

Travelers' Voices: Intercity Transportation's Capacity to Provide Safe, Dignified Services to All

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Project Overview

As a component of the National Institute on Disability and Rehabilitation Research (NIDRR)-funded RERC on Accessible Inter City Transportation, Oregon Health and Science University's Center on Self-Determination conducted focus groups with to solicit the perspectives of intercity travelers with special needs (i.e. disabilities and/or aging issues) on the capacity of the intercity transportation industry to provide safe and dignified services. Focus group discussions center around 1) travelers' experiences using intercity transportation, 2) travelers' perceptions of provider knowledge and skill, and 3) travelers' views about gaps in services and recommendations for improvements to provider training systems. Findings from this study will be paired with results from its affiliated RERC projects including 1) a qualitative study of intercity transportation providers, 2) two national surveys of travelers with special needs, and 3) biomechanics research around safe dependent transfer techniques. All information will be combined to create a comprehensive, evidence-based training curriculum for intercity transportation personnel and informational materials for passengers with special needs.

All information will be combined to create a comprehensive, evidence-based Passenger Assistance Training curriculum for intercity transportation personnel.

Importance of the Issue

Persons with disabilities spend approximately \$2.9 billion annually on air travel (Open Doors Organization, 2005), and represent a significant and growing share of the population of intercity travelers. Safe and dignified transportation is not simply a means to access other services but a major quality of life issue in itself and a key component of health.

In spite of laws which define the responsibilities of air carriers (Air Carriers Access Act, 1986), complaints by passengers with disabilities about inadequate and/or unsafe services occur frequently. In 2005, the US Department of Transportation received 498 disability-specific complaints against air transportation providers – 5.7% of total complaints (USDOT, 2006). Furthermore, available data allow us to estimate that approximately 5300 injuries per year occur among flight attendants and other transportation personnel (excluding baggage handlers) due to assisting passengers with disabilities (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2004). The combination of these factors necessitates an examination, critique, and effort to improve current industry practices around services to intercity passengers with disabilities.

Findings

Comments from focus group participants fell into four broad areas that reflect passengers with disabilities experiences and perceptions of safe and dignified air travel. In order of frequency of comments, these were:

1) System suggestions 35% of all consumer comments were in this category. Consumers reported that they wanted reservation systems that had standard ways of asking for what they need during travel, and wanted this information to be shared with gate agents and airport contractors.

- 1) Improve communication between gate agents, transporters, reservation agents, etc.
- 2) Mobility equipment should not be checked as baggage unless requested.
- 3) Increase passenger knowledge of airline system and terminology/educate passengers regarding what the providers can and cannot do for them.
- 4) Airline reservation systems should have a standard set of questions regarding assistance needs, and that info should be given to staff at airport, or directly to the passenger to carry with them.
- 5) Ask everyone if they need assistance- as a standard question./People are getting older, build in more assistance and accommodations in general.
- 6) In-plane equipment/design does not fit passenger needs.
- 7) Airport equipment/design does not fit passenger needs.
- 8) Direct service providers are underpaid, so are not motivated to do job well.
- 9) Seat assignments for people who need assistance should be tailored for each plane (e.g. which are best for transfers, etc.)

2) Passenger/consumer experiences and perceptions 30% of all consumer comments were in this category. 2), 3), 6) and 7) occurred most frequently. This indicates that passengers have a significant amount of anxiety about flying, particularly around injury and loss of mobility. This also tells us that passengers report that their experiences lead them to loyalty or avoidance of certain airlines.

- 1) When I am proactive about communicating my needs, I get better service/things work better.
- 2) Anxiety regarding sustaining injury during transfers.
- 3) Anxiety regarding losing mobility due to equipment loss or damage.
- 4) Feeling discriminated against.
- 5) Having to wait longer than other passengers.
- 6) Airline loyalty: I prefer x airline.
- 7) Airline avoidance: I no longer use x airline due to a negative experience.
- 8) Negative experiences with equipment damage/batteries, etc.
- 9) Positive experiences with staff providing good service or solving a problem.

3) Training suggestions 18% of consumer comments were in this category. Passengers recommended that training emphasize knowledge of disabilities and diversity, communication with the customer/good customer service, and transfer safety for the passenger and provider. Passengers also thought it would be helpful for training to be ongoing and on-the-job.

- 1) Some diversity training should be included for service providers at all levels.
- 2) Training should emphasize communication with customer and good customer service.
- 3) Training should be on-going.
- 4) Training should include real-life practice of transfers.
- 5) Training should include information regarding the diversity of disabilities, including hidden disabilities.
- 6) Training should emphasize transfer safety for passenger and provider.

4) Experiences with direct service providers 17% of comments were in this area. All positive experiences with providers were attributed to the provider being comfortable with the physical aspects of doing transfers, and the provider being courteous and comfortable in the interpersonal interaction.

Positive:

- 1) Provider asks what type of assistance I need.
- 2) Provider is friendly/gives good customer service.
- 3) Provider is comfortable with transfers.

Negative:

- 1) Does not ask what customer needs.
- 2) Provider has difficulties in communicating: ESL.
- 3) Provider seems uncomfortable doing the job.
- 4) Provider does not seem to know anything about disabilities.
- 5) My needs got lost in the "shuffle" between gate agents, transporters, etc./no one person takes responsibility.

Methods:

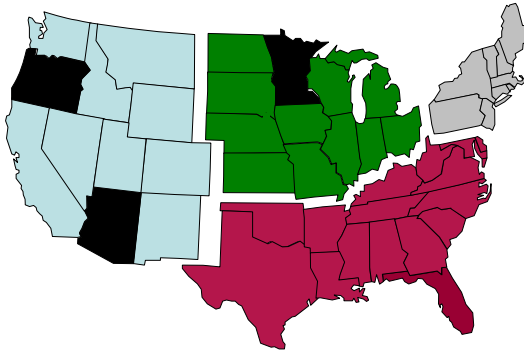
Recruitment Thirty-two air travelers with disabilities, were recruited by networking with disability based organizations, 6 air carriers and subcontracting organizations in Portland (OR), Phoenix, and Minneapolis. Sites were selected in order to provide for the greatest representation of travelers with disabilities.

Participants Participants ranged in age from 24 to 79, with a mean age of 47.4 years. Forty-eight (48%) percent of participants were male, 51% female and 93% identified themselves as "Caucasian, non-Hispanic." The mean age for onset of disability was 14 years old. Twenty-five (25%) reported disability type as Spinal Cord Injury (SCI), 13% as Polio/post polio, 9% Joint and Connective tissue disease, with 24% reporting other physical disability and 28% Low vision/Blind (remaining participants 22% reported other various disabling conditions). Twenty-one (22%) percent of participants were high school graduates, 43% had some college but no degree, 28% were college graduates, and 28% had graduate degrees. Fifty-eight (58%) of the participants reported being employed full or part time. One-hundred (100%) percent of participants reported as having traveled by air 1-3 times. Fifty (50%) of participants reported using a power wheelchair or scooter, 31% using Crutch(es)/cane and 25% using manual wheelchairs.

Procedure Five structured focus groups were conducted between February 2006 and April 2006. Each group was audio-recorded, lasted approximately 2 hours, and had 3 to 10 participants. A "Position Information Questionnaire" was also used and contained questions about participant demographic information, perceptions around experience and perspectives regarding safe and dignified air travel for passengers with disabilities. Participants were paid \$30.00 to participate. Consent to participate and consent to audio-record were obtained prior to each group and all activities were conducted under the approval and supervision of the Institutional Review Board at Oregon Health and Science University.

Analysis Audio recordings were professionally transcribed for analysis and review. A coding system was used to evaluate responses provided by participants during focus groups. This system was created based on a review of a sub-set of focus group transcripts. Two graduate-level research assistants independently reviewed focus group transcripts and independently generated lists of the most frequently occurring topic areas and responses. After this independent generation of potential codes, research assistants met to identify areas of consensus on topics and on codes within each topic area. The most commonly occurring, consensually identified responses were given codes. Once these codes were agreed upon, research assistants met with the principal investigator and project coordinator who conducted the focus groups to confirm the validity of the coded responses and to reach agreement on a final coding system.

Content Coding of focus group transcripts was completed by a graduate research assistant. A subset of the focus group transcript pages (14 pages, 6% of total sample) was also coded by the project coordinator to assess inter-rater reliability. In the current study, inter-rater reliability on the coded responses ranged from .69 to .91. Mean reliability on the coding was .82, which is considered to be within the acceptable range.



Discussion

The focus group study presented here was conducted as part of our effort to develop comprehensive, relevant materials to help airline personnel improve services to passengers with disabilities. Through their comments, focus group participants provided us with insight into the experiences and needs that the airline industry should address to provide dignified services to travelers with disabilities.

- 1) Comments about the system are the MOST common (e.g. make reservation system better, improve communication, etc.)
- 2) Next common were comments about personal experiences. Among these, passengers often said that they were or were not loyal to a specific airline based on a positive or negative experience they had. They also often mentioned being anxious about air travel, particularly around transfers. They often mentioned being concerned about injury for them and for the person doing the transfer.
- 3) Finally, there were about equal numbers of comments re. Training and positive and negative comments about direct providers. Overall, consumers wanted providers to know more about disabilities, be more comfortable communicating, and be more comfortable doing the job. They suggested that training include real people w/ disabilities, and emphasize transfer practice and diversity training.



Resources:

• **Airline Transportation Hotline (US DOT)**
 7 a.m. to 11 p.m. Eastern time, 7 days a week.
 Individuals may call the hotline at **1-800-778-4838 (voice)** or **1-800-455-9880 (TTY)** to obtain assistance.

• **Independent Living Resources**
 503-232-7411 <http://www.ilr.org>

• **Arizona Statewide Independent Living Council**
 (602) 262-2900
<http://www.asailc.org/>

• **Aviation Consumer Protection Division Tips and Publications**
 Excellent resource for practical travel tips, print materials, and guidance to travelers' rights
<http://airconsumer.ost.dot.gov/pubs.htm>

• **Alaska Airlines**
 800-252-7522; 800-682-2221 (TTY)

• **US Airways**
 866-523-5333; 800-245-2966 (TTY)

• **Continental Airlines**
 800-932-2732; 800-343-9195 (TTY);
 800-228-2744 (Oxygen Desk)

• **Northwest Airlines**
 800-225-2525 (special seating requests); 800-328-2298 (TTY)

For more information about the PAT project, additional resources for accessible intercity travel, or free training materials contact the Center on Self-Determination:



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