



TOLLING. MOVING SMARTER.

**Organization Name:** Port Authority of New York and New Jersey, Tunnels, Bridges and Terminals (TB&T)

**Project or Program Name:** Customer Experience

**Goal that best reflects your Project or Program’s achievements:** Provides professional growth or leadership opportunities for People of Color through our policies, projects, hiring practices, or actions

**Launch date for the Project or Program**

1/1/2020

**How many months of proven experience is this submission based upon?**

18 months.

**Is this Project or Program complete? If no, when will it be completed?**

No. Due to the success of this program in providing professional growth opportunities for people of different ethnicities, genders, and ages, while aiding a diverse population of toll customers, this is an ongoing program with the possibility of expansion.

**Briefly describe the Project or Program**

TB&T Customer Experience Unit Toll Payer Engagement Diversity Effort In the last 16 months, The Port Authority of New York and New Jersey (PANYNJ) the department of Tunnels, Bridges, and Terminals (TB&T) has created a diverse team of customer experience professionals (CX) to better reflect the region's multicultural composition. Through professional support, institutional promotion, and leadership opportunities, CX team members are encouraged to leverage their unique identities to effectively connect with toll payers from all backgrounds. Together, CX has assisted over 4,000 toll payers. The effort to build a diverse CX voice is supported by industry best practices. For example, a Harvard Business Review study found cognitively diverse teams were able to solve problems faster than those who had similar cognitive behaviors. Further, author Kimber Lee states that, "The more diverse your customer service team is, the more likely they will be able to show empathy towards a diverse customer base and take customer requests seriously." ( 7 Benefits Of Diversity In Customer Service At Your Company - Harver). Over the last year, the idea of diversity as an agency strength and effective customer engagement has undergone a focused evolution at The Port Authority. The Authority elevated customer engagement from a traditional "Customer Service" model to now encompass a 21st Century "Customer Experience" philosophy. Additionally, the PANYNJ's inclusion strategy embraces transformative policies to attract a capable workforce reflective of the region's multicultural background. PANYNJ is committed to encouraging organizational diversity to improve customer service by understanding and assisting our customer base. PANYNJ department, Tunnels, Bridges and Terminals' (TB&T) Customer Experience Unit (CX) pivoted to reflect this inclusion mandate by building a strong internal team comprised of 66% women, as well as 55% minorities. Recognizing that diversity moves beyond skin color, this team also incorporates the experiences and insights from different generations, educational and professional backgrounds. The TB&T CX Unit's internal diversity has resulted in readily observable positive customer engagement outcomes. For example, bilingual customer service is now available in English and Spanish, reflecting the two most used languages in the Port Region (83% of customers). Further, the CX team coordinates translation services in languages including, but not limited to, Arabic, Korean, Chinese, Hindi, and Russian. However, a study by RHR International, a global firm of management psychologists and consultants, found that a lack of networking and mentoring

relationships for diverse talent within the company could hinder chances at promotions to senior leadership and negatively impact team diversity. (Racial Diversity: There's More Work to be Done in the Workplace (economist.com)). In other words, it is not enough to build a diverse team to serve a diverse population; TB&T must promote, support, expose, and educate its teams within the larger agency. To ensure the success of the CX multicultural collaboration and guarantee that contributions aid toll payers, every CX team member is provided career training, professional membership support, certification support, leadership opportunities, and inclusion workshop engagement. Special emphasis is given to ensure team members have meaningful opportunities for visibility with senior leadership, presenting their findings directly, interacting on Agency-wide collaborative efforts and are prominent in all discussions involving their work. Additionally, each team member takes at least two career-related education courses every year, a required metric for their annual review. Further, TB&T recognizes individual CX members in Authority-wide programs and has featured team members in Board presentations. Multiple opportunities for career growth through committee appointments and educational support are also prioritized for team members. The results of providing professional growth and leadership opportunities for People of Color through our policies, projects, hiring practices, and actions is reflected in the measurable success of our toll payer engagement. The team's strengths clearly produce results among one of the Nation's most diverse toll paying populations.

## **What objective(s) was the Project or Program designed to accomplish?**

Each day, approximately 300,000 toll payers use TB&T's regional facilities. These customers reside in one of the most culturally diverse regions in the Nation. Given the vast disparate nature of our toll payers, providing communications equity is a main goal for TB&T. Customers may not be first language learners, disabilities may hinder phone communications, there may be generational understanding technology or economically disadvantages customers may not have access to phone or computer resources. To meet these challenges, our CX group was established to provide toll paying customers a 21st century customer service experience. The team was developed with representatives across gender, cultural, and racial spectrums. Together they leverage their unique backgrounds and perspectives to provide comprehensive tolling customer support. A primary innovation for TB&T was moving the Toll Payer Advocate from the reporting structure of the TB&T Revenue Recovery Unit to the new CX unit. This change enabled CX to reach more customers while supporting the Advocate a within a customer service driven platform. As a result, TB&T CX now prioritizes aiding toll payers with issues beyond the scope of NY E-ZPass Customer Service Center. Primarily, CX works with customers experiencing severe financial hardships who are working to address their PANYNJ-related tolling issues. Recognizing that successful toll payer engagement is contingent on a successful support of a diverse CX team, team members are encouraged to build on their own unique identities, expand their skill set, and engage in a number of diversity and inclusion opportunities. This is accomplished through:

- o Work Training
- o Diversity and Inclusion Education
- o Leadership Recognition and Opportunities
- o Participation in Inclusive Employee Resource Groups

## **How did the Project or Program accomplish the stated objectives?**

CX has elevated its commitment to provide professional growth for its diverse workforce through: Work Training Each team member is encouraged to take work related educational trainings. These skills are then used to create metrics for measuring toll payer engagement, identify customer trends, and refine practices to produce responsive customer interactions. CX team members chose to take course including programs:

- o Access
- o SQL
- o EXCEL
- o Salesforce

## Diversity and Inclusion Education

According to the Deloitte University Leadership Center for Inclusion, 83% of Millennial employees are actively engaged with company priorities when they feel the company they're working for fosters an inclusive culture (<https://www2.deloitte.com/content/dam/Deloitte/us/Documents/about-deloitte/us-inclus-millennial-influence-120215.pdf>).

To engage in the CX team's internal diversity and build innovative toll payer solutions, team members successfully completed over two dozen educational courses in the last 16 months. These courses improved the team's cultural awareness and include topics such as:

- o Anti-Racism Training
- o Ethics in the Workforce
- o Mitigating Bias and Agency Leadership Role Ensuring Inclusion
- o Civil Rights and Disability Awareness
- o Communicating Up, Down, and Across
- o EEO Training
- o ADA Reasonable Accommodation training
- o Managing Blended Teams
- o Mitigating Unconscious Bias
- o Building a Resilient Mindset Through Chaos and Change

## Leadership Recognition and Opportunities

The last year has seen unprecedented opportunity for CX to showcase its strengths in diversity. Emphasis was placed on providing opportunities for CX staff to interact with senior agency leadership.

- o CX staff led a major agency-wide CX strategic study that included best practices research, the facilitation of stakeholder workshops, and the alignment of a customer-centric strategic approach for the department. This study provided development and leadership opportunities for CX staff coordinating key study components. Staff presented findings to peer departments to inform an agency-wide approach to delivering a comprehensive customer experience.
- o A CX team member's contributions were recognized with a prestigious agency award ("Pillars of the Port Authority"). This Authority-wide award highlighted her service and skills utilized in aiding a high volume of toll payers that included non-English speaking customers.
- o PANYNJ featured the Toll Payer Advocate program at the 2021 State of the Agency Address given by the PANYNJ Chairman and Executive Director. Team management presented CX work to the entire PANYNJ staff of over 8,000 members, discussing CX's successful customer support while resolving complex tolling issues.
- o A CX team member led the development and implementation of a department pilot program for a customer advisory council. The Port Authority Bus Terminal Advisory Council is managed by CX and partners with the local community to ensure topics such as accessibility, safety, and general customer experience are addressed
- o The CX team serves as the department liaison for the agency's Civil Rights Act Title VI Working Group, ensuring program accessibility and non-discrimination compliance.

## Employee Resource Groups

Additionally, the CX team members are committed to supporting the Authority's mission to embrace diversity and inclusion by participating in and contributing to Employee Resource Groups, including:

- o PAWC - Port Authority Women's Council

- o PAHS - Port Authority Hispanic Society
- o WTS - Women Transportation Seminar International
- o NBE - PANYNJ Network of Black Employees

## **What were the successful, demonstrable results of the Project or Program that positively affected the customer, agency and/or the community?**

As the toll industry moves towards All Electronic Tolling (AET), toll payers run the risk of being exposed to potential transition-related issues, including a trying learning curve and accessibility challenges. CX seeks to bridge these gaps and help the tolling public maintain their accounts in good standing, rectify outstanding issues, and successfully use AET crossings. CX offers our diverse toll payers a direct contact and personalized step-by-step assistance. Each case is handled individually, and the customer is not only heard but is made a partner in efforts to resolve their tolling problem. To reach the greatest number of people regardless of socioeconomic backgrounds, all modes of communications are employed by CX to communicate with the tolling public including phone, letters, email, and fax. Together this outreach successfully contacted 4,000 toll payers in 16 months. Some important work included:

- o Worked with over 4,000 customers of different ethnicities, genders, abilities, and generations
- o Created over 300 payment plans for toll payers to address their PANYNJ issues
- o Hosted the first New York State Toll Payer Advocate Forum

The team also engaged with elected officials representing approximately 30 million people at all levels of government throughout the Port region. Our ability to speak with customers in a variety of languages is highlighted and used by elected officials to best serve their constituents.

## **Is your Project or Program relevant and applicable to the overall toll industry? If so, how?**

Absolutely. According to the Bookings Institute, nonwhite Americans constituted the main engines of the nation's growth, and are likely to do the same going forward (What the 2020 census will reveal about America: Stagnating growth, an aging population, and youthful diversity (brookings.edu). Concurrently, the Washington Center for Equitably Growth noted that a majority of women suffer wage inequality that this inequality heavily affects families of color (<https://equitablegrowth.org/gender-wage-inequality-in-the-united-states-causes-and-solutions-to-improve-family-well-being-and-economic-growth>). TB&T's CX team is reflective of these distinctions. Care has been taken to develop a customer experience team that reflects regional diversity. In 2021, our team routinely communicates and engages with toll payers of all backgrounds and ethnicities throughout the New York/New Jersey region. We have also implemented program improvements which highlight diversity and inclusion with our customer base and presented these to other Toll Payer Advocate groups. In May 2021, we hosted the first New York State Toll Payer Advocate Conference. This meeting discussed best practices, customer engagement, and advocate philosophies. The informational exchange was strong enough that a mutual agreement was reached to continue hosting these conferences on a quarterly basis.

## **How did this Project or Program achieve or demonstrate excellence?**

The CX diverse team supported the following toll payer achievements:

- o Successfully responded to over 4,000 E-ZPass tolling issues
- o Had team members complete over two-dozen diversity and inclusion trainings
- o Collaboratively worked on policies to decrease the average time of resolving toll payer issues from 18 days to under 10 days
- o Negotiated over \$700,000 in payment plans to address customer tolling issues
- o Promoted team members through successful award nomination

- o Selected team members for leadership roles in various committees and initiatives
- o Incorporated Best Practices when communicating with customers through the provision of multilingual services and direct contact
- o Developed streamlining practices shared with other Toll Payer Advocates to improve customer service beyond the Port region.

## **Describe any innovative aspects of your Project or Program**

Toll Payer PANYNJ Payment Plans – Prior to the addition of the PANYNJ Toll Payer Advocate, customers with a DMV registration suspension resulting from failure to pay PANYNJ tolls and fees had one option: pay in full. Most of these customers owe over \$1,000. Many customers simply did not have the necessary sum available for a one-time payment.

The PANYNJ Toll Payer Advocate developed payment plans to create equitable financially responsible payment plans to help customers regardless of income level. In 16 months, CX helped over 300 customers from all backgrounds develop financially responsible plans to address their outstanding PANYNJ tolls and fees. Additionally, the Toll Payer Advocate developed a series of metrics for hardship cases involving extreme documentable conditions in the event of severe financial or medical occurrences.

CX shared the principals of these plans with the other Toll Payer Advocates who are now pursuing similar courses of action.

CX negotiated over \$700,000 in tolls and fees through these payment plans which underscores the sustainable nature of tolling advocacy.

Professional Growth as a Measurable Metric – the CX team members integrated professional training into their yearly evaluations. PANYNJ may use these evaluations to determine employee raises and promotions. The CX unit's goal is to take at least two trainings supporting professional growth each year. Most members opted to take many more. Regardless of amount, management provides time during normal business hours to achieve this educational goal. CX hosts weekly team meetings at which the members share their training experiences.

Bias-Free Review Process – CX's Toll Payer Advocate has implemented a blind case consideration process in which customers identities, names, and genders are protected using a number code rather than personal name on cases. They/them pronouns are also employed. This innovation circumvents any unconscious bias managers may have when reviewing settlements or fee reductions in the case of financial or medical hardship.

Gender Neutral Correspondence and Interventions - This year, a new emphasis was placed on gender neutral correspondence when communicating with customers. All CX customers are now asked how they preferred to be addressed. In cases when this contact is not possible, gender neutral terminology is adopted. Advocate template correspondence was updated to reflect these changes. Additionally, the Toll Payer Advocate aids customers who have changed their gender identity. At the customer's request, this information is provided to the New York E-ZPass Customer Service Center to adopt, furthering inclusivity communications with CX toll payers.

## **List individuals worthy of special recognition for this Project or Program**



TOLLING. MOVING SMARTER.

This is a team effort and every member of the CX Unit and TB&T management contributes through to its success. Individual efforts include, but are not limited to:

Susan Cornejo – PANYNJ Toll Payer Advocate, offers bilingual service while assisting over 900 toll payers to date

Cindy Corso – Navigates toll reimbursement and toll payer messaging for customers throughout the bistate region

Raina Cinquemani – Developed and leads the Port Authority Bus Terminal Advisory Council to engage the traveling public

Meagan Devereaux – supervises the Toll Payer Advocate while working with elected officials to address their constituents' tolling issues; manages standardization of customer communications across all channels.

Ashely Feiker –developed customer response standards across TB&T and coordinates Title VI compliance to ensure TB&T remains equally accessible to all customers

David Haytaian – advises retired PANYNJ employees with E-ZPass related issues

Brian Jacob – manages the CX team at TB&T; developed and led the CX strategic study to advocate for customer service initiatives across the Agency

Joaquin Liguas – provides extensive direct 1-on-1 support for toll payers experiencing E-ZPass system failures

Jessica Nallo – develops customer social media messaging to reach toll payers through their personal phones, TB&T website, and on kiosks located within terminals; leading development of CX metrics reporting to monitor performance and identify opportunities for improvement