

MTI Brings Empathy at the Intersection to Sciencepalooza!

June 2025

Imagine hearing the crosswalk signal chirp on, but you can't see the traffic that's moving around you. Engines rev, drivers tap their horns, and footsteps blur past as the timer counts down and you try to make your way safely across the street. For many older adults and people with disabilities, crossing the street isn't just a routine task—it's a daily act of trust and vulnerability.

At the exciting STEAM-centered [Sciencepalooza!](#) event in San Jose in April, Mineta Transportation Institute ([MTI](#)) staff delivered an interactive "Empathy at the Intersection" experience to more than a hundred K-12 students from all over the region to draw attention to the many lived realities of different individuals traveling everyday on California roads.



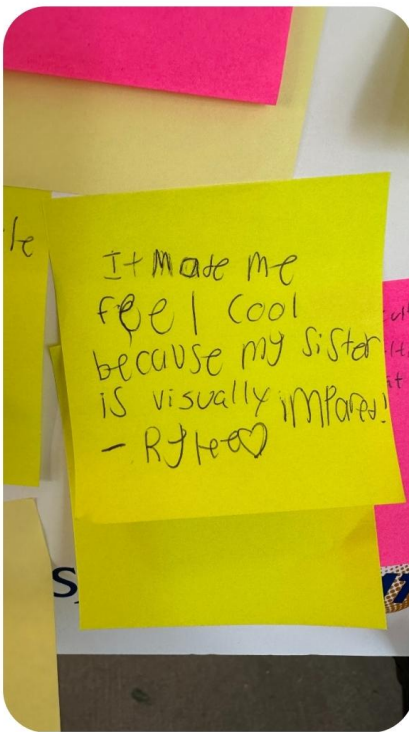
(Center) MTI staff posing in front of the Empathy at the Intersection simulation and (far left & right) leading a participant through the simulation.

Approximately [42.5 million](#) Americans live with disabilities, and this includes individuals with hearing, vision, cognitive, walking, and other difficulties—all of which can make navigating streets and sidewalks more challenging. Older Americans are significantly more likely than younger adults to have a disability. In fact, approximately 46% of Americans ages 75 and older and 24% of those ages 65 to 74 report having a disability, and the percentage of older adults in the U.S. is [increasing](#).

The Empathy at the Intersection event (inspired by the [Massachusetts Department of Transportation](#)) simulated what it is like to navigate a crosswalk with vision impairment. Specifically, the activity involved equipping participants with goggles and devices that simulate living with vision loss/impairments caused by common issues such as cataracts and glaucoma and then moving past life-size cardboard cutouts of a child and another adult also “crossing.”

The team then asked participants to write their reactions to the experience on sticky-notes. Many of the over one-hundred participants that day wrote that crossing with vision impairments was more difficult and intimidating, with multiple responses using words like “scary” and noting the need to be “very cautious.” Others expressed empathy even more directly, comparing their experiences to those of parents, siblings, and other loved ones.

“Now I know how my mom walks. It’s hard,” expressed one participant. Another described, “It felt much more scary to walk without my full vision.”



Students who tried crossing a street with vision impairments thanks to the Empathy at the Intersection simulation delivered by MTI at Sciencepalooza! 2025 in San Jose, CA wrote how they felt about the experience on sticky-notes.

[According](#) to the Federal Highway Administration, each year roughly one-quarter of traffic fatalities and approximately one-half of all traffic injuries in the United States are related to intersections. Being aware of how people with different abilities navigate in their daily lives can help us prevent harm while increasing awareness of the needs of all community members.

Traversing with empathy at the intersection and centering diverse lived experiences in planning, urban design, and policy means making our streets safer and advancing mobility for everyone.