



# Air Travel Accessibility

## Fact Sheet

### 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, ICAO adopted a high level strategy during the Facilitation Panel (FALP14); and will host the second edition of the Accessibility Symposium in Montreal in October 2026 to provide a comprehensive overview of the priority actions, and next steps to advance accessibility at global, regional, and national levels.

### 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.

IATA's position is that accessibility in air travel must evolve from fragmented, nationally focused rules toward a globally harmonized, end-to-end journey approach, enabled by digitalization, common standards, and shared responsibility across the travel chain.

## Digitalizing the accessibility of the travel chain

As the future evolves, digital solutions (e.g. SSR data, One ID, and the European Disability Card) will be integrated into a seamless data ecosystem enabling real-time, end-to-end assistance delivery across airlines, airports, and service provider. IATA supports the digitalization of the European Disability Card (EDC) - an EU-wide initiative designed to ensure mutual recognition of disability status across all Member States, enabling persons with disabilities to access the same support and preferential conditions when traveling. IATA supports the European Disability Card (EDC) as a key enabler of harmonized recognition of disability status across the EU. However, to be effective in air transport, the EDC must be:

- Digitally interoperable with airline and airport systems
- Embedded into passenger data flows (e.g. SSR, One ID)
- Supported by common standards for data exchange and real-time assistance coordination

Without this integration, the EDC risks remaining a static proof mechanism, rather than enabling a seamless accessible journey.

## 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 advancing 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 safely storing mobility aids is 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 [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. 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 the consistent application of special assistance service (SSR) codes to streamline the capture of accommodation requests and support 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 consistent global 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).

IATA has finalized its [Guidance on Service Dogs](#) to support airlines and industry partners in delivering safe, respectful, and consistent travel experiences for passengers with disabilities who rely on trained service dogs. This guidance was developed in collaboration with airlines, service dog training organizations, the disability community, and other relevant stakeholders.

Service dogs play an essential role in supporting persons with disabilities, and their use in air travel is an increasingly important focus in the broader effort to improve accessibility. However, inconsistent definitions, verification requirements, and handling procedures across jurisdictions have created operational challenges for both airlines and passengers with disabilities. To address these issues, this guidance aims to:

- Establish a shared understanding of what qualifies as a service or assistance dog, distinct from pets and emotional support animals.
- Promote consistent practices across airports and airline operations.
- Reduce uncertainty for frontline staff while ensuring safety, health, and regulatory compliance.
- Improve the overall passenger experience for persons with disabilities, without compromising operational or cabin safety.

This guidance recognizes varying regulations and encourages alignment, particularly in areas regarding documentation, behaviour expectations, and onboarding arrangements. It is also intended to serve as a reference in discussions with regulators, ICAO and other relevant stakeholders on regulatory harmonization and best practices.

## Ensuring proportionate and sustainable approaches to additional seating requirements

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 1P1F principle raises proportionality and sustainability concerns 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, confusing airlines and passengers alike.
- Under the UN Convention, there are long-standing definitions of proportionality and 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 balanced solutions to ensure fair and equal access to air travel.

## Safety Assistants and Accompanying Persons

Requirements in some jurisdictions for free travel of accompanying persons raise important safety, operational, and proportionality considerations. A key principle is that a safety assistant is not a commercial benefit, but a safety-based requirement in specific circumstances. Airlines already operate under stringent safety regulations (e.g. EASA requirements), and decisions regarding assistance must be based on objective safety criteria.

Safety determinations should therefore remain grounded in operational and regulatory requirements and should not be overridden by blanket provisions that do not reflect individual circumstances.

A generalized requirement to provide free accommodation may lead to unintended consequences, including:

- Increased risk of misalignment, particularly on long-haul flights
- Operational constraints, including limits linked to aircraft safety requirements such as evacuation procedures
- A potential increase in denied boarding situations, which could ultimately disadvantage the very passengers such measures aim to support.

IATA supports a targeted, safety-based framework that:

- Clearly defines when a safety assistant is required, based on objective and transparent criteria
- Provides airlines with flexibility to:
  - Arrange or facilitate the presence of a safety assistant, where required
  - Exercise discretion in waiving fees in justified and appropriate cases

Where a passenger chooses to travel with an accompanying person for reasons other than safety requirements, standard commercial conditions should apply.

## 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.

## Enhancing Disability Assistance Services at EU airports

Since the implementation of Regulation (EC) 1107/2006, which transferred responsibility for disability assistance services from airlines to airports, service delivery across European airports has evolved unevenly. This has resulted in variability in passenger experience, operational challenges, and complexities in accountability—particularly in jurisdictions where airlines remain closely associated with service outcomes. A coordinated review of current practices and regulatory frameworks is therefore needed to ensure consistent quality, clarity of responsibilities, and a high standard of service for passengers with disabilities. Enhancing assistance services at EU airports requires a balanced and coordinated approach, combining:

- Clear standards and accountability
- Improved passenger communication
- Stronger collaboration across stakeholders
- Sustainable and transparent cost frameworks

This approach will support a more consistent, efficient, and passenger-centric system, aligned with the broader objective of delivering seamless and inclusive air travel.

## Information is one click away from the airlines' website 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 UNWTO in deploying the San Marino agenda for disability inclusion, as well as 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 and Spanish Association for Standardization (UNE), in collaboration with the European Network for Accessible Tourism and many other partners. The UN tourism has published a [compendium of good practices](#) incorporating IATA protocols to support improvements in customer service for passengers with disabilities across the travel and tourism ecosystem.

## 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](#) has been developed and launched in 2025.

## The future

The aviation industry is entering a new phase in delivering accessibility—one that requires closer global alignment, stronger partnerships, and accelerated digital innovation.

### Advancing Digital Accessibility Across the Travel Chain

IATA will continue to support the digitalization of accessibility across the travel chain, working in close collaboration with regulators and industry stakeholders. In particular, IATA stands ready to support regulators in the development and trial of digital solutions, including initiatives aimed at operationalizing accessibility data in a secure, interoperable, and passenger-centric manner. Through this work, IATA aims to:

- Support regulators in testing and scaling digital accessibility solutions
- Enable secure and efficient data-sharing frameworks
- Advance the transition toward end-to-end accessible journeys across the entire travel chain

### Understanding the costs and benefits of airlines' accessibility services

To support evidence-based policymaking, IATA is advancing research to better understand the costs and benefits of aviation accessibility services. This includes identifying:

- The range of operational and capital investments required to deliver accessible services
- The distribution of costs and benefits across stakeholders in the travel ecosystem
- Opportunities to improve efficiency, service quality, and scalability

Preliminary analysis was conducted in 2023 based on industry data, highlighting the scale and complexity of accessibility service provision. However, further work is needed to develop a more comprehensive and globally representative picture, including across different airline business models and regions.

### 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 resolution on accessibility for passengers with disabilities, and the adoption of the associated strategy and program in spring 2026, IATA will actively support their implementation.

In this context, IATA will continue to work closely with ICAO and ACI, including coordinating the second edition of the Accessibility Symposium in October 2026, to advance global dialogue, share best practices, and support the consistent deployment of accessibility initiatives across the aviation ecosystem.