

# America's Tomorrow: Equity Is the Superior Growth Model

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By Courtney Hutchison

Public transportation is the lifeblood of cities, enabling residents to get to work, take their children to school, and access vital community resources. Too often, however, transit systems fail to meet the needs of those with disabilities — making it nearly impossible for them to participate fully in civic, cultural, and economic life.

This was the troubling reality facing Sasha Blair-Goldensohn, a Google software engineer and disability rights activist in New York City. When a tragic accident in 2009 partially paralyzed his lower body, this native New Yorker quickly realized that the subway he had relied on his entire life was woefully inaccessible by wheelchair, with frequent elevator outages that could [leave him stranded for hours at a time](#). Blair-Goldensohn penned a [powerful op-ed](#) in *The New York Times* recently framing transit inaccessibility as a matter of equity and inclusion, and is continuing the fight as a plaintiff in [two court cases](#) calling for a more accessible NYC subway.

*America's Tomorrow* is excited to bring you the latest episode of *Equity Speaks*, a PolicyLink podcast focusing on racial and social equity. Blair-Goldensohn and PolicyLink CEO Angela Glover Blackwell discuss the moral imperative of [making cities accessible to all](#), the power of the “[curb-cut effect](#)” as a frame for transit advocacy, and the promise

of universal design as a way forward for city planning.

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**Angela Glover Blackwell:** This is Angela Glover Blackwell, CEO of PolicyLink and I'm joined by Sasha Blair-Goldensohn to talk about the "[curb-cut effect](#)", but more importantly to talk about an advocacy effort that Sasha is a part of trying to create greater access to transportation in New York City. Many of you know that PolicyLink, a national organization trying to advance equity by Lifting Up What Works, has really been concerned for some time about the notion that Americans too often feel that creating opportunities for one group takes something away from another group — that equity and inclusion is a zero-sum game.

When I say the [curb-cut effect](#) I'm talking about how that curb-cut that is in the sidewalks because of the advocacy of people with disabilities in wheelchairs, who could not access opportunity that was theoretically available to them because they couldn't traverse their communities. And yet when that curb-cut was there, people pushing strollers immediately went to it, workers with carts, and parents could feel a little better about their new bike riders traversing the city sidewalk to sidewalk, not having to ride in the street. It also saves lives because that curb-cut orients people to cross at the corner and that makes a tremendous difference. The curb-cut effect makes the point that by focusing authentically and effectively on those who are most vulnerable while we address challenges, we [create solutions that benefit everybody](#).

I have the impression from [something that Sasha wrote in the New York Times](#), that he very much appreciates this point of view. I wanted to bring his voice and his story to the equity movement that is often associated with PolicyLink to be able to understand how expansive we can be when we think about the benefits to society when we make sure that everyone can participate, prosper, and reach their full potential. So thanks again Sasha for joining.

**Sasha Blair-Goldensohn:** My pleasure.

**Angela Glover Blackwell:** I must say, Sasha, when I saw your [op-ed in the New York Times](#), I was interested for two reasons: One, the topic was very interesting to me because you were talking about access, but I also remembered that I read about you in the *New York Times* years ago when you had your terrible accident in New York City that left you in a wheelchair. Therefore, there was a direct relationship between that story I read years ago and this story, so I was drawn to it. I wondered if you would take a little time to tell our listeners a little bit about yourself, how you happened tragically to end up in the situation you're now in, and how that has changed the way you see the world.

**Sasha Blair-Goldensohn:** I'd be glad to. Nearly eight years ago, almost exactly eight years ago — July 2009 — I was a fit, able bodied person walking in Central Park on my way to work and a giant limb chose that exact second to fall. It was a clear day, it was just preposterously bad luck that I happened to be walking under it at that moment and it fell on top of me. From that moment, I had very much good luck to still be here I would say. There's really no question about that actually, because it was really touch and go for a while. I was in an intensive care unit for about a month and a rehab hospital for six months, and by the time I got out I got back so very much. I didn't get back the ability to walk, so I would have to start getting around in a wheelchair. So for the past several years that has been my life and my experience, and it's been...obviously your life changes, but you become aware of a lot of things. And a big one has been access. I grew up in the city and the subway is how you get around. I was kind of proud [of it]. I'd have friends visit from other cities and towns, and I'd say isn't this cool there's this subway that anybody can take. For two dollars you go anywhere around town, and it runs all night. It's not always the cleanest, it's not beautiful, but it works, it gets you there. And then lo and behold it doesn't get you there at all — it doesn't get a lot of people there.

**Angela Glover Blackwell:** I would love for you, if you can, to say a word about the litigation. I know you can't go into any details, but I want our listeners to know that your activism has taken you all the way into a direct challenge. If

you could just describe it. Then I want to talk a little bit more about how important this is, not just for you, or people in wheelchairs, but how important it is for all New Yorkers, and ultimately all people who need to access opportunity.

**Sasha Blair-Goldensohn:** Sure thing. There are four elevators between my home and my getting to work. Any one of those elevators being out stops me. Concretely, what does that mean? In any week going back and forth from work, there will be at least one time that one is out. So, one of my trips back and forth to work — and it's not like the trip is delayed a bit, people can deal with that — it means I get halfway through a trip and I'm stopped. And the thing is there is no system. First of all it's not announced on the subway, so you can get off the train, on the platform, you get up to the elevator, and, "Oh." It'll be bad enough if it were just out and nobody knew, but not infrequently it's out and it's clear that somebody knew. There will be a cardboard sign on it or a little strip of nylon tape across it. Someone knew and thought that that was a sufficient reaction. And then in a few days, maybe somebody will fix it. What do you do at that moment? You got off the train, you can't get on the elevator. Your options are, if I'm in a rush...you know, you got to get to work, pick up your kids, people are going somewhere, that's why they're on the train. What I've found is the quickest way to get going is to find two or three strong-looking, industrious-looking people on the platform and ask them. It took me a while to get up the gumption to do that and have the confidence. It's terribly dangerous — it's not an advisable thing, my physical therapist would not want me to do that. I've come to find that it actually kind of works. I've gotten good at managing people and being the foreman and say, "You here, you here, you here." And I have a system. It works, but it's awful. I take it back: it's awful that I have to do it and that's the system and the Metropolitan Transit Authority (MTA) hasn't made anything better than that. But there is something very affirming about it, which is to say, community. Community is a big deal, and people are kind. People are always busy ignoring people and acting anonymous, especially in big cities. People have sometimes refused because they have a bad elbow or something. Much more often than not, people will chip in and say, "Ok, yeah I got ya."

So, I was having this happen all the time, and I thought, am I just having back luck? So my cousin, who is a journalist, she put in a freedom of information law (FOIL) request to get a year's worth of outage data from the MTA and they dumped it into a big spreadsheet. I'm a computer scientist so what do I do? I analyze it, I took the average. And I was like, whoa, this is not just me, not at all. There were 9,000 outages over the past year. What does that mean? So let's see 365 days in a year, neighborhood of 20+ a day, and these are not outages because they are improving. No these are just things that nobody predicted and the situations that happened to me where it just stopped working and these outages, these aren't five minutes. The median time, some have more or have less, four hours. This is an elevator. Once I saw that, I thought, this is far from being just me, and I ended up getting in touch with DRA (Disability Rights Advocates). It was astounding — those are the numbers that I put in the [*New York Times*] article.

**Angela Glover Blackwell:** So I talk about the curb-cuts and the people pushing strollers and workers with carts, but also the lives saved by ordering people to cross at the corner. When you think about this issue of access to the subway and what difference working elevators could make, have you couched this argument in the context of all the other people who haven't been activists around this that should be?

**Sasha Blair-Goldensohn:** Absolutely. I haven't had to stretch too hard to think about that. It's not like I'm thinking how can I make this a bigger issue than just me. No, because every time I get in an elevator in a subway, I'm very rarely alone. And who is always in there? Very rarely is it other wheelchairs actually, because most people in wheelchairs have given up on the subway because it works so poorly so if they actually wanted to get somewhere, they'd probably find another way. So since I'm one of the ones on the subway elevators, who do I see all the time — strollers, elderly people, workers, often. That's someone you mentioned in your article. Who takes the curb-cuts? It's workers with handcarts. Talk about not being a zero-sum game, we're making our whole community, our whole society more functional and more economically viable [when we deal] with obstacles in our way that don't need to be there.

**Angela Glover Blackwell:** We have been talking about that at PolicyLink in the context of the economy and the



people who are being marginalized and left out of it. A lot of what's happening now in the United States is that people who are White and working class, White and poor are really front and center because of their angst, their insecurity, the opiate addiction, increasing suicide rates, and early mortality. And a lot of people are starting to write about it. [Ann Case and Sir Angus Deaton](#) at Princeton University have probably written the most. When we're talking about poor, near-poor White people, if we intervene, and just try to solve the problem there, we're going to still have the fundamental problem of what's been happening with people of color. And that fundamental problem of what's happening with people of color — if we were to address it directly the benefits of it would go to all. So getting people to understand what you just said: always go to the most vulnerable not out of charity, go to the most vulnerable because the only way to sustainably, effectively fix something for the long term is to start there.

**Sasha Blair-Goldensohn:** What it reminds me of, right now in New York City...the MTA is never well-loved, but this is a disastrously bad summer. The lead story on local news more or less every night is about the so-called “[summer of hell](#)” because Penn Station, which is a major choke point and has been in bad shape for many historical reasons for many years, has come to a [breaking] point. Commuters from Long Island and New Jersey, and all over the place, are thinking this is the worst, I'm being late to work every day, I'm sitting on the train, they've cut down the number of trains. And in a funny way, I've come to think that they're finding out what I've been dealing with and what this community has been dealing with for much longer. This is what it feels like when the system is at best, sort of okay on a regular day, and on many days far worse than that. So, the point is that I feel like sometimes now we come to the MTA and say they need to deal with this elevator thing, they'll say they can't deal with this now, Penn Station is already a mess, everyone else is already struggling. [We need] to convince people that this is the same fight and convince people that this is in some ways the best moment to deal with it. Because this is already going to be hard. So, let's make it work together and approach it in the universal design way and say what's the way to fix it for everybody, to look at all these problems as one problem and how can we help the maximum number of people with one effort instead of doing it piecemeal and with band-aids, because that's never going to get it done.