

Advice on the carriage of disabled passengers and PRMs

Background

One of the consequences of an aging population is the number of people with some degree of disability or reduced mobility (Passengers with Reduced Mobility – PRM) choosing to travel by air, is increasing. In some States there is a clearly defined legal requirement - the US for example has the Americans with Disabilities Act. Likewise, in some airlines there are clearly defined procedures which define the parameters for the carriage of PRMs while at others the decision is passed to the Pilot in Command.

It is also apparent that there have been cases where there has been inconsistency - PRMs accepted for one leg of a trip but rejected for a subsequent leg with the same airline - clearly a scenario which could lead to needless distress.

The purpose of this Briefing Leaflet, which is based on ECAC Doc 30 and its Appendices, is to help flight crews understand the implications of different types of disability and the consequent levels of assistance that may be required by PRMs.

Definitions

It must be understood that the terms “disabled person” or “PRM” are often used in a general sense. The problem is that this description fails to take into account the very different needs that people have when they are travelling by air. ICAO Annex 9 defines a person with disabilities as “any person whose mobility is reduced due to physical incapacity (sensory or locomotor), an intellectual deficiency, age, illness or any other cause of disability when using transport and whose situation needs special attention and the adaptation to the person’s needs of the services made available to all passengers.”

This definition encompasses a wide range of people within its parameters including senior citizens and people who have sustained injuries as well as those who fit the more generally accepted description of disabled. Accordingly it is a good idea to consider the three broad categories of PRMs and how they might change passenger needs.

Those with some kind of physical disability (which may range from total dependence on a wheelchair to a slight walking difficulty). This category would include the IATA codes “WCHR”, “WCHS”, and “WCHC”. The WCHC category includes a wide range of disabled passengers, from those whose disability affects only the lower limbs and who require assistance to embark, disembark and to move inside the aircraft, up to those who are completely immobile and require assistance at all times.

Those with a sensory impairment (which may range from profound deafness or total blindness to some degree of vision loss or hearing loss); this category would include IATA codes “Blind”, “Deaf” and “Deaf/Blind”.

Those with a cognitive impairment, learning disability or mental health problem that can range across a wide spectrum from total independence to high dependency on others. These would be encompassed by the IATA code “DPNA”.

The extent to which people in any one of these three categories will need special assistance will also vary considerably according to the individual’s particular needs as well as the aircraft type, configuration and passenger load but nonetheless it’s possible to suggest some general principles.

Where possible, PRMs and other passengers who need assistance – for example to fasten/unfasten a seat belt or grab an oxygen mask - should be allowed to choose seating which minimises inconvenience to them and maximises the scope for cabin crew assistance.



As social demographics have changed so the power of the grey dollar has meant that more people are choosing to travel in their retirement years leading to a commensurate increase in PRMs



What is a PRM? The phenomenal upper body strength of Paralympic silver medalist oarsman John Maclean makes him a very different proposition to the ladies pictured on page 1.

- Passengers with a physical disability - where possible it is generally easier to allow a WCHC passenger to use an aisle seat provided that this does not impede other passengers from leaving their seats, nor impede the crew in their safety duties, obstruct access to emergency equipment or impede the emergency evacuation of the aircraft. Where the passenger cannot be allocated an aisle seat or does not wish to occupy one, they should nonetheless be allocated to a row with movable armrests to facilitate transfer.
- Sensory impairment - people who are blind or partially sighted and those who are deaf or hard of hearing will need help where regulation in some parts of the world require airlines to provide access to safety instructions and demonstrations. Guidance is available on these, and other issues of appropriate assistance, and can be found in a number of sources (for example ECAC Doc 30). Where possible an aisle seat may be the most convenient both for ease of movement and for communication with the cabin crew.
- Cognitive impairment, learning disability or mental health problems - anyone with a profound learning disability is highly unlikely to be travelling alone. Those with less severe learning disability may need help to understand safety instructions. People with some forms of mental health problems may need some additional reassurance from cabin crew. Where possible an aisle seat may be the most convenient both for ease of movement and for communication with the cabin crew.
- In any case, PRMs should not be allocated seating that impedes the crew in their duties, obstructs access to emergency equipment or impedes an emergency evacuation of the aircraft. They should never be allocated seats in the exit row.
- In circumstances in which the number of PRMs forms a significant proportion of the total number of passengers carried on board, the number of PRMs should not exceed the number of able-bodied persons capable of assisting with an emergency evacuation.

There is a growing emphasis in all walks of life to recognize the rights of disabled people and PRMs. There are issues of responsibility, which all parties must accept. For example if an individual disabled passenger or a group of PRMs travelling together fail to notify the airline in advance of their needs there is a greater risk that the airline will not be able to accommodate them. Equally, while the commander's decision on the carriage of any passenger (including PRMs) is final, any refusal of carriage of a PRM should be made only on the basis of a full understanding of the person's ability and level of autonomy. It should never be based on possibly flawed assumptions about disability. For example, a person who has no use of their legs and therefore needs wheelchair assistance to reach a seat and to leave it there may present safety issues for the evacuation of the aircraft in an emergency, while somebody who is deaf or blind may present no greater risk than any other passenger under the same circumstances. Conversely, it is possible that some forms of impairment may mean that person is actually better able to deal with the conditions after an accident than an able-bodied person.