

Airport Best Practices in Meeting the Needs of Travelers with Disabilities

Presentation abstract

The growing interest on accessible travel and hospitality among travel and tourism scholars and professionals is partially due to the increased awareness of aging and its associated disabilities (Michopoulou & Buhalis, 2013). The 2010 U.S Census Bureau reports that about one in five Americans have a disability, and “the probability of having a severe disability is only one in 20 for those 15 to 24 while it is one in four for those 65 to 69” (United States Census Bureau, 2012). Aging is indeed likely to be the cause of reduced levels of physical and cognitive functions, an issue which is presented as particularly acute, as Centers for Disease Control and Prevention predicts the number of Americans with disabilities is projected to increase substantially over the next two decade, and disability will affect the lives of most Americans and their families as the baby boomers grow older (National Research Council, 2007).

The prevalence of travel in modern society is evident in the over 2 billion long-distance trips (overnight trips or 50+ miles of one-way travel) taken by U.S. residents each year (United States Travel Association, 2016). The ability to travel plays an important role in many Americans’ daily lives, and the reduced ability to travel due to aging and disabilities will negatively impact their everyday activities, including work, independent living, community involvement, recreation, and subsequently, an individual’s well-being across the lifespan. In this sense, passenger access and mobility to transportation is not a concern of a limited few, but rather the way of future travel.

While travelers with different abilities have encountered various challenges during air travel, the increasing demand for air travel, coupled with aging population, will continue to put pressure on airports’ capacity to provide quality travel experience for passengers. To keep a competitive advantage, airport authorities have started to adopt some innovative strategies and practices to provide a better travel experience for passengers, including people with physical, mental or sensory impairments.

In this presentation, we will review some of the best airport practices worldwide in addressing the needs of travelers using wheelchairs, travelers who are hard of hearing or with low vision, travelers with autism, dementia or Alzheimer’s. Examples of these practices include airports providing quiet / sensory rooms for over stimulated kids with autism, training programs to help airport staff understand how to serve people with Alzheimer’s, technology applications to track wheelchair requests, and video relay service for people with hearing impairment.

Potential innovative solutions to address passengers’ needs at airports will also be reviewed. For example, a two-way communicator with sign language detection and voice recognition function was piloted to help airport staff assist people with hearing and speech impairment. An indoor navigation system for people with visual impairment has been tested in airports. Although only a few innovative technology or programs have been applied at airports, many assistive technologies and applications on the horizon can potentially be adopted by airports to better serve people with disabilities.

References:

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United States Travel Association (2017). U.S. Travel Answer Sheet. Available at https://www.ustravel.org/system/files/media_root/document/Research_Fact-Sheet_US-Travel-Answer-Sheet.pdf

Lead speaker : Shu Cole

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Biography : Shu Cole is an Associate Professor at Indiana University School of Public Health–Bloomington. Current research projects include 1) understanding travel barriers experienced by people with SCI; 2) identifying innovative solutions to improve accessibility at airports; and 3) developing an innovative system for hotels to provide accessibility information. Shu has published widely in refereed journals and presented at numerous national and international conferences. She has co-authored book chapters on inclusive travel and tourism, and currently serves on the editorial board of several peer-reviewed journals. She is serving on the ASCIP’s Research Committee and is co-chair of National Recreation and Parks Association’s Research Sessions.

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