



ADALIVE!

EPISODE 62: AIRPORT ACCESSIBILITY AND THE ADA

Event Date: November 7, 2018

Presenters: Steve Mayers, IAP Airport Director, Customer Experience, ADA and Title VI Coordinator - Hartsfield-Jackson Atlanta International Airport (ATL)

Host: Beth Harrison – Director of Knowledge Translation, Southeast ADA Center

VOICE-OVER ANNOUNCER: Blog Talk Radio. (Music) Welcome to WADA ADA Live! Talk radio. Brought to you by the Southeast ADA Center, your leader for information, training and guidance on the Americans with Disabilities Act. And here's your host.

BETH HARRISON: Good afternoon, everyone. On behalf of the Southeast ADA Center, the Burton Blatt Institute at Syracuse University and the ADA National Network, welcome to episode 62 of ADALive. I am the director of knowledge translation from the Southeast ADA Center and your host today. On today's episode, we will be talking about airport customer service and the ADA. Before we begin, as a reminder ADALive listening audience, you can submit your questions about airport accessibility and customer service at any time at ADALive.org.

With the holiday travel season upon us, we thought this would be a good time to turn our attention to airport accessibility, and who better to have as a guest to discuss this topic than the customer experience and ADA coordinator for the busiest airport in the world. It is my pleasure today to introduce our guest, Steve Mayers, ADA coordinator for Hartsfield Jackson Atlanta International Airport and recipient of the FAA civil rights advocate award for promoting airport accessibility.

Hi, Steve and welcome to our show.

STEVE MAYERS: Hi, it's a pleasure to be here finally, one of our board members who is a member of the Southeast ADA Center has been trying to get me on this show, and I'm so happy to be here.

BETH HARRISON: We're really tickled that it worked out that you could be our guest today. First of all, congratulations on being the recipient of the Federal Aviation Administration Civil Rights advocate award.

STEVE MAYERS: Yes, it certainly is, you know, it's a big surprise since I took over this program 3 years ago, I feel, and I've been trying to be an advocate for the disability community and persons with disabilities. And I must say also, it's the dedication of Hartsfield Jacksonville international Airport and our senior leadership; those behind me ensuring that we make the airport in the City of Atlanta the most accessible airport in the world.

BETH HARRISON: Wow, well congratulations again. Speaking about that is a really good segue, can you talk a little bit about the ADA and the Title VI office at Atlanta's airport.

STEVE MAYERS: The FAA or the division of the Department of Transportation is tasked with ensuring that the Americans Disabilities Act, section 504 of their rehabilitation act are applied in the airport. The FAA through what we called ACs or advisory circulates from the public will interpret the laws and make our recommendations and rules that are applicable in airports. So this program is called in the FAA, the airport civil rights program. They have made, since we, by the way, since we receive grants funding from the FAA and most airports do, if you take a penny from the FAA we have what's called a compliance review; which the FAA comes through our airport through the program, and they do a review of all of their requirements that could be more than what the ADA requirements are. I'll give you an example of service animal relief centers in airports; and now we have adult changing stations coming to forefront by 2020/2021.

That is the entire program that is set up as a civil rights program at the FAA and that trickles down to airports.

BETH HARRISON: Because the airport is so big, can you just talk about some of the major accessibility issues that you see, Steve, and how you all work to address them, whether there's certain things that stand out that come up again and again or...

STEVE MAYERS: When we're talking size, by the way, we're relatively small compared to some airports I've been to around the United States and also the world. That's why we are the most efficient airport in the world. We're certainly the busiest with the number of passengers this year approaching 105 million passengers, you know, most of the issues that we see or we face at our airport are around, you know, individuals who are not aware, let's say the most other than the ADA community, they do not understand what the ADA means and what we have to do...

Why we can't, for instance, curbside every 100 feet we have to have a curb cut. There are individuals who are not educated on the Americans with Disabilities Act because they may not have a disability. And they don't understand why we have to allocate a particular section of our curb, so that you cannot park here or you cannot wait here because we have to give it to a deserving person with a disability to give them extra time to unload and load.

So most of the challenge I face is really about educating those without disabilities as to why we have facilities or individuals who have disabilities, and I think that's a continuing challenge and why our focus really at our airport is really to have an educational campaign around the individuals who don't, so that they can become aware so that the responses are, oh, it's just a waste of time, because, you know, only one person uses that. Well, our opinion is if one person needs it, they are going to do it, you know, because we have to serve everyone equally, and so I think that's our biggest challenge, is the education of those without disabilities.

BETH HARRISON: You talked about it's kind of an ongoing educational campaign. Could you talk a little bit about how you try to educate the public about what you're doing there in terms of ADA compliance at the airport?

STEVE MAYERS: Absolutely, and that's a great question. We do have an ADA community and our ADA community here at our airport meets every two months. On that committee, we don't have just individuals with disabilities or advocates. We invite anyone who would like to have a voice and try to understand, you know, the accessibility at our airport, or our accessibility issues that we face. That's one avenue that we use.

The other avenue, of course, is we are now doing PSAs that will be rolling out we'll be partnering with the AMAC Center at Georgia Tech to do more PSAs for the general public that will be played on the...we have partnerships with radio stations or online on our website. We try to market our program, if you go to ATL.com/ADA, we're able to get as much information on what the offerings are at our airport. We have PSAs actually within the airport here if you go to the information counter, there is a sign there that...or not a sign, but there is a monitor that actually displaces information on what the services that we can provide and... the other thing that we do actually generally when we... my department is in charge of training our partners here at the airport. And every opportunity that I get, I go in and speak on disability issues even though I do not have a disability, so that our staff, our partners...so we have concessionaires, we have airlines... we have all those individuals that we make them aware that there is there's a community that we serve that includes individuals with disabilities.

Also, engagements like this I mean, speaking to you guys on the phone and... not on the phone but speaking to you guys in regards to these issues and making you aware of what the airport offers is actually our way of doing public service also. Every opportunity that I get and everything that we do, we include planning development, all of that. We include, individuals, the ADA and have top of mind for everyone that we serve.

BETH HARRISON: That's Excellent. And absolutely, this is a fine example right here, that you are working to raise that awareness level. I'm also impressed with really what a

big umbrella you have cast across the educational campaign. You're working not only with your partners within the airport, but you've also developed this community partnership, so that's great. I mean, that really is making sure that...that net of awareness is spread pretty wide. You know, another thing that I found interesting that you said the universal design at the airport, can you talk a little bit about that?

STEVE MAYERS: I have a wonderful professor, and I hope that he will listen to this recording because I'm giving him some props. Dr. John Sanford at Georgia Tech who has been an advocate for...he runs the universal design school at Georgia Tech.

BETH HARRISON: Okay.

STEVE MAYERS: And we have, of course, a lot of engineers and architects who work for our airport that are graduates of Georgia Tech also, and so we partner with organizations who can instantly give us feedback in ensuring that our airport meets the needs of everyone in the community which, of course, is universal design. So I have a mini innovation center with John that we use to you know...when we're doing signage I had a few students who have masters and PhDs who will come and take a look at our processes at the airport and say, okay, we think this will work better. Let's do a trial and fund it and let's get it done, so we're able to make sure that we meet everyone's needs, and we consistently,...one of the reasons why we're really efficient is that we consistently try to find ways to make our airport better for everybody. Not just individuals with disabilities. And, so that is the application that we and the order that we have through our planning and planning and development division to ensure that everyone that is operating at our airport through our lease agreements, through our contracts... that everything we do that has to be used to make sure it's as efficient as possible and have ease of access everything to that we do.

BETH HARRISON: You know, you use the term, you have “a mini innovation center” and is it my understanding, Steve, that you use this kind of format to think about and strategize on how to meet more universal design?

STEVE MAYERS: Yes. Absolutely because in order for you to be the most accessible airport in the world, you cannot meet the...you cannot just meet the bare minimum. So using an ADA community or whatever we build or will be building a new building or new facilities, we always include different parts of the community in the design or asking questions. And so the research from our mini innovation center partnership with AMAC and Dr. John Sanford at Georgia Tech enables us to find that universal design that will be able to serve the entire community. So continuous innovation ensuring that we're able to meet the community's needs.

I'm not sure if you know what the AMAC center is. AMAC is an organization at Georgia Tech that provides accessibility solutions. So if there's an organization that wants to, for instance, have their website accessible, there are students or members of that committee...not committee, of that department who would offer services for web accessibility. They do consulting, video, remote captioning, accessible textbooks, braille and all of that...So it's a center of focusing on universal design for individuals with disability at Georgia Tech.

BETH HARRISON: Could we talk a little bit about the Air Carrier Access Act? I believe your office is responsible for compliance with that, Steve?

STEVE MAYERS: Yes, so I spoke previously about the FAA and the Department of Transportation and what the FAA, what their interpretation of certain rules are, but Congress passed the air carrier access act specifically to give individuals with disabilities access to airports and aircraft for grant funded organizations that fall on the Title II. As an example, without going into too much detail, I'll just give you an example that came out of the Air Carrier Access Act was service animals on aircraft and what type of service animals can be on service aircraft.

Emotional support animals I'll touch on in a bit here, but, you know, within an airport under Title II, you have a public entity that receives grants from the FAA. The question is whether the private entities that lease the concession space...so you have you have Delta Airlines or any other airlines that may have a lounge, and they're considered a private entity or you have Burger King, as a private entity at the airport whether they fall

under the Title II or Title III. Well, according to the FAA their rules and interpretation they fall under Title II because they have a lease agreement with us. And so if a service animal comes into our airport, and they have to have access to the airport to get to the aircraft. An emotional support animal,...we fall under the same rules, but the private entity does not have to allow an emotional support animal in the airport. Because there's no such rules for emotional support animals within the airport that says that you have to give access to the private area. However, under the FAA rules we have to give access to the aircraft by allowing the emotional support animals to go through the public areas of the airport to get to the aircraft, if I'm not being confusing. Because they haven't really clarified those rules but under the Air Carrier Access Act, it's just individuals with disabilities who are given access to aircraft and airport facilities...That's a law that was passed by Congress and interpreted by the FAA, and it has its rules that it applies on us of what it wants us to do because we're grant funded.

BETH HARRISON: Okay. I see, and so because you receive that grant funding, you have to comply with that?

STEVE MAYERS: Absolutely, yep.

BETH HARRISON: And such things as a service animal in public places in the airport?

STEVE MAYERS: Absolutely. Amongst other things, but, yeah.

BETH HARRISON: One of the things that just, you know, from a door to gate experience view, if you will, Steve you know, like I get to the airport and then I get to my gate, how does a passenger with a disability receive special assistance?

STEVE MAYERS: Okay. So in the United States, we have agreements between the airport and the airlines, and there's are some responsibilities that the airlines want to take control of, of course, because of cost and all that, and there's some things that the airport does in the United States, specifically, wheelchair assistance is something that most airlines want to do themselves. For you to get special assistance, if you're in a wheelchair, for instance, it's the airline that is responsible for that. But let's say you're not in a wheelchair, but you have a child with a disability or you yourself would like to

get assistance, you can also organize that airline. You should be able to have a seamless travel through the airport by getting help by anybody that's batched within this airport.

BETH HARRISON: Yeah, if I knew that I was going to be coming to the airport, to the airport there in Atlanta, and I knew that I was going to need assistance, would your office be the first place I should call?

STEVE MAYERS: Honestly, the best place to make any type of assistance that you need is actually, if you have access to a computer there's a website, and there's phone numbers, too, but on every airlines' website there is a section for accessibility or helping individuals with disabilities.

BETH HARRISON: ADA Live listening audience, do you have questions about airport accessibility or any of our other ADA Live topics, you can submit your questions at any time at our online forum at ADAlive.org. I want to pause for a minute now for a word from our sponsor, the Hartsfield Jackson Atlanta International Airport ADA and Title VI office.

VOICE OVER ANNOUNCER: Making ordinary service extraordinarily accessible is the motto of the ADA and Title VI office at Hartsfield Jackson Atlanta International Airport. Their mission is to provide a safe, enjoyable travel experience as well as equal access for guests and passengers with disabilities and/or special. The office works closely with airport stakeholders to ensure the best provision of services to passengers with disabilities. The office also assists guests in revolving disputes regarding the Americans with Disabilities Act. For more information visit their website at www.ATL.com/ADA.

BETH HARRISON: Welcome back. We're speaking with Steve Mayers, ADA and Title VI coordinator, and I was just kind of curious could you talk a little bit about what a typical day looks like in your office.

STEVE MAYERS: One of the things I absolutely love about my job is the educational piece of educating the public and educating anyone who, you know, has a complaint about anything, whether it's an accessibility issue and then letting them know how we can get it done. I leave my office, and I go outside, and I observe how the traveling public

traverse the airport. I walk this airport because I inspect what I expect, and, so that then I'm not in a cocoon in a way of being defensive about what I see when individuals call me to say, hey, we need an improvement here because I know I've actually seen it.

BETH HARRISON: Well, you know, the underlying theme through our whole discussion has been the education and how you do that through so many different avenues, and I really I liked what you just said how you just set aside time to go out and look at what's going on, and I loved your quote, I inspect what I expect.

STEVE MAYERS: There really isn't anything that I like seeing individuals with disabilities in this airport and asking them, how is it going? And to hear, you know 99% of the time it's, "oh, my God, it's great. You guys have been amazing," so that's what I like to hear, too.

BETH HARRISON: That's great. That's great. One thing that I am interested in and that perhaps you could talk a little bit about, Steve, is security at the airport, like the TSA, the Transportation Security Administration.

STEVE MAYERS: Uh huh.

BETH HARRISON: And that kind of delicate balance between ensuring airport security while being respectful of people with disabilities who may be in a wheelchair or those kinds of things. Can you talk a little bit about that?

STEVE MAYERS: Well, yeah, of course, TSA is a great partner for airports across the United States and, of course, provides the traveling public with, you know, security and making sure they get to their aircraft without any incident. The recommendation that I would make for anyone that needs assistance for TSA and notice the public is aware and, again, this is an education of which I would like to mention also that TSA is a part an active part of our ADA committee and a great partner for our airport. TSA Cares is an organization that, you know, families with a child who has who needs assistance or an individual who's in a wheelchair anyone with a disability that would like to get assistance through security, they can also call TSA Cares, at 855 787 2227 to get assistance through the TSA line. Of course, if someone is traveling with a service animal or an

emotional support animal, TSA is not going to really stop you from going through security. They're going to screen you, and it's not their... it is not their requirement for them to say you can't come through with your service animal or your emotional support animal, as long as the airline has given you access to their aircraft, and the airport has allowed you through...allowed you through the airport as an access to the airport, so they do an awesome job especially when the assistance is requested and granted by TSA. There are support teams in our airport that are trained specifically to handle individuals with disabilities, especially, individuals with like, for instance, autism. We have an autism awareness month right here at our airport and TSA is a big part of that, too, so they've been a really good partner for us, and I know that to be a fact across the United States.

BETH HARRISON: Yeah, one thing that you just kind of mentioned as you were talking we were discussing that topic was where passengers with autism, and I was again kind of getting ready for our discussion I was I found out that you guys have a Wings for Autism. Program.

STEVE MAYERS: Mhm.

BETH HARRISON: What's that?

STEVE MAYERS: Wings for Autism, we're always actively trying to get more individuals to fly. Again, I think I mentioned I encourage people individuals with disabilities to travel and explore the world and one of the challenges for families with children or individuals that or they're grown adults with autism is noise sensitivity, light sensitivity, people sensitivity, all of that is an issue traveling in the airport with 104 million passengers. So what we do is partner with an airline, this year we partnered with Delta Airlines and delta has this on a monthly basis that if you have a child with autism you can bring your child to the airport, tour the airport and also tour the aircraft, so that they can get acclimated to the noise and the lights and the sounds. So they will then know how to handle all of those concerned one of they take a long trip or to go from one location to another, so every year we bring I think last year we had 50 families with children with autism. They go to the airport, and we talk about autism and what it means, and we sponsor them to

be here and get an aircraft and get a pilot who has a child who has autism and speak about experiences. So when I was talking about the money pieces, you know, the more individuals that we have to fly with disabilities we're doing a good cause, but we want to make sure everyone has the ability to fly, of course, to turn a profit for us but in the end that's not our main goal. Our main goal is to make sure that the traveling public, even with individuals with disabilities, have the opportunity to live a normal life, like everyone else.

We also do this for the blind by the way. There's a blind agency here in Atlanta. That's a volunteer group that brings their students to the airport, and we show them how to traverse the airport. There's a guide dog association that we did the same thing too through our non-profit liaison office. Volunteers, we have individuals, by the way, who volunteer who have disabilities at our airport. And I have, actually, hired individuals with disabilities at my airport to serve the public because we want to make sure, you know, individuals with disabilities that traverse our airport can say, I can do that too. So that's how our partnerships work

BETH HARRISON: One thing that I wanted to talk a little bit about was, and you had mentioned it a couple of different times, there are emotional support animals and support animals...is there some kind of a general rule or rules that you guys are following, I know there seems to be change on that front rather than strict...

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STEVE MAYERS: Yeah, and this is an unfortunate, it really is an unfortunate position to be in. Especially for individuals who have a legitimate need for service animals, especially service animals... Because it goes back to the educational piece. The general public do not...the vast majority of folks who from my experience at least who say that they have a service animal, really do not. You know, you can go online, and you can buy an emotional support animal pass because there are requirements from the airlines for documentation for emotional support animals. There are certain questions that we can ask about service animals, such as, you know, is this your pet? Such as what... what

benefit or what service does it provide to you? I can ask about the animal, but I can't ask about the individual's disability.

When those questions are asked, depending on the answer, I will know whether or not this is a service animal, so... and we also do behavioral training because service animals, which are two that are recognized the miniature horses and also the dogs, they are trained. They are certified, and we know their behavior because we have been through this in our airport, and... I know what service animal is. It would not be running all over the place in my airport uncontrolled, and by the way, if a service animal does that in our airport, we have the right to ask you to leave the airport.

So these are the problem that we face right now is that we have had is people who have brought their pets into the airport and say that they're service animals, and then we have other passengers or employees that are being bitten, that are being harmed when there is a claim because there are folks that they think they know the law when they actually don't, and we find that they're using the law to get out paying \$150 fee from the airlines to transport their animal from one or their pet from one location to another. Not an animal their pet from one location to another without legitimately doing so. So now the DOJ and the FAA is looking into solidifying what it means because there will be a commentary period, of course, the airlines have established some new rules. That is to the detriment of the individuals who have legitimate service animals and are now bearing the brunt, you know of, questioning whether this is a service animal or not, and, so it's unfortunate, but we're going to we're working to make sure that there is some ways that we can actually now fix this issue that we now have.

BETH HARRISON: Well, thank you, Steve. I think it's to know the Department of Justice and the FAA are working together to look at coming up with a set of you know, that solidifies you said of rules or rule around. I know there's quite a bit of confusion, so thank you for speaking to that. We are about out of time, Steve, but before we go, I wanted to just ask if you have any thoughts on future challenges that you see for airport accessibility and what that might look like at Hartsfield Jackson?

STEVE MAYERS: Well, I wouldn't say I see any challenges. What I see are some really good opportunities for individuals with disabilities who will be able at least in the United States to have access to airports. With the new technologies we have coming in stream, when we're building new buildings and new airports in the United States... when the big guys like us can win awards and say, yes, we have actually... we have done this, all the other airports across the United States will follow, and I think as leaders in the industry, we are looking at every opportunity to, you know when we build a brand new parking garage, we're not adding the minimum accessible spaces, we're adding more accessible spaces than the minimum because we recognize that the population is aging. We are recognizing more individuals are self-identifying that they have a disability. So the future looks really bright, at least in my airport I know that to be a fact because of the importance that the City of Atlanta and Hartsfield Jackson International Airport are a leadership everyone how important it is that we serve everyone universally including individuals with disabilities. So, you know, I will stick with my challenge of educating the public, but it looks really, really bright because we have this top of mind with everything that we spoke about today.

BETH HARRISON: That's is fantastic, Steve, and I really I like how you have said throughout our talk today that there at Hartsfield Jackson you look at the standard as kind of the minimum, and you go beyond because you know what the needs of your community are and what that greater community is. And also, you touched on the new technology that are coming up and how those are going to be such great opportunities, so I think it is very exciting, and you all, as a very shiny example and definitely a leader in airport accessibility so you're a great model for other airports out there. Thank you so much, Steve.

STEVE MAYERS: It's been my pleasure.

BETH HARRISON: Yes, thank you so much, Steve. It has been my pleasure, too. Our guest today has been Steve Mayers, customer experience ADA and Title VI coordinator with the Hartsfield Jackson International Airport. I want to thank you so much for being with us today. As always, we thank you for joining us for today's episode of ADA Live on

airport customer service and the ADA. This episode and all previous ADA episodes are available on our website at ADAlive.org. All our episodes are archived in all formats, including streamed audio and accessible transcripts, and you can download on podcasts. It's as easy as going to the podcast icon in your mobile device and searching for ADA Live. A reminder, you can submit any questions on any of these topics by going to ADAlive.org. If you have questions about the Americans with Disabilities Act, post them to regional ADA center at 1 800 949 4232. And remember, all calls are free, and they're confidential.

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