Air Travel Accessibility

Fact Sheet

Background

- The World Health Organization (WHO) has estimated that more than one billion people live with some form of disability, which constitutes approximately 15% of the world's population.
- According to the UN World Population Ageing report, globally, there were 727 million persons aged 65 years or over in 2020. Over the next three decades, the number of older persons worldwide is projected to more than double, reaching over 1.5 billion in 2050.
- As the process of population ageing continues to advance in both developed and developing countries it is important to ensure continued and equitable access to leisure and travel for this segment of passengers.

Industry Resolution

- In 2019, the IATA Annual General Meeting (AGM) unanimously adopted a landmark industry resolution which reaffirmed the commitment of IATA member airlines to provide safe, reliable and dignified travel for people with disabilities.
- Through the AGM resolution, airlines have reconfirmed their commitment to improve accessibility in air transport and urge states to work in partnership with the air transport industry when developing policies related to accessible air transport.
- The resolution is founded on robust core principles that support and promote a consistent, global approach to passengers with disabilities traveling by air, with an emphasis on consultation, coordination and communication with all stakeholders involved in making accessible travel possible.
- This industry commitment to doing the right thing is just the first step. IATA’s role is to help the air transport industry take the next steps to advance that commitment into concrete action that benefits the travelers who need it.

Collaborative Approach

- Disability inclusion cannot be approached by different stakeholders individually. Those stakeholders (i.e. governments, airlines, airports, etc.) must work in partnership and reflect such a partnership approach in the accessibility policies and programs they put in place.
- Most importantly, this must put individuals with disabilities at the very center of such a collaborative approach, in order to balance the accessibility needs of passengers, with operational realities that shape how airlines and airports deliver their services to those passengers. This will in turn help to maintain safety as the number one priority of the air transport industry.
- A major focus must be placed on ensuring that policy and regulations related to accessibility in different countries are harmonized and in line with IATA’s principles on passengers with disabilities. This will create the consistency and continuity needed to avoid confusion and discomfort for passengers. IATA is working closely with policymakers around the world to encourage them have this at the forefront of their plans if they intend to put new regulations/policies in place.

Recent Initiatives

The COVID-19 pandemic led to the worst crisis in the history of air transport. It also resulted in the implementation of biosafety measures around the world (e.g. the wearing of masks and social distancing measures). Some of these, such as mask mandates and distancing measures, subsequently have been removed in many jurisdictions. During the crisis IATA worked with all relevant stakeholders to ensure that such measures took into account the needs of travelers with disabilities and did not create barriers to travel for those travelers. Actions included:
Mobility Aids Action Group

The safe handling of mobility aids including wheelchairs has been identified as a key topic to advance air travel accessibility. When damage or loss events occur, 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.

To address this issue from a holistic perspective, a Mobility Aids Action Group was created in July 2021. It is the first of its kind aimed at tackling issues around the safe and secure transport of mobility aids.

The Action Group involves the full range of stakeholders impacted by this issue, including accessibility organizations (representing travelers with disabilities), airlines, ground service providers, airports and mobility aids manufacturers. This is the first time a mobility aids manufacturer has participated in an IATA action group.

The main findings of the action group can be summarized as follows:

- The dimension and or the weight of some mobility aids can create significant operational challenges during the process of loading and securing in the cargo compartment of the aircraft and off-loading.
- The lithium-ion batteries that power wheelchairs and mobility aids are considered dangerous goods when carried by air, but they can be transported safely by air provided certain safety requirements are met.
- Mobility aids must be loaded and secured in the aircraft in an upright position according to safety regulations and standards, ensuring safety and protection of the unit, the cargo hold floor and the personnel loading the aid.
- Some passengers are not aware of crucial information related to the dimensions of their mobility aid. Without this information, aircraft operators lack the required expertise to properly assemble, disassemble, load and secure mobility aids.
- Missing relevant information can result in serious injuries to operational staff owing to the heavy weight and dimensions of the mobility aid. In addition, unintended operation of a battery is likely to damage the wheelchair and could also damage the aircraft. In an extreme scenario, this could cause a serious on-board safety incident.
- Many mobility aids are not designed for air travel, and they cannot be configured to fit through the aircraft cargo compartment door and are difficult to secure in the cargo compartment. The airline industry is doing what it can to minimize the damage until a fundamental change in wheelchair design becomes a reality, but the major breakthrough benefit for travellers will only come when wheelchair manufacturers change their design to meet the demands of air travel.
The Future

• The IATA focus on accessibility is integral to ensuring all people enjoy the benefits of air travel.

• The IATA Global Accessibility Symposium, which was launched in 2019, continues to be a crucial vehicle for dialogue between the accessibility community, airlines, regulators and other relevant stakeholders going forward. The next event will be part of the World Passenger Symposium.

• Future IATA development in the area of accessibility will include:
  
  o Continue to engage with ICAO, regulatory agencies, international organizations, stakeholders and representatives of the disability community to advance accessibility and disability inclusion.
  
  o Support the application of the provisions of the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD) into national regulation, including “the identification and elimination of obstacles and barriers” in transportation and the application of universal design principles.
  
  o Tackling the digital accessibility gap to fosters opportunities rather than create challenges. Regulation needs to ensure physical and digital accessibility is taken into account in design processes; also, international standards can help ensure the right design of digitalized products and services.
  
  o Promote consistent application of IATA standards and Recommended Practices such as the consistent application of SSR codes along the travel chain
  
  o Supporting research for consistent and dignified assistance to travelers with invisible and intellectual disabilities such as Alzheimer and Dementia
  
  o Supporting airlines to provide better and pragmatic assistance to their customers through training, awareness and education material