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TRAVEL SYMPOSIUM TACKLES TOUGH ISSUES OF ACCESSIBILITY

Greg Monroe's first flight as a traveler with a disability was a mix of shame, tears and pain.

Though the trip was years ago, Monroe, who had been left paralyzed from the neck down after a car accident, vividly recalls every step of what became a very unpleasant journey made worse by unprepared airport workers.

There was the way he had to sit helpless in his wheelchair at the curb while his wife unloaded all their luggage by herself. Workers only came to help as she was hauling their last suitcase at the check-in.

On the plane, flight attendants repeatedly offered him drinks despite his polite refusals. He finally had to explain that he couldn't hold a cup. Rather than take the information in stride, the attendant burst into tears as she apologized.

Worst of all, airplane staff had placed his cushion upside down in his seat, forcing him to feel every stinging bump and jolt on the hours-long flight.

The experience was so upsetting that Monroe didn't board a plane again until recently, when he flew from Florida to Baltimore to share his story with airline industry leaders.

"I want to go where you go. I want to do what you do. I want to dance where you dance, as much as I can," he told the crowd of managers, customer training officials and others. "I'm not dying, and I'm not dead, so I'm asking you to do better for all of us."

Monroe's address came at the end of the first-ever gathering for airline and airport officials, government regulators and advocates to discuss ways to improve air travel for people with disabilities.

Participants at the inaugural Universal Access in Travel symposium gathered in Baltimore this November to discuss challenges and strides made in design, product innovation and customer service.

“It’s important that people with disabilities have comprehensive civil rights protection, and that includes the right to travel freely,” said Fanny Rivera, a top Federal Aviation Administration official who kicked off the conference. “This is the chance to get into this issue, break it down into its component parts and really make it better to achieve accessible transportation, from the moment you leave home to the moment you come back.”

The FAA was one of three partners of the conference, organized by the American Association of Airport Executives and the Open Doors Organization, a non-profit organization that works with businesses to ensure consumer opportunities for people with disabilities.

“The airports and its suppliers have come a long way in addressing accessibility, but there is still a great deal of work to be done,” said Eric Lipp, the Executive Director and founder of Open Doors Organization. “This conference was an important step in bringing the key players together to share best practices while also having a candid exchange about the biggest challenges remaining.”

The first bi-annual symposium was attended by managers and facility supervisors of major international airports across the United States, senior executives of some of the nation’s largest rental car, airport service companies and leading airlines.

With a rapidly growing elderly population, the numbers of people who are visually impaired, hearing impaired, or use walkers, canes, wheelchairs and service animals are on the rise. Based on U.S. Census data, several officials at the symposium estimated that the number of people with disabilities is expected to exceed 56 million by 2010.

“That’s larger than the coveted teen market,” Tari Hartman-SquireCQ, a Marketing expert with EinsofcommunicationsCQ told participants at one session. “And if you don’t market to them, you’re not only going to lose it, you’re going to hand it to your competition on a silver platter.”

Access Through Upgrades

One successful approach has been to give people with disabilities the facilities and tools to move through airport terminals without assistance – a preferred approach for many participants with disabilities at the conference.

“We need to get information without asking for help,” said Brenda Battat, Associate Executive Director for the Hearing Loss Association of America. “If we ask a question and can’t understand the answer, we’re just wasting time.”

Jim McCarthy, who is blind, agreed that he’d rather find his own way than have a worker lead him to his flight.

“If I have a guide, I’m more or less like luggage,” he explained. “My comfort is not considered important.”

To accommodate both groups, airport designers have been upgrading terminals with new technology in recent years.

For the deaf, airport designers are now installing gate monitors that even show which rows are boarding, as well as interactive visual paging screens which carry general announcements and also allow users to retrieve and send pages.

For the visually impaired, several airports are now considering installation of the Talking Signs infrared wayfinding system, which communicates directional information to individuals carrying handheld receivers.

“This is critical information,” said David Kessler, a consultant who led efforts to install videophones and kiosks at the San Francisco International Airport, who said the changes have also been a hit with customers who do not have a disability.

“This has less to do with regulatory considerations and more to do with universal design,” he explained. “What you can do to improve your communications systems will benefit all users at an airport.”

The greater access carries a higher cost for construction, but not by much. Officials with the Phoenix Sky Harbor International Airport in Arizona said it only cost an additional \$4 million to make their new monitor and information system accessible to people with hearing problems when they launched a \$16 million upgrade.

“Most of those costs we were going to spend anyway,” said Dennis Murphy, Sky Harbor project manager.

Airports and airlines are both seeing improvements on the Internet as a great vehicle for accommodation. According to Lipp, the Web is a growing resource for these travelers. “Our study shows that 51% of people with disabilities are booking on line,” said Lipp. “Accessible, easy-to-navigate web sites allow travelers with disabilities to plan their trips before they travel—and notify airline or airport staff of their needs well before they arrive.

Prospect Airport Services in Detroit, Mich. is leading the way in adapting the advantages of the Internet to increase accessibility. For example, by registering online before they travel, visitors are able to list any special needs or luggage they will be bringing long before they arrive for their flights. Using handheld PDAs with the travelers' information and needs, airport attendants are able to greet people when they arrive with exactly the level of service that the traveler requested in advance.

“Through the site, you decide what you want when you get to the airport,” said Prospect official Karen Kettlewell said.

Service: The Missing Link

Technological innovations and preparation help, but many disabled travelers still find travel by air to be a mixed experience – mostly because employees can't handle their needs. A nationwide study by Open Doors Organization, conducted in 2005, found that 82% of air travelers with disabilities encountered obstacles at airports, while 84% said they had problems with airlines.

"I have a different experience everywhere I go," said Michael Winter, a Civil Rights worker for the U.S. Federal Office of Transit Administration.

Sometimes, Winter said, he's able to have his wheelchair taken and be helped on the plane without a hitch. Other times, what Winter calls the "interesting days", something breaks down, and he's left waiting 45 minutes in an empty plane while baggage officials search for his wheelchair.

"I'm like you. When you travel, you don't want to have an interesting day," he said. "Sometimes, you just want to get on and off the plane."

Airline and business officials spent a large part of the symposium discussing ways to improve training for flight attendants, baggage handlers and other airline staff.

Despite investments to help disabled customers and meet more stringent federal regulations, getting workers to support the process remains the biggest challenge.

"The presence of everyone here shows that there are a lot of people thinking about these issues," said Thomas Zoeller, A vice president for the American Association of Airport Executives. "We have got a ways to go. But we're seeing a lot of progress."

Participants at the symposium shared employee training videos which stress the need to serve while respecting the dignity of the customer. One presentation from Delta Airlines repeated the key concept: "Ask. Then listen."

It's an approach favored by disability experts like Gary Karp, a motivational speaker and author who uses a wheelchair.

"When I go the airport, I'm not looking to bust anybody. I'm looking for good service," he told the crowd. "Training is critical here. They have to know how to preserve our dignity and independence. Just because we've lost some things, the ability to do things for ourselves becomes that much more important."

Employee training officials at the gathering said it's important to make workers familiar with the complications that come with a disability.

“We all have our rules and regulations that we have to comply with,” said Ray Prentice, Customer Care director for Alaska Airlines. “But you can’t succeed unless you get personally attached, and get your staff personally attached.”

Greg Monroe agrees.

“Customer Service is a behavioral change,” said Monroe, who managed airport operations in St. Louis and West Palm Beach for Avis Rent A Car before his accident. “You have to want to take care of people.”

Compliance and Beyond

In addition to adjusting service, government regulations and fines continue to play a major role in increasing accessibility at airports.

Several seminars at the symposium featured briefings by government officials on current and proposed rules for accommodating individuals with disabilities.

In the airline industry, two major federal laws mandate access. The Air Carrier Accessibility Act of 1979 was the first to require airlines to accommodate individuals with disabilities, while the more sweeping Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 expanded accessibility laws to include equitable access at all commercial businesses and public areas including airports.

Both laws are under constant review, and new regulations and interpretations are constantly being considered. “I’ve worked on this issue since the 1970s,” said Robert Ashby, Deputy General Counsel for the U.S. Department of Transportation. “And it hasn’t gotten boring yet.”

Ashby and the Department of Transportation handle regulations and impose fines on air carriers who violate the law, a responsibility they have been steadily expanding. Since 2000, the department has increased the scope and fines of accessibility law in hopes of forcing lagging carriers to catch up with innovative airlines.

Six years ago, DOT officials mandated that foreign air carriers must also comply with the ACAA and ADA rules. An investigation is underway into reports that some foreign carriers are not accurately recording complaints by customers with disabilities.

At the same time, penalties have increased for violation of accessibility law. For instance, the fine for failing to have adequate storage space in the cabin for a manual wheelchair has increased from \$100,000 to \$500,000. Fines for failing to have adequate procedures for boarding and debarking wheelchair passengers can range from \$200,000 to \$1.5 million. Rather than being paid to the government, most of these fines can be used by the airline to improve their service to customers with disabilities.

While Transportation officials handle enforcement among carriers, workers with the U.S. Department of Justice are also frequent players, called in to investigate allegations and complaints of discrimination against people with disabilities by vendors, concession workers or other indirect airline industry workers.

“It is important that we remember that these are civil rights laws,” said Sally Conway, a Department of Justice worker who handles complaints of ADA violations at airports. “These laws say it is no longer acceptable to segregate, separate or exclude people just because they have disabilities.”

Ms. Conway told airline officials that failures by cab drivers, shuttle service drivers and others to provide service to people with disabilities are a frequent weakness in the transportation system.

“These are huge issues. You can take an airplane from one place to the next, but then you’re stymied (getting to your car),” said Conway, who also uses a wheelchair due to multiple sclerosis. “We also get thousands of hotel complaints, but luckily, that’s way beyond you guys.”

Looking to the Future

By most accounts, accessibility in the airline industry is improving. With the number of travelers with disabilities rising every year – the 2005 study by Open Doors Organization found that approximately 21 million people with disabilities had traveled in the last two years – airlines and airports are getting better.

“It used to be, I would come into an airport and there would just be panic on people’s faces,” recalled Conway. “But now, more people are out. The gate workers are more comfortable.”

The benefits for companies that reach out to welcome all travelers can be enormous.

In the last few years, Avis Rent A Car System launched a series of *Avis Access* initiatives to improve accessibility for customers with disabilities, including offering transfer boards, swivel seats, spinner knobs and, in some markets, scooter rentals.

“We need all of the companies and authorities that provide service at the airport to recognize that accessibility is simply an extension of customer service,” said Avis-Budget Group Vice President Bob Bouta, whose company was a major sponsor of the conference. “Companies that ignore the needs of this very large demographic group are doing themselves and the customers a huge disservice.”

Advocates agreed.

“This is an amazing and historic time when people’s potential is being released,” Karp said. “We’re a lot better at negotiating for what we want. Providers have to realize it’s a lot better to say, ‘OK, what do we do?’”

The gathering marked the first time that many airport managers and industry officials had a chance to meet.

“The biggest accomplishment of this conference is that we’ve got everyone in one room,” Eric Lipp said. “Many of these people have been doing their jobs for a long time, working to improve access. But they could only hear about what others were doing through word of mouth. Now these people can meet, network and learn.”

Participants are already hoping to hold follow up meetings on the topics in future years.

Meanwhile, the work continues.

“I’ve heard about a lot of things that I need to go back and fix,” said Sam Gonzalez, Landside Operations Manager for Phoenix Sky Harbor Airport. “I’ve got a lot of ideas.”

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UNIVERSAL DESIGN SIDEBAR

Making an airport, business or public space accessible to all doesn't require a massive, costly overhaul due to a lawsuit or regulation. With the proper mindset, a good architect can create a space open and inviting to all, regardless of disability or condition.

The concept, known as universal design, was one of several topics covered at the first annual accessibility symposium. In a presentation to airport managers and others, Universal Designers & Consultants Inc. President John Salmen(CQ) discussed the seven major elements that contribute to an open and inviting airport.

1. Equitable use - Major areas of a building, including entrances and corridors, should be designed for use by everyone. In a properly designed space, no one would be forced to enter or travel in a different way, avoiding segregating or stigmatizing people.

2. Flexibility of use - The design allows a visitor or user to choose their own method of negotiating the space. The flexibility can include everything from allowing people to walk on the right or left side of a stairwell to ensuring that corridors are wide enough so that people can set their own pace when walking.

3. Simplicity -- Users don't have to puzzle out how to find an area or its function. Straightforward, intuitive design can allow anyone to find his or her way regardless of language, education or background.

4. Perceptible Information - Signs, kiosks and other systems should provide important information to users in a variety of formats, including through legible writing, visual and pictographic representation and audible formats.

5. Tolerance for error – With proper foresight, designers can avoid creating spaces that could potentially cause accidents or mishaps. This includes protecting hazardous areas from being accessed by the general public, providing failsafe ways for people to recover from missteps or getting lost and ensuring ease of use that allows everyone to safely reach their intended place.

6. Lowering physical effort -- A well-designed structure doesn't make it difficult for a person to move naturally. This includes avoiding the need for visitors and workers to do repetitive physical tasks, making inclines as gradual as possible to avoid fatigue and designing chairs and waiting areas to ensure that guests maintain a neutral body position.

7. Adequate sizes and spaces for all users – Designers should bear in mind the diversity of people who will use an airport. By placing handles and buttons at varying heights, adding wider spaces and countertops that can be reached by anyone and making other considerations, it is possible to create an open and accessible space for all.