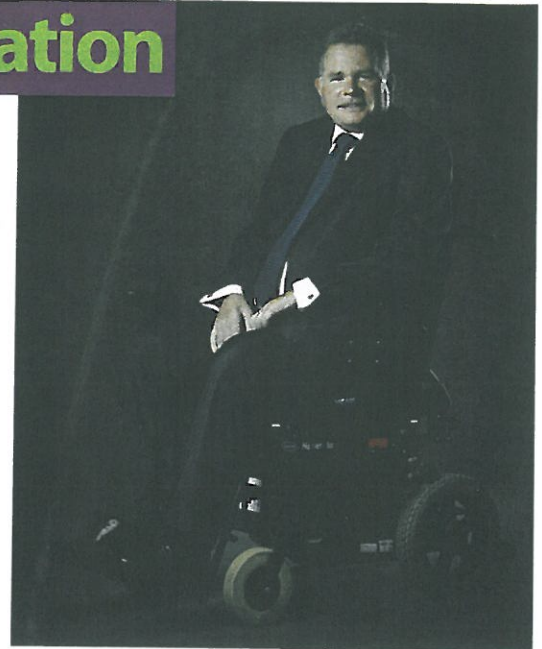


Has European aviation legislation

helped to improve travel by air

for the SCI passenger?



Andy Wright reports

can notify the airport providing assistance, or a company sub-contracted by the airport to do the same. However the guidelines then continue and state that if the pre-notification request is not adhered to, all reasonable efforts must be made to ensure the PRM is still able to take their flight.

By only encouraging and not mandating the requirement for a PRM to pre-notify their need for assistance, it makes it difficult for an airport to ensure that sufficient staff are always ready and available to assist un-notified passengers.

Omniserv – a European division of the American owned Airserv Corporation, which manages PRM airport assistance in over 109 airports globally, is currently responsible for the well-being of passengers with reduced mobility travelling through Heathrow, Stansted and Glasgow in the UK.

In 2013, Heathrow airport provided assistance to in excess of 900,000 passengers, of which less than 70% were pre-notified. In other words, over 270,000 passengers arrived at the airport expecting assistance but had not pre-booked it. Compared to many airports in Europe, 70% is actually a very good pre-notification percentage.

One of the consequences of some passengers potentially abusing a complimentary assistance service or others not pre-notifying their need for assistance in advance, is it places a strain on an airport's resources and could compromise the quality of assistance provided to passengers who need it most.

However, by introducing new technology, designed to gather and collate pre-notification data, as well as measure more accurately historical patterns and trends of past flights, Omniserv at Heathrow is able to produce accurate forecasts of future assistance requirements. This data can assist in

allocating the appropriate number of passenger service agents within each terminal at any given time, ensuring that passengers who require assistance are attended to promptly.

Mystery shopper exercises have been carried out to monitor performance and a series of forums have been conducted with representatives from disability organisations, including SIA, to seek feedback.

In addition, considerable time, effort and money have been invested by Omniserv to improve staff training and equipment. The initial one-day training course has been extended to three days and incorporates comprehensive disability awareness and passenger dignity modules.

Scheduled future activities include a series of 'open-days', which will enable small groups of disabled people to experience the airport journey from check-in right through to aircraft embarkation, in the hope of providing greater confidence and understanding of the processes.

Andy Wright
Omniserv

If you would like to respond to this debate, please do so by email to Dan Burden, Head of Public Affairs at SIA on d.burden@spinal.co.uk
If there is sufficient interest and a good response, Andy would like to set up an SCI Aviation Forum, giving SCI people a voice and an opportunity to influence future PRM airport procedures.

For many travellers with a spinal cord injury, the prospect of flying can be a daunting one. Will the airline have my pre-advised 'special assistance' information on their screen when I check-in? How will I be embarked or disembarked – will the staff be sufficiently well trained and empathetic? Will my wheelchair be damaged whilst in transit? These are just some of the questions considered by mobility-impaired passengers, which often leads to undue amounts of anxiety and stress. So, has the introduction of European legislation improved the quality of travel for passengers with reduced mobility?

On the 5 July 2006, the European Parliament adopted Regulation (EC) 1107/2006, which identified the rights of 'disabled persons and persons with reduced mobility' when travelling by air. The legislation was designed to ensure that a consistent level of service was provided to people with reduced mobility throughout the European member states, as well as to protect them against discrimination by taking the previous responsibility away from the airlines directly and placing the duty of assistance in the hands of the airport instead.

By so doing, assistance would now have to be provided, free of charge, from numerous points in and around the airport perimeter, to include car parks, taxi ranks, bus and rail stations, as well as designated assistance points directly outside terminal buildings. For passengers who require it, assistance must also be offered throughout the airport until the passenger is seated comfortably on board their aircraft.

For the purposes of the regulation, a very broad definition of whom the legislation was intended to benefit – 'disabled person' or 'person with reduced mobility' (PRM) was adopted.

The legislation also encourages that the airline be pre-notified at least 48-hours in advance of travel so that they