



**COMMISSION
AGENDA MEMORANDUM**

Item No. 11a

BRIEFING ITEM

Date of Meeting January 26, 2021

DATE: December 29, 2020

TO: Stephen P. Metruck, Executive Director

FROM: Heather Karch, Aviation Facilities & Infrastructure Manager - Architecture
Chelsea Rodriguez, Airport Volunteers & Customer Accessibility Manager

SUBJECT: 2020 Accessibility Improvements at Seattle-Tacoma International Airport

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The purpose of this briefing is to update the Commission on the accessibility-related progress from the Open Doors Organization (ODO) assessment at Seattle-Tacoma International Airport (Airport), and to share general accessibility-related highlights outside the scope of the original ODO report. Despite the challenges associated with COVID-19, there have also been opportunities to improve accessibility. In some cases, COVID-19 has even accelerated the urgency and subsequent rollout of improvements. As a result, the Airport has been able to make concrete accessibility related progress during a year that brought many unprecedented challenges to air travel. The briefing outlines accessibility-related progress grouped into three categories – **Facilities**, **Customer Service**, and **Engagement**. Accessibility can and should be viewed holistically, thus there is overlap between these three categories. Specifically, our engagement efforts within the disability community have helped inform facility changes and customer service improvements.

The ODO Accessibility Assessment Report completed in March 2018 lists 108 recommendations to improve accessibility at the Airport. The assessment frames recommendations between low and high priority, and further subdivides into 2, 5, and 10-year time frame suggestions. In less than 3 years, 65% of ODO assessment recommendations are either completed, or in progress. We have used these recommendations as a foundation for our overall effort, but they are just a starting point as we continually look to improve accessibility at the Airport.

Despite the challenges associated with 2020, the passenger experience has improved in many ways. Highlights outlined include:

- The upcoming completion of the Airport's first Sensory Room, which is a calming space for passengers (of all ages) with autism, sensory processing disorders, or other neurological diversity;
- The creation of the Airport's first social story, aimed at the autism community, which is a pre-travel resource with images, sensory icons, and simple sentences that explain the travel experience during a world of social distancing and mask wearing.

Meeting Date: January 26, 2021

- The re-launch of the SEA Accessibility Advisory Committee (SEA AAC) with fresh voices and perspectives providing a constructive platform for discussing accessibility related initiatives, challenges, and opportunities;

These 3 highlights are a few of many listed below, which demonstrate the Airport's commitment to advancing ODO recommendations.

In 2021, the Airport will build upon this past year's work by opening the International Arrivals Facility with accessibility amenities including an adult changing table, Service Animal Relief Area, and nursing room; strategically expanding the volunteer program to both better meet the needs of travelers with disabilities, and reflect our community; and, piloting a new airport dress rehearsal program, which will build upon the success of the existing Wings for Autism event, by providing additional opportunities where travelers with disabilities can "practice" an upcoming travel experience amongst other efforts. Central to this work will be continuing to engage with SEA AAC and the disability community, generally, while continually looking to improve our facility and customer service to meet the goal of becoming the most accessible airport in the nation.

FACILITY UPDATES

Facility updates are related to the physical infrastructure systems of the Airport, including signage, that are available for all passengers. Current facility improvements include:

Sensory Room

We are in the final stages of opening the Airport's first Sensory Room to address the needs of passengers with autism, sensory processing, or other neurological diversity. The room is intended as a calming space and was designed to address the diverse needs of the passengers. Specialized furniture and finishes were selected to allow for a variety of levels of interaction and includes additional acoustic insulation to limit disturbance to the adjacent meditation room. Within a small space we were able to create a unique environment including a backlit ceiling that mimics a star-filled night sky, rocking chair, squeeze chair, and large scale "rock" pillows, that create opportunities to address multiple types of sensory feedback needs of our passengers.

Feedback from both internal and external stakeholders within the disability and aviation community shaped many design decisions including the development of a new wayfinding symbol for the room. Currently there is not a universal symbol for sensory spaces. Airport Signage and Graphics team developed multiple options that were vetted by external stakeholders. An unexpected highlight was the opportunity to commission a custom wall graphic from a local artist, June Sekiguchi. We look forward to providing this new amenity to improve the passenger experience for those whom the airport experience can be especially challenging.

Meeting Date: January 26, 2021

Signage

The Signage Team has made multiple accessibility related improvements throughout the airport, specifically in baggage claim and along curbsides to increase information about wheelchair support and amenities.

- (1) The ramps connecting the arrivals curbside to the baggage claim level are now clearly marked as to whether they are accessible or not. The Signage Team gathered feedback about the wheelchair related language from SEA AAC.
- (2) The Signage Team continues to collaborate with Commercial Management to improve the layout and content of directories throughout the airport.
- (3) To support passengers with no or low vision braille transcriptions will be included in the signage packets for each location where the upcoming biometric screening operation will be implemented. The braille handouts include the relevant information that is shown on signage that was previously unavailable to those without sight. Periodic audio announcements of the program will also be included in the program rollout.
- (4) Concourse B and D signage was updated to remove inconsistent patched signage to a fully illuminated sign system throughout concourses.
- (5) Based on stakeholder feedback and the importance of signage and wayfinding to the passenger experience, we plan on creating a SEA AAC Signage and Wayfinding Subcommittee to focus on signage and wayfinding throughout the existing airport and for upcoming projects.

Garage and Curbside

- (1) The Parking Revenue Infrastructure Project is adding a total of five electric vehicle charging stations at accessible parking spots, two on level four and three on level seven.
- (2) The first phase of the elevator cores upgrade is almost complete and includes improved large-scale graphics and spelling out the colors of each core to address passengers who are color blind. The second phase of elevator core improvements include graphics within the elevator that relate to the Pacific Northwest Sense of Place and reinforce wayfinding.
- (3) Starting in 2021, the Airport will offer a 90% discount on prearranged accessible vehicle permits. The prearranged accessible vehicle permit is only for accessible vehicles and use related to passengers with reduced mobility. The permit allows cardholders to pickup and drop-off curbside for passengers with reduced mobility. The reduced permit price will allow for wider scale adoption of the program since a larger number of organizations will be able to purchase them.

Restrooms

A new restroom opened on Concourse D that is the first in a large renovation program that will add and update restrooms on Concourses B, C, and D. A majority of the new restrooms are

Meeting Date: January 26, 2021

wider than normal ambulatory stalls that also include handrails. The handrails are helpful for a wide range of passengers including the elderly or those with reduced mobility. We continue to get positive feedback about the new family restroom in North Satellite and seek more opportunities to include amenities such as adult changing tables and integrated Service Animal Relief and nursing spaces in upcoming projects.

CUSTOMER SERVICE UPDATES

Customer service is continually embedded into the Airport's decisions. Similarly, accessibility is integrated into Customer Service initiatives. Customer Service-related updates include:

Social Story

Customer Experience determined there was a need to elevate our pre-travel resources for the autism community. With valuable guidance and feedback from Arc of King County and Washington Autism Alliance & Advocacy stakeholders, a COVID-19 specific social story and resource guide were created before the busy holiday travel season. Social stories are widely used in the autism community as preparation tools for upcoming social situations. The Airport's social story includes current photos that highlight mask wearing and social distancing, simple sentences that explain steps in the travel journey, sensory icons to identify possible sensory triggers, sample COVID-19 signage that travelers will see, maps, links to helpful resources, and more! Due to COVID-19 travel changes, the need for this resource accelerated, and the social story was created a year earlier than previously planned. The Airport's social story helps prepare travelers with autism, and others that might find it useful, for a world of mask wearing and social distancing. It is available for download on the Airport's website and FlySEA app.

Sunflower Lanyards

In October 2019, the Airport became the first in the nation to participate in the sunflower lanyard program. Originally pioneered by Gatwick International Airport to help identify and better meet the needs of passengers with hidden disabilities, such as autism and PTSD. At the Airport, travelers benefit from increased awareness of their needs by wearing the optional sunflower lanyard. Airport Pathfinders, customer service staff, volunteers, and the airport community then know that a traveler wearing the lanyard may need additional support. Depending on the situation, our team can then tailor their customer service approach. Since launching the program at the Airport, there is growing sunflower lanyard momentum and it has been introduced at other national airports. To support the program's growth, the Airport has participated in exploratory conversations with over a dozen other airports, as well as launched a quarterly working group of other national airports who are already participating or plan to. Although sunflower lanyards are outside the scope of the ODO report, it is an important added amenity for passengers with hidden disabilities. Participating in the program complements existing accessibility offerings, such as our social story and upcoming sensory room.

Website Updates

The Airport website has been fine-tuned to better publicize important amenities, such as the Aira app service for passengers who are blind or low-vision, sunflower lanyards, the wheelchair

Meeting Date: January 26, 2021

reservation process, and more. The website has updated language, additional accessibility frequently asked questions (FAQs), and expanded useful links. Additionally, accessibility-related content was also integrated into a new Customer Service FAQ widget. The widget is a new Airport web tool where customers ask questions and template responses based on topic are generated. If customers cannot find the answer to what they're looking for on the FAQ widget, it will directly open a case with the Airport's Customer Care team, which will personally respond to assist and/or provide guidance. The Airport's website was referenced as a positive example during a recent ODO *Fostering Independence for Travelers with Disabilities* webinar.

Text for Assistance

During business hours, passengers can now text for assistance and interact with a Customer Communications team member. This new service allows for a contactless interaction with customer service. As noted in the ODO assessment, embracing technology facilitates customer communication, and is an efficient way to connect with travelers with disabilities.

SEA App

The Innovation team updated the FlySEA mobile app to greater highlight accessibility information. These updates include a dedicated Accessibility button, available to users on the front page. The app provides information about the Airport's wide range of accessibility services including wheelchair services, auditory and vision assistance, accessible routes of travel, and information for travelers with hidden disabilities. The Airport's social story can also be conveniently accessed.

Customer Service Standards

The Airport's Customer Service Standards manual was developed for the benefit of all airport customers and outlines the customer service expectations for all Airport employees and volunteers, regardless of employer. The manual has been written to standardize employee interaction performance across the airport. An aim is for these standards to bring customer service consistency throughout the passenger journey. Accessibility customer service expectations, such as using 'people-first' language, have been integrated into the standards. The customer service standards in this manual will serve as the criteria to formally evaluate employee and volunteer interactions and the overall customer service experience at the Airport.

Training

The Airport's Learning team is in the final stretch of a new *Excellent Customer Service for People with Disabilities* e-learning for all badge holders. This e-learning builds upon existing training content to further customer service accessibility best practices. The training includes an emphasis on general disability etiquette, 'people-first' language, familiarization with the Airport's amenities such as sunflower lanyards and includes scenarios that reinforce customer service expectations. The training was also shared with SEA AAC for their feedback before finalization.

Meeting Date: January 26, 2021

Volunteer Program

Although paused since March 2020, training and program refinements have been made to ensure volunteers are poised to better meet the needs of travelers with disabilities when they return. Prior to the pause, the program was on track to significantly increase therapy animal volunteer teams and roster size overall. A larger volunteer program will allow for greater customer service reach for all, including travelers with disabilities.

ENGAGEMENT UPDATES

Engagement includes our efforts to engage with both the professional and passenger focused community to increase our overall knowledge, interact with stakeholders, and promote the Airport's current efforts. It is worth noting that the Airport has been referenced as a positive example at multiple conferences this year including Open Doors Organization's *Fostering Independence for Travelers with Disabilities Through Innovative Design and Technologies* webinar. Engagement activities in 2020 include:

SEA AAC

In July 2020, the Airport's Facility and Infrastructure (F&I) and Customer Service departments relaunched the SEA Accessibility Advisory Committee with a new group of external stakeholders including members of Arc of King County, Transportation Security Administration, Delta Airlines, Alaska Airlines, Washington Department of Transportation, King County Metro, Sound Transit, and other subject matter experts to represent diverse perspectives of the disability community. The Committee met for a second time in October 2020 and plans on meeting on a quarterly basis with additional project specific meetings as needed. Customer Service creates a monthly newsletter to provide Airport related updates and stay connected in between quarterly meetings. In the first 6 months, the Committee has provided valuable feedback about projects currently in design and disability related impacts of operational changes.

Aviation Industry Outreach and Advocacy

- (1) In January 2020, *Airport Magazine* highlighted accessibility initiatives at the Airport including the launch of the sunflower lanyard program, hearing loop technology, Aira, SEA app updates, and other facility related improvements.
- (2) In February 2020, F&I and Customer Service staff were included in a video production created as part of the IATA/Microsoft Hackathon event. The video was launched at the IATA Global Accessibility Symposium in October 2020 and highlighted the Airport's commitment to improving accessibility. In addition, F&I Staff were invited to be a member of the jury panel for the Hackathon. The 2020 Hackathon challenge was to develop technical solutions to enhance the booking experience for passengers travelling with mobility aids using and/or tracking of mobility aids.
- (3) In August, F&I Staff presented on a panel at the FAA Civil Rights Conference to discuss the nursing and lactation spaces at the Airport.

Meeting Date: January 26, 2021

Advocacy

- (1) In 2020 we expanded our communication strategy to include blogs about accessibility related issues. In July 2020, Customer Service and F&I staff co-authored a blog to highlight accessibility initiatives in honor of the anniversary of the signing of the Americans with Disability Act. In November 2020, Customer Service authored one highlighting the success of sunflower lanyard program and growth over the past year. In addition, Customer Service launched the first Airport social story for passengers with autism. In February 2021, F&I will author a blog to correspond with the opening of the Sensory Room.
- (2) Recently the producers of Explorable podcast reached out to Airport staff to discuss recording a podcast about accessibility initiatives at the Airport. Explorable is a podcast about travel, disability, and inclusion. The team met with the Explorable team to discuss and plan on recording in January.

CONCLUSION AND NEXT STEPS

Staff is committed to making the Airport the most accessible airport in the country with a coordinated interdepartmental effort and engagement with the disability community. We have shown real progress during this challenging year and continue to reflect this commitment through our actions. The re-establishment and engagement of the SEA AAC is a promising effort that will continue to provide valuable feedback; all passengers will benefit from the increased focus on information communicated through the app, website, and signage as well as access to live customer service staff via text message; our passengers with hidden disabilities will benefit from the addition of the Sensory Room and social story and expansion of the sunflower lanyard program; and the integration of accessibility information into required staff training ensures that all staff have increased awareness of accessibility. We continue to represent the Airport within the broader community through speaking opportunities at conferences and other media opportunities. Our progress this past year reflects our ongoing commitment to improving accessibility and reinforces the reputation of the Airport, within the aviation community as a leader in accessibility initiatives.

ATTACHMENTS TO THIS BRIEFING

- (1) Presentation slides

PREVIOUS COMMISSION ACTIONS OR BRIEFINGS

October 22, 2019 – Accessibility Improvements at Seattle-Tacoma International Airport