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TRB Webinar: Impacts and Responses to Drug Use on Transit

October 14, 2025

1:00 – 2:00 PM (eastern)

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Purpose Statement

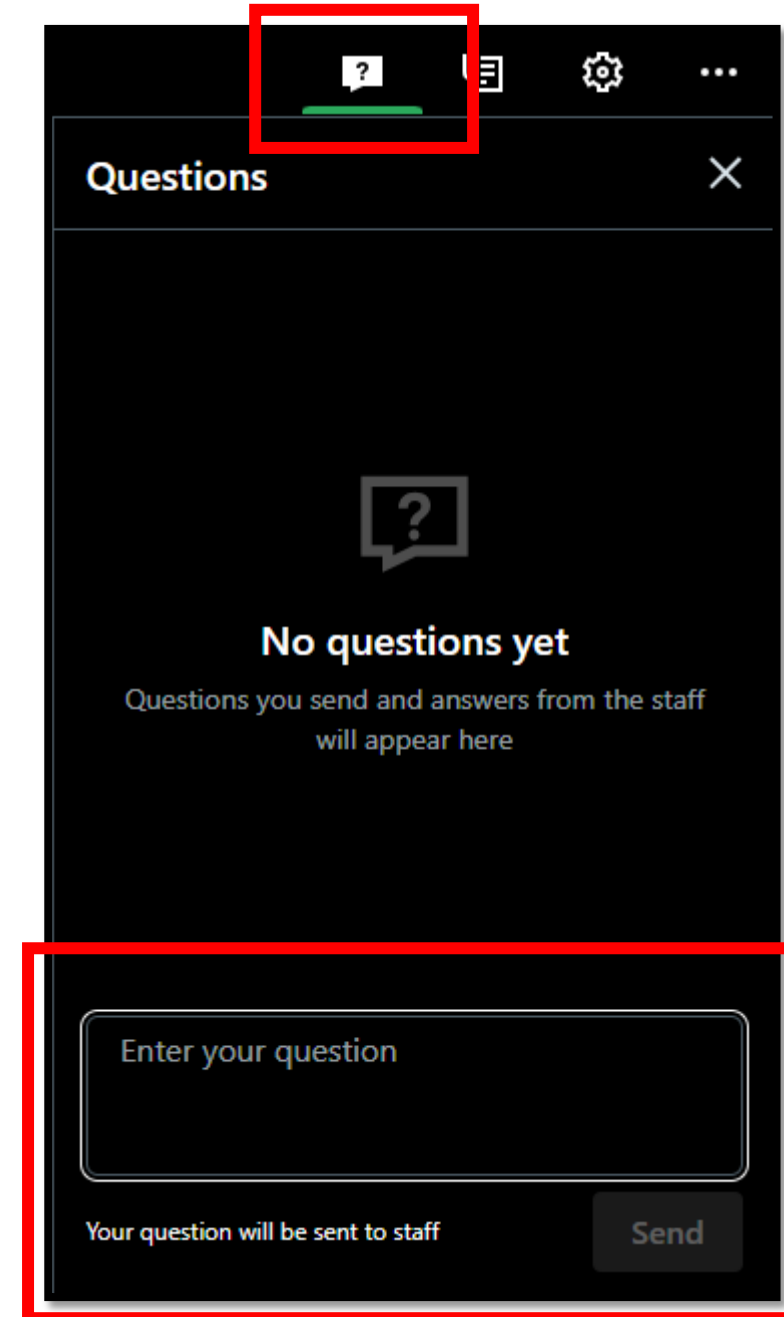
This webinar will highlight a first-of-its-kind report documenting how transit agencies in five cities—Portland, Denver, Los Angeles, Chicago, and Philadelphia are responding to the rise in drug use on transit systems.

Learning Objectives

At the end of this webinar, participants will be able to identify effective responses to the scale and scope of substance use impacts on transit systems.

Questions and Answers

- Please type your questions into your webinar control panel
- We will read your questions out loud, and answer as many as time allows



The screenshot shows a dark-themed mobile application interface for a webinar. At the top, a navigation bar contains several icons: a question mark icon (highlighted with a red box), a list icon, a settings gear icon, and a three-dot menu icon. Below the navigation bar is a header section titled "Questions" with a close button (X) on the right. The main content area displays a large question mark icon and the text "No questions yet" followed by "Questions you send and answers from the staff will appear here". At the bottom, there is a text input field with the placeholder "Enter your question" (highlighted with a red box). Below the input field, the text "Your question will be sent to staff" is displayed, and a "Send" button is located on the right side of the bottom section (also highlighted with a red box).

Today's Presenters



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TCRP Synthesis 179

The impacts and responses to drug use on transit

Transportation Research Board Webinar
October 2025

presented by



LEADING MOBILITY



UNIVERSITY
OF ALBERTA

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Acknowledgements

The study team would like to acknowledge the contributions and support provided by staff from the following organizations in this synthesis report:

- Chicago Transit Authority
- Chicago Police Department
- City of Chicago Department of Family and Support Services
- Denver Regional Transportation District
- Denver Regional Transportation District Transit Police
- Jefferson Center
- Los Angeles County Department of Health Services
- Los Angeles County Metropolitan Transportation Authority (Metro)
- Los Angeles Police Department
- Merakey
- Multnomah County Sheriff's Office
- People Assisting the Homeless (PATH)
- Southeastern Pennsylvania Transportation Authority (SEPTA)
- Southeastern Pennsylvania Transportation Authority (SEPTA) Transit Police
- Thresholds
- Tri-County Metropolitan Transportation District of Oregon (TriMet)
- West Side Heroin/Opioid Task Force

Project Objectives

The primary goal of this synthesis report is to document current practices employed by transit agencies in addressing observed and reported incidents of drug use on public transit property, including vehicles, stations, and bus stops.

The research is guided by the following objectives:

- To **determine if and which transit systems have seen and documented an increase in drug use** within their transit system;
- To **investigate and document the way transit systems respond to drug use on transit**; and
- To **identify existing data collection methods and sources specific to drug use on transit** and understand how data are used for reporting, operational planning and program design, and monitoring and evaluation

This synthesis can be used by policy makers to inform outreach and other programs addressing drug use on transit, by agency staff who wish to improve their operational responses, by advocates who wish to understand the effectiveness of various programs and approaches, and by researchers who want to identify and close gaps in knowledge in the field.

Specific Focus Areas

Theme

Specific Topics

Data

- Types of data sources
- Specificity of data collection practices

Employee Impacts

- Employee response to substance use on transit
- Employee training and responsibility
- Employee safety and exposure

Systematic Approaches/Interventions

- System-wide responses to substance use on transit.
- Approaches (e.g. outreach, community partnerships, social supports, harm-reduction, enforcement)

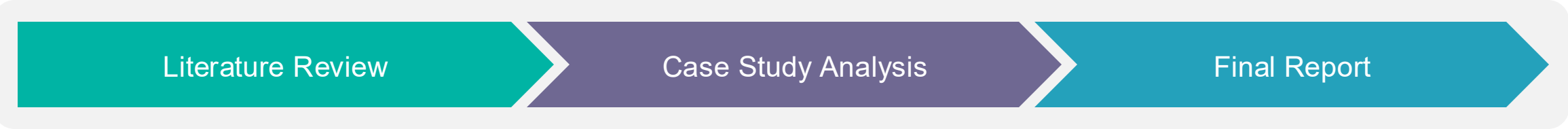
Customer Safety

- Understanding how substance use on transit impacts passenger perception of safety on the transit system

Looking Backward & Forward

- Lessons learned
- Future steps (e.g. policy and program changes)

Study Process



- Review of academic literature.
 - Review of TCRP reports, as relevant.
 - Confirmation of five case study transit agencies. Agency selection based on opportunity, differences in program approaches and leadership in the subject area. Confirmation of agency contact.
 - Review of agency documents/ information and grey literature (with support from participating agencies).
- Conduct in-depth analyses of five case study transit agencies through an agency visit, staff interviews and review of provided information.
 - Study team visits: Portland, Denver, Los Angeles (June 2024); Philadelphia and Chicago (July 2024).
- Preparation and submission of draft and final synthesis reports.

Key Deliverables

Interview Guide & Agency Visit Agenda

Agency Information & Data Request

Draft and Final Synthesis Reports

Case study selection criteria

Diversity in regulatory responses

E.g. decriminalization of narcotics, scaling of enforcement and outreach responses.

Geographic variation

Locations across the US with transit agencies on the west coast, interior, Midwest and east coast.

Transit infrastructure and mode

Differences within the transit agency's operating environment in terms of infrastructure, facilities and operations.

Climate variation

Locations with differing climates throughout the year.

Evidence of existing program responses

E.g. existing transit safety plans, policies, programs and initiatives that speak to the complexity of substance use on transit?

Confirmation of agency support

Success of the synthesis is contingent of the involvement and cooperations of participating transit agencies.

Snapshot of agency responses

Safety Initiative	Peer Agency Examples
1. Implementing Crime Prevention Through Environmental Design (CPTED) changes to stations and facilities.	Los Angeles Metro, Denver RTD
2. Improving cleanliness at stations and facilities.	All agencies
3. Deploying additional law enforcement staff .	All agencies
4. Deploying additional front line customer service staff (e.g. customer service agents/ambassadors) to assist riders and to increase visibility.	All agencies
5. Deploying outreach staff to assist vulnerable individuals and connect them to resources for housing, mental health, and drug use.	All agencies
6. Fostering partnerships with city agencies and non-profit organizations to deliver services for vulnerable individuals.	All agencies
7. Funding temporary shelter beds for individuals sheltering on the transit system.	Los Angeles Metro, Philadelphia (SEPTA)
8. Review codes of conduct and regulations.	Los Angeles Metro
9. Updated camera surveillance systems.	Denver RTD

Data collection methods identified by the project team

COMMONLY COLLECTED DATA (3+ AGENCIES)	AGENCIES
Naloxone treatments/deployments	All agencies
Customer complaints/comments	CTA, LA Metro, SEPTA, TriMet
Operator assaults	LA Metro, SEPTA, TriMet
Engagements/contacts with vulnerable individuals	RTD, LA Metro, SEPTA
Outreach referrals	RTD, LA Metro, SEPTA
Transit Watch app reports	RTD, LA Metro, SEPTA
LESS COMMONLY COLLECTED DATA (1-2 AGENCIES)	AGENCIES
Homeless/vulnerable population counts	CTA, SEPTA
Calls for service	LA Metro, TriMet
Arrests and citations	LA Metro, TriMet
Employee exposure to drug use	CTA, TriMet

Portland, Oregon



On-board ad depicting transit staff, outreach workers and law enforcement officers that are available to assist customers with transit safety concerns.

Source: David Cooper



September 2023 ad from TriMet expressing support for proposed legislative changes to address drug use on transit.

Source: TriMet



Members of TriMet's Safety Response Team (the agency's outreach program).

Source: TriMet

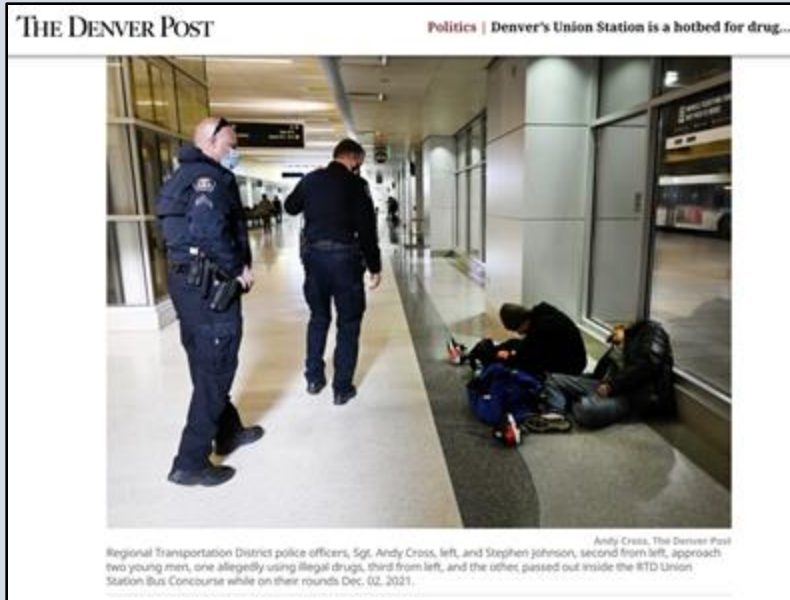
Portland, Oregon



September 2023 article about TriMet's involvement in the University of Washington's "Assessing fentanyl and methamphetamine in the air and on surfaces of transit vehicles" research study.

Source: TriMet

Denver, Colorado



RTD Transit Police officers at Union Station prior to station improvements and additional staffing.

Source: [Denver Post \(2021\)](#)



RTD open-door elevator pilot.

Source: [KDVR Denver](#)



RTD first-ever homeless outreach manager.

Source: [YouTube](#)

Los Angeles, California



Crowd control barriers on the concourse level of Westlake/MacArthur Park Station.

Source: LA Metro

metro.net

Metro has zero tolerance for smoking and illegal drug use on our system.

If you see something, say something.
Please report any issues through the *Transit Watch* app.

Connect to Metro Security 24/7:

- > Call 888.950.SAFE (7233)
- > Text 213.788.2777
- > Call 911 in an emergency

M Metro

Advert discussing how drug use is prohibited on Los Angeles Metro.

Source: LA Metro



LA Metro Ambassadors.

Source: David Cooper

Los Angeles, California



Damaged elevator resulting from misuse by individuals engaging in substance use at the Slauson BRT Station.
Source: David Cooper



Enhanced cleaning at APU / Citrus College Station.
Source: David Cooper



CPTED external station entrance modifications at Westlake/MacArthur Park Station.
Source: David Cooper

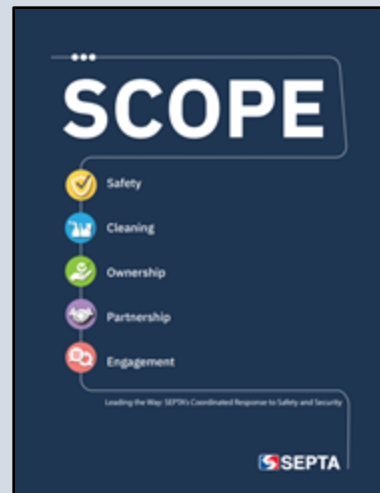


Unsanctioned vendor market at Westlake/MacArthur Park Station.
Source: David Cooper

Philadelphia, Pennsylvania



Cleaning efforts at SEPTA station in Philadelphia.
Source: SEPTA



Cover page of the SCOPE Program report.
Source: SEPTA



Partnership excerpt from the SCOPE Program.
Source: SEPTA



SCOPE outreach approach.
Source: SEPTA



SEPTA Transit Police officer on patrol at Allegheny Station.
Source: David Cooper

Chicago, Illinois



*Outreach worker entering CTA train.
Source: CTA*



Harm Reduction Vending Machine at the 95th/Dan Ryan Station on the Red Line.

THE MACHINES CONTAIN HARM REDUCTION PRODUCTS:

 NARCAN (naloxone) available without a unique PIN code at every machine	 FENTANYL TEST KITS	 XYLAZINE TEST KITS	 GENERAL HYGIENE KITS	 MENSTRUAL HYGIENE KITS	 SOCKS & UNDERWEAR
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If you have suggestions on what the machines should offer (or anything else that will help us improve this service!), Please submit those here: bit.ly/PHVMSurvey

HOW it works & HOW to access

The Public Health Vending Machines work just like regular vending machines, except all of the items are free. All you need to access them are a unique PIN code.

To get a PIN code, there are several options:

- Complete this form and a PIN code will be emailed: CHICAGO.GOV/VENDINGMACHINES
- Go in person to a partner organization, where you will receive a card with PIN code information.

To get a PIN code, you will need to provide your zip code of most recent residence. You will also be asked some optional demographic and other information, which CDPH will use to evaluate the effectiveness of this pilot program.

Instructions on how to use the Harm Reduction Vending Machine.

Overall Observations

Expanding Responsibilities of Transit Agencies

Transit agencies are experiencing mission creep as they take on complex public health and outreach responsibilities beyond their original scope, adding operational burdens, complexity, and costs.

Limitations in Data

Many agencies operate without well-defined goals, leading to decentralized and fragmented data that complicates strategy integration and outcome measurement.

Balancing Harm Reduction and Safety

A tension exists between harm reduction practices and the need to maintain safety on transit systems for employees and customers. Key areas of concern include Naloxone administration, sharps disposal, and allowing outreach services to use transit stations as intervention hubs.

Challenges in Program Approaches

1. **Setting Objectives:** Before creating a data program to understand the scope of drug use on transit, agencies must first set clear, quantifiable objectives. These guide data collection, define the issue's scope, and track progress. With objectives in place, agencies can better assess the effectiveness of initiatives and thus refine strategies.
2. **Communication Gaps:** Information sharing between transit agencies, outreach providers, and law enforcement is often insufficient. Improving centralized information systems would enhance coordination and referrals.
3. **Low Uptake of Support Services:** Support services are often mismatched with individual needs, are inadequate in terms of operational hours or capacity, or riddled with barriers to access.
4. **Front-Line Staff Impacts:** Front-line staff face significant mental and physical health risks, including exposure to assaults, biohazards, and trauma, contributing to burnout and turnover.
5. **Enforcement Difficulties:** Enforcing drug laws on transit is complicated by decriminalization, non-prosecution trends, jurisdictional challenges, and the need to confirm through lab testing that a drug was smoked or consumed.

Areas of Opportunity

1. **Access to Naloxone:** Standardizing naloxone deployment policies across agencies has the potential to reduce fatalities from overdoses.
2. **Role Clarity:** Clearly communicating the roles of police, security, outreach workers, and customer service agents can improve public understanding of transit safety efforts.
3. **Outreach with Peer Specialists:** Contracting with outreach organizations employing Certified Peer Specialists, who have lived experience with drug use, can create more credible and effective outreach, while also improving resource allocation.
4. **Codes of Conduct Alignment:** Updating transit codes of conduct to reflect that drug use is prohibited within transit facilities, and increasing public awareness through signage, can aid enforcement.
5. **Station Design:** Applying CPTED principles—improved visibility, better lighting, and enhanced access control—can deter drug use on transit property while maintaining a high quality of customer experience.

Knowledge Gaps

1. **Data Challenges:** Inconsistent data collection and reporting methods, along with indirect measures (e.g., customer reporting), make it difficult to gauge the scale of drug use on transit systems. Integrating data with public health, law enforcement, and outreach organizations can improve data accuracy and address drug use more effectively.
2. **Fare Enforcement:** The relationship between fare enforcement and safety is understudied, though staff believe it enhances security. Further research is needed to understand how this relationship relates to transit safety.
3. **Psychological support:** Work-related psychosocial hazards such as poor management support and being witness to drug use can impact transit worker safety and well-being, especially for frontline workers. These hazards can cause cognitive, emotional, and physical stress, worsened by personal histories with substance use. Research should explore strategies such as physical barriers and consistent policies to improve worker health and resilience.

Next Steps

1. **Upcoming 2-Day Forum:** The project team in partnership with RTD will be hosting the ***“How RTD and North American Transit Agencies Are Addressing Drug Use on Public Transportation”*** in Denver, Colorado on Tuesday, December 2 and Wednesday, December 3, 2025.
 - Present and contextualize the key findings from the TCRP study and share updates from peer agencies on their initiatives and lessons learned
 - Foster collaboration and peer learning between agencies across the country, RTD, and local partners
 - Co-develop a framework for coordinated action across agencies and partners
 - Commit to future collaboration and next steps
2. **Scoping of a Canadian study** on the Impacts and Responses to Drug Use on transit:
 - Define and assess the scale and scope of drug use within Canadian public transit systems. Build upon the research methodology applied in the U.S. study, with an added focus on developing an evaluation framework to measure the effectiveness and limitations of both outreach and enforcement approaches.
 - Work is targeted to commence in 2026.

Today's Presenters



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Upcoming events for you

October 22, 2025

TRB Webinar: Planning Bus Operator Workstation and Barrier Designs for Health and Safety

https://www.nationalacademies.org/event/45725_10-2025_trb-webinar-planning-bus-operator-workstation-and-barrier-designs-for-health-and-safety

January 11-15, 2026

2026 TRB Annual Meeting

<https://trb-annual-meeting.nationalacademies.org/>

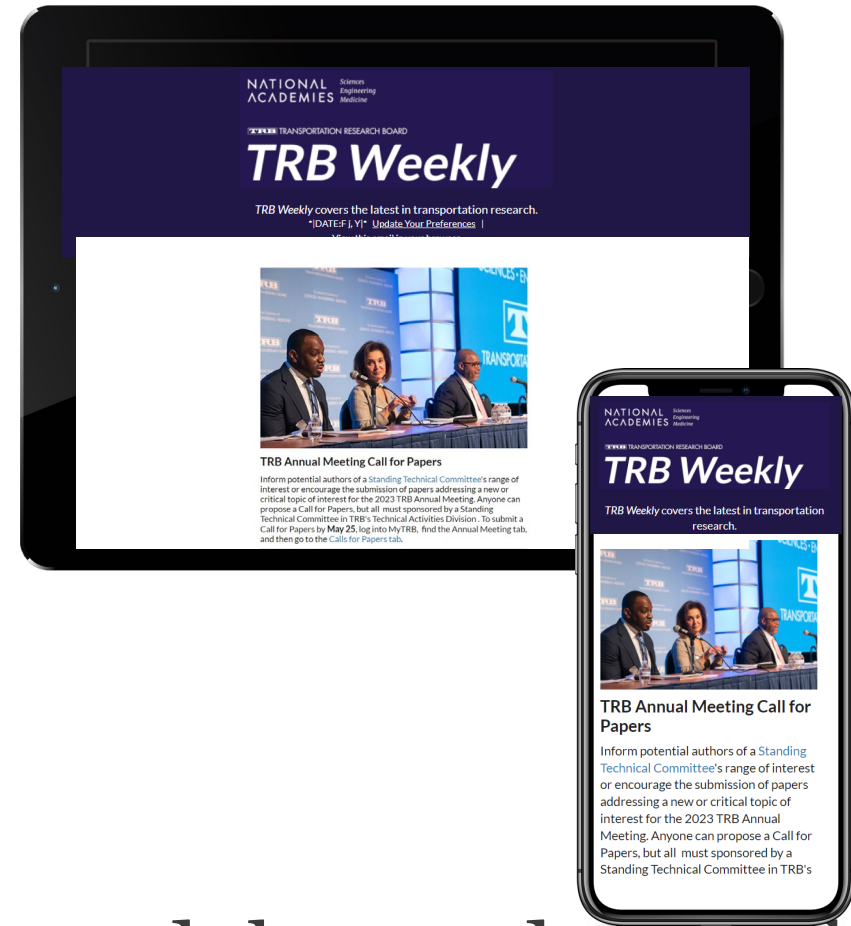


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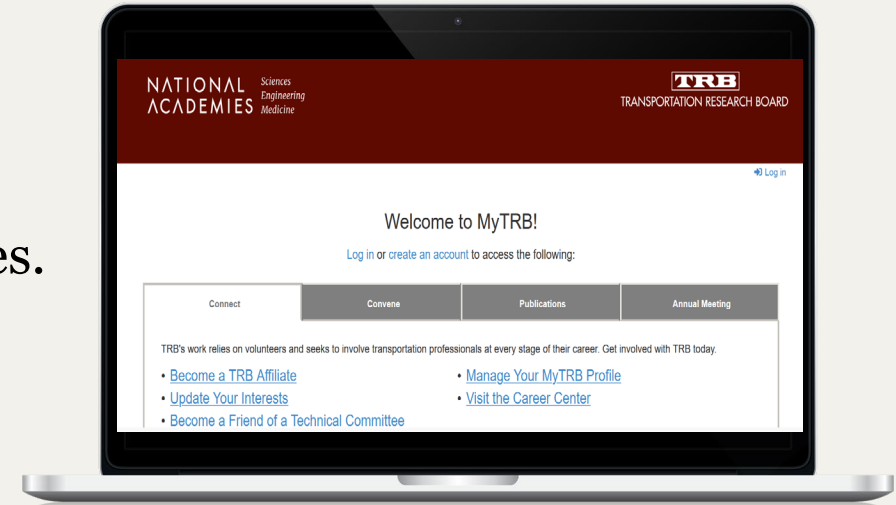


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