

**Association for Airline Passenger Rights (AAPR)**

**PO Box 15275**

**Washington, DC 20003**

**Visit us on the web: [www.flyfriendlyskies.com](http://www.flyfriendlyskies.com)**



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June 6, 2011

Secretary Ray LaHood  
Office of the Secretary of Transportation  
U.S. Department of Transportation  
1200 New Jersey Ave, SE  
Washington, DC 20590

**RE: Airline ACAA Accessibility & Etiquette Training for Commercial Airlines**

Dear Secretary LaHood,

I am writing to you on behalf of the Association for Airline Passenger Rights (“AAPR”) and its board of directors to share with you some exciting news about our ongoing efforts to make air travel more accessible for travelers with disabilities. AAPR commends the U.S. Department of Transportation (“DOT”) scrutiny of US-based air carriers to comply with provisions of the 1986 Air Carrier Access Act (“ACAA”) – 49 U.S.C. § 41705. In response, AAPR and Solutions Marketing Group (“SMG”) have designed a comprehensive services to assist airlines and their staff not only better comply with ACAA, but also take the necessary steps to expand their marketability to a growing consumer base – travelers with disabilities!

The mission of the Association for Airline Passenger Rights is to promote fairer customer service and accessibility standards in the airline industry and to improve passenger satisfaction. In fact, half of our board members are people with disabilities themselves, so ACAA enforcement is critically important to our organization and its members.

DOT’s rules implementing ACAA require airlines to provide assistance to travelers with disabilities in boarding and deplaning aircraft, including the use of wheelchairs, ramps, mechanical lifts or service personnel where needed. Carriers also must respond within 30 days to written complaints about their treatment of travelers with disabilities and specifically address the issues raised in each complaint, as well as inform passengers that they can refer their complaints to DOT for an investigation.<sup>1</sup>

In February 2011, DOT fined Delta Air Lines \$2 million for ACAA violations – which was the largest civil penalty ever assessed against an airline by DOT in a non-safety-related case.<sup>2</sup> In January 2011, Mesaba was assessed a civil penalty of \$125,000 by DOT for violating rules protecting travelers with disabilities.<sup>3</sup> And late last year, DOT fined AirTran a civil penalty of \$500,000 for similar reasons, of which up to \$200,000 may be used to improve its service to disabled passengers beyond what is required by law.<sup>4</sup> There have also been other DOT fines levied on the airlines.

Last month, AAPR and SMG have already alerted US-based air carriers that many – if not most – of the ACAA violations cited in the DOT fines could be easily avoidable with the proper training and understanding of disability customer service. It is our intention to consult with these airlines to become more pro-active in making air travel more accessible for travelers with disabilities, rather than adopt risk-adverse strategies designed to limit DOT fines.

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<sup>1</sup> U.S. Department of Transportation, Air Carrier Access Act, January 2011.

<sup>2</sup> U.S. Department of Transportation, “Delta Fined for Violating Rules Protecting Air Travelers with Disabilities,” February 17, 2011.

<sup>3</sup> U.S. Department of Transportation, “Mesaba Fined for Violating Rules Protecting Air Travelers with Disabilities,” January 7, 2011.

<sup>4</sup> U.S. Department of Transportation, “AirTran Fined for Violating Rules Protecting Air Travelers with Disabilities,” August 30, 2010.

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**Secretary LaHood Letter on AAPR/SMG ACAA Training**

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Furthermore, aside from avoiding costly government fines, there exists a compelling “business case” for improving accessibility for air travelers with disabilities. Consider these facts:

- **80% of airline passengers with disabilities have identified obstacles.**
- **21 million adults with disabilities traveled at least once in a two-year period.**
- **Travelers with disabilities spend more than \$3.3 billion in air travel annually.**

A 2005 Harris Poll sponsored by the Open Doors Organization (ODO) in cooperation with the Travel Industry Association of America (TIA) found that consumers with disabilities would take two or more flights a year if airlines were to accommodate their needs as a person with a disability. The landmark market study conducted years earlier identified and quantified the needs and interests of consumers with disabilities with respect to the travel, entertainment and hospitality industries. The 2002 study revealed disabled travelers take 31.7 million trips per year in the U.S., and spend \$13.6 billion annually. Major areas of spending include \$3.3 billion on airfare, \$4.2 billion on hotel accommodations, and \$2.7 billion on food and beverage. In addition, adults with disabilities patronize restaurants about once a week, and they account for \$36 billion in annual revenue for restaurants. This information is helping businesses find ways to best meet the needs of people with disabilities, and realize revenue growth among this large but relatively untapped market. The study, conducted by Harris Interactive, interviewed 1,037 adults 18 and over with disabilities.

According to a national survey of consumer attitudes towards companies that hire people with disabilities, “most participants (75%) had direct experience with people with disabilities in a work environment.” The study demonstrated that socially responsible companies are socially responsible were viewed more favorably by consumers (92%), with “87% specifically agreeing that they would prefer to give their business to companies that hire people with disabilities.”<sup>5</sup> It is likely that these positive attitudes would also be associated with companies that value the business of their customers with disabilities by making their services more accessible.

Our team is ready to support carriers to they can acquire and retain new customers that will also impact their bottom-line. And, the research shows that when companies meet the needs of these segments they will become lifelong customers. Enclosed, please find a one-page flyer that outlines key components of our training, as well as a press release recently issued by the Association for Airline Passenger Rights announcing the training.

AAPR and SMG stand ready to assist DOT in better preparing US-based carriers to meet the unique needs of travelers with disabilities. Thank you in advance for your consideration.

Sincerely,

Brandon M. Macsata  
Executive Director

Cc: Booker Daniels, Solutions Marketing Group

<sup>5</sup> Siperstein, Gary N., Neil Romano, Amanda Mohler and Robin Parker, “A National Survey of Consumer Attitudes toward Companies that Hire People with Disabilities,” *Journal of Vocational Rehabilitation* 24 (2006), pp. 3-9.