



ADA Live!

Episode 105: Let's Fly Away – Air Travel for Passengers with Disabilities

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Host: Cyndi Smith, program manager at the Southeast ADA Center

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Steve Mayers: Hi. I'm Steve Mayers and you're listening to ADA Live!

4 Wheel City: Yo. Hi, let's roll (singing)

Cyndi Smith:

Hello, everyone. On behalf of the Southeast ADA Center, the Burton Blatt Institute of Syracuse University, and the ADA National Network, welcome to ADA Live! I am Cyndi Smith, program manager at the Southeast ADA Center. Listening audience, if you have any questions about the Americans with Disabilities Act, ADA, you can use the online form anytime at adalive.org. According to the Open Doors Association's 2020 market study, pre-pandemic travel patterns and spending for people with disabilities showed that in 2018 to 2019, 27 million travelers with disabilities spent \$58.7 billion on travel. Air travelers with disabilities spent \$11 billion, up nine billion dollars from 2015.

Cyndi Smith:

Air travel can be complex. We ask ourselves, did I forget anything? What about TSA screening? Where is my terminal and gate? Will I experience delays? Travel is even more complex for the 3.3 million domestic passengers who depend on a wheelchair for mobility. We worry about boarding and deboarding, possible wheelchair damage, and backup plans if our chair is damaged. To help us understand what airports and airlines are doing to make travel experiences better for people with disabilities, we welcome Steve Mayers, director, customer experience, and ADA coordinator at the busiest airport in the world, Hartsfield-Jackson Atlanta International Airport. Steve oversees the guest experience, ADA administration, volunteer and nonprofit programs, and team member development. Welcome, Steve.

Steve Mayers:

Hi, Cyndi.

Cyndi Smith:

Steve, in your position at such a huge airport, what are the top concerns you hear from travelers with disabilities?

Steve Mayers:

Of course, we have an external, internal view of feedback that we get from customers because of the services that we provide. Some of the biggest concerns that we have been tracking over the last few years and of course, this has changed through time due to the pandemic and the economy and in regards to labor and all of that, is that we are seeing a lot of complaints about wheelchair assistance taking longer than normal. Of course, that's because some of our partners at Hartsfield-Jackson, our partner airlines are responsible for wheelchair assistance and they have hired contractors to give that assistance. There could be some longer wait times, especially around some of the holidays and our busiest travel periods.

Steve Mayers:

At Hartsfield-Jackson, we track the number of complaints that we get so that we are able to make operational changes and put some pressure on our partners, not only to meet the good faith of the law, but also to ensure that we have higher customer satisfaction and break down barriers for individuals with disabilities. Our goal here is to ensure that we have free access to our facilities and break down those barriers. As of right now, that is one of the biggest things we are going to talk about. Well, we'll possibly talk about other things today, but as of right now, that is the biggest concern that we have at our airport right now.

Cyndi Smith:

The Air Carrier Access Act prohibits discrimination on the basis of disability in air travel. Can you tell us about the provisions of this law?

Steve Mayers:

Absolutely. I'd like to say that if I had to make a recommendation for anyone with a disability, get familiar with any law, get familiar with the Air Carrier Access Act because it's a law that makes it illegal for airlines to discriminate against passengers because of their disability, realizing that the Air Carrier Access Act has to do with the airline and transportation once you get into the airport, all the services they provide. Now, airlines are required to provide passengers with disabilities many types of assistance, including wheelchair or guided assistance to board an aircraft, deplane or connect to another gate, and make arrangements for seat and accommodation assistance to meet the needs of passengers with disability-related needs. There were some changes in the last couple of years in regards to specific service animals and emotional support animals, but that's the basic gist of the law.

Cyndi Smith:

You mentioned the issue with the wheelchairs. If I am a wheelchair user, can I take my own chair on the plane?

Steve Mayers:

I'm assuming that the individual, yes, is using their own assistive device. In this case, airlines are required to provide passengers with disabilities, again, many types of assistance. Taking the wheelchair on the plane, we have to differentiate what that means. That means that you can use your assistance device into the airport, get through security, get to your gate. At that point, the airline will take your wheelchair from you and have it loaded under what we call the belly of the aircraft. So it will be as if it's a piece of luggage. Then they are supposed to provide you with assistance in actually getting you onto the aircraft and make sure that you get strapped in. There are specialized devices that the airlines use for that. So the answer overall is yes. As I said in the law, they're supposed to provide you with assistance with your own equipment and to make sure that they have care for it, but they will stow it as luggage and then retrieve it for you when you land.

Cyndi Smith:

The February 2021 Air Travel Consumer Report contains data on the number of wheelchairs transported and mishandled by airlines during the 2020 calendar year, the second full calendar year for which we have data on airline passengers with disabilities. Can you tell us about this data collection and report?

Steve Mayers:

The Department of Transportation, for those who are listening, if you are looking for any Code of Federal Reference, so you'll hear me say CFR, which is Code of Federal Reference, that's referring to the federal register of laws. There is what we called a requirement under 14 CFR 234 to require airlines classified as reporting carriers. So those who carry more than 1% of the total traffic in the United States are required to report mishandled wheelchair and scooter data in aircraft cargo compartments. This was updated in the FAA Reauthorization Act of 2018. This is due to the fact that there were a lot of complaints around wheelchairs, assistive devices being damaged. So in the reauthorization, there was an update to that rule and the Code of Federal Reference, and now, the airlines have to report that information. If you would like to see what that looks like, of course, you can go to the Department of Transportation's Office of Aviation Consumer Protection because they do the data collection once it's reported and reporting

to assist customers with the information on the quality of services provided by those airlines.

Cyndi Smith:

How have the airlines responded to this survey?

Steve Mayers:

As I said, it's the law, so whether they like it or not, they have to report it, especially when... I'll give an example of one of the great things that the FAA does is if they're doing a ADA Section 504 review with my airport, they will ask me for two, three, four years of complaints that I've received on any ADA issue, claims of discrimination, that kind of stuff. Whether I like it or not, I have to ensure that I am collecting that data or storing it, ensuring that I have that in the storage space, that I can show them what analysis we've done to make sure we resolve some of these issues. Now they're looking at it from a purely legal perspective. I guess that there's no gray area there. It's what you're required to do by law. So the airlines, every month, you can go in and see what the airlines have reported. I've not received one complaint from the airlines to say that they will not send it over, whatever complaints they have from an ADA issue to my office.

Cyndi Smith:

Thank you, Steve. ADA Live! listening audience, if you have questions about this topic or any other ADA Live! topics, you can submit your questions online at www.adalive.org, or call the Southeast ADA Center at 1-404-541-9001. And now, a word from this episode sponsor.

Voice Over:

Hartsfield-Jackson Atlanta International Airport is the busiest and most efficient airport in the world, and by some accounts, the best in North America. ATL is the economic jewel of Georgia generating 34.8 billion economic impact for Metro Atlanta and providing more than 63,000 jobs on site, making it the state's largest employer. Hartsfield-Jackson is a global gateway, offering nonstop service to more than 150 domestic and 70 international

destinations. Hartsfield-Jackson also holds the distinction of being the first airport in the world to serve more than 100 million passengers in a single day. For more information about the Atlanta Hartsfield-Jackson International Airport, visit their website at www.atl.com.

Cyndi Smith:

Welcome back. We are talking with Steve Mayers, director, customer experience, and ADA coordinator at the Hartsfield-Jackson Atlanta International Airport about air travel for passengers with disabilities. We were talking about the February 2021 Air Travel Consumer Report data on wheelchairs transported and mishandled by airlines. As a passenger, what should I do if my wheelchair is damaged or lost?

Steve Mayers:

This is one of my favorite stories I'm going to tell first before I give specific instructions. Cyndi, you were a part of this because you were on the ADA committee with our airport. We had a passenger who recorded his wheelchair being mishandled at our airport, mentioned Delta Air Lines. He has a disability and he has a huge following. He tagged Delta Air Lines and the airport, and the airport reached out to him. So one of my staff members reached out to him. We invited him to our ADA meeting and try to get feedback on how we can solve this issue of damaged wheelchair to make sure that it does not happen again. Just for the audience here, a part of our ADA committee is our partner airline, so we have Delta there and we reported this to Delta. The great story is that Delta actually found a new procedure, a new way to help protect wheelchairs at Hartsfield-Jackson as they're being taken off the airplane or being put on the airplane.

Steve Mayers:

So now, there's a lift where the wheelchair can wheel in rather than two or three employees lifting a wheelchair and putting it on a belt. In the end, it is the responsibility of the airlines, so that if there's any damage both to your luggage as well as your assistive device, they are to fix it for you. Of course, they don't want that kind of claim and so they're doing everything in their power to ensure that your wheelchair is not damaged. So

your best step, first and foremost, is if you're not able to go to the airline website to file a claim, you can do so by calling that airline's contact number and filing a claim with them.

Steve Mayers:

So that's your best bet, but in the end, if it's something that keeps happening over and over again, call your ADA coordinator at the airport. Do something like what that gentleman did to get our attention, because once you get our attention, if you have a great ADA coordinator, they're going to take that personal because we understand that you need it to traverse our airport as well as it being a part of your person to help you as you go through your journey and we want to make sure that it's in a functioning order. Those are your two options.

Cyndi Smith:

Thank you. I know that Hartsfield-Jackson Atlanta International Airport has begun installing adult changing tables in some terminals. Can you tell us about this project?

Steve Mayers:

Yeah. Currently, we have an adult changing table at our international concourse in Concourse F. We had a discussion about adding more changing tables throughout the airport. The challenge that we've had of course is an infrastructure one, because of course, they have to be secured to a wall or supporting wall to ensure that it can bear weight. We are expanding our Concourse D and within that concourse, we are going to be putting in not only... The plan is, at least of what I've told them that we need to have, would be an adult changing room or specifically rooms that can handle most disabilities including an adult changing table. Whether someone needs to have a shower just like what they do in San Francisco and San Francisco's done an excellent job of having bathrooms that are universal that can take care of most disabilities.

Steve Mayers:

If you need to have a shower, because you are taking care of someone or yourself and you had an accident, there are ways to make sure that you can get the service that you

need that are free. Always, we are actively trying to add new features for individuals with disabilities, and this changing room or having changing tables is very, very important to us because we understand that the population is aging and that we need to have more facilities for individuals with disabilities, especially the aging group.

Cyndi Smith:

What accommodations does the airport make if I'm traveling with a service animal?

Steve Mayers:

Right. First and foremost, just want to give some differentiation. The permission for you to fly with your service animals is up to the airline. However, because airports in the United States that receive grant assurances have to provide access to the airport, we permit you to travel through the airport with your service animal. They are private entities within our airport. We hold them to the same high standards of the law. For instance, if you traverse in the airport with a service animal that you ensure, of course, you do have your necessarily documentation on you that you would use for the aircraft, because we have had situations before where someone has claimed to have a service animal and employees have been bitten. The new requirement is, of course, is that on the aircraft, the airlines require you to have some document training, that kind of stuff and you can refer back to the update of what we call the [AC 00:17:12] or the change to the Code of Federal Reference according to the DOJ for service animals.

Steve Mayers:

But coming through our airport, most airports, to be honest, once you had your service animal in the airport, we are going to give you access to get through our airport to get to the aircraft, unless that service animal is troubled in some way. That's the only time that we can to ask you to leave or secure your animal because the service animal cannot be off leash and running all over the airport and barking and stuff like that because there will be a lot of questions on that. But we'll have a conversation with you and tell you what your rights are and then get you to comply and then we'll go from there, but we will provide you access to the aircraft and that's a requirement, so we'll make that happen.

Cyndi Smith:

Great. Recently, the airlines have tightened the rules around emotional support animals. Can you describe these changes?

Steve Mayers:

As I said before, there was a change and the Department of Transportation decided to exclude from the service animal definition all non-task trained animals such as emotional support animals. This approach where it reduces the confusion among airlines, passengers, and airports, and other stakeholders by more closely aligning the definition of what a service animal is under the Air Carrier Access Act. Of course, the service animal or a task-trained animal will have to be trained, as I said earlier, generally provided enhanced training on how to behave in public while an emotional support animal may not have received this degree of training.

Steve Mayers:

Personally, we want to ensure that individuals with disabilities that require service animal, the system is not being abused by those who, I cannot say that they don't have a disability, but we did have instances where someone will say that this is a service animal. We ask the appropriate questions and then they're not answers as to what the requirements are and how those questions can be answered. I'm personally happy that this happened because I think that this law in particular was being abused and we definitely need it for the individuals that actually need it. Again, it cleared up the ambiguity as it relates to emotional support animals, training, and service animals.

Cyndi Smith:

What does the airport do to accommodate passengers with autism and other sensory disabilities?

Steve Mayers:

I mentioned this yesterday. We made an announcement that we are bringing back autism awareness month participating with our airlines and doing tours. That happens in April of every year. We celebrate autism awareness month at our airport. It has been on pause due to COVID, but I'm happy to say that come April of next year, I have put those funds back in the budget for us to do our awareness training, awareness day, the tour of the aircraft. We're going to be partnering again with Autism Speaks, just having the families come back to the airport. We're looking forward to that. So that's one thing that we do. We do have a multisensory room on our international concourse that have been there for a few years now. We are looking to expand that too. I know that some of the airlines have been asking for us to have it on other concourses because, of course, the busiest concourse or busiest area of our airport is from the domestic side rather than international.

Steve Mayers:

We do not want to put too much pressure on those who are traveling with someone who has autism and require multisensory room. Some of the feedback that I've also received, it really is a quiet space for some individuals with autism and their families is between Concourse A and B, which is inside security. But if you're in the airport and you need a quiet space or somewhere calming, we do have an area that is a digital forest that has actually helped to calm some individuals with autism. That's another option for you. I know it's out in the open and not necessarily like a multisensory room, but I have heard that that has actually helped also.

Cyndi Smith:

Steve, as we wrap up, what is next for passengers with disabilities traveling to or through Atlanta Hartsfield-Jackson International Airport.

Steve Mayers:

I say, "Wow" because there's just so much that I personally, in the airport, would like to do for individuals with disabilities, but understanding that there's a lot of construction that's happening across the United States and airports as a part of the infrastructure bill, and so

that is going to cause some headaches for not only individuals with disabilities, but our regular travelers also. As an example, we have shut down the elevators at the baggage claim station in our airport due to the fact that we are removing two elevators and adding four brand new ones. By the end of next year, this should be completed, but when this project is completed, it will be more efficient with more elevators and if you're coming through with a wheelchair with your assistance and you need an elevator, we just have a lot more because we had a capacity issue.

Steve Mayers:

So right now, as of now, you have to stop in Concourse T if you're inside our airport to use the elevators to get out if the vertical transportation is a part of your journey. Second thing is we are rehabbing our parking decks, the closest to the airport. That's where we have most of our accessible parking spots. First, we are going floor by floor. You may see that you may want to go park in our hourly deck. For instance, in the south side of our airport, there, you will have to park on the fourth floor to have access to accessible spots. So just a little bit of a headache there for those who require accessible parking. We are trying to do some very innovative things also to help with on our concourses, making the journey more efficient rather than being assisted by someone.

Steve Mayers:

We are doing a trial in the next couple of months here with Southwest Airlines to use autonomous wheelchairs on the concourses to transport customers between gates. So you land and you have to connect to different flight. If it's on the same concourse, well, we'll call in an autonomous wheelchair for you that will take you to the next gate. So we're trying some automation also. As I said before, it may not be a requirement from department of aviation that I work for to do wheelchair assistance, but because we collect all of this information and we want your feedback, we log it. We see what the feedback that you're giving us, what you think that will improve your journey through our airport. We do an analysis of that on a quarterly basis and we say, "This keeps coming up over and over again. It came up last year. It came up this month," and we are going to try and help

our partners or make recommendations to them for us to help everyone equally, and that's what this is all about. This is all about equal access to our airport.

Steve Mayers:

So we're doing everything in our power. I'm making a pitch for everyone listening that if you're coming through our airport and you have any feedback whatsoever on your journey through here, whether it's in our control or outside of our control, we're one team here, we work with our partners, we want to make sure that you understand that we are here to listen to you and we want to make sure that you get the best education that you can in how to traverse our facilities. Finally, the thing that I'd like to bring up, and this goes back to laws in gray areas, and this is not only at Hartsfield-Jackson, but many airports in the United States where you have what we call a ConRAC, which is a consolidated rental phase. So you have rental cars that are connected by a train system. Buses are easier because if it's on a fixed route, they have to have lifts on it. But if an airport have what we call a ConRAC center, as I said before, the definition of what curbside is becomes an issue for most airports and something that we're looking at.

Steve Mayers:

I bring that up because there's nothing that says that the airline has to push you through to your parking lot or your rental car center. So if you're coming through our airport or you need wheelchair assistance and you're going to the rental car center, please call your airline and request a service from them. If you don't get any resolution from them, please call me and then I'll get the airlines working with them to accommodate you. 100% of the times when that happens, when you call my office because someone had said no because they're not aware, they could be somewhere else in the country and not know that we have a local agreement here that accommodates you, we get it done. Those are the things that's making the journeys better. That's what's happening, feel free to call me. Feel free to reach out. Myself and my staff will take care of you.

Cyndi Smith:

Steve, thank you so much for sharing your time and valuable information about traveling with a disability. Listeners, you can access all ADA Live! episodes with archived audio, accessible transcripts, and resources on our website at adalive.org. Listen to the SoundCloud ADA Live! channel at soundcloud.com/adalive. Download ADA Live! to your mobile device and your podcast app by searching for ADA Live! Have questions about the Americans with Disabilities Act, ADA? Use the online form anytime at adalive.org or contact your regional ADA center at 1-800-949-4232. All calls are free and confidential. ADA Live! is a program of the Southeast ADA Center, the Burton Blatt Institute at Syracuse University, and a collaboration with the Disability-Inclusive Employment Policy Rehabilitation Research and Training Center. Our producer is Celestia Ohrazda with Beth Miller Harrison, Mary Morder, Emily Rueber, Marsha Schwanke, Chase Coleman, and Barry Whaley. Our music is from 4 Wheel City, the Movement 4 Improvement. We also invite you to tune in to our companion podcast, Disability Rights Today, for in-depth discussions on important court cases that shape the Americans with Disabilities Act. Learn more and listen at disabilityrightstoday.org. See you next episode.

4 Wheel City: (rapping)

[End of Transcript]

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