

# FHWA PEER EXCHANGE

2018

Illinois Department of Transportation

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### DOT Context

Illinois DOT's central office is headquartered in the state capital with a secondary administrative office in Chicago. Our central office staff are organized into nine offices:

The state is divided into five regions, with nine district offices that break down the regions even further. The vast majority of our work is done in Region/District 1, which is the Chicago metro area. We are led by a Secretary (Randy Blankenhorn), and each region is led by a Region Engineer.

A unique characteristic, in my opinion, is that we are the state office that receives all the NHTSA funds for safety campaigns, but we don't have a stand-alone office that leads the strategy and implementation of safety programs. We have a Bureau of Safety Programs and Engineering housed under the Office of Highway Project Implementation. Safety programs here at IDOT have, unfortunately, a colorful history and it's difficult to overcome the mistakes of the past.

All of our outreach professionals are in the Office of Communications, which has its benefits and drawbacks. As for budget issues, this past year was the first year we had an actual budget in a few years and we have crushing pension issues, so yes – we have our fair share of budget issues. Our gas tax has been flat for 20 years, and the financial future of the state looks bleak.



### About Jamie

Jamie Simone is the Bureau Chief of Program, Project & Safety Outreach for the Illinois Department of Transportation. She is responsible for overseeing IDOT's outreach efforts, evaluating current public involvement practices and identifying ways to improve engagement in local communities throughout the state. She has served in this role since April 2017. Prior to IDOT, Jamie served as the Interim State Director for the Chicago office of The Trust for Public Land, overseeing the urban parks program which included The 606, an award-winning elevated trail and park system located on the near northwest side of Chicago. Jamie has served in a variety of roles that have bolstered her expertise in community engagement, urban design and project management. Jamie is a member of the American Institute of Certified Planners (AICP) and Lambda Alpha, she is a LEED Accredited Professional (LEED-AP), and has previously served on the boards of the Illinois Chapter of the American Planning Association and the Friends of the Bloomingdale Trail. Jamie holds a master's degree in urban planning and policy from the University of Illinois at Chicago, and a bachelor's degree from the University of Iowa.

## DOT Public Outreach Highlights

Since I started at the department a year ago, I have been keenly focused on improving our approach to public outreach. We have approved manuals that our engineers use for creating stakeholder involvement plans that check the box on the required meetings and public hearings for highway projects. The only time we require outreach is if federal funds are used, and then we follow the NEPA requirements. (There are some exceptions, but we typically do not include outreach when federal funds are not used.) Unfortunately, I am not involved in the scoping or project development; this is done by the engineers managing the project.

I can offer other best practices that are working well at IDOT. Much of our phase I work is done by consultants, and therefore they lead the public engagement. But when we do lead engagement with our staff engineers (typically on smaller projects), it is of comparable quality to what the consultants produce. I've also been impressed with the use of "dry-runs" before any public meeting.

This is essentially a mock public meeting with all materials (boards, PowerPoints, etc.) presented to a group of peers not involved in the project to test out the materials and provide critiques for improvement.

## Biggest Public Engagement Challenges

We have many challenges when it comes to public engagement. I think our biggest issue is getting our engineer-heavy work force to think about the process and purpose of engagement differently. My goal is to re-write our current engagement policies to expand and refine the way we work in and with communities. I hope to expand engagement by requiring that every aspect of a project have some sort of engagement component (right now we only include public involvement in Phase I) and to refine it by making it more robust, authentic and satisfying for the public and the department alike. We have similar issues with public engagement when it comes to our programs/plans and, rather than considering projects and programs/plans as completely separate, I hope to re-write our outreach policy in such a way that it can apply to virtually anything we do.

## Contact

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