Passengers with Disabilities
Fact Sheet

Background

The World Health Organization (WHO), estimates that more than one billion people in the world live with some form of disability, which constitutes 15% of the world’s population. What’s more, the growth rate of persons with disabilities or with special needs is higher than population growth. This is primarily due to population aging and the global increase in chronic health conditions linked to disability.

With the nearly universal ratification of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UN CRPD), disability-inclusive development and accessibility for all have become a main priority topic in the 2019 UN global agenda, and a new UN disability inclusion strategy has recently been passed.

Nearly 70 years ago, IATA member airlines agreed to Resolution 700, which made aviation the first transport sector in the world to set standards for passengers requiring assistance. Since then, the growing number of passengers wanting the freedom to fly have exposed gaps in current approaches and processes at the airline and airport level. The high damage rate of wheelchairs and other mobility aids has been an example of this. What’s more, a patchwork of national or regional regulations covering passengers with disabilities have proliferated. This has become complicated with airlines subject to different rules depending on a flight’s destination, which has created inconsistencies and discomfort for passengers and carriers.

This and more has created the need for a strategic industry approach to make air travel more accessible and inclusive going forward.

Industry Resolution

• In June 2019 at the IATA Annual General Meeting in Seoul, IATA member airlines voted unanimously in favor of an industry resolution to improve the air travel experience for travellers with disabilities.
• Through the AGM Resolution, airlines have reconfirmed their commitment to improving accessibility in air transport and urge states to coordinate with industry and associations when developing policies.
• The resolution is founded on robust core principles that support and promote a consistent, global approach of both policies and procedures related to passengers with disabilities travelling by air with an emphasis on consultation, coordination and communication with stakeholders.

Collaborative Approach

• Disability inclusion cannot be approached as a standalone, it needs to be promoted across all policies and programs, coordinated with the stakeholders in the chain and in consultation with persons with disabilities.
• Major focus is required to ensure policy and regulations related to accessibility are harmonized and in line with smarter regulation principles. We will be working closely with policy makers around the world to try to create a regulatory framework that increases access to air transport for persons with disabilities. Until today, many government measures have been put in place with insufficient consultation with industry and little mention of the consequences that inconsistent regimes might cause in the complex reality of air transport.
• Another major focus will be on our own industry processes to make sure they are efficient and as comfortable as possible.
• Industry cannot do this on its own. Airlines must collaborate with governments, airports, and most importantly, the disabled community, because if we don’t listen to what passengers need, how can we provide what they need?

1 WHO, World report on disability - 2011
December 2019
We must communicate about what we do and seek feedback from the disabled community.

Wheelchairs and air travel

- **Damage rate of mobility aids**: The damage rate of mobility aids, notably wheelchairs, has been identified as an important topic that needs to be addressed. Damage events can be extremely painful for passengers as these mobility aids are often considered an extension of their bodies and essential to their autonomy. Currently, there is a need for new and standardized processes to avoid damage and make the acceptance of these aids more comfortable for passengers and all those who handle them across the chain. This will be a key working area in the work going forward.

- **Increase in requests for wheelchair assistance**: An IATA survey conducted with airline members earlier this year showed that the increase in assistance requests is significant and continuing to grow. However, many assistance requests come from passengers who do not have disabilities but need support at the airport (e.g. elderly passengers who do not feel confident navigating their way through a busy airport). We are using the results of the survey to target our advocacy at specific markets and make recommendations about how to offer better service to our customers and cater to the needs of those passengers who are not disabled but still request assistance.

- **Regional Workshops on Wheelchair Assistance**: Workshops were held in Heathrow, Delhi and New York in 2019 with representatives from regulators, airlines, disability organizations, airports and other regional stakeholders to assess current realities, challenges and opportunities. Given the growing number of wheelchair assistance requests, ways of differentiating the service for those who need wayfinding assistance was discussed to ensure that all passengers get the service they need. Avenues to promote dialogue between disability associations, policy makers and industry were also discussed to help facilitate a regulatory framework that reduces operational complexity and increase accessibility.

Other recent developments

- **ICAO Assembly**: The recently concluded triennial ICAO General Assembly recognized that a harmonized approach to the work on accessibility in aviation is a contributor to the achievement of the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), and agreed that, where appropriate, Member States should consider the IATA core principles on passengers with disabilities when developing and implementing accessibility regulations.

- **First Global Accessibility Symposium**: The inaugural IATA Global Accessibility Symposium was held in Dubai on the 5th and 6th November with the participation of a broad range of stakeholders including accessibility advocacy groups, airlines, regulators and other industry partners. It was the first event of its kind seeking to improve the air travel experience for passengers with disabilities. See the IATA news brief from the event.

The Future

- The Symposium was a key step in establishing dialogue between the disabled community, airlines, regulators and other relevant stakeholders on how to ensure that aviation continues to be the business of freedom for all travellers, including those with disabilities. The aim is to make this an annual event so that communication and feedback is regular.

- Future IATA development in the area of accessibility will include:
  - Advocating for global policy consistency through the International Civil Aviation Organization (ICAO) and in coordination with disability associations
  - Improving understanding of the needs of travelers with hidden disabilities
  - Improving and standardizing processes to streamline handling of wheelchairs and other mobility aids
  - Supporting airlines to provide better assistance to their customers through ad hoc educational and learning material
  - Promoting inclusive and long-term global development supported by technology
  - Proposing harmonized end-to-end processes / standards in assistance to passengers with disabilities