

Facilitating travel for those with invisible disabilities

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Negotiating the numerous processes involved in air transport can be a stressful experience for even the most hardened of travelers.



It is especially difficult for those with disabilities, including invisible disorders that can limit or challenge a person's movement, such as deafness or autism.

Unfortunately, the very fact that these symptoms are invisible can lead to misunderstandings, false perceptions, and judgments.

All aviation stakeholders are becoming more adept at assisting passengers with unique requirements. British Airways, for example, is testing a new video service that uses British Sign Language (BSL). Customers can contact the airline through SignLive's Community Directory and get information relating to all aspects of their journey.

"Before the pandemic, almost half a million customers who required additional assistance flew with British Airways each year and we're focused on supporting customers with both invisible and visible disabilities to make their journey easier and stress free," says British Airways Head of Sustainability, Carrie Harris.

"In 2019, we invested in a new specialist accessibility team and as part of our broader focus on sustainability, diversity, and inclusion. We are proud to be working with SignLive to make it as easy as possible for our customers using British Sign Language to receive the support they need. We hope to roll this technology out permanently as part of our unique British Airways' service."

Those passengers that need additional help will also benefit from three new initiatives at Singapore's Changi Airport Group (CAG). An airport guide, specialised training for staff, and lanyards for identification purposes all feature in an improved facilitation offering.

"Navigating unfamiliar places and procedures while catching a flight can be stressful, especially for passengers whose disabilities may not be immediately apparent," says Damon Wong, Vice President of Passenger Experience, Ground Operations and Customer Service at CAG. "The initiatives aim to improve the overall travel experience for passengers with invisible disabilities and we hope it makes the airport a more comfortable and accessible place for them."

Sunflower lanyard

The sunflower lanyard, which symbolizes a hidden disability, is quickly gaining traction. It is entirely optional, and users can share as little or as much personal information as they want. The aim is purely to give wearers the confidence to ask for help without being judged.

Seattle-Tacoma International Airport was the first to recognize it in the United States. Tampa, Charlotte Douglas, and Memphis International Airports are among the many other US airports that have followed suit.

London Heathrow was an early adopter of the lanyard and continues to improve its offering for passengers with hidden disabilities. It offers an Assistance Service in every terminal to help people with both visible and non-visible conditions. It has also dropped the People with Reduced Mobility (PRM) tag as that had become too closely associated with wheelchair users and discouraged those with other impairments to request support.

Sara Marchant, Service Manager for the Heathrow Passengers Requiring Support Service, says the airport now uses Passengers Requiring Support (PRS). "We think this is a much more inclusive and realistic description," she says. "It raises our bar from concentrating on the 2.7% of our passengers who have mobility issues to include the 39% of passengers who tell us they have some form of support requirement when traveling through the airport."

Meanwhile, Virgin Atlantic created a symbol that can be downloaded on mobile apps and discreetly lets staff know when people need more help or, for whatever reason, they're struggling or feeling overwhelmed.

Geraldine Lundy, the airline's Passenger Accessibility Manager, has also introduced special onboard seats for disabled children and entertainment systems for blind customers.

"We're committed to giving all customers easier access to travel," she says. "The Hidden Disabilities scheme is one of a series of initiatives that Virgin Atlantic is planning on introducing over the coming years, to help those with disabilities overcome any key challenges they may face."

Universal design

The IATA *Airport Development Reference Manual* (ADRM) recommends airports to adopt universal design principles and processes. This means products, services, and facilities—as well as physical and digital communication and information—can be accessed, understood, and used to the greatest practicable extent by all travelers, including those with invisible disabilities.

Multi-Sensory Stimulation Environments (MSSEs) and quiet areas, for example, will support those with sensory and cognitive impairments or mental health conditions in de-escalating or managing the effects of busy airports.

“At IATA, we’re deeply committed to facilitating the freedom to travel for all customers,” says Linda Ristagno, IATA’s Head of Accessibility. “Regardless of the type of disability a passenger has, and the way in which that impairment presents itself within an aviation or aircraft environment, they should be able to expect and experience an equitable level of support and service relative to other customers.

“For our airlines, accessibility encompasses all divisions and is supported by long-term strategic approaches while airport universal design principles should aim to respond flexibly to the needs of individuals,” she adds. “A quiet area or relaxation space is another way of providing support to people with profound, multiple, or long-term conditions as well as those with anxiety, depression, or related conditions.”

Credit | Neil Juggins / Hidden Disability Sunflower