

# Air Travel with a Disability: Increasing Participation in Meaningful Occupations

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## BACKGROUND

- Air travel provides individuals with a means of exploring the world for enjoyment, business, and visiting others<sup>5</sup>
- 25.5 million Americans ages 5+ have self-reported travel-limiting disabilities<sup>2</sup>
- 48 airlines reported wheelchair assistance needs grew 30% between 2016 and 2017<sup>4</sup>
- Some individuals lack knowledge of services that are available to assist them throughout the air travel experience<sup>6</sup>.
- The Air Carrier Access Act of 1986 prohibits discrimination against passengers with disabilities during air travel<sup>1</sup>
- Airlines are required to provide passengers with disabilities assistance throughout the entire air travel experience<sup>6</sup>
- The physical environment and services provided play a crucial role in barrier-free travel<sup>3</sup>
- Training is essential to ensure that staff are educated on their legal responsibilities and meeting the needs of passengers with disabilities<sup>3</sup>
- Despite efforts to improve accessibility during air travel for individuals with disabilities, there is still very little research available to support the need for change<sup>3</sup>
- There are still limitations and uncertainties around air travel for individuals with disabilities that need to be addressed

## PROJECT FOCUS

Establish an occupational therapist’s role in identifying needs and providing resources to promote equity during air travel.

Expand on a current air travel program to further assist individuals with various disabilities or medical conditions.



## PROGRAM DETAILS

### Navigating MSP

- A current monthly program at Minneapolis-St. Paul International Airport (MSP) that provides a practice air travel experience for individuals with disabilities
- Originally established for individuals with Autism
- Participants are paired with a volunteer who assist them with navigating the airport and provide resources
- Participants experience TSA security, explore the terminal, board a plane, prepare for takeoff, and gather helpful travel tips

### Program Growth

- The goal of this program was to expand the participant population and provide educational materials that are inclusive to individuals with a variety of disabilities
- Established training curriculum for volunteers to better assist participants
- Brought greater awareness to the Air Carrier Access Act and other laws protecting individuals with disabilities from discrimination during air travel

## METHODS

- Collaborated with leaders of Metropolitan Airports Commission (MAC) and Travelers with Disabilities Advisory Committee (TDAC) to improve accessibility within MSP Airport
- Created and administered a 10-question survey on accessibility during air travel to 29 individuals who utilize a wheelchair
- Created and administered a 10-question survey to 193 Navigating MSP participants (2017—current) to assess satisfaction and areas for improvement within the program
- Attended 3 Navigating MSP events and provided feedback to the program director from an occupational therapy perspective
- Researched and identified laws, policies, and resources in place to improve accessibility for individuals with disabilities during air travel
- Collaborated with wheelchair seating and positioning specialists to gain further knowledge of wheeled mobility, equipment, and promoting participation in meaningful occupations from a wheelchair level

## RESULTS

### Survey Responses

- Identified needs to improve accessibility during air travel
- Developed beneficial resources and handouts for Navigating MSP to address a variety of individuals needs
- Made positive adjustments to Navigating MSP program to better assist participants
- Shared results with MAC and TDAC members to advocate for improvements in accessibility during air travel

### Handouts

- Developed materials on resources available, travel tips, navigating an airport, policies and procedures, preparing a wheelchair for travel and proper handling, and traveling with a service animal

### Training

- Designed and delivered training curriculum for Navigating MSP volunteers
- Educated volunteers on a variety of diagnoses, etiquette and language, safe equipment handling, participant advocacy, and ways to better assist participants in overcoming barriers they may face during air travel

### Clinic Partnership

- Presented on air travel with a wheelchair
- Provided information on Navigating MSP and resources available during air travel
- Created various informational resources to assist occupational therapists in preparing patients for air travel



## BOTTOM LINE FOR OT

- Very little research has been done in the U.S. on air travel with a disability. Further research is warranted to provide awareness of barriers to airlines and improve the overall travel experience for individuals with disabilities.
- Occupational therapists can assist clients with planning their trip, addressing and overcoming barriers, engaging in preparatory methods, providing education on resources available, and making environmental adaptations to promote participation and independence in a meaningful occupation.
- Occupational therapists can play a crucial role by providing valuable input to U.S. airlines designing air travel programs for individuals with disabilities
- An occupational therapist’s therapeutic use of self is beneficial when advocating for individuals needs and educating airlines on ways to promote a barrier-free travel environment.



## REFERENCES

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