

**60<sup>th</sup> CONFERENCE OF  
DIRECTORS GENERAL OF CIVIL AVIATION  
ASIA AND PACIFIC REGIONS**

*Sendai, Japan  
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**AGENDA ITEM 5: AVIATION SECURITY AND  
FACILITATION**

**IMPROVING ACCESSIBILITY IN AVIATION**

(Presented by the Association of Asia Pacific Airlines (AAPA) and  
International Air Transport Association (IATA))

**SUMMARY**

Airlines and airports are facing substantial operational challenges due to a rising demand for wheelchairs by air passengers, including able-bodied passengers for non-medical reasons. The growing demand for wheelchairs often exceed their availability at airports, resulting in longer wait times for passengers. In some jurisdictions, regulations disallow air carriers from enquiring or requesting documentation from passengers to support the need for wheelchairs. This paper recommends a review of existing requirements to reconcile this anomaly between civil aviation requirements and accessibility, to ensure that passengers who genuinely need wheelchair services get served, without compromising safety and operational efficiency.

## IMPROVING ACCESSIBILITY IN AVIATION

### 1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 Air transport regulations establish requirements and procedures for the carriage of ambulatory and non-ambulatory passengers, and for the timely and safe evacuation of passengers from aircraft in the event of emergencies. Relevant airline personnel are trained in accordance with these requirements and procedures to ensure safe handling during an emergency or evacuation.

1.2 Annex 9 to the Chicago Convention embodies ICAO Standards and Recommended Practices (SARPs) and guidance material pertaining to the facilitation of aircraft, passengers and cargo. Amongst others, it provides recommendations on the facilitation of transport of persons with disabilities, stating that “*Assistance should be provided in a manner that respects the dignity of the individual*”.

1.3 Airlines and airports are committed to the safe and dignified facilitation and carriage of passengers with disabilities. Today, airlines and airports provide assistance to persons with reduced mobility (PRM) to ensure that they have access to air transportation customarily available to the general public. This includes the provision of wheelchairs with the requisite advance notice.

1.4 There is an increasing number of passengers requesting wheelchairs in international air travel. However, it has become clear that some passengers are requesting wheelchairs even though they do not suffer from reduced mobility or any physical condition that requires a wheelchair for mobility at airports.

### 2. DISCUSSION

2.1 Airlines and airports have to balance the needs of safety, human dignity, accessibility and operational integrity, in the provision of wheelchairs to passengers. There is currently an anomaly between prevailing government regulations and accessibility, with implications for aviation safety, where wheelchair facilities are concerned.

2.2 Air carriers generally have service contracts with ground handling providers or airport operators for the provision of wheelchairs. However, airport operators or ground handlers have limited numbers of available wheelchairs. In addition, airlines and airports are not able to prioritise the provision of wheelchairs to passengers with a medical or physical limitation, usually due to regulatory reasons. It is not uncommon to see 80 or more wheelchair requests on some flights, particularly on trans-continental routes such as India-USA, Vietnam-Europe and UK-Australia.

2.3 As the demand for wheelchairs grows, passengers with disabilities or those with reduced mobility, with a real need for wheelchairs, are not getting access to the wheelchair services, in particular when the airport operator or groundhandler has limited wheelchair resources. This has resulted in situations where such passengers are left waiting on board aircraft for long periods of time on arrival, due to the lack of wheelchairs.

2.4 With the rising numbers of wheelchair requests, it could be envisaged that in an emergency situation, there may be additional challenges with respect to the swift evacuation and safe handling of passengers. Unless there are some common criteria on the provision of wheelchairs, airlines and airports may not be able to mitigate the operational risks in an emergency evacuation.

2.5 Many State regulations require airports rather than airlines to provide wheelchairs, although it is the airlines that receive and administer wheelchair requests from passengers. In some airports, Meet-and-Assist services are offered as a paid service provided by a monopoly concessionaire making a wheelchair request a convenient and affordable option for passengers.

### **3 RECOMMENDATIONS FOR REGULATORS**

3.1 In order to address the anomaly between passenger facilitation processes, accessibility and existing safety requirements, it may be timely to convene a thorough exploration of the issues to ensure a clear way forward that does not put safe and efficient operations at risk. Over-prescriptive regulations may inadvertently disadvantage those who genuinely need a wheelchair for medical or physical reasons to get around an airport.

3.2 States may wish to consider allowing airlines and airports to administer some criteria to determine the reasons why passengers are requesting wheelchairs, in order to make informed decisions on the allocation of a limited resource, whilst fully complying with the principles of non-discrimination. This could include requesting for documentation issued by a licensed medical practitioner. It would help airlines to ensure that genuine wheelchair requests are prioritised and airports can ensure that there are enough wheelchairs for those who really need them.

3.3 Airlines and airport operators should also be consulted before regulations are implemented so as to ensure the practicality and satisfactory delivery of the wheelchair service.

### **4 ACTION BY THE CONFERENCE**

4.1 The Conference is invited to:

- a) recommend to States to review existing facilitation frameworks related to the provision of wheelchairs for persons with disabilities or reduced mobility, with a view to balancing the need for accessibility in air transportation, with due regard to safety, operational requirements and human dignity;
- b) recommend to States to explore possible solutions and provide recommendations for airlines and airports on the provision of wheelchair services, so that wheelchairs are available to passengers with disabilities or reduced mobility in a timely and efficient manner where possible; and
- c) encourage States to work with airlines and airport operators to put in place measures to address possible abuses of wheelchair requests by able-bodied passengers.

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