Beyond ADA: Increasing Airport Accessibility for All

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Published in: Airport Improvement Magazine
Date: January-February, 2013

Airports are constantly looking for new ways to increase revenue, but there are few strategies that boost profits while also filling a social need. Improving accessibility for travelers with disabilities is one of those rare opportunities. People with disabilities spend $6.5 billion annually at airports. Improving accessibility through proper planning, design, policy, procedure and training can allow airports to tap into this market and better the travel experience for customers with disabilities.

Today's age and attitudes allow for very limited resources for accessibility, so it's no wonder there is little understanding of its core values and characteristics. Often, airports feel lost without a map when faced with adhering to new regulations. Over the past couple of years, though, it has become apparent that the FAA and DOT are serious about every airport having a specified access coordinator or expert on accessibility.

There are so many things that need to be done, and the learning curve is so steep, that actually beginning the process can be quite daunting. So here are some simple ideas on how to get the ball rolling.

The first suggestion is hands-on planning. The best way to do this is the controversial "role play," where you actually mimic a disability while surveying your site - navigating it in a wheelchair, for instance, or wearing devices that block or limit vision. While some in the disability community are understandably not fond of such methods, they do offer legitimate benefits and can be very effective as part of a larger strategy. They can also be very convincing and effective at initiating change.

The second piece of low-hanging fruit is finding resources. Reach out to the carriers that service your airport. They likely have an access coordinator or head of disability who can familiarize you with how they handle access. These professionals can also familiarize you with the elements airlines may need to function smoothly, such as elevators to the tarmac and relief areas for service animals. Also reach out to Airports Council International, which has educational programs that Open Doors Organization helped create. In 2014, attend our Universal Access in Airport Conference (and other events like it), where you can meet with airports, airlines and equipment providers exclusively about accessibility

issues. In addition, make sure to have at least one or two local disability organizations that you can rely on for support.

My third suggestion sounds harder than it is: Install a hearing loop. Many aging Americans, who do not self-identify as having a disability, wear hearing aids; yet they still often miss airport announcements. A hearing loop or induction loop can help more visitors for a relatively low cost than just about any other accommodation. Millions of travelers wearing hearing aids will no longer miss announcements about gate changes or emergency procedures. Hearing loops are already installed at Heathrow and other UK airports, as well as in all London taxis. Helping many travelers with a low-cost accommodation is a win-win situation.

Finally, but maybe most importantly, people with disabilities use technology a great deal. So have plenty of information on your website, including a copy of the Air Carrier Access Act and links to the DOT and Americans with Disabilities Act websites. Indoor Wi-Fi helps people with disabilities use smartphones to mark key places in your airport such as gate information displays and accessible bathrooms or water fountains for others to find later.

Overall, the industry has begun to evolve. Most airports have an access coordinator and have been part of an FAA accessibility audit; and others have instituted visual paging and family restrooms. These are steps in the right direction, but this is only the beginning. There is no end to what we can do. Ultimately, we hope all airports will weave access into their core principles.