

A person with long brown hair, seen from behind, is sitting in a wheelchair and looking out a large airport window. Outside the window, several airplanes are visible on the tarmac under a clear blue sky. A purple maple leaf icon is positioned above a curved line that enters a white circular area containing the title.

# Checking in:

Progress and  
Challenges in  
Accessible Air Travel  
in Canada

Commentary by Chief Accessibility  
Officer Stephanie Cadieux, 2025



Office of the Chief Accessibility  
Officer of Canada

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de l'accessibilité du Canada

Canada



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# Introduction

When I took on the role of Chief Accessibility Officer in 2022, one of the biggest tasks was just getting started. Accessibility is a large subject, so I knew I wouldn't be able to tackle everything all at once.

## **The Accessible Canada Act has 7 priority areas...**

- 1** employment,
- 2** the built environment (buildings and public spaces),
- 3** information and communication technologies (ICT),
- 4** communication, other than information and communication technologies,
- 5** the procurement of goods, services and facilities,
- 6** the design and delivery of programs and services, and
- 7** transportation (airlines, as well as rail, road and marine transportation providers that cross provincial or international borders).

I knew that transportation and accessible air travel would be one area of focus, but I couldn't have predicted how personal the issue would become in October 2023, when my wheelchair was left behind on a flight from Toronto to Vancouver. When it happened, I knew that my experience was one of many, and far too common. Numerous similar stories had already appeared in the media, and more followed. It became clear that this was an issue whose time had come: no more excuses, it was time for change.



Since then, I have learned a great deal about accessible air travel, and I am committed to sharing what I've learned, for the benefit of people with disabilities, the air travel sector, and the public as a whole.

I want to acknowledge that my personal experience is as a traveller who uses a wheelchair, and that's where I will place an emphasis, simply because I have more immediate knowledge of the issue. I offer it up as one way to keep important conversations and momentum for change going. When discussing accessible air travel, wheelchair and other mobility devices often get the most media coverage or are mentioned first. But it is critical to recognize that passengers with other disabilities also face significant barriers.

In fact, a 2021 Statistics Canada survey, [Accessibility in Federal Sector Organizations in Canada, 2021](#), found that the highest proportion of passengers with disabilities reporting a transportation barrier were travellers with hearing difficulties (78.4%). The percentages of travellers with other disabilities experiencing barriers were also high, at 74.4% of those with physical disabilities, 71.6% of those with vision loss or blindness, 68% for those with cognitive disabilities, and 69.6% among those with other health problems or long-term conditions.

The statistics and metrics shared here are accurate at the time of writing, but they may have changed by the time this report is published. There continues to be a need for more and better data around accessible air travel, and so I welcome all updates.

In the following pages, I reference the work being done by numerous advocates, some of whom I mention by name. It's important to note that by no means is this an exhaustive list. I wish to offer a heartfelt thank you to all of those sharing their stories, doing the hard work of advocacy, and creating change from within. Ultimately, lasting change will be driven by ongoing, collective efforts.

Finally, while this commentary focuses on air travel, I note that accessibility issues exist across all modes of transportation (marine, rail, bus) and need to be addressed. My annual report this year will focus on accessible transportation in all modes of travel.

**I wish to offer a heartfelt thank you to all of those sharing their stories, doing the hard work of advocacy, and creating change from within. Ultimately, lasting change will be driven by ongoing, collective efforts.**

# Where we begin: recommended priorities

Making air travel accessible is the right and smart thing to do. As every sector looks at where to focus efforts and investments to benefit all Canadians, I urge key parties to prioritize the following:

## Data

More and better data is absolutely key to identifying barriers faster and telling us if we are making real progress in air travel accessibility or not. The Government of Canada should reintroduce for discussion in Parliament its draft proposed law (Bill C-52), which includes more authorities for the government to create regulations that require transportation service providers, including airlines, to collect and provide data related to accessibility complaints they receive.

## Report on progress

Airlines are required to submit annual accessibility progress reports to the Canadian Transportation Agency every June. These reports are made public, which is a step forward in greater transparency. However, the industry needs to report publicly on progress on their commitments to remove barriers and timelines for meeting them fully, especially on improving the training of their employees and frontline workers. These personnel directly impact the experiences of passengers with disabilities and their treatment with dignity and respect. The industry needs to show us all how they are trying to do better and how those efforts are being directly informed by the lived experiences of people with disabilities.

## Public awareness campaigns

Key federal departments, the Canadian Transportation Agency, and airlines all need to undertake information campaigns that clearly define (in plain language) the rights and responsibilities of airlines and passengers. This knowledge is power and is critical to helping improve air travel experiences for persons with disabilities.

## A high stakes issue

When an airline loses someone's luggage, it is inconvenient. When they lose someone's wheelchair, it is catastrophic.

Mobility aids are extensions of the human body and need to be treated with care and respect. Personalized medical devices are not replaceable with a voucher for the local pharmacy or department store. For passengers with disabilities, loss or delay in having their equipment returned means nothing less than complete incapacitation and often significant health risks.

We are people, not machines. Lavatories on planes are completely inaccessible to many people with disabilities (PwDs). If the lavatory was out of service for everyone else, the plane simply wouldn't fly.

Safety briefings and announcements in-flight are made, but if you can't hear, how will you know when important information is being shared without captioning or sign language?

If you are blind, how do you independently find your seat? And once there, can you use the entertainment system? Are the in-flight safety manuals offered in alternate formats? Is there adequate room at your assigned seat to accommodate your service animal?

When it comes to accessible air travel, the issues faced by people who use mobility devices, like wheelchairs, are often the first ones to be discussed. But the inaccessibility of air travel goes far beyond this and affects people who are Deaf, blind, neurodiverse, or have other disabilities.

With each challenge, we must remember we are talking about nothing less than the human dignity of each traveller.

PwDs are used to fitting into a world that wasn't designed to include them. They are used to encountering barriers and they are experts at innovating solutions. They also know the perils of air travel. Some even refuse to travel out of fear of something going incredibly, catastrophically wrong.

For many, that fear is based on previous experiences. But PwDs do travel. In fact, they want to travel more. They travel for medical appointments, family visits, vacations, and work, but systemic issues with the accessibility of air travel persist.

**Time is more than up,  
and the system has to adapt.**

## A turning point

Over the last few years many stories have captured the attention of the public and the media. There have been accounts from Tim Rose, Maayan Ziv, Ryan LaChance, Max Brault, Rodney Hodgins, Sarah Morris-Probert, and so many others, including my own experience of arriving in Vancouver to learn my chair had been left behind. These are just some of the stories of colossal failures by airlines in their treatment of passengers with disabilities. Countless other experiences from people around the world, and ones shared privately with me, have driven me to focus a significant portion of my time on pushing government and industry for change. As more and more of these failures and ordeals made headlines, it was clear, people with disabilities (PwDs) were not going to accept it anymore. The advocacy aligned. The message seemed to finally reach the industry and the lawmakers.

I have had the opportunity to promote the need for changes, work with the industry to help motivate action on the changes, learn about the complexity of the system, and about the commitments and improvements that are being driven from within the industry.

I've learned a lot, and I think it is necessary to share some of that learning with all of you, the community of PwDs, caregivers, the industry, and the lawmakers and regulators. I also want to share it with the public at large, because anyone can develop or acquire a disability at any time.

I believe it's important to be open and transparent about the problems, the complexity, the efforts underway, and the road ahead.

## What do we mean by accessible air travel?

For context, how do we define accessible air travel? In short, we mean people with disabilities (PwDs) can fly wherever a non-disabled person can, access the same services as others, and be treated with the same level of care, compassion and dignity as everyone else, with products and services designed for their needs.

We clearly are not there yet, because in 2025, Statistics Canada released data about PwDs and transportation. Between 2022 and 2025, 52% of Canadians aged 15+ with disabilities or long-term conditions took at least 1 trip involving air, train, bus, or ferry travel. Their experiences were telling. Among those who travelled:

**47%**

encountered a barrier at a station, terminal, or onboard the vehicle, and

**43%**

of those who also had unmet accessibility needs said they didn't know how to request accommodations or services.

In Canada, 27% of the population self-reports a disability of some type. Globally, 1 in 5 people has a disability. That is more than a billion people. And yes, PwDs travel.

MMGY Global's 2024 report "Portraits of Travellers with Disabilities: Mobility and Accessibility" suggests travellers with mobility disabilities spend \$58.2 billion in United States dollars (USD) annually on travel. Imagine how much that might go up if so many PwDs weren't opting out of travel because of bad past experiences and fear of incapacitating barriers?

Accessibility isn't a niche market. It isn't optional. It's a necessity.

This has been a longstanding, systemic issue that has garnered increased political and media attention, particularly over the past 2 years. Several very serious incidents made the news in 2022 and 2023 here in Canada and in the United States as well, which led to calls for action from advocates, including myself, the Honourable Carla Qualtrough, and the Honourable Omar Alghabra (then Ministers of Employment, Workforce Development and Disability Inclusion and Transport, respectively). Their successors, the Honourable Kamal Khara and the Honourable Pablo Rodriguez, as well as the Honourable Anita Anand continued the calls for change.

**Accessibility isn't a niche market.  
It isn't optional. It's a necessity.**

# Regulations and where we are right now

Transportation is one of the pillars of the *Accessible Canada Act* (ACA). Federally regulated organizations, including transportation companies in air, rail, marine vessels, buses and transport trucks, and airports, the Canadian Air Transport Security Authority (CATSA) and the Canada Border Services Agency (CBSA) are subject to the Act.

The Canadian Transportation Agency (CTA) is the regulatory body responsible for air travel in Canada and has additional legislation and regulations that address accessible air transportation: [Accessible Transportation for Persons with Disabilities Regulations](#) (ATPDR) and the [Accessible Transportation Planning and Reporting Regulations](#) (ATPRR) for large air carriers, and the [Air Transportation Regulations](#) (ATR) and [Personnel Training for the Assistance of Persons with Disabilities Regulations](#) (PTR) for small air carriers.

I think it's important to increase collective awareness of accessibility and air travel and how we can do better, because as in many other arenas, accessibility is too often an afterthought or an add-on. As we design for the immediate future, accessibility needs to be built in from the start. The longer we wait, the more barriers we create, which will then need to be adapted. Instead, we must build universally-designed systems and infrastructure that include everyone from the start.

In 2020, Scott Streiner, then chair of the CTA, spoke at the International Air Transport Association (IATA) Global Accessibility Symposium.

“There are 2 core arguments for incorporating accessibility into the recovery process: basic decency and return on investment,” he stated. “Ensuring accessibility is about recognizing the worth and dignity of each person. It is about allowing everyone lives of autonomy and choice. It is about respecting the fundamental right to equal access.”

I agree with him. The law supports it. The business case backs it up. But that was 3 years before my chair was left behind, 4 years before the Air Summit, and 5 years before I wrote this. That was before just over 1,300 more complaints were received by the CTA.

For the purposes of this commentary, I will focus on large air carriers federally regulated in Canada (as defined by the CTA).



## Roles and responsibilities: who does what?

Air travel is complicated, so it helps to know who is responsible for what. Each passenger's journey will intersect with many players, from airports, security, customs and border control, airlines, airline service providers like baggage handlers and terminal staff. This means there are aspects of the journey that are within each partner's direct or indirect control, while other aspects are outside of their control.

If the journey is to an international destination, that adds another layer of complexity, because now the journey is subject to laws and regulations of multiple jurisdictions. Add to that the reality that the needs and preferences of all people with disabilities are not the same, and all of this happens inside very cost-sensitive and time-compressed industry realities.

Because they are all mentioned in this commentary, here is a brief breakdown of some of the major players in the accessible air travel space:

**The Canadian Transportation Agency (CTA):** The CTA is an independent regulator and quasi-judicial tribunal, that administers Part V of the Canada Transportation Act, and shares responsibility for the Accessible Canada Act. It develops, after consultation with the Minister of Transport, and implements regulations on accessible transportation and resolves complaints. The CTA's accessibility regulations apply to federal transportation service providers that carry passengers only. More information about their role is provided later in this commentary.

Each passenger's journey will intersect with many players, from airports, security, customs and border control, airlines, airline service providers like baggage handlers and terminal staff.

**Transport Canada (TC):** TC is the federal department that has overall responsibility for air, land and water transportation in the country. They are responsible for policies and programs to ensure safe, secure, efficient and environmentally responsible transportation, including accessible transportation.

**The International Civil Aviation Organization (ICAO):** The ICAO is responsible for establishing standards and regulations to ensure the safety, efficiency, and regularity of global air transport. In simple terms, ICAO defines the guidelines that govern civil aviation worldwide, coordinating with member states to maintain uniform standards and facilitate international cooperation. Canadian airlines generally adhere to these standards.

**The International Air Transport Association (IATA):** IATA is the trade association for the world's airlines, representing some 350 airlines and over 80% of global air traffic. They support many areas of aviation activity and help formulate industry policy on critical aviation issues, and thus exert influence on industry innovation, as well as the development of standards, policies, and regulations.

This commentary also references the **National Airlines Council of Canada (NACC)**. Though they are not responsible for regulations, the NACC is an association of Canada's largest passenger airlines, including Air Canada, Air Transat, Jazz Aviation and WestJet. All NACC members are federally regulated organizations under the *Accessible Canada Act*. NACC advocates for accessible air travel by promoting positive policy, regulatory, and legislative changes.

In April 2023, NACC members issued a formal Commitment to Passenger Accessibility, which was signed onto by the Chief Executive Officers of NACC's member airlines. Their key commitments are to:

- consult with persons with disabilities,
- improve passenger transfer and mobility aids handling,
- expand on accessibility features in air travel, and
- collaborate with governments and industry stakeholders to address barriers in accessibility throughout passengers' experience.

## It's complicated—but change is overdue

Making air travel accessible is complicated and it will take time to fully resolve challenges and remove barriers. There are many moving parts in the system, with different service providers for different parts of the air travel journey. This can lead to inconsistent experiences by travellers, and most certainly increases the opportunity for oversights and failures.



### **When we think about inaccessibility or areas where improvement is urgently needed, we include things like:**

- the handling of wheelchairs or other mobility aids,
- processes for transferring people with reduced mobility to and from their seats,
- the inaccessibility/availability of accessible onboard lavatories and onboard wheelchairs,
- availability of braille or wayfinding for people who are blind or low vision,
- the accessibility of in-flight announcements,
- the accessibility of entertainment systems,
- services/systems for ensuring people who are Deaf or hard of hearing have access to airport or in-flight announcements,
- emergency procedures,
- adequate space for service animals,
- assistance navigating the airport,
- services for neurodiverse passengers, and more.

**Changes in these areas can and should be happening faster, across the board, and consistently.**

# National Air Accessibility Summit

When the federal government first called on the airlines to do better, the responsible Ministers promised to hold a summit to bring the disability community and the industry together to talk about the issues. That first summit was held in May 2024.

I issued a statement after the summit outlining the commitments made by government and the aviation sector and [I made a number of additional recommendations](#).

The failures in air travel that gained attention in media and led to the summit also resulted in the launch of a Parliamentary Standing Committee on Transport, Infrastructure and Communities study on accessible air transportation in Canada. The [committee's report](#) was presented to the House of Commons on June 20, 2025 and provided 23 recommendations to government, the Canadian Transportation Agency (CTA), airlines, and airports. The recommendations cover many of the topics I will touch on in this piece, and others touched on at the summit. I was pleased to see the committee make recommendations including:

- that government require airlines to report all complaints to the CTA and that a report on that data be made public and that airports should be required to do the same,
- that airlines develop standardized and accessible complaints systems specifically for accessibility-related complaints, and
- that Transport Canada should develop standards for aircraft that would require accessible lavatories and wheelchair spaces on planes.

## What's been done

Indeed, the summit encouraged action. The National Airlines Council of Canada has convened to get to a common medical form that will be accepted by all the major airlines. This will be a step forward to save people with disabilities (PwDs) from having to complete multiple forms and pay doctors' fees multiple times. It is taking longer than expected, but with hope, it will be launched soon.

Individually, airlines and airports are upping their accessibility game. Airports are investing in their infrastructure, adding and improving upon their facilities with changing places, washrooms, sensory rooms, more and better equipment (such as lifts and ramps), artificial intelligence (AI) powered sign language and speech-to-text message systems, digital wayfinding apps like AIRA and GoodMaps, robotic wheelchairs, dog relief areas, mobility device charging stations, and much more. In 2024, the Canadian Airports Council (CAC) in collaboration with Harper Learning and Universal Access Design, developed and launched a new national training program for airport employees to improve accessibility and encourage consistency of experience across the country.

Many airports are installing hearing loops to make it easier for passengers with hearing loss to cut through the busy noise and make it easier to hear important announcements. Airport authorities are also watching closely the next generation of inclusive audio technology like Auracast that has the potential to provide additional ways to make airports easier to navigate for members of the Deaf community or those with hearing loss.



The Canadian Air Transport Security Authority (CATSA) has been re-imagining security screening with focus on access. They added blue-vested facilitators across 16 airports nationwide, to help guide PwDs through the security screening process to ensure passengers receive barrier-free services at security screening checkpoints.

Companies led by PwDs are developing products that can improve the transfer and seating experience for passengers. For example, ableMove, out of the United Kingdom (UK), has an established product and the founder is working closely with a number of airports to improve their policies and the passenger experience for PwDs. AbleFly, a Canadian startup co-founded by Sandra Gualtieri, is developing the AbleFly Comfort Device, which can be customized to a user's individual postural needs, and provide cushioning and pressure-relief, mimicking the characteristics of a user's mobility device so that they feel comfortable, safe, and supported during flights.

Airlines are refocusing efforts on training, testing new and better solutions for safely handling and stowing and tracking mobility devices, improving their websites, providing more and better information to passengers about their accessibility, recognizing the Sunflower lanyard program, and establishing advisory committees of people with lived experience. In 2024, Air Canada heard from Michelle Mahoney that she and other

PwDs needed straws to be able to drink. Today, you can get a straw. Each of these actions is taking effect, moving us closer to consistent, dignified travel.

Canada has been supportive for advancing accessibility, and in December 2024, in Montreal, the International Civil Aviation Organization (ICAO), along with the International Air Transport Association (IATA) and Airports Council International (ACI), held an inaugural Symposium on Accessibility in International Civil Aviation. Since then, ICAO has included accessibility in their Strategic Plan, as an essential aspiration, entitled: “Positioning aviation as a vital part of a connected, accessible, inclusive, and affordable global transport system.”

This is a big step towards global change.

For their part, IATA reaffirmed their commitment to accessibility (and the *United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities*) with a resolution in 2019. They are working with 350 member airlines across 120 countries, encouraging multi-lateral collaboration and global standards. They provide guidance to member airlines and airline service providers to help promote best practices, harmonization, and coordination across the industry.



During this same period (2024) in the United States, the Department of Transportation (DOT) finalized a rule adding significant protections for PwDs, many of which are similar to those provided by the *Accessible Transportation for Persons with Disabilities Regulations* (ATPDR) in Canada, but with a few notable additions, including the presumption of violation when a wheelchair is mishandled, passenger notification when wheelchair is loaded and unloaded from a cargo compartment, and enhanced training for certain airline personnel and contractors that includes hands-on training for those providing physical assistance.

That rule built upon 2 other significant changes to air travel rules in the U.S. In 2022, the DOT established the first *Airline Passengers with Disabilities Bill of Rights* to help educate passengers with disabilities about their rights when they travel, and in 2023, a rule to require single aisle airline lavatories to be accessible to PwDs. This is important, but PwDs need to be aware that this doesn't mean accessible washrooms are going to be a reality on these planes anytime soon.

New single-aisle aircraft with seating capacity of 125 or more delivered on or after October 2, 2026, will be required to have lavatories equipped with grab bars, accessible call buttons and door locks, and other modest improvements. It won't be until after 2035 that new aircraft will be required to have larger fully accessible washrooms. The DOT has also laid the groundwork for a possible future rule that would address passengers staying in their own wheelchair onboard airplanes.

In the United Kingdom (U.K.), advocates have joined forces to drive a campaign for significant change in the sector, which British television presenter, disability advocate, travel writer, and artist Sophie Morgan tagged #RightsOnFlights. Their work led to the production of a documentary titled "Sophie Morgan's Right to Fly." The group also drafted legislation: the *Assisted Air Travel Act*. They have been lobbying the U.K. government to pass it.

Further, an Aviation Accessibility Task and Finish Group was formed to look at air travel issues in the UK, and their report was made public in July 2025. They made recommendations in a number of areas including training, passenger information and communications, non-visible impairments, mobility aid design and handling, and tailored service delivery.

The European Union (E.U.) also has advocates like Jack Kavanaugh and the Aerofix Project actively collaborating with innovators, regulators, and legislators with the goal of enabling an end-to-end journey for wheelchair users without them having to leave their assistive device. With the coming into force of the *European Accessibility Act* in June 2025, companies are required to ensure all digital products and services like apps, websites, and kiosks are accessible. There is a transition period to 2030 for companies to remediate existing products and services. The E.U. also recently updated their guidance on their existing *Passengers with Reduced Mobility* (PRM) regulations regarding accessibility, and legislators are considering additional regulations to fill gaps in liability and compensation for lost or damaged equipment and stronger enforcement powers.



## More on the CTA's role

In Canada, while Transport Canada has the overall policy responsibility for the accessibility of air transportation, the Canadian Transportation Agency (CTA) can make regulations related to accessibility, following consultation with the Minister of Transport.

The CTA has levers they can use to push progress forward, like codes of practice, decisions from the tribunal, and convening for the purposes of research and best practices development. They can also use regulations including the *Accessible Transportation for Persons with Disabilities Regulations* (ATPDR), the *Accessible Transportation Planning and Reporting Regulations* (ATPRR), *Air Transportation Regulations* (ATR), and *Personnel Training for the Assistance of Persons with Disabilities Regulations* (PTR).

In 2018, the CTA led an international working group including representatives from Canadian and United States (U.S) advocacy associations, Canadian and U.S. airlines, Canadian and U.S. airline organizations, Canadian ground support providers, members from the International Civil Aviation Organization (ICAO) and the International Air Transport Association (IATA), the U.S. Department of Transportation, 2 manufacturers of wheeled mobility aids, and a mobility aid rental organization. Most recently, the CTA, Transport Canada and the National Research Council undertook in-depth research and analysis related to the handling and securement of mobility aids for air travel including functional guidelines.

When something goes wrong the CTA also has enforcement powers. Between 2019 and 2024, they issued 31 Notices of Violation totaling \$1,311,250 in administrative monetary penalties to transportation service providers related to their obligations under the Accessible Transportation for Persons

with Disabilities Regulations. The fines for failures are large. Nevertheless, they have not been enough to force the big changes required in the industry.

The CTA's jurisdiction to hear accessible transportation complaints is limited to circumstances where a barrier relates to a passenger or customer's disability and to their access to the federal transportation network (see, for example, [Part V of the Canadian Transportation Act](#), particularly sections 172 and 172.1).

In these cases, the CTA could process complaints about a barrier related to information and communications technology (ICT) features (such as inaccessible websites or apps) or other types of barriers (communication, built environment, services, or other) either under the ATPDR or other CTA-administered accessibility regulations, or any other barriers to an accessible transportation network that are not covered by the accessibility regulations.

Complaints made by employees about barriers in the workplace, including ICT barriers affecting employees, would fall outside the CTA's jurisdiction. Rather, these would be reported to the Accessibility Commissioner. However, the tribunals having the authority to receive and address accessibility complaints have developed a "No Wrong Door," approach which is intended to minimize the burden and confusion for persons who file accessibility complaints. An organization that receives a complaint for which it does not have jurisdiction will refer the complaint to the correct organization.

## Why data matters

One of the most frustrating issues for me as I advocate for improvements is the lack of good, transparent data. The more than 1300 complaints referenced earlier don't tell us what wasn't reported to the CTA, and it doesn't tell us what has improved. We can only measure progress by anecdotal information, by things we observe. We can't look at good cross-industry data on how many people with disabilities (PwDs), requiring which services, travelled, with and without incident, over time, and be able to concretely say that air travel for PwDs is better or not.

At the summit, there was a commitment made. Government had introduced Bill C-52, which would give government the power to create new regulations for the collection and sharing of data, but the bill did not pass and died on the order paper at the close of the last parliament. It will need to be re-introduced and passed. Without it, the CTA does not have the authority to demand that data be collected and reported by the airlines.

I cannot stress enough how crucial this is.

## Culture

While the Canadian Transportation Agency's work is an important piece, and we do need guideposts, regulations don't change culture. The same is true of the *Accessible Canada Act*. Our biggest barrier to change is culture. Treating people with disabilities (PwDs) with dignity is not something that can be regulated by government. It is part of organizational culture, starting at the top. We need senior leadership to get vocal, be visible, and make it clear that providing accessible service is non-negotiable. If people don't want to do the work, it doesn't happen. If society views PwDs as "less than," it becomes acceptable to treat us differently. It is ableism.

When you are the person getting lousy service, or your wheelchair is damaged or lost, it's easy to point to the changes required in the industry. There is a lot that needs work. Certainly, as a person with a disability, and frequent traveller, I know this. I live it. I also know that these issues are pretty universal, because I have spoken with people from all over the world who have had similar experiences.

## Canadian Leadership

What I've also learned, and what you might not know, is that Canada is a pretty good place to be. So, we should also take time to recognize what we have that others do not, the ways in which Canada is a leader.

For travel within Canada, if a person with a disability requires more than 1 passenger seat due to disability-related needs (for example, because they travel with a support person or a service dog, or due to the nature of their disabilities), carriers must provide additional, adjacent passenger seating at no extra cost. This requirement is the only requirement of its type in place today, anywhere in the world.

Canada is the only country to have regulations that require airlines to establish allergy buffer zones when a person with a severe allergy makes a request.

Multiple groups in Canada are doing research into best practices for air travel. The National Research Council's Centre for Air Travel Research (CATR) is the only facility in the world designed to study the full experience of travelling by air. CATR is used to run studies on air travellers' experiences that include the complete air travel journey, such as arriving and checking in at an airport, going through security, going to gates, bathrooms, and public announcement systems.

One project that the National Research Council recently undertook, in collaboration with the Canadian Transportation Agency and Transport Canada, has been to develop a job aid for ramp and baggage handlers on the safe transportation and securing of powered mobility devices. The job aid is a physical card with visual instructions that help baggage handlers quickly recall their training during operations at airports to reduce incidents of damage while loading or unloading a mobility aid in the cargo hold. The job aid also

includes sticker sheets with standardized, easily recognizable symbols that can provide essential information about the mobility aid. The symbols are drawn from the Rehabilitation Engineering and Assistive Technology Society of North America (RESNA) guidelines for air travel configuration cards. They communicate critical information, such as weight, battery type, and designated lifting points. These stickers can be applied by check-in agents in conversation with the mobility aid user at the check-in desk at the airport.

The KITE Research Institute in Toronto is doing research on how mobility devices are damaged in flight so they can develop technical guidelines for airlines to better prevent the damage from occurring. In early September, the Engineering Health team at KITE hosted an Accessible Air Travel Forum bringing together people with disabilities (PwDs), airlines, airports, aircraft manufacturers, researchers, and policymakers to build awareness and co-create solutions for making air travel more accessible. This forum will be repeated.

As I mentioned earlier, Canada has been working with the International Civil Aviation Organization (ICAO) to advance accessibility at ICAO. This has resulted in the first ever ICAO symposium focused on accessibility, and the inclusion of accessibility in their sustainability goals. While it doesn't immediately lead to changes you or I will feel during our travel, this is a big step.

Canada has supported ICAO through the Working Group on Accessibility in Aviation, including assisting with a project to assemble a compendium of best practices from around the world related to accessible air travel and examining common approaches advocating for PwDs across borders. Whether on a voluntary or mandatory basis, common approaches are in everyone's best interest.

We should feel good about that. But until no one's wheelchair is damaged, and until no one's dignity and autonomy are disrespected, we need to keep shining the light on the systemic issues that need resolution.

**... until no one's wheelchair is damaged, and until no one's dignity and autonomy are disrespected, we need to keep shining the light on the systemic issues that need resolution.**

The government has set its priorities and as it launches new investments and initiatives to strengthen Canada's economy, now is the time to ensure we're not reinforcing barriers or creating new ones. With a new Transportation Minister appointed, I look forward to the government advancing accessible air travel and am monitoring when and how they will do so.



## Smaller, but mighty

While this commentary has focused on the large airlines and airports, the reality is that innovation, creativity, and commitment are making things better in other areas too. Some small carriers and small airports are constrained by what they can do with their equipment, or frankly their geography, but they can also adjust more quickly, providing more personalized service. Although these smaller airlines and airports are not subject to the same regulations, they too have customers with disabilities and accessibility challenges they want to overcome. Sometimes all it takes is the will to find a way.

SeAir Seaplanes is one example: they wanted to find a way to give wheelchair users a better experience. They partnered with Aircraft Access Solutions who have developed a portable, mechanical lift system to get passengers with disabilities into their seaplanes. It's a solution that can be adapted for small fixed-wing aircraft and helicopters. While there are limitations on the size and type of wheelchairs that they can accommodate in these small planes, the lift system is a gamechanger for passengers with disabilities.

The will to do better is what matters. Having a culture that embraces accessibility and recognizes that people with disabilities are people first, paying customers who deserve a dignified and safe experience.

# International leadership

Canada isn't alone in the push for better accessibility in air travel. The stars have finally aligned. I've mentioned the International Civil Aviation Organization (ICAO) and the International Air Transport Association (IATA), the work in the United States and the United Kingdom and the European Union, and now, industry conferences around the world have tracks focused on accessibility. Airlines from around the world are seized with efforts to improve services, as are airports.

This is good. For example, at Alicante-Elche Airport (ALC) in Spain, I saw firsthand the incredible accessibility throughout the airport, with over 300 dedicated disability services staff managing service from curb to gate, with highly visible service counters, impressive wayfinding, a dedicated security area, a sensory room, and more.

In Italy, all of the airlines have standardized accessibility policies and information on their websites to make it easier for passengers to find what they need. The Abra Group in Latin America (Avianca and Gol Airlines) has a Chief Accessibility Officer, Michael Swiatek, with a dedicated team and budget.

In Japan, a collaborative study group has formed, bringing together airlines, airports, suppliers, government, universities, and advocacy groups to focus on innovation in accessibility for air travel.

And passengers are noticing the changes. Air New Zealand has been given the title “most accessible airline,” in an article by Sophie Morgan in *Conde Nast Traveller*. That is a testament to the work of Ed Collett, Senior Aircraft Programme Manager and Chair of Air New Zealand Enable Disability Resource Group, whose passion for the work is extremely personal, as the dad of 2 kids with disabilities. Meanwhile, Emirates has become the first in the world to be an “Autism certified airline.”

You could even say we might be starting to see competition to be the best. So there really is momentum. Progress is happening. Is it perfect? No, and it won't be for awhile yet. And to be fair, this is because of the complexity involved.



## Change and unintended consequences

Bringing change into complex systems doesn't come without unexpected challenges. I've mentioned there are a lot of changes underway. People continue to reach out to tell me what they are experiencing, and I myself am experiencing some of the changes when I fly. Changes include facilitators at security, the ability (on some flights) to stow manual or folding wheelchairs in the aircraft cabin overhead bin or closet, efforts to include sign language on Flight Information Display Systems (FIDS), the improved tags for mobility aid tracking, and growing understanding and recognition of the Sunflower lanyard for people with invisible disabilities.

In 2021, the International Air Transport Association (IATA) launched a global Mobility Aids Action Group with the goal of improving the handling of this vital equipment to reduce the risk of damage for passengers with disabilities. The Action Group was comprised of representatives from disability organizations, airlines, ground service providers, airports, regulators, academia and mobility aid manufacturers. Air Canada, the Canadian Transportation Agency, Transport Canada and the National Research Council participated. The resulting guidance reflects the best practice currently available.

Airlines are now following the guidance to prevent damage to wheelchairs. This is good. However, this is a case where positive change created unfortunate consequences for some users of larger mobility aids. The guidance, now adopted as policy by airlines, means that new height and weight restrictions for equipment are in place.



Passengers who have previously flown with their equipment are finding out they may no longer be able to. Hence, I repeat my recommendation that industry work on proactive communications with passengers—as a priority—to inform people with disabilities of the changes they have made that could impact some people's ability to travel. Not every traveller is aware of the size restrictions of the cargo doors on each model of airplane, and not every traveller is going to know to seek out this information on a website before they book.

If you are a user of a large mobility aid and you are reading this, I encourage you to do some checking before you book your next flight.

With progress, there are often bumps in the road, and new issues emerging even as old ones are resolved. That is why accessibility must be permanently embedded into operations and approached with a continuous improvement mindset.



## More on the complexities

In my frustration over the slow pace of progress, in a conversation with William Harkness, Accessibility Engineering Leader at Boeing Commercial Airplanes, I said something to the effect of “Geez Bill, why isn’t this done already? It’s not rocket science.” To which he replied, “Actually Stephanie, it kind of is.” We laughed.

But he also explained the complexity of designing safe securement options for wheelchairs and their users that are also safe for flight, and how all of the variables that might exist (both in terms of mobility devices and humans) have to be factored in.

It’s not an excuse, it’s a reality, and one of the biggest reasons the work ahead must be collaborative. The work ahead must involve all of the players and engage people with disabilities (PwDs) in the design.

So yes, it is a complex space, but also an innovative and exciting one. Complexity cannot be the excuse for not fixing the problems. There are countless efforts underway to improve air travel for PwDs, to build accessibility into the future of air travel. I have had the opportunity to be immersed in this world, through conversations and conferences, and my own flight experiences. I am buoyed by what I am seeing, hearing, and experiencing.

## Promising initiatives

Perhaps the 3 most important things that I observe happening are **acknowledgments**, **conversations**, and **collaborations**.

Acknowledgements that accessibility matters and that the system has fallen short. Conversations that include people with disabilities, and collaborations between airlines, with airports, and service providers. Conversations about how the system can improve. Discussions about how Artificial Intelligence (AI) and new technologies can help. Discussions and collaborations about what an accessible travel journey looks like, and how it will come together.

Accessibility Standards Canada (ASC) has published a technical guide on the accessible travel journey for this exact reason. To provide the travel industry with a guide for what truly barrier-free travel, across all modes, looks like. ASC's travel journey technical guide is a positive step towards helping all organizations in the tourism and travel sectors learn more about why accessibility in travel is important and how to provide accessible services and support.

Manufacturers like Boeing and Airbus are improving lavatory accessibility options so airlines will have choices to meet the United States Department of Transportation deadline. Lots of research is happening that will allow for individuals to stay in their wheelchair onboard airplanes in the future. The most talked about prototype is the Delta Flight Products but it's not the only option being imagined or designed and tested. This is still too many years away for our (PwDs) liking, but it is progress, nonetheless. Michelle Erwin and All Wheels Up in the USA have been advocating for this for years, and we can thank them for much of the progress we are seeing now.

## Remaining questions

There are still lots of unanswered questions—like is service for people with disabilities (PwDs) better when airports control the service from curb to gate? How can airlines balance the needs of passengers with different disabilities, like severe allergies and service animals? How can airlines communicate to passengers what they need to share and why, when and how in a way that doesn't place the burden on PwDs to book travel differently than other passengers? How do airlines respect an individual's privacy and still get the information they need to meet passenger needs without making assumptions? How do manufacturers of wheelchairs and equipment play a role, ensuring mobility devices are designed to enable safe travel by air?

More questions will arise as we learn more and try new things. It's not simple, and it will take conscious intent, effort, and commitment to get it right. Inclusive design is good design. It makes things work better for everyone. There are no one-size-fits-all solutions, but inclusive design aims to find the solutions that will work best for the most possible people. It's the approach required to get to an accessible air travel experience for all.

Looking to the future, there is plenty to do. Part of the challenge for the industry will be prioritizing their efforts effectively. Some changes are easier, like improving training programs and customer service, some are harder and more expensive, like new planes with new options for securing wheelchairs and upgrades to terminal infrastructure.

That said, it is still about choices, and we can celebrate the good decisions that are made. For example, Miami Airport is installing elevators at their gates, the first airport in the USA to do this. And we need to insist that our government and corporations (the industry) make investing in these and other accessibility enhancements a priority.



## Conclusion

In the future, an accessible air travel journey should be a matter of course. It shouldn't be mysterious. It should be the norm.

As I said at the beginning, the issue of accessible air travel really hit the media, or our Canadian consciousness, in 2022 to 2023, but advocacy and thought leadership from so many people has been driving change for much longer. It will continue to be vitally important. There are so many individuals who shared their personal experiences with me, and many others advocating inside the industry who are committed to making things better too. Together we can celebrate the progress and keep pushing the limits.

The more time I spend on this issue the more incredible, dedicated people I meet who are advocating and working for change. I am impressed by and thankful for their continued efforts around the globe.

**“Accessibility isn’t one big thing. It’s a thousand small things done right.”**

**David Dame**



In closing, I'd like to reiterate my recommendations for priority areas of action:

**Data:** More and better data is absolutely key to identifying barriers faster and telling us if we are making real progress or not, so the Government should reintroduce for discussion in Parliament its draft proposed law (Bill C-52) addressing this issue.

**Report on progress:** The air industry needs to report publicly on progress on their commitments to remove barriers and timelines for meeting them fully, especially on improving the training of their employees and frontline workers.

**Public awareness campaigns:** Key federal departments, the Canadian Transportation Agency (CTA), and airlines all need to undertake information campaigns that clearly define (in plain language) the rights and responsibilities of airlines and passengers.

Action on these items will make a difference and help to speed progress.

This commentary is my own contribution to raising public awareness. I expect to see others follow suit. Please join me in keeping this issue top of mind, in the news, a frequent topic of conversation, and something the public will no longer accept.

As another frequent flyer with a disability and friend of mine recently wrote: "Accessibility isn't one big thing. It's a thousand small things done right." Thanks for that, David Dame. I think that sums this up well. Progress over perfection.

We just have to make sure that progress is real and ongoing.



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