



**COMMISSION
AGENDA MEMORANDUM**

Item No. 11b

BRIEFING ITEM

Date of Meeting March 22, 2022

DATE: February 18, 2022

TO: Stephen P. Metruck, Executive Director

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

SUBJECT: SEA Accessibility Program 2022 Update

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The purpose of this briefing is to update the Port of Seattle Commission on the Accessibility Program at Seattle-Tacoma International Airport (SEA). This Accessibility Program is a broad interdepartmental effort that encompasses the amenities we offer travelers with disabilities, the facilities and programs, and our engagement with the disability community. Although 2021 has been another challenging year due to the evolving nature of COVID, significant progress has been made. We found opportunities to improve accessibility and even gain national recognition for our efforts. Whether it was successfully opening SEA's first Sensory Room, rolling out a new Accessibility customer service e-learning, engaging with disability community members, or receiving the 2021 FAA Civil Rights Partner award in recognition of the airport's accessibility work; 2021 has been a banner year for accessibility at SEA.

Recognizing the importance of taking a holistic perspective towards accessibility, this briefing is grouped into three categories – Facilities, Customer Service, and Engagement. The foundation of SEA's Accessibility Program is the Open Doors Organization (ODO) Accessibility Assessment Report, completed in March 2018. The assessment frames recommendations between low and high priorities, and further subdivides into 2, 5, and 10-year time frame suggestions. In the past four years we made progress towards implementing the 108 recommendations to improve accessibility at SEA. We have expanded our goals with additional initiatives intended to advance accessibility. Significant progress was made in 2021 and 70% of the original recommendations are either complete or in progress.

Although ODO's recommendations are the foundation of accessibility improvements, they are just the starting point. As technology and passenger needs evolve, so has SEA's Accessibility Program. In 2022 and beyond, SEA's Accessibility Program will focus on an evolving list of recommendations developed through disability community stakeholder engagement, customer feedback, internal accessibility audits, and interdepartmental collaboration. SEA's Accessibility Program involves the work and efforts of many departments. Our success hinges on the ongoing work of the many key team members and stakeholders involved in advancing these initiatives.

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We aim to continue this positive momentum in 2022 to fulfill our goal of being the nation's most accessible airport.

FACILITY UPDATES

Infrastructure updates are related to the physical infrastructure systems of SEA, including signage, that is available for all passengers. Current infrastructure improvements include:

Sensory Room

To address the needs of passengers with autism, sensory processing, or other neurological diversity we developed SEA's first sensory room that opened on April 2, 2021 to coincide with World Autism Awareness Day. The room is intended as a calming space with furniture and finishes selected to address the diverse needs of passengers including additional acoustic insulation. Feedback from both internal and external stakeholders within the disability and aviation community influenced many design decisions including development of a custom wayfinding symbol for our signage.

Since opening, the room has been well received and has surpassed expectations in terms of use and positive feedback from passengers. We are pleased to be able to provide a space that improves the travel experience for many and potentially opens opportunities for those who avoid air travel to enjoy SEA in the future. The feedback from the passengers really illuminates the demand for this type of space because it can address a wide range of passenger needs. Based on the success of the room we look forward to developing a second sensory room in the C Concourse Expansion Project, currently in design.

Service Animal Relief Areas (SARA)

In 2021 SEA increased the number of indoor and outdoor SARA. Phase II of North Satellite project included our largest indoor pet relief area to date. The space was designed to allow passengers to walk around the flush turf area and includes a water bowl filling station, sink, bench, and Pacific Northwest inspired tree stump to encourage animals to use the space. North Terminal Utilities Upgrade project installed the first plumbed outdoor SARA at the north end of the arrivals drive by door 26. The SARA includes a water station and real boulders for the 3-D object to encourage use.

Looking ahead to 2022 a SARA will open in the International Arrivals Facility to support our international travelers and we will be developing a fenced SARA at the south end of the arrivals drive outside of Gina Marie Lindsey Arrivals Hall. Phase 5 of the Restroom Project, which is currently in design, will also be installing a SARA in Concourse D.

Signage

Signage is critical to a successful passenger experience and the sign department made multiple accessibility related improvements over the past year including:

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- (1) The Interim Signage Improvements Phase 1 project was partially installed and includes new dynamic and illuminated signage at the breezeway and esplanade between checkpoint 2 and checkpoint 3.
- (2) Updated digital directories designed to improve clarity and align with SEA brand.
- (3) Designed and installed signage inside the rental car busses to encourage passengers in wheelchairs or scooters to be safely secured.
- (4) Updated signage in elevators and wheelchair areas to eliminate outdated “special needs” language to “wheelchair assistance,” and incorporated people first language.
- (5) Developed braille translation handout for passengers to explain details of biometric screening process and options available.

Seating

The Operations department made considerable efforts to ensure we are including accessible seating options throughout the airport in 2021. They worked together with the Sign Team to ensure every holdroom has clearly identified accessible seating near the jet bridge door. To provide an optimal experience at the new Marketplace at N they purchased wheelchair accessible tables and included a mix of seating including chairs without armrests that can accommodate up to 500 pound seating capacity.

Adult Changing Tables

Adult changing tables are a relatively new amenity provided at SEA and fill an important need for a wide range of passengers that need additional restroom support. In 2021, Phase 2 North Satellite added a second adult changing table for a total of two in the North Concourse. Moving forward an additional adult changing table will be available to passengers in the International Arrivals Facility, opening in 2022. Phase 5 of the restroom renovations, currently in design, will include an adult changing table in both the C and D Concourse.

Garage Improvements

The initial round of elevator core accessibility improvements included some revised expansion joints and additional cane rail installed at the elevator banks throughout the garage. Additional garage accessibility improvements as part of the elevator cab updates, currently in construction, include audio announcements and improved wayfinding. We will continue to evaluate additional accessibility opportunities for the garage in upcoming capital projects.

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Upcoming Facility Improvements

Nursing Suites

Moving forward, we hope to replicate the success of the Nursing Suite that opened in Phase I of North Satellite Renovation with the addition of a nursing room in the C Concourse Expansion project and one in D Concourse as part of Phase 5 Restroom Project.

Exit Ramps and Curbside

The SEA Gateway project will update all sloped exit ramps from baggage claim to lower curbside to meet current code requirements, thus ensuring an accessible path from any baggage claim door. The Terminal Security Enhancements Phase II project will improve the accessibility of the upper and lower drive curbside, and will bring the upper and lower curbside to code compliance. Updating the slope of the ramps and doorways also provides a design opportunity to enhance the intuitive wayfinding and introduce memorable design elements at ticketing and baggage claim level.

CUSTOMER SERVICE UPDATES

The SEA brand promise is to create, through a passionate service culture, an elevated travel experience that's inspired by the original nature of the Pacific Northwest. This elevated travel experience is for all, including travelers with disabilities. Within the Customer Service department there is a recognition that the airport experience begins prior to arrival and that the travel journey has many steps. We are systematically addressing steps where we can elevate customer experience for travelers with disabilities. This perspective is rooted not just in the accessibility programs and services SEA offers, but also in staff training, customer communication, customer feedback, and quality assurance. Highlights of this work include:

Programs + Services

Just as SEA's facilities have improved to better meet the needs of travelers with disabilities, so have our programs and services. Highlights include:

- (1) **Sunflower Lanyard:** In October 2019, SEA became the first airport in the nation to participate in the Sunflower Lanyard program. Originally pioneered by Gatwick International Airport, this program helps staff identify that a traveler has an invisible or hidden disability (ex: autism, MS, PTSD) and may need additional assistance, patience, or flexibility. The Sunflower Lanyard is now recognized at 30+ airports across the nation, and locally is growing in recognition beyond SEA. To support the program's continued growth, SEA staff host a quarterly Airport Sunflower Lanyard Working Group with airports who already participate or are planning to participate. The Working Group is an

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opportunity for airport staff to share lessons learned and best practices on this growing program.

- (2) **Aira:** SEA also was the first airport on the west coast to participate in the Aira Airport Network. Aira (pronounced EYE-rah) helps people who are blind and low vision safely navigate the airport by connecting travelers to a virtual agent via their smartphone. The Port's free minutes plan covers the cost for any traveler using the Aira service while on the airport's wifi.
- (3) **Wheelchair Service Gap:** Although airlines are obligated to provide wheelchair service at key locations, such as from ticketing-to-gate, gate-to-gate, and then gate-to-baggage claim, SEA contracts for the 'service gap.' This service gap is the space between light rail, parking garage, and drives to ticketing counter and then baggage claim to light rail, parking garage, and drives. This service is also available for travelers who are blind or low-vision and need sighted guide support.

In recognition of the critical role wheelchair service plays in traveler's experience, the Customer Service Department is leading an interdepartmental Working Group to elevate wheelchair service at SEA. Although the work plan is still taking shape, there is a recognition that broad buy-in and engagement with the disability community, airline partners, and wheelchair service providers will be needed.

Staff Training

Investing in the staff who provide customer service to travelers with disabilities is a linchpin of SEA's Accessibility Program. To that end, the Airport's Learning team finalized an *Excellent Customer Service for People with Disabilities* e-learning in 2021. The training includes emphasis on general disability sensitivity, 'people-first' language, familiarization with the Airport's amenities such as Sunflower Lanyards and includes scenarios that reinforce customer service expectations. It is a required training for all Port of Seattle Aviation staff, including volunteers. Additionally, the e-learning is broadly promoted and available to the airport badge holder community to supplement existing disability training they may already offer staff. The e-learning was vetted by the SEA Accessibility Advisory Committee who provided valuable input which strengthened the final product. In 2022, the Learning team aims to build-upon the e-learning, with in-person disability customer service focused training for frontline staff, as well as future wheelchair attendant specific training.

The Port of Seattle ICT Department hosted four training sessions for Port staff about the accessibility features built into commonly used Microsoft software products. The sessions were hosted in July to coincide with the anniversary of the ADA being signed. Sessions included information on creating accessible content, low vision accommodations, hard of hearing accommodations, and neurodiversity.

Customer Communication

The ODO assessment encouraged embracing technology to facilitate customer communication for travelers with disabilities. COVID-19 demonstrated a general customer preference for more

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contactless communication. In 2021, the Customer Communication team added a new feature for travelers to text with Customer Communication team members during business hours. Additionally, the AskSEA program launched in fall 2021 where travelers can ask their airport-related questions using their Google or Amazon Alexa devices.

External Relations hired Open Doors Organization to train staff, who work on the external website, how to make the website more accessible. In 2022, Open Doors is conducting a website accessibility audit and will provide a report, monitor remediation, and issue a certificate of compliance based on WCAG 2.1 standard.

Customer Feedback

Customer feedback helps us learn where SEA is doing well and where improvements can be made. Our Customer Communication team already hears from travelers via social media, email, phone, and in-person. Accessibility related feedback is immediately shared with key stakeholders and addressed.

Other proactive customer feedback approaches include a QR code-based survey within the Sensory Room where people are encouraged to share their feedback. Passengers have shared valuable insight on navigability to the room, why they chose to visit, and how we can make the airport travel experience less stressful. This winter, the Business Intelligence department is leading a Wheelchair Experience survey which will complement an airport-wide study on Customer Satisfaction. Similar to the Sensory Room survey, the aim is to get customer perspective on their experience and what would make it better.

Quality Assurance

A SEA Customer Experience Quality Assurance program was recently launched to measure and reinforce employee engagement utilizing the SEA Customer Service Standards Manual. The Standards Manual was adopted last year to help evaluate employee customer engagement performance to raise the bar to a world-class SEA customer experience. Accessibility customer service expectations were integrated into the standards. Experience Evaluators are professional evaluators who anonymously pose as customers to utilize various airport services and report on every aspect of their experience, including the evaluation of wheelchair services. Experience evaluations are conducted monthly and occur at touchpoints across the SEA customer journey.

Teams with representatives from the Port of Seattle, SEA business partners and stakeholders, including representatives from the SEA wheelchair service community will be meeting regularly to receive program updates and to review experience evaluations. Wheelchair services are one of the 56 airport-wide touchpoints that are evaluated throughout the year. Experience evaluations provide feedback to SEA leaders and airport tenants with valuable insights that lead to actions to improve customer satisfaction, reward positive behavior, and to identify training opportunities. Accessibility remains a focal point within SEA's quality assurance efforts to ensure services meet expectations while offering customers positive and consistent experiences.

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ENGAGEMENT UPDATES

Engagement includes our efforts to engage with the disability community, increase awareness about SEA's Accessibility Program, and our industry advocacy efforts. In culmination, these many efforts have hopefully supported industry-wide accessibility improvements. Recent engagement highlights include:

Disability Community Engagement

A cornerstone of SEA's engagement efforts is the SEA Accessibility Advisory Committee. This committee is composed of internal Port of Seattle employees, airline partners, and disability community stakeholders. Disability community stakeholders are affiliated with Paralyzed Veterans of America NW Chapter, MS Society NW Chapter, Arc of King County, Purple Mountain Advocates, Open Doors Organization, NW ADA Center, and more. Quarterly meeting topics have ranged from signage, upcoming facility improvements, how to best measure success, and more. The committee provides a constructive platform for discussing accessibility related initiatives, challenges, and opportunities. Though the committee's feedback is highly valued, it is just one engagement approach. Throughout the year, Customer Service and Facilities staff regularly meet with disability community members to learn more and potentially collaborate on initiatives.

External Relations is a critical partner in our engagement work. In 2021, the airport communications staff in External Relations designed a photo shoot to show travel in our new pandemic normal, specific to travelers with disabilities. The images have been widely used for a variety of external communication and illustrate that the airport is a welcoming and inclusive place for all. This year, External Relations and Customer Service communications staff have made expanded outreach to accessibility audiences a priority goal. Strategies for expanding outreach include deepening relationships with influential communicators in the disability space, expanding our communications with more blogs, brochures, and videos, putting emphasis on specific communities such as the deaf community and those who could benefit from the Sunflower Lanyard, and adding in a new targeted advertising campaign to reach audiences who want accessibility services. Our community can expect to see this information in the media, in their news feeds, in advertising, in the airport, and in their own accessibility communities.

Aviation Industry Advocacy

SEA staff were interviewed in episode 13 of Explorable podcast highlighting the airport's commitment to accessibility. Explorable is a travel disability and inclusion podcast, where experts, advocates, and disability allies are interviewed on disability travel topics.

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- (1) Feature article in July *International Airport Review* on SEA's efforts to make travel more accessible for all
- (2) Inclusion in upcoming ACRP 01-48 Report on *Assessing Airport Programs for Travelers with Disabilities and Older Adults*. SEA is to be highlighted as a mini case study.
- (3) AAAE conference panel participation presentation along with colleagues from Houston Airport and Southwest Airlines on *What You Don't See – How to Address the Challenges of Invisible Disabilities*.

A significant 2021 advocacy accomplishment was SEA's selection for the 2021 FAA Civil Rights Advocate and Partner Award. This was in recognition of SEA's accessibility work, with an emphasis on expansion of amenities for travelers with hidden or invisible disabilities.

CONCLUSION AND NEXT STEPS

Aviation staff are committed to making SEA the most accessible airport in the nation. Accessibility is a consideration in all current and future initiatives and projects. While many efforts can be implemented quickly such as information updates on the website, other projects such as major infrastructure changes or signage changes require significant investment and time to complete.

Increasing awareness of these programs and amenities is an overarching goal for 2022 and beyond. Working with our External Relations and Customer Communication teams we plan to regularly highlight accessibility initiatives at SEA. We are proud of our efforts to provide information via the SEA website but have learned many passengers are not fully utilizing it, and often unaware of available resources. This can lead to frustration. We are looking for more opportunities to amplify accessibility pre-travel information, as well as information available when travelers arrive at the airport.

We have made significant progress by taking an intentionally holistic perspective of focusing on the three pillars of facilities, customer service, and disability community engagement. We will continue to expand our engagement with passengers through initiatives like expanding and diversifying our volunteer team, auditing our terminal facility and programs, developing on-site resources like accessibility brochures, and updating garage elevator cabs to improve wayfinding and reinforce Pacific Northwest sense of place.

Our progress reinforces SEA's reputation within the aviation industry as a leader in the field, which has been shown to influence accessibility improvements across the aviation industry. SEA's Accessibility Program involves the work and efforts of many departments, disability community members, and aviation stakeholders. Together, we look forward to continuing to build-upon this positive momentum in 2022 and beyond.

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ATTACHMENTS TO THIS BRIEFING

- (1) Presentation slides

PREVIOUS COMMISSION ACTIONS OR BRIEFINGS

January 26, 2021 – 2020 Accessibility Improvements at Seattle-Tacoma International Airport

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