



Air Travel Accessibility

Background

Air travel should be accessible to all passengers. Therefore, all stakeholders should work together to eliminate barriers to travel. The World Health Organization (WHO) has estimated that more than 1.3 billion people live with some form of disability, which constitutes approximately [16% of the world's population](#). Furthermore, as the population ages, the proportion of people with disabilities grows.

The airline's commitment to accessible air transport was reaffirmed at the 2019 IATA Annual General Meeting, when IATA members approved a [Resolution on Passengers with Disabilities](#).

The UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) requires its parties to take appropriate measures so that persons with disabilities have equal access to the physical environment, transportation, information and communication, including information technologies and systems, and other facilities and services open or provided to the public in urban and rural areas.

The Convention has also identified the need for international cooperation to create a legislative framework with a concrete, enforceable and time-bound benchmark for monitoring the gradual implementation of accessibility for all.

IATA supports applying the Convention's provisions to national regulation, including "the identification and elimination of obstacles and barriers" in transportation.

To promote consistent and coordinated airline policy and ensure high-quality service provision, IATA, ICAO, and ACI hosted an Accessibility Symposium in Montreal in December 2024 to develop comprehensive strategic planning that includes appropriate coordination mechanisms between states and provides a foundation for sustainable and transformative change towards accessibility in all pillars of aviation.

IATA advocates for Multilateral Collaboration between State Regulators and the Application of Global Standards

Since applying the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, States have shown a clear and positive interest in advancing accessibility for passengers with a disability in society. However, existing accessibility regulations are still fragmented and are mainly geared toward eliminating complaints in national jurisdictions, rather than laying the necessary foundations to achieve accessible and universal air transport in a global and coordinated way.

This does not help the industry consolidate policy processes and standards, and leaves room for interpretation.

By its very nature, international air transport involves multiple parties working together, operating into and out of more than one (national) legal jurisdiction every time an aircraft takes off or lands, and connecting to different carriers during a single itinerary.

The smooth functioning of the aviation network requires a carefully coordinated industry approach to standardizing certain functions and applying consistent rules.

Invisible Disabilities

Negotiating the various processes involved in air transport can be a stressful experience for even the most seasoned travelers. It is particularly challenging for those with conditions that are not immediately apparent, such as autism or dementia. Unfortunately, the very nature of these invisible symptoms can lead to misunderstandings, false perceptions, and unfair judgments.

Currently, there is a lack of global understanding regarding invisible disabilities and the assistance for these passengers at airports and on board. Some passengers hesitate to communicate their conditions for fear of being denied boarding. There are already examples of good practices by airlines and airports to reassure passengers, including providing information

about what to expect before travel and utilizing sensory rooms. However, it is also essential to raise awareness regarding the advanced notification for assistance service requests, to provide support at the airport in areas the airline is responsible for, to offer direct aid on board the aircraft, and to ensure assistance during flight disruptions.

Shared accountability and common standards to help prevent damage to mobility aids

The safe handling of mobility aids, including wheelchairs, is key to advance air travel accessibility. When damage or loss occurs, it can be devastating to the traveler, as these devices are extensions of their body and crucial to their independence. It also represents a reputational issue for the airline.

The root of the challenges in loading and safe storage of mobility aids is the fact that few, if any, of these devices have been designed with air transport in mind.

Several issues work against the ability to transport them safely and without risk of damage or injury to loading staff that need to be addressed:

- The size and dimensions of some mobility aids can create significant operational challenges when navigating airports, loading, and off-loading.
- The weight of such devices can present a risk of injury to ground staff during the loading and unloading of these devices, often manually.
- The lithium-ion batteries that provide power to mobility aids can cause severe safety hazards if not properly handled during transport. Lithium-ion batteries are classified as dangerous goods for transport.
- Airports' designs are not optimized for transporting mobility aids from the airport to the ramp. This operation often happens manually, jeopardizing the aid's safe handling and the handlers' wellbeing.
- The designs of many mobility aids and aircraft cargo compartments on typical domestic single-aisle and regional aircraft are incompatible. Many mobility aids cannot be configured to fit through the cargo compartment door and are challenging to secure once loaded.
- Lastly, there is often an information gap. The airline may not have the necessary information regarding the dimensions of a mobility aid that a passenger is using. There may not be an easily accessible or dedicated channel for the passenger to communicate that information, including whether any special tools may be required to disassemble the device to facilitate loading.

In February 2023, IATA published [new guidance material](#). Key elements include:

- Better processes for booking and information exchange, including the use of Special Service Request (SSR) and Passenger Name Requirement (PNR) codes to give advance information on the specifications of mobility aids
- A recommendation to create an electronic mobility aid tag, fixed to the mobility aid and containing technical information which will help airlines and ground handlers transport the aid safely
- Advice airlines on developing a communications toolkit for engaging with passengers with disabilities, including a signposted and accessible website area.
- Best practices for loading, collection and return of mobility aids
- A recommendation for dedicated specialized ramp personnel to be trained and deployed to handle mobility aids
- Guidance for how to properly resolve instances where mobility aids are damaged
- Revised and enhanced training of ground handlers and airline staff

Best Practices on the Application of SSR Codes and Assistance Service

Passengers with disabilities may not be aware of the different types and levels of accommodations and services that airlines and airports offer and provide. In 2024, IATA issued guidance material to help travel agents and air transport industry employees consistently assist disabled passengers.

The guidance promotes appropriate interaction between passengers and operators by involving active listening, attentively addressing specific needs, and encouraging open communication, allowing them to express concerns or preferences related to their disability freely. Additionally, this guidance advocates for the consistent application of special assistance

services codes (SSR) to streamline the capturing of accommodation requests and the support of accompanying passengers throughout their air travel journey. The SSR codes form part of a standard protocol that facilitates communication among travel agency systems, airline systems, and between airlines and airports. When these codes are misused or applied inconsistently, the entire travel experience can be disrupted.

Standards and Certification for Trained Service Dogs

IATA supports the right of individuals with disabilities who have a legitimate need to travel with a trained and certified service dog.

Some regulations define service dogs, while others allow for interpretation, resulting in chaos and confusion for airlines and passengers. For instance, under the current EU Regulation (EC) 1107/2006, there is no explicit definition of service dogs, leaving carriers to determine whether a service dog qualifies as a legitimate service animal trained to work in a public setting and assist a person with disabilities.

IATA advocates that state regulators collaborate to develop a global, consistent definition and standard for certified service dogs, so that the industry and passengers have clear guidance regarding the acceptability of assistance animals.

This definition should explicitly exclude Emotional Support Animals (ESAs). To this end, IATA urges state regulators to collaborate on introducing a definition of a "trained service dog" that establishes parameters for the acceptance and use of assistance-trained dogs in society more generally, rather than solely within the narrow context of aviation.

For airlines, it is vital that this definition only includes dogs individually trained to do work or perform tasks for the benefit of an individual with a disability. It excludes all other species of animals, whether wild or domestic, trained or untrained. This common-sense approach recognizes that dogs are the primary species that can be trained to assist an individual with a disability (and be trained to behave in a public setting).

The 'one person one fare' regulation is an expropriation of airlines' seats

One person one fare (1P1F) refers to the proposal that persons required to use extra seats, either for an accompanying person or because they cannot fit in a single seat, be only charged the price of a single seat.

If an accompanying person is present, that person would travel free of charge. This is not a legal requirement anywhere except on domestic routes. However, airlines in some countries have been "recommended" to offer this service, and the EU proposes a similar rule.

The issue is complicated. A unanimous resolution at IATA's 75th AGM in 2019 committed IATA members to ensuring 'Passengers with disabilities have access to safe, reliable and dignified travel', and the industry is working diligently with representatives of the disability community to improve travel for passengers with disabilities.

However, the industry cannot support the 1P1F principle on several grounds:

- The finances of an air route are often precarious. The average airline profit per passenger is around \$7. This can equate to around 3-4 seats in total on a flight. If these seats are given away for free, then the financial viability of an entire flight could be threatened.
- The circumstances under which a disabled or a passenger of size would require two seats are not easily defined and could be abused. A lack of a single global definition would create an unworkable minefield of unharmonized requirements that would confuse airlines and passengers alike.
- Under the UN Convention, there are long-standing definitions of proportionality and the reasonable steps that should be taken to ensure individuals with disabilities have equal access. This is why, for example, not all legacy metro stations in key cities provide step-free access – the cost of retrofitting them all is disproportionately large. The same principle applies to providing free seats to disabled or passengers of size on aircraft.

Airlines remain committed to working with regulators and travelers with disabilities to find proportionate and workable solutions to ensure fair and equal access to air travel.

Airlines record a 30% yearly increase in wheelchair assistance requests at airports.

The considerable increase in wheelchair assistance requests is a key issue for the aviation industry. To understand the scale of the problem, IATA is looking at the issue through surveys and studies, and the results suggest that:

- The increase in airport assistance requests is significant and continues to grow yearly, with increases of +30% in bigger airports.
- The requests are more prevalent in specific geographies (e.g. flights to and from India, the United States, the United Arab Emirates and Europe).
- Many assistance requests may come from passengers who do not have physical disabilities but do not feel confident navigating through a busy airport, or people who need directional assistance for whatever reason, including age.
- Another concern is the insufficient training for travel agents, airports, and service providers. It is essential for travel agents and ground staff to be trained in soft skills, such as how to ask passengers the right questions to find out if they need a wheelchair.

The increasing number of requests for wheelchair assistance to navigate airports is not sustainable for airlines and airports.

Currently, there are no regulations that require wheelchairs to be the exclusive means of supporting passengers in need. Therefore, IATA calls on state regulators to motivate airports and assistance service providers to explore more sustainable solutions to this concern.

The airport's managing authority is ultimately responsible for providing assistance services and should make every effort to ensure individuals can reach their departure gates on time and without unnecessary delays.

Encouraging passengers to inform airlines of assistance needs during booking would greatly enhance the industry's ability to deliver quality service. IATA believes that the accessibility issues at certain European airports necessitate a more coordinated long-term approach and improved collaboration between national and European regulators, airports, and airlines.

Accessibility information is one click- away from airlines' landing page.

Accessible information is vital for anyone planning to travel. This is especially true for individuals with disabilities who need support and must meticulously organize their travel plans. Although airlines have made progress in offering detailed information on their websites, there is still room for enhancement, especially in simplifying the process of finding specific details.

IATA has recently issued guidance material on ensuring airline websites provide easy access to all necessary information for travelers with disabilities. To ensure equal access for all passengers, this includes:

- Developing a user-friendly gateway to the dedicated accessibility area of airlines' websites,
- Clarifying the criteria for assistance entitlement, and
- Emphasizing the importance of passengers requesting assistance early, preferably during the booking process.

The guidance stresses a streamlined approach, enabling travelers with disabilities to access crucial information with just one click from the homepage. It provides best practices on creating transparent and intuitive information pathways on airline websites for passengers with disabilities or reduced mobility, ensuring they have direct access to essential details about air travel arrangements and passenger rights.

UN Tourism Action Agenda 2030

IATA supports UN Tourism in deploying the Action Agenda 2030 for disability inclusion and tourism's contribution to the Sustainable Development Goals. The agenda includes measures to advance training, develop measurement systems, and increase industry awareness of the advantages of a diverse workplace. The first step was to clarify the application of ISO standards for tour operators and travel agents through six sets of guidelines, produced by UN Tourism, ONCE Foundation
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and Spanish Association for Standardization (UNE), in collaboration with the European Network for Accessible Tourism and many other partners.

EU INCLusive AViation (INCLAVI) Project

IATA is involved in the EU-supported INCLAVI (INCLusive AViation) initiative. This project aims to tackle the skills gaps in the aviation industry concerning the mobility of persons with disabilities (PwDs) and accessibility standards that align with the EC Strategy for the Rights of Persons with Disabilities 2021-2030. INCLAVI's goal is to position air travel as a leader in accessibility and promote disability-inclusive progress in the transportation sector through education, training, and knowledge sharing. A collection of 41 detailed training modules is being developed and expected to launch by the end of 2025.

The future

IATA is committed to disability inclusion through its annual general meeting in 2019. It reiterates its commitment by reviewing and updating its policy, standards, and recommendations to provide safe, reliable, and dignified travel to passengers with disabilities and ageing persons.

- **Advocate for the application of harmonized regulations supported by sound standards**

Achieving safe and dignified travel for passengers with disabilities requires collaboration among governments, industry, and travelers to create an air transport system that includes everyone and ensures no one and no country is left behind. This effort aims to align passengers' needs with operational constraints while prioritizing safety as the industry's foremost concern. IATA will coordinate efforts with friendly regulators to develop harmonized, consistent, and coherent national accessibility aviation regulation principles.

- **Prioritizing accessibility and disability inclusion as part of its agenda.**

Providing Accessibility Services is essential for enabling everyone to engage in society fully. IATA will persist in collaborating with government bodies, international organizations, stakeholders, and advocates from the disability community to promote air transport accessibility for every passenger. The aim is to be practical and ensure that the creation of accessibility regulations and practices is equitable, usable, and achieves explicit, measurable policy goals that facilitate a safe and enjoyable travel experience for all.

- **Supporting ICAO to deploy its long-term accessibility agenda**

Following the ICAO General Assembly's groundbreaking resolution on accessibility for passengers with disabilities, which directed the Council to formulate a strategy and work program, ICAO, IATA, and ACI organized the first Accessibility Symposium in Montreal in December 2024. This event played a vital role in crafting a long-term strategy harmonizing with the travel and tourism sectors, which the three organizations intend to present at the next ICAO General Assembly.