

Good News for Travelers with Disabilities

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Traveling with a disability may become a little bit easier.

Earlier today the Department of Transportation proposed a regulation that would require airline Web sites and automated airport kiosks to be accessible, and a new federal rule announced last week strengthens protections at train station platforms.

Under the proposed air travel rule, airlines would be required to make their Web sites accessible over a two-year period, and ensure that their ticket agents do the same. If passed, the requirement would apply to U.S. and foreign carriers with Web sites marketing air transportation to U.S. consumers for travel within, to or from the United States. Small ticket agents would be exempt, according to the Department.

“I strongly believe that airline passengers with disabilities should have equal access to the same services as all other travelers,” Transportation Secretary Ray LaHood said in a statement released today of the proposed rule.

In addition, airlines and airports that use automated kiosks for services such as printing boarding passes and baggage tags would have to ensure that any kiosk ordered 60 days after the rule takes effect is accessible. This requirement would apply to U.S. and foreign carriers and U.S. airports that own, lease or control automated airport kiosks at U.S. airports with 10,000 or more annual boardings.

The proposed regulation is an important step, said Eric Lipp, executive director of the [Open Doors Organization](#), a nonprofit group in Chicago serving people with disabilities. “I’ve never met an airline that hasn’t wanted an accessible Web site. It just comes down to money.” The exorbitant expense, he said, has precluded the airlines from developing sites, even though the technology is readily available. “People want to see Web sites be accessible. Isn’t it overdue?”

Open Doors estimates that people with disabilities spend about \$15 billion annually on travel.

And with the growing population of aging baby boomers, the number of people with disabilities in the United States is expected to increase.

But while technology for accessible kiosks exists, the kiosks themselves have not been manufactured and are not yet available in the marketplace, so providing them will be a much greater challenge.

Currently, the Department of Transportation requires that carriers make discounts available to passengers who cannot use inaccessible Web sites and must make telephone or in-person reservations. Also, if passengers with disabilities are unable to use the kiosk because it is not accessible, carriers are required to provide equivalent service, such as having an airline employee assist in operating the kiosk.

The proposal is the latest in a series of rules to implement the Air Carrier Access Act (ACAA), originally issued May 2008.

The new rail station rule is intended to give passengers better access to intercity, commuter and high-speed train travel across the country.

“By putting this protection in place, passengers with disabilities will be able to get on and off any accessible car that is available to passengers at a new or altered station platform.” Transportation Secretary Ray LaHood said in a statement issued late last week by the Department of Transportation, which is amending its Americans with Disabilities Act regulations (ADA).

Amtrak has been proactive in recent years in making train stations in large cities ADA compliant, said Lipp, the Open Doors executive, but the smaller, often privately owned stations, have often been slow to implement change.

“I think this law will put pressure on the small stations to get this done.”

To learn more about the rail station rule, view: http://www.ofr.gov/OFRUpload/OFRData/2011-23576_PI.pdf. For more about the accessible Web site and kiosk proposed rule, visit: www.regulationroom.org.