

I am legally blind and always travel with a registered guide dog. As a religious professional and academic I travel frequently by air (100,000 miles in the past couple of years within Canada and the USA). I also have occasion to travel on the BC Ferry system, as well as Greyhound inter-city coaches, and (rarely) on VIA Rail.

Air travel is my primary concern in this submission. Here are my observations about some of the issues which challenge my travel experiences, and sometimes appear to border on being outright discriminatory to me as a person with a disability.

1) Because of my work, I often use "points" with various 3rd party agents (like Airmiles, Aeroplan, RBC Rewards) to book my flight tickets, and sometimes web-based agents like Travelocity, Cheapflights.com etc. in an effort to have affordable fares. When one does not book directly through the airline, it often becomes a long, laborious, and stressful effort to ensure that I will have the CTA mandated 2nd seat to give adequate space for my guide dog and myself on the plane. Third parties will either refuse outright to make the notation about my guide dog on the booking, or refer me to the airline's medical desk. I often spend more time on the phone going back and forth over a booking to confirm my service dog's space than in the air! Both Air Canada and Westjet have no clear or consistent process for this. Their actions penalise travellers who do not pay full airline fares and choose 3rd party booking instead.

2) Further more, the medical desk and/or airline reservation clerks at Air Canada and to some extent, also Westjet, consistently ask for the same innumerable details about my guide dog, including her registration number, training centre, age, breed, height, length, width etc. It seems to me that identification could be requested at check in, rather than subject customers to this excessive interrogation. They don't seem to understand that guide dogs for the blind are not lap dogs which can be stowed beneath a seat. There is no getting around the fact that these dogs are of a minimally large size and need the space of the second seat in order to be safe and comfortable (ditto for me, the handler).

3) I always travel alone, and would therefore much appreciate some sort of consistent "meet and assist" service to ensure that I can have sighted guide to get from arrival at the airport to the check in counter (no one does this), then to security, and the gate for all legs of the journey. This service seems to be radically inconsistent, depending on the airport and airline. Sometimes there are long waits for staff to appear once the plane has landed...this is not humane after a long flight when my guide dog is bursting to get outside to relieve herself. Given the lengthy pre-flight arrival times at airports mandated by the airline, especially for someone with a particular request (i.e. person with a disability and service dog), it can make for very long days of travel. If anything, people travelling with service dogs should have shorter pre-check in times.

4) Overbooking seems to be rampant, especially with Air Canada. More than once, I have been asked to give up the second seat allowing space for my guide dog, because the flight was over-booked and they want to squeeze someone on and stick them in the seat next to me. Sometimes they convince someone to get off the flight to open a seat (giving away a travel coupon). But sometimes there is absolutely nothing to do when the flight attendant digs in and suggests to me that the plane can't leave until I cede the seat. Not only are other passengers (who do not understand the 2 seat 1 fare policy) annoyed with me, but I and my dog (and the poor shmuck passenger who got stuck in the extra seat) all have an uncomfortable flight. The hour or more I had spent doing due diligence on the phone with the airline to advise them I travel with a service dog ends up being for nought, and I am left wondering if the policy has teeth or is a sham.

5) Frequent travelers who fly with guide dogs share a concern; the location of service dog relief areas in some airports is often too far from the departure area of the airport, and thus there is no time to consider bringing the dog out between flights, especially with the need to go through security again

when re-entering (or are simply nasty like in Toronto, located next to the smoking area where we get to suck up carcinogenic exhaust while relieving our guide dogs). All airports should have a clean, quiet INDOOR service dog relief area within the departure perimeter. Example is Seattle, and I hear Vancouver has just established an indoor relief area.

6) I sometimes travel on smaller aircraft (Q400's Dash 8 etc) with my service dog. These usually use a narrow portable stairway to board and exit the aircraft. I can manage to climb the steps behind my dog instead of beside her, but with carry on luggage, it becomes a hardship. Sometimes, other passengers or an airline employee will offer to help, though not always. I suggest that airlines wave the luggage fees for anyone travelling with a service dog, and in fact, anyone with a disability which limits their capacity to carry luggage, however small. At the very least, skycheck service should be an automatically offered to someone boarding with a service dog.

7) A resounding vote from me to extend the 2 seat 1 fare policy so that I can travel comfortably on flights to the USA and abroad with my service dog. Ditto compliance with all service dog policies that currently apply to domestic flights.

With appreciation for this opportunity to provide input on the consultation,

Sincerely

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