# 1.3 Working with Metropolitan Planning Organizations

**Purpose:** This resource briefly describes the role and potential usefulness of local metropolitan planning organizations (MPOs) in fostering communication with vulnerable populations.

**Directions:** Network members can use this resource to understand different ways MPOs can assist in data assimilation and in policy and grant coordination.

There are 385 MPOs in the United States that represent urban areas with populations over 50,000. MPOs carry out transportation planning processes, including long-range planning (Long Range Transportation Plan or LRTP), short range planning (Transportation Improvement Program or TIP), and an annual program of work (Unified Planning Work Program or UPWP). Many MPOs have expanded their mission beyond transportation, sometimes as part of Regional Planning Councils or other organizational frameworks, to include regional coordination for programs, such as emergency planning, housing, health, and other regional services.

Although the MPO is not listed as a lead or support agency under Emergency Support Function #1 (Transportation) and does not have a typical role in the response or recovery aspects of an evacuation, an MPO can assist with or provide a forum for emergency preparedness, particularly as it relates to vulnerable populations.

1. **A Seat at the Table.** An MPO is required by federal law to have a policy board, which is the decision-making body for transportation projects in the region. The board is made up of local elected officials, state officials, and public agencies that administer or operate major modes of transportation. Transit operators fall within the last group and are there to ensure that transportation investments are multi-modal. Under the policy board, there is almost always a technical coordinating committee (TCC) and usually a citizen’s advisory committee (CAC). Larger MPOs may have sub-committees that focus on particular topics. Plugging into one of these committees on the topic of integrating vulnerable populations into the planning process will help bring awareness to the subject. The best way to build relationships with the MPO, other transportation entities, and their representatives and public officials is to attend a policy board, TCC, CAC, or subcommittee meeting.
2. **Mapping.** Many MPOs have the capability to produce various types of maps. They utilize census, safety, travel, employment, and other data to demonstrate the flow of traffic throughout a region. They can also produce maps that show evacuation routesor transit routes ending at shelters. Maps can also show which transit stops are accessible and offer sidewalk connectivity or ADA compliant features. Census data can identify pockets of poverty or zerovehicle households and hard-to-reach populations. For more information on how Geographic Information System (GIS) can be utilized, see the resource entitled Demographics and Database Research. Agencies can request maps for their own internal meetings and data collection efforts.
3. **Coordinated Planning.** SAFETEA-LU requires that projects funded under the Job Access Reverse Commute Program (5316), New Freedom (5317), and Elderly and Persons with Disabilities (5310) programs be derived from a locally developed, coordinated plan. The purpose of the Coordinated Human Services Plan is to work with all the agencies that operate transit services for older adults, people with disabilities, and lower incomes to coordinate their services better and identify collective needs for the future. This process puts pen to paper in terms of policy and project recommendations and provides a forum for various agencies and operators.
4. **Pedestrian Planning and ADA Compliance.** MPOs are charged with developing pedestrian plans or integrating pedestrian improvements into the LRTP. In an evacuation, there will be people that need public transit as a means to get to a shelter or to a drop-off point. To limit the number of paratransit vehicles deployed to individual homes, continuous sidewalks, ADA compliant curb ramps, and crossing treatments around transit stops will encourage people with disabilities to go to an advertised pick-up-location. Plugging into the MPOs planning cycle and attending public meetings will help bring these issues to light.
5. **Grants.** Many MPOs coordinate Urban Area Security Initiative (UASI) efforts and grants that can support various emergency planning and implementation initiatives. One-time funding can help get an initiative started. In one instance after an evacuation, a need was identified and the MPO found resources to hold a focus group with CBOs, emergency managers, transportation professionals, and others to discuss communication efforts with vulnerable populations.