

Accessible Air Transportation: Challenges and Options

Context

For many years, air passengers with disabilities or mobility difficulties have faced discrimination and careless or undignified treatment in many airports and at the hands of many airlines across the world.

Commonly reported problems range from being denied boarding simply because you have a disability through to finding your wheelchair broken and unusable when you reach your destination.

"When I book a plane, even months in advance, I am still not sure I am going to reach my final destination. I don't even know if I am going to board. For persons with disabilities, travelling is still a challenge."

Stig Langvad, Executive Member, European Disability Forum

The growing number of older people in almost all our populations and the greater availability of low cost air travel in many parts of the world, have led to a significant and increasing number of older people and people with disabilities wanting to travel by

air. Indeed in Europe while overall passenger numbers decline, numbers of passengers with disabilities continues to rise significantly year on year.

These two factors combined have put pressure on governments as well as on air carriers, airports, tour operators and travel agents to provide better and more reliable services to meet the needs of this growing passenger market and to recognise that air travellers with disabilities have rights that must be respected.

Airports: The Challenges

Modern airports operating on a commercial basis are increasingly designed as major retail outlets rather than simply as points of departure and arrival. This means that the size of terminals and the distances that have to be

covered from check in to departure gate have increased significantly in recent years. For many older people and those with mobility difficulties the sheer size of the airport creates a barrier to free and independent movement. This, in turn, means that many who could otherwise be self-sufficient have to rely on support services such as wheelchair assistance. This is a particular issue at major hub airports. At London Heathrow, for example, 40% of passengers are in transit and may need to move considerable distances both within and between terminals.

Other barriers at many airports include poor signage and an absence of visual and audible information. For example, many airports now have stopped audible announcements of flights in the belief that it creates a calmer environment. For anyone with a visual impairment unable to read small screens, it creates considerable stress and worry. Indeed the crowds gathered around departure boards in such airports suggests that the lack of audible announcements is a source of stress to many travellers.

For those people with disabilities who need assistance to get through the airport, the type and quality of assistance available varies enormously. Even in those parts of the world where legislation exists setting quality standards and requirements for training, the level of service that people with disabilities receive is unpredictable and at times totally unacceptable. One common practice among assistance providers is to ask a blind person to sit in a wheelchair because it is faster to move them through the airport that way. In other cases wheelchair users are pressured to give up their own wheelchair at check in rather than remaining in it up to the door of the aircraft. For many wheelchair users, being confined to a poorly designed airport chair, possibly for several hours, is likely to be the cause of significant discomfort and loss of mobility and possibly to provoke conditions such as pressure sores. It also adds to the anxiety about whether the wheelchair will be loaded on the correct flight.

For many people with disabilities, security searches are a source of discomfort and indignity. Again, it is lack of training at the root of the problem with many security staff having little understanding of or empathy with the needs of people with disabilities. That is not to say, of course, that security checks should not be thorough and rigorous, but they should be

carried out with respect and sensitivity for those, for example, with prosthetic limbs or incontinence aids.

A further issue which is coming increasingly to the fore is the pace at which new technology in airports is leaving people with disabilities behind. For example, more and more airports have introduced self-service check-in machines instead of staffed desks. These cannot be used by many people with disabilities either because the screen and controls are too high or because there is no audible instruction on their usage. Similarly, e-gates introduced to speed progress through immigration are generally inaccessible to a wheelchair user and unusable by anyone with vision loss.

Aircraft: The Challenges

"When I landed, there wasn't any proper equipment to take me from the aircraft to my wheelchair."

"When I returned they had to carry me onto the plane, up the steps which is not a dignified way to do things and is dangerous."

Shuaib Chalklen, UN Special Rapporteur on Disability

The experience of boarding an aircraft and of moving around on board can also present major challenges to people with disabilities. Many low cost airlines in particular board and disembark passengers from remote stands which means that those unable to walk up steps from the tarmac need to be boarded via high loaders or ambulifts. This process can delay the aircraft departure and incur greater costs for the airline. As a result, some airlines discourage passengers who need this kind of assistance and, in some countries, will attempt to board them

by manually carrying up the aircraft steps which is both dangerous and undignified.

There is also still a wide range of airline policies and interpretation of those policies on when a person with a disability needs to be accompanied. Even in countries where laws exist to cover these situations, decisions taken by pilots or ground staff can mean that a person who declares themselves to be self-sufficient can still be denied boarding. In one European court case a wheelchair user made her outward bound flight independently and was then denied boarding on her return a few days later on the same flight with the

same airline. This uncertainty is the cause of a huge amount of stress for many wheelchair users.

On board the aircraft, the lack of accessible washrooms in many cases can be a major barrier to travel on flights lasting more than a short period. While modern aircraft design can always accommodate an accessible toilet, airlines do not always choose to install one because of the loss of seating that may be involved.

Finally, one of the most common and distressing events is the frequent loss or damage to mobility equipment. Arriving at your destination to find that your wheelchair, on which you are totally dependent is bent out of shape or broken – or simply hasn't arrived, is devastating. There is currently inadequate and inconsistent practice both in the immediate action needed to restore mobility to the person concerned and in the level of compensation paid in the case of loss or irreparable damage.

Priorities for Improvement

Legislation and enforcement

Although aviation is a global business, there is not a global approach to meeting the needs of the large and growing population of travellers with disabilities.

Even in those regions that have specific legislation on the rights of air travellers with disabilities, such as the USA, Canada and Europe, the requirements are different and at times even incompatible. This means that a passenger with a disability travelling, for example, from the USA to Europe, may find that different standards apply to some parts of the journey.

The major difference between the USA and Europe is in where responsibility is placed. In the USA, the airline is responsible for ensuring that the needs of passengers with disabilities are met. In Europe it is the airports. The logic can be argued either way but the key point is a lack of consistency and confusion for the passenger.

The extension of the US Air Carriers Access Act provisions to non-US carriers flying to or from the USA and those on code share flights with US carriers anywhere in the world has heightened awareness of disability issues across many areas but has also highlighted the wide divergence in practices, policies and cultural norms on issues such as the carriage of service animals.

However, the bottom line is that in many parts of the world there are no laws or standards and passengers with disabilities have no certainty or confidence in the level of service they will receive. Although there are good standards and guidance from bodies such as ICAO¹, they are not mandatory and are often ignored.

Clear, unequivocal, consistent and above all enforceable standards for accessibility throughout the journey would be a major step forward in giving people with disabilities the confidence to travel.

Information

Another key area in which improvements could be made is the way in which information is provided to people with disabilities before and during the journey. For the majority of people who are not frequent flyers it is difficult to know what questions to ask or what to expect. Issues as simple as knowing what the maximum walking distances may be at an airport can help a passenger to decide whether or not they will need assistance.

The use of IATA² codes to categorise passengers with disabilities in terms of the level of assistance they need is also a source of considerable confusion and misuse. One of the most common causes of problems at the airport and on board is that the wrong IATA code has been allocated at the point of booking or check-in. This means, for example, that someone has been categorised as able to manage stairs when they are not. The difficulty often arises because the passenger does not know what the boarding process will entail and does not ask the right questions or give the right information.

¹ International Civil Aviation Organisation

² International Air Transport Association

Clearer and more comprehensive information from airlines about every step of the journey would help to inform and empower passengers with disabilities.

Training

Many of the problems that arise can be tracked back to a lack of staff training. This applies to staff at the airport, on board the aircraft and as far back in the process as travel agencies and airline call centres.

Good practice dictates that all staff, working in whatever capacity at an airline or airport should have at least basic training in disability awareness and equality issues. At the airport this should extend to those working in cafés and shops as well as those at check-in and baggage handling. Staff in catering outlets need to understand, for example, how to serve a hot drink to a wheelchair user or describe to a blind passenger the choices available. For those responsible for baggage handling, where speed is of the essence, the important message is the devastating impact of damaged mobility equipment on the person with a disability and the importance of correct and sensitive handling of such equipment. One Swedish airport which brought in people with disabilities to train baggage handlers found that instances of damage were reduced significantly.

The staff providing direct assistance to passengers with disabilities need detailed and in-depth training including the kinetics of lifting, communication skills with passengers who are deaf etc.

Some airports and airlines are now rolling out e-learning on disability to all levels of management and administrative staff so that the culture of understanding permeates the whole organisations.

Some airlines are also checking the understanding of their contracted ground handlers through e-learning which includes a test of competence. Failure in the test leads to re-training and ultimately to renegotiation of the contract between the airline and the handling company.

This kind of non-negotiable commitment to training at all levels is fundamental to driving up standards. Equally important is that the training

delivered is consistent and high quality so that the traveller can have confidence that his needs will be understood and met appropriately at both ends of his journey. This is at the heart of the European Union legislation on air passenger rights, for example.

Conclusion

With the population of older people and people with disabilities increasing worldwide, the demand for air travel with continue to increase. As noted earlier, the demand for air travel among people with disabilities is continuing to grow even in areas under economic pressure.

While there are examples of excellent practice that can be found in some parts of the world, taken as a whole the experience of air travel, even in those countries with laws in place, is still uncertain and often fraught with problems and challenges. For the most part the solutions are simple and low cost. All that is required is a greater understanding of the social and economic reality of this large and growing market sector.