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# *Getting to Work: Transportation Policy and Access to Job Opportunities*

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## I. Why Transportation Policy is Linked to Employment Opportunity

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Equal access to employment opportunity is a cornerstone of civil rights law and policy. Federal statutes such as Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 are designed to level the playing field by combating discriminatory practices by employers. However, employers are not the only decision makers who affect equal access to opportunity. For decades, metropolitan areas have been expanding outward, and jobs have been moving farther away from the low-income and minority people who disproportionately remain in urban cores. For many of these people, inadequate or unaffordable transportation is a significant barrier to employment.

As jobs move to auto-dependent suburbs, those without access to cars—including low-income workers and people with disabilities—lose out on employment opportunities. Many workers without access to a car spend hours on multiple buses traveling to remote work places; some are unable to get to these jobs at all. Low-income people who do have access to cars spend a large percentage of their household resources on transportation at the expense of other necessities.

Congress is now considering the surface transportation reauthorization bill, which will allocate funds for highways, rail, bus, and other modes of transportation across this country. The projects that it funds will not only affect Americans' access to existing jobs, they will generate hundreds of thousands of new jobs. For these reasons, the transportation bill will have a significant impact on employment opportunity.

Congress must address the issue of equal access to job opportunity as it considers the surface transportation reauthorization bill. This authorization process presents civil and human rights advocates with an opportunity to engage members of Congress, educate stakeholders, and elevate the visibility of social justice concerns in transportation policy.

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## II. Lack of Transportation Isolates Many Americans from Jobs

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### *a. People and jobs – a geographic mismatch*

Most Americans live in a metropolitan area consisting of a central city or county with a population of more than 50,000, or in the outlying counties economically associated with the core areas.<sup>1</sup> Historically, the majority of jobs in a metro area were located in the central core business district. Residential suburbs expanded to accommodate growing populations,<sup>2</sup> and transportation systems developed to move workers from residential areas to business districts.

This regional model of urban core jobs and “bedroom communities” is no longer dominant. Today, more people work in the outlying areas than in central cities. According to the Brookings Institution, by 2006, 45 percent of jobs in our 98 largest metro areas were located more than 10 miles from the urban core.<sup>3</sup>

Across the 100 largest metropolitan areas, on average, about 22 percent of people work within three miles of the city center, and more than 35 percent work more than ten miles from the center.<sup>4</sup>

The flow of jobs into the suburbs does not affect all populations equally. Lower-income people and people of color disproportionately remain in the central cities. A report by the General Accountability Office found that 50 percent of welfare recipients live in central cities, compared with 30 percent of the total population.<sup>5</sup> About 60 percent of African Americans live in cities, compared with about 30 percent of non-Hispanic whites.<sup>6</sup> But notably, isolation from job growth is not solely a function of city lines; the growing population of low-income and minority suburbanites is also disconnected from new job growth, which takes place mostly in higher-income suburban areas.<sup>7</sup>

### *b. Our automobile-dependent transportation system disproportionately affects low-income people and minorities*

The outlying areas where job growth is taking place are generally accessible only by car; many areas within cities and inner suburbs, along with most rural

areas, are also inaccessible by public transportation, walking, or biking. Because of the high expense of car ownership—estimated at upwards of \$9,000 per year—many low-income people are effectively walled off from these new opportunities.<sup>8</sup> Jobs in car-dependent areas are disproportionately inaccessible to people of color: 19 percent of African Americans and 13.7 percent of Latinos lack access to cars, compared with only 4.6 percent of Whites.<sup>9</sup>

Households with incomes below \$25,000 comprise 65 percent of households without vehicles.<sup>10</sup>

The current economic climate has made commuting without a car even more difficult for the large number of transit-dependent individuals who can no longer get to work because their ride has been cut or eliminated. Due to shortages in state and local revenues, public transit systems are carrying out some of the deepest service cuts and steepest fare increases in recent history. Since the beginning of 2009, approximately 85 percent of public transit systems have increased fares or cut services, and thousands of workers in the transit industry have been laid off.<sup>11</sup>

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### III. Transportation Sector Job Creation Has Not Benefitted All Americans Equally

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The transportation sector generates millions of jobs. It is estimated that more than 14 million jobs—about 11 percent of civilian jobs in the U.S.—are transportation-related.<sup>12</sup> Our transportation investment decisions to date have made these jobs less accessible to some Americans than others. Transportation dollars overwhelmingly go toward building new highways that expand metropolitan areas.<sup>13</sup> These jobs are frequently located far from where most low-income people live and are not accessible by public transportation.

Currently, women and minorities are underrepresented in transportation construction employment. Of the roughly eight million people employed in the transportation construction industry in 2008, African Americans comprised only 6 percent and women comprised less than 3 percent.<sup>14</sup> Latinos are disproportionately employed in lower-paying transportation sector jobs and concentrated in a few occupations.<sup>15</sup>

Yet the number of construction job openings is growing, presenting more opportunities for disadvantaged groups to obtain good jobs without displacing current workers.<sup>16</sup> Most construction skills are learned on the job, through formal and informal apprenticeship systems. Construction is one of the few industries where workers with little formal education can obtain good jobs, with decent pay, good benefits, and job ladders. In 2006, the average wage for construction workers was \$18.29 per hour, well above most jobs in the service sector.<sup>17</sup>

## IV. Getting the Policy to Work—Transportation Policy that Promotes Job Opportunity

As Congress considers how to invest billions of taxpayer dollars in transportation and infrastructure, civil and human rights advocates must educate policymakers about ways to maximize access to employment opportunities for all Americans. A sound and equitable surface transportation authorization bill would include both increased access to affordable transportation and a dedicated focus on job creation.

Public transit riders save approximately \$1,400 in gas per year.<sup>18</sup>

### *a. Affordable and accessible transportation to work*

Low-income workers who disproportionately rely upon public transportation have been hit hard by cuts to public transportation. State and local transportation systems need the power to restore and improve services. Federal funds must be available to serve the transportation needs of public transit riders. We must invest in transit options that will enable low-income people to reach a greater variety of job opportunities—including transportation projects in outlying areas.

### *b. Job creation*

The reauthorization bill has the potential to create hundreds of thousands of jobs in the transportation

sector and transportation-related projects. It is critically important to maximize the job creation power of every transportation dollar we spend. This includes: selecting modes of transportation that generate the most jobs; incentivizing projects that locate jobs in underserved communities; and vigorously enforcing requirements for equal opportunity programs and grants targeting disadvantaged business enterprises.<sup>20</sup>

Transportation investments make good economic sense. The American Public Transportation Association estimates that 36,000 jobs are created or supported for every \$1 billion invested in public transportation; and every \$1 invested in public transportation generates almost \$4 in economic benefits.<sup>21</sup>

There are conflicting opinions on whether expenditures for mass transit projects produce more jobs than highway spending.<sup>22</sup> The big picture, however, shows that public transportation projects have greater potential to foster equal employment opportunity across racial and socioeconomic lines. There are a variety of reasons for this. First, highway construction tends to create short-term positions that are often filled by non-local workers who leave at the end of a project.<sup>23</sup> By contrast, investments in public transportation create long-term jobs in administration and operations.<sup>24</sup> Second, reinvestment in city cores and inner suburbs where lower-income people and minorities are concentrated

### **Public Transportation Improving Job Access for Low-Wage Workers in Practice**

The construction of the Hiawatha light-rail line in the Twin Cities, which runs between downtown Minneapolis and its southern suburbs, provided significant benefits for transit-dependent low-wage workers—improving transportation equity in the Twin Cities.

- The number of low-wage jobs accessible by 30 minutes of transit travel in morning peak hours increased by 14,000 or 50 percent in light-rail station areas and by 4,000 or 25 percent in areas with direct, light-rail-connecting bus routes.
- Low-wage workers have increasingly been locating near station areas. Hiawatha and related transit upgrades are estimated to have drawn 907 low-wage workers into the Hiawatha station areas.

The number of low-wage employers has increased near station areas, with Hiawatha and related transit upgrades estimated to have brought in more than 5,000 low-wage jobs into areas near downtown Minneapolis and suburban light-rail stations.<sup>19</sup>

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not only brings job opportunities closer to them, but facilitates access to jobs in other sectors.

Federal law should also create incentives for states and localities to provide jobs to people from low-income communities, including tying federal funding to compliance with contracting goals for disadvantaged business enterprises.

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## V. Conclusion: Opportunities for Engagement among Civil and Human Rights Advocates

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For equal employment opportunity to be a practical reality, we must invest in transit options that get people to where the jobs are. The surface transportation reauthorization bill provides a significant opportunity to connect workers to work through public transportation and investments closer to the urban cores that will stem the tide of jobs far from underserved populations.

The federal government is about to infuse billions of dollars into the economy, creating thousands of jobs. How we allocate these dollars will have a significant impact on whether low-income and minority workers have an equal chance to fill them. Civil and human rights activists can shape this discourse by advocating for public transit projects, rebuilding in core areas, supporting diversity in contracting, and incentivizing projects that produce long-term, local job creation.

## Endnotes

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