

# Assisting Travelers with Special Needs



# Making Travel Inclusive

Travel is more accessible than ever. It is becoming increasingly affordable and there is a wider choice of travel options. The improvement in connectivity creates stronger economies as there are more destinations, aircraft seats, train tickets, hotel rooms, cruise ship cabins and attractions to sell. The travel industry is extending a welcoming invitation to travelers with special needs. Much has already been done to accommodate this important segment of the market. But new technologies and services are generating more service opportunities.

For travel suppliers and partners, this is not just a moral obligation. It is a business necessity. The demand for improved services for travelers with special needs will continue to increase. According to the World Health Organization, **15% of the world's population (1 billion people) is estimated to live with a form of disability.**

In addition, by 2050 the number of persons aged over 60 will account for 20% of the world population, with one-fifth of this group being over 80 years old.

## Making the Correct Arrangements

Worldwide, there are varying legal requirements for serving travelers with special needs. Some markets regulate the need for service delivery, others do not. Regardless, travel professionals and service delivery providers who ignore this market segment are missing out on business opportunities.

It can also be the case that special needs travelers are simply too discouraged to travel. Arrangements can be challenging to make, support may be needed during travel for a variety of reasons, and the whole travel experience can be long, tiresome, and stressful.

Moreover, travel agents may prefer not to serve special needs travelers. Communicating special needs to all suppliers is a serious duty that may involve extra work compared to arranging travel for regular travelers. Travel agents must ask questions about any chronic condition or special need mentioned and own the responsibility for the customer's safety and comfort.

This includes confirming any requested services and advising on best practice should something go wrong.

*"Although the airline environment is safe and comfortable for most passengers, there can be challenges due to restricted cabin space, reduced air pressure, and dry air. Those with limited mobility may have extra requirements. The industry continually strives to make travel seamless. Travelers with a medical condition may require decisions on their fitness to fly, or measures such as a request for supplemental oxygen on board, to minimize the risk of illness in-flight that could result in flight diversions."*

**David Powell,**  
**Airline industry Medical Advisor**

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# Case Study 1



*Henry is 66 years old.* He is overweight and suffers from sleep apnea, which can block breathing during sleep. This necessitates the use of a breathing machine on his flight from Manila to Paris.

*The travel agent* assures Henry that he can travel with his device and adds an appropriate request to the flight reservation. He also asks Henry to carry a letter from a doctor confirming the need for a breathing machine.

*On departure day,* Henry gets through check-in and security without a problem. The gate agent, however, asks for evidence of the airline's approved medical clearance and a doctor's certificate. In particular, the gate agent tells Henry that he should have filled out and submitted a MEDIF-type form to the airline 48 hours or more in advance of his flight departure and secured an official doctor's certificate.

*The end result was a four-day delay in Henry's departure.*

## What should the travel agent have done?

To properly serve this customer, the travel agent should have:

- ✓ researched sleep apnea online to ensure familiarity with the illness
- ✓ asked the customer for the correct machine name, which was a continuous positive airway pressure machine (CPAP)
- ✓ requested confirmation to board the machine with the correct reservation service request code (MEQT)
- ✓ ascertained if there were any other health conditions given the traveler's age and weight. For example, the travel agent could offer to book and sell two adjacent seats on each flight to improve comfort.

# Case Study 2

*Katrina is 17 years old and has Type 1 diabetes.* She relies on diet and insulin injections to control her blood sugar levels. As a graduation gift, her parents organize a family trip to China. They inform the travel agent about their daughter's condition and request special meals for Katrina on all flights.

*The travel agent* in turn advises the airlines of Katrina's need to carry insulin in the cabin and have it refrigerated inflight. A booking is made with a reputable Chinese tour operator who is advised of Katrina's condition in writing.

*Following a long day walking and climbing* along the Great Wall, Katrina's blood glucose level drops. Then the bus ride to Beijing airport to catch a flight to Shanghai is slowed by bad weather. When the tour group arrives, bags are quickly checked in, including one with Katrina's insulin equipment and the tour operator escort leaves the airport. It is late evening now. Katrina's parents frantically ask an airport customer service agent to help retrieve the checked bag with insulin. The agent does not understand as he speaks minimal English. Restaurants at the airport are closed for the night. Fortunately, a doctor is on duty at the airport clinic to give Katrina an insulin injection.

## What should the tour operator have done?

To properly serve this customer, the tour operator should have:

- ✓ ensured language issues were resolved, especially concerning medical conditions
- ✓ planned carefully as the series of events could have been anticipated
- ✓ been aware of suitable hospitals or clinics close to every attraction and drop-off point
- ✓ anticipated that bad weather might necessitate an earlier departure
- ✓ asked tour participants if they needed their bags or their permission to group check bags with the airline
- ✓ provided an alternative form of transportation for critical medications.



# Making Training the Platform for Development

To strengthen their businesses, travel suppliers and agents must be able to deliver the services that make the journey of a special needs traveler safe, comfortable, and efficient. This added value service brings an enormous competitive advantage in a crowded market.

IATA's course, [Assisting Travelers with Special Needs](#), provides a platform for success, delivering the requisite knowledge and skills to plan and book travel. Learners gain important insight

into booking procedures and practical advice on what support services to request or look for, and how to request them, from cruise, rail, lodging, airline and attraction suppliers on behalf of their special needs travelers.

For more information:  
[www.iata.org/training-special-needs](http://www.iata.org/training-special-needs)



# Making the Special Needs Traveler Feel Welcome

All travel products must be accessible to travelers with special needs, with support available at every step in the journey. This will properly serve the market and create new niche business opportunities for the travel industry and destinations alike.

To achieve this goal, the correct training and communication are critical. Accessibility information must be reliable, up-to-date, and available across a range of channels. Standardizing this information would avoid unnecessary complications too; for example, there are many different definitions of accessibility. Developing and implementing global standards in terminology will therefore be an important step forward.

Not only airlines but also other travel industry segments such as airports, retail and wholesale travel sellers, hospitality, and

rail companies are working hard to make the traveler with special needs feel welcome.

The key to progress is instilling a positive mindset through training that develops new knowledge, skills, technologies, and services.

Dealing with travelers with special needs is not something to be done once other passengers are serviced. The industry must continue to promote and implement accessibility features in products and services from the outset.

# Did You Know?



## North American travelers with disabilities

In 2015, North American travelers with disabilities spent **\$17.3 billion** on travel, according to The Open Doors Organization (ODO), compared with **\$13.6 billion** in 2002. Because, disabled travelers often travel with another adult, the economic impact is actually double.

SPENT ON TRAVEL

**\$17.3 billion**  
in 2015

SPENT ON TRAVEL

**\$13.6 billion**  
in 2002



## Adults with disabilities who have traveled by air

An ODO 2015 United States study also showed that among adults with disabilities who have traveled by air, **72%** said they encountered major obstacles with airlines and **65%** with airports, down from 84% and 82% in 2005, respectively.

MAJOR OBSTACLES WITH AIRLINES

**84%**  
in 2005

**72%**  
in 2015

MAJOR OBSTACLES WITH AIRPORTS

**82%**  
in 2005

**65%**  
in 2015



## Australian tourists with disabilities

It is estimated that **14%** of Australian tourists have disabilities.

AUSTRALIAN TOURISTS WITH DISABILITIES

**14%**  
in 2017



## Domestic Travelers

A 2009 United Kingdom study found that some **12%** of all persons who traveled domestically had a disability or long-term health problems. These tourists stayed longer and spent more than the average.

TRAVELERS WITH A DISABILITY OR LONG-TERM HEALTH PROBLEMS

**12%**  
in 2009



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