfortable, convenient, and comprehensive network for walking, bicycling, and emerging forms of transportation like scooters.
- Conducting health impact assessments of regional transportation plans, transportation improvement programs, specific projects, and other MPO activities.
- Adopting resolutions that commit the MPO to key actions on topics like Health in All Policies, Complete Streets, or Vision Zero.
- Establishing Safe Routes to School programs and other health-supportive community programming.
- Providing technical assistance, model policies, and other resources to support local jurisdictions in planning for walking and biking, supporting Complete Streets, and supporting other aspects of health- and equity-focused planning.

Additional resources

- To learn more about metropolitan planning organizations and health, see the Safe Routes Partnership's detailed reports: [Metropolitan Planning Organizations & Health 101: The Nuts and Bolts of Regional Transportation Agencies](#) and [Metropolitan Planning Organizations & Health 201: Best Practices & Promising Opportunities for Health](#).
- For a quick overview of regional transportation plans, see [How Regional Transportation Plans Influence Health](#).

How to Encourage Your MPO to Address Health

How can you get started on engaging and influencing your MPO.

1. First, educate yourself. Understand the basics about your MPO – what region does it serve, how is decision making structured on its policy board, what advisory boards and other structures are there, and what opportunities exist to influence the board? Talk to advocates and political leaders who can provide perspective on the competing currents and priorities within your MPO's leadership.
2. Begin to build relationships. Meet with MPO staff and identify allies. Determine whether the MPO policy board member representing your jurisdiction is likely to be friendly to your general goals, and cultivate a relationship with that member, their staff, and other members who are supportive of health.
3. Determine a feasible yet ambitious goal. Now that you understand the roles that MPOs can play generally and how your MPO works and leans specifically, select one or several goals that you would like to see your MPO implement. Maybe this is including funding for a protected bike lane or sidewalks on a school route in the regional transportation plan or transportation improvement program, or the prioritization of walking and biking routes to healthy food venues.
4. Build influence and good will. Find a variety of ways to get involved, and show yourself to be a persistent, knowledgeable, and constructive participant. Sign up to be notified about topics of interest. Attend community meetings during planning processes, speak up during public comment periods, and write comment letters summarizing your visions, concerns, and suggestions. Becoming appointed to an advisory committee can be a good way to begin to influence internal processes for your MPO, strengthen relationships with staff, and advocate for your goals. Look out for other opportunities for public input as well.
5. Work toward short-term and long-term goals. Advocate for short-term wins while also supporting structural changes that will create more community voice and higher prioritization/prioritize, of health, and equity, and the voice of the community.