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Community and Multi-Sector Partner Engagement in United States Vision Zero Plan Development

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Abstract

Background: Vision Zero aims to eliminate serious and fatal road injuries using a Safe System approach. Safe System principles establish that safety is a shared responsibility; this involves both multi-sector partners and community engagement. This descriptive study explored multi-sector partners and community engagement in the development of municipal Vision Zero plans.

Methods: We reviewed all first edition Vision Zero plans published by United States municipalities from 2014-2022. Using a structured coding tool, we abstracted partner involvement and community engagement strategies used in the development of Vision Zero plans.

Results: We identified, reviewed, and abstracted 64 plans. The average number of partner groups per plan was 11.5 (12.0 for municipalities with population $\geq 150,000$; 10.1 for municipalities $< 150,000$) and was higher for later plans (11.9 for plans published 2019-2022; 10.0 for plans published 2014-2018). Common partner groups engaged in the plan were law enforcement (85.9% of plans), local transportation planning (78.3%), mayor/city council/city manager (78.1%), engineering/public works (78.1%), and schools (73.4%). Community engagement strategies were reported in 71.9% of the plans and were more frequent among municipalities with population

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>=150,000 (76.1%) compared to a population <150,000 (61.1%), and in those with more recent plans (82.1%) versus earlier ones (56.0%). The most common community engagement strategies were public meetings, online surveys, and map mark-ups.

Conclusions: These findings highlight the extent to which Vision Zero plans were aligned with core Safe System tenets regarding diverse partner involvement and community engagement. Plan developers should consider translation of Safe System principles in Vision Zero plan development.

Keywords

Safe System; road safety; collaboration; policies; transportation planning; COVID-19 pandemic

INTRODUCTION

Traffic fatalities are a leading cause of death in the United States (U.S.). The rate of traffic fatalities in the U.S. is higher than rates in most other high-income countries by population, distance travelled, and registered vehicles.¹ An increasingly popular framework to reduce these deaths in the U.S. is through implementation of Vision Zero that centers a holistic Safe System approach. A Safe System approach calls for deep and equitable community engagement, broad multi-sector partnerships, and a central focus on safety in all aspects of the transportation system.²

Vision Zero plans are public documents that are designed to lay out priorities, action steps, and targets for eliminating traffic deaths and serious injuries.² Over the last several years, Vision Zero plans have become increasingly prevalent across the U.S.³ With resources from the 2021 Bipartisan Infrastructure Law, the U.S. Department of Transportation (DOT) established the Safe Streets and Roads for All grant program that provides \$5 billion from 2022-2026 to “regional, local, and Tribal initiatives to prevent roadway deaths and serious injuries”.⁴ Activities eligible for this funding include developing or updating comprehensive safety plans; conducting planning, design, and development activities in support of a plan; and carrying out projects and strategies identified in a plan.⁵ This unprecedented federal investment toward safety plans, including Vision Zero and safe mobility plans, indicates interest and investment in Vision Zero is likely to continue to increase further.

The process of creating a Vision Zero plan lays a critical foundation for the plan’s success, as it can unify the larger community around a shared agenda and ensure plans are responsive to community needs and concerns.⁶ A Vision Zero plan also establishes a shared responsibility to safety among those who design, build, and maintain transportation systems.³ While there is a general understanding that inclusion and engagement of practitioners, partners, and the public in the development of a Vision Zero initiative is critical,^{6,7} research on adherence to this core tenet in Vision Zero plan development is limited.⁷ In working towards more active engagement of practitioners, partners, and the public, external and widespread monitoring of these practices across the country is needed to better understand where and how this is or is not being implemented. Such monitoring can inform future local, state, and federal recommendations and actions to help support and shape such practices. Additionally, monitoring potential progress in these practices over space (e.g., by population size) and time can indicate when and where supports,

recommendations, and actions are needed to ensure inclusion and engagement efforts are integrated into Vision Zero planning efforts.

To address these gaps and in recognition of community-engaged implementation, we conducted a content analysis of all publicly available U.S. municipal-level Vision Zero plans published from 2014 to 2022 to investigate involvement in key partner groups and community engagement strategies in plan creation. We further examined these distributions by population size and publication year to explore whether partner and community engagement changed over space and time.

METHODS

Plan Collection

The research team collected and archived Vision Zero plans published through December 2022. Identifying Vision Zero plans included a structured search with every municipality with a population of at least 50,000 (as of July 1, 2019). We searched for the presence of Vision Zero plans or planning efforts one-by-one in all 788 U.S. municipalities. Additionally, Vision Zero plans were discovered through interviews with Vision Zero coordinators,⁸ inquiring with planning and safety listservs, and through a survey of road safety professionals.⁹ Most of the Vision Zero plans we found were subsequently posted.¹⁰ We included plans not specifically called “Vision Zero” if they included a vision to eliminate all traffic fatalities and serious injuries. Given the focus on local Vision Zero planning efforts, the plans identified for content analysis included only municipal level plans, not those written at the county, regional, or state level. Additionally, only first edition plans were included. The final sample included 64 first edition municipal-level Vision Zero plans published through December 2022.

Data Abstraction

The abstraction tool was designed to capture information about partners and community engagement, as documented in the plans. The tool was reviewed and revised several times to ensure clarity. Trained abstractors used this tool to abstract all plans, with each abstraction checked by a second abstractor. Discrepancies between the two abstractors were resolved by consensus.

Specifically, partners were abstracted from their job title or organization ascribed to in the plan. In most plans, specific people were listed but some plans only identified organization names. Rarely, individuals were listed without organizational affiliations; in those cases, we conducted a search of the name and municipality to identify partner types. If partners were listed in the plans, we interpreted that as being involved in plan development. On occasion, plans involved more than one partner of the same type; therefore, we refer to them as “partner groups.”

Community engagement strategies were recorded from stated engagement reports and efforts seeking public comment within the plans. Plans were searched for a variety of community engagement strategies, such as in-person public meetings, virtual public meetings, and the circulation of a draft version of the plan for public comment.

Analysis

Descriptive statistics were reported as counts and frequencies, overall and by population size and year of plan publication. For population size and year of plan publication, we noted in the text absolute percentage point differences of at least 20%. Municipality population size was assigned based on the U.S. Census.

RESULTS

Of the Vision Zero plans abstracted (N=64), 25 were published between 2014-2018 and 39 were published from 2019 to 2022. Eighteen plans were created by small-to-midsize municipalities, defined as a population of fewer than 150,000, and 46 were created by larger municipalities, defined as a population of 150,000 or more.

Partner Engagement

Partner groups engaged in the creation of the plan were acknowledged in 92.2% (n=59) of the Vision Zero plans (Table 1). The average number of partner groups per plan was 11.5. The most common partner groups engaged in the plan were law enforcement, local transportation planning, engineering/public works, mayor/city council/city manager, and schools/colleges/universities.

The average total number of partner groups per plan was 10.1 for small-to-midsize municipalities and 12.0 for larger municipalities. Several partner groups were more common in larger municipalities compared to small-to-midsize municipalities: emergency medical services (EMS; 23.9% vs. 0%), local fire (60.9% vs. 38.9%), private health organizations (39.1% vs. 16.7%), private sector/business groups (43.5% vs. 11.1%), public health agencies (71.7% vs. 50.0%), and regional transportation planning organizations (56.5% vs. 33.3%).

Plans published more recently include more types of partners in plan development than earlier plans. The average total number of partner groups per plan was 10.0 for plans published between 2014-2018 and 11.9 for plans published between 2019-2022. Several partner groups appeared more often in plans published more recently (2019-2022) compared to later (2014-2018): committee/advisory board (79.5% vs. 52.0%), communications/marketing (33.3% vs. 8.0%), engineering/public works (87.2% vs. 64.0%), local land use planning (56.4% vs. 36.0%), local transportation planning (92.3% vs. 56.0%), mayor/city council/city manager (84.6% vs. 68.0%), and regional transportation planning (59.0% vs. 36.0%).

Community Engagement

At least some documentation of the public participation process was included in 71.9% (n=46) of the plans (Table 2). Overall, 59.3% described the process in detail within the text of the plan. Public meetings were the most common public engagement strategy, described in 48.4% of the plans. Public meetings included all events for formally collecting input about Vision Zero held by municipal officials and open to the public, including town halls. While all public meetings documented before 2020 took place in person, all plans published

between 2020-2022 that documented the use of public meetings included at least one virtual or hybrid (in-person and virtual) public meeting.

Surveys conducted online were used in the development of 40.6% of plans, print surveys/questionnaires were described in 23.4% of plans, and 12.5% of plans described using both methods. Map mark-up processes were documented in 35.9% of plans. Map mark-ups refer to online or in-person activities where the public provides comments attached to specific locations on a virtual or physical map of the community, allowing for feedback connected to the built or natural environment.

Overall, 21.9% of the plans recorded the circulation of a preliminary draft for public comment, which included documentation of comments received and/or revisions made to the plan in response to the comments. Only 3% of plans provided the sociodemographic characteristics of community participants in the engagement strategy. No plans discussed the extent to which participant characteristics were representative of the broader community.

Community engagement strategies were described more often among municipalities with population $\geq 150,000$ (76.1%) compared to a population $< 150,000$ (61.1%). Compared to small-to-midsize, larger municipalities more frequently engaged the community through print surveys (28.3% vs. 11.1%) and public meetings (56.5% vs. 27.8%). Community engagement strategies were described more often among later plans (published 2019-2022, 82.1%) compared to earlier ones (published 2014-2018, 56.0%). Later compared to earlier plans more commonly included online surveys (53.8% vs. 20.0%), public meetings (59.0% vs. 32.0%), and the use of websites/blogs/listservs (38.5% vs. 4.0%).

DISCUSSION

At a time of rapid increases in transportation-related injuries and deaths,¹¹ localities across the U.S. are seeking effective strategies to quickly reverse these trends.⁸ Vision Zero and a Safe System approach offer holistic and engaged frameworks for addressing the underlying and interconnected factors generating transportation injury and death. Central to this approach, and in keeping with participatory implementation science models¹² and principles of Community-Engaged Dissemination and Implementation Research,¹³⁻¹⁴ is a focus on diverse partner involvement and community engagement. Analyzing all first edition municipal-level U.S. Vision Zero plans published through 2022, we found most plans included information on partner and community engagement efforts that went into creating the plan.

Partner Engagement

Content analysis of 64 Vision Zero plans indicated an average of 11.5 different partner groups involved in plan development. The plan-making process tended to favor involvement of specific local government agencies over regional or state governmental organizations, community-based organizations, and businesses. The local government focus may be an artifact of examining solely municipal-level plans. Vision Zero principles require support from a diverse range of community groups, as well as public agencies working at multiple

levels, allowing for better representation of the many parts of the system that impact injury and death outcomes (e.g., policies, culture, vehicle and built environment design).¹⁵

The most engaged partners were government agencies, particularly law enforcement. While these are key partners to engage, Safe Systems highlights that safety requires redundancy and is a shared responsibility, so it is crucial to engage a variety of partner types.¹⁶ Approximately half of Vision Zero plans engaged local land use planners and about two-thirds engaged public health partners. These groups connect with systemic elements of transportation and health. Given that urban sprawl is a strong predictor for higher travel speeds and higher rates of serious and fatal traffic injuries,¹⁷ local planners are a critical partner in applying a Safe System approach. Land use planning also includes aspects of the built environment relevant to the safety of road users, including the human-scale design of streetscapes.³ Additionally, public health agencies are uniquely suited to help communities plan for and implement Vision Zero, given its holistic approach that centers engagement, community relationships, and multi-sector partnership.^{18,19}

Notable partner groups appearing less frequently in plan involvement included EMS, private health organizations, and hospitals. These are the entities most responsible for post-crash care, making them a critical partner in the Safe System approach.⁵ Their relative rarity in Vision Zero plans suggests that perspectives on the practice of post-crash care may be under-represented in planning processes.

Larger municipalities involved more partner groups than small-to-midsized municipalities, which may be expected if larger municipalities can draw on greater resources and a more diverse pool of partners. However, the difference was not as large as perhaps expected. We also found that more recent plans showed greater diversity of partnerships than earlier ones.

Community Engagement

Most Vision Zero plans described community engagement strategies used during plan development; public meetings were the most common strategy reported. The COVID-19 pandemic had an impact on community engagement. For example, the 2021 Columbus, Ohio plan stated, “Our ‘new normal’ for community engagement in unprecedented times became virtual interactions”.²⁰ Another advantage of virtual engagement is that groups can be reached who may have difficulty participating with in-person engagement activities.²¹ However, virtual engagement tends toward top-down presentation of information, rather than group interactions, and online engagement efforts exclude those without internet access.²² Thus, virtual public meetings ideally would supplement, but not replace, accessible face-to-face meetings.

Researchers and practitioners have encouraged Vision Zero planners to meet with under-represented community members to receive their feedback and inform processes and focus areas described in the plans.² Notably, some plans described targeted outreach to communities identified as disproportionately harmed by traffic injury for feedback on their plan. Even so, municipalities cannot confirm equitable participation of under-represented communities without collecting some sociodemographic data (e.g., race, income, gender, age, zip code), and only two plans mentioned such data collection efforts.

As public documents, Vision Zero plans can be tools for engagement. Guidance for developing a Vision Zero plan suggests sharing the draft plan with the community and documenting feedback and how it was incorporated into the final plan.⁶ Only one-quarter of plans reported having taken this step. This is a missed opportunity for municipalities to gain support for the direction of the plan and ensure clarity regarding the feedback process.

Implications and Future Research

Future Vision Zero efforts could focus on broadening coalitions and involving more perspectives, including non-government agencies such as community groups, to ensure plans are aligned to community needs. Furthermore, it would be of interest to explore how the size of the coalition and the diversity of partnerships impact Vision Zero work. What are the characteristics of the most effective Vision Zero coalitions? Would the use of a Community Readiness Assessment, a brief key informant interview tool that can inform context-specific next steps to address a health problem, assist Vision Zero groups to engage with a broader set of partners in their work?²³

Additionally, while there are strengths and limitations to virtual engagement strategies, further work is needed to fully understand how to select the most effective strategies to ensure meaningful opportunities for input and collaboration in the least burdensome manner in a post-COVID world. When developing future Vision Zero plans, municipalities could also improve the documentation of public engagement generally, and more specifically public comments on a draft version of the plan, as well as how they responded to those comments. Transparency around this process is critical for building community and partner trust.

Finally, municipalities do not appear to be documenting how equity and disparities are considered within their community engagement efforts. Concerted effort is needed to intentionally design engagement and partner outreach efforts based on who is most affected by transportation-related injury and death and to transparently document how this informed engagement and outreach strategies. Are Vision Zero initiatives achieving the U.S. DOT definition of meaningful public involvement, defined as “a process that proactively seeks full representation from the community, considers public comments and feedback, and incorporates that feedback into a project, program, or plan when possible” (page 5)?⁷

Strengths and Limitations

The strengths of this project include the systematic search and inclusion of all identified initial municipal-level Vision Zero plans. All abstractions were checked by a second reviewer, to ensure internal reliability, using a pre-tested abstraction tool. However, we acknowledge several limitations. First, although the procedure for gathering municipal Vision Zero plans across the U.S. was thorough and iterated, it is possible some plans were missed, particularly if they were not posted online. Second, this study relied on what was documented in plans, so any partners and community engagement strategies not included in the descriptions could not be evaluated. Moreover, at least one plan referenced a larger transportation engagement strategy that Vision Zero engagement was part of, but the details of those efforts were not described in the Vision Zero plan. Finally, based on the plan

abstraction, as well as what was typically documented, the level of involvement of partner groups could not be accounted for, only that they participated.

The current study was designed to intentionally understand the landscape of partners currently engaged in these planning efforts within Vision Zero initiatives across the country. While we cannot yet point to specific and detailed models of engagement and collaboration associated with better or worse planning and implementation outcomes, it can and was designed to provide a national baseline of where these practices stand across the country, including a current understanding of engagement practices and partners that groups might want to consider as they are currently designing Vision Zero planning efforts. Having a bird's eye view on what is happening across the U.S. and working towards additional research in this space is critical as initiatives seek to quickly learn from each other and accelerate progress in the Vision Zero planning and implementation space.

Conclusion

Partner and community engagement are essential parts of creating an equitable and actionable Vision Zero plan. This content analysis of U.S. municipal Vision Zero plans published from 2014 to 2022 explored current practices in these forms of engagement in the development of those plans. We found that public agencies are most often involved, while community-based groups and other key perspectives were often missing in plan development. Exploration of community engagement strategies found that public meetings were the most common strategy and that recommended aspects of community engagement, such as reviewing public comments on draft plans and sociodemographic descriptions of participants, was uncommon. The overarching goal of this work was to improve understanding of these practices and highlight examples of how future Vision Zero plan development might include more inclusive practices to ensure Vision Zero work is designed to meet the needs of communities. These findings should be considered by those creating or updating Vision Zero plans to ensure plan development is well-aligned with core Vision Zero and Safe System tenets that center authentic engagement, community voices, and equity.

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Data Availability Statement:

After completion of appropriate permissions, data are available upon request to Kelly Evenson for a 12-month period following publication date.

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What is already known on this topic

- Vision Zero plans document priorities and action steps for eliminating traffic deaths and serious injuries.
- Engagement of practitioners, partners, and the public is a core tenet of Vision Zero plans.

What this study adds

- Documentation of multisector partner engagement in plan development is widespread in Vision Zero plans, with law enforcement, engineering/public works, local transportation planning, and elected or appointed local leadership most frequently cited as being engaged.
- Documentation of public engagement in plan development is becoming more widespread in Vision Zero plans. The most common form of engagement was public meetings.

How this study might affect research, practice, or policy

- Those creating Vision Zero plans should ensure plan development is well-aligned with core Safe System tenets, including involvement of diverse partners and centering authentic community engagement.
- Future studies could explore how more diverse partnerships and public engagement processes impact creation and implementation of Vision Zero initiatives.

Table 1:

Partner groups engaged in the United States Vision Zero plan creation overall and by population size and year published (n=64); 2014-2022

	Population Size						Year Published					
	Overall (n=64)		<150,000 (n=18)		>=150,000 (n=46)		2014-2018 (n=25)		2019-2022 (n=39)			
	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%
Law enforcement	55	85.9	16	88.9	39	84.8	21	84.0	34	87.2		
Local transportation planning	50	78.3	13	72.2	37	80.4	14	56.0	36	92.3		
Engineering/public works	50	78.1	16	88.9	34	73.9	16	64.0	34	87.2		
Mayor, city council, city manager	50	78.1	15	83.3	35	76.1	17	68.0	33	84.6		
Schools	47	73.4	11	61.1	36	78.3	17	68.0	30	76.9		
Committee/advisory board	44	68.8	13	72.2	31	67.4	13	52.0	31	79.5		
Public health agency	42	65.6	9	50.0	33	71.7	8	32.0	13	33.3		
Mode-related advocacy	39	60.9	11	61.1	28	60.9	14	56.0	25	64.1		
State transportation planning	35	54.7	8	44.4	27	58.7	13	52.0	22	56.4		
Local fire department	35	54.7	7	38.9	28	60.9	12	48.0	23	59.0		
Regional transportation planning	32	50.0	6	33.3	26	56.5	9	36.0	23	59.0		
Local land use planning	31	48.4	11	61.1	20	43.5	9	36.0	22	56.4		
Social justice/civil rights groups	24	37.5	5	27.8	19	41.3	10	40.0	14	35.9		
Private sector/business groups	22	34.4	2	11.1	20	43.5	11	44.0	11	28.2		
Parks and recreation	21	32.8	6	33.3	15	32.6	8	32.0	13	33.3		
Private health organizations	21	32.8	3	16.7	18	39.1	6	24.0	15	38.5		
Communications and marketing	15	23.4	6	33.3	9	19.6	2	8.0	13	33.3		
Emergency medical services	11	17.2	0	0.0	11	23.9	6	24.0	6	15.4		
Disability	10	15.6	3	16.7	7	15.2	5	20.0	5	12.8		
District Attorney's office	10	15.6	0	0.0	10	21.7	6	24.0	4	10.3		
Environmental/conservation groups	10	15.6	2	11.1	8	17.4	5	20.0	5	12.8		
Foundations	9	14.1	0	0.0	9	19.6	4	16.0	5	12.8		
Community development	8	12.5	1	5.6	7	15.2	2	8.0	6	15.4		
Aging	8	12.5	3	16.7	5	10.9	3	12.0	5	12.8		
Fleet services/local public transit	7	10.9	1	5.6	6	13.0	1	4.0	6	15.4		
Local chamber of commerce	7	10.9	2	11.1	5	10.9	3	12.0	4	10.3		

	Population Size						Year Published					
	Overall (n=64)			<150,000 (n=18)			>=150,000 (n=46)			2014-2018 (n=25)		
	n	%		n	%		n	%		n	%	
City attorney	5	7.8		1	5.6		4	8.7		0	0.0	
Federal transportation organizations	5	7.8		2	11.1		3	6.5		1	4.0	
Sustainability	5	7.8		0	0.0		5	10.9		2	8.0	
Multicultural affairs/equity	4	6.3		1	5.6		3	6.5		2	8.0	
Parking	3	4.7		2	11.1		1	2.2		1	4.0	
Technology	3	4.7		0	0.0		3	6.5		2	8.0	
Budget	2	3.1		0	0.0		2	4.3		0	0.0	
Emergency management	2	3.1		0	0.0		2	4.3		2	8.0	
Families of crash victims	2	3.1		1	5.6		1	2.2		0	0.0	
Local media	2	3.1		1	5.6		1	2.2		0	0.0	
Mobility	2	3.1		1	5.6		1	2.2		0	0.0	
Social services	2	3.1		1	5.6		2	4.3		1	4.0	
None reported	5	7.8		2	11.1		3	6.5		3	12.0	

Table 2:

Community engagement strategies documented in the United States Vision Zero plans overall and by population size and year published (n=64); 2014-2022

	Population Size						Year Published					
	Overall (n=64)		<150,000 (n=18)		>=150,000 (n=46)		2014-2018 (n=25)		2019-2022 (n=39)			
	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%
<u>Types of Strategies Used Per Plan</u> *:												
Public meeting	31	48.4	5	27.8	26	56.5	8	32.0	23	59.0		
Online surveys	26	40.6	7	38.9	19	41.3	5	20.0	21	53.8		
Map mark-up	23	35.9	5	27.8	18	39.1	6	24.0	17	43.6		
Websites, blogs, and listservs	16	25.0	6	33.3	10	21.7	1	4.0	15	38.5		
Print surveys	15	23.4	2	11.1	13	28.3	4	16.0	11	28.2		
Online meeting	14	21.9	4	22.2	10	21.7	0	0.0	14	35.9		
Public comment on draft	14	21.9	5	27.8	9	19.6	3	12.0	11	28.2		
Social media	12	18.8	5	27.8	7	15.2	2	8.0	10	25.6		
Focus groups	8	12.5	2	11.1	6	13.0	1	4.0	7	17.9		
Charette	3	4.7	0	0.0	3	6.5	1	4.0	2	5.1		
<u>Number of Strategies Used per Plan</u> :												
None reported	18	28.1	7	38.9	11	23.9	11	40.0	7	17.9		
One	8	12.5	3	16.7	5	10.9	5	20.0	3	7.7		
Two	8	12.5	3	16.7	5	10.9	3	12.0	5	12.8		
Three	8	12.5	0	0.0	8	17.4	4	16.0	4	10.3		
Four or more	21	34.4	5	27.8	17	37.0	2	8.0	20	51.3		

* Note that the percents do not add to 100% since plans could include more than one strategy and some plans had no strategies reported.