Flight 309 is Now Boarding From a Different Gate

Airline Travel for People with Hearing Loss: What You Can Do Now

By Lise Hamlin
If you have a hearing loss, you know what it’s like to be sitting on the edge of your seat, wondering just what the last announcement was and what the next one will be. A page for a passenger? A gate change? A boarding call?

The Hearing Loss Association of America works at the national level to impact public policy that benefits our members and all people with hearing loss. Here is the latest work on airline travel.

According to the United States Department of Transportation (DOT), U.S. airlines carried 272 million domestic passengers on 3.9 million flights during the first five months of 2008. There is no question in my mind that many of those passengers have a hearing loss.

Recently, HLAA Executive Director Brenda Battat sent an e-mail to HLAA members talking about our work to make air travel more accessible to people with hearing loss. She wrote:

“When it comes to air travel people with hearing loss struggle: inaccessible airports, announcements and in-flight entertainment systems that are not captioned and communicating with agents in noisy airports make travel more difficult, if not impossible for most of us.”

It was clear after that e-mail went out that we had hit a nerve. People with hearing loss found a voice for their concerns and complaints about accessible air travel, sending us tales of missed connections, uncooperative airline personnel and in general, stressful travel. Air travel is a hot button issue for many people with hearing loss. And we can see why.

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One member let us know she was so stressed at the airport she was reluctant to venture to the restroom for fear of missing those visual clues that would let her know when her plane was boarding. Another commented that it made a world of difference when her hearing husband accompanied her on flights: she could relax knowing her husband would alert her to every important announcement as it was being made, that she would not need to depend on overtaxed airline personnel who may or may not remember to notify her.

So, what do the rules say and what can we do to make air travel less stressful for us all?

Air Carriers Act and DOT
The Air Carrier Access Act prohibits discrimination by U.S. and foreign air carriers on the basis of disability. The Department of Transportation (DOT) has issued rules defining the rights of passengers and the obligations of air carriers under this law. They also issued new rules that will come into effect in 2009.

DOT rules apply to the conduct of air carrier personnel (e.g., pilots, flight attendants, gate agents or check-in counter personnel). They do not apply to federal security screeners who are covered by rules of the Department of Homeland Security (DHS), Transportation Security Agency (TSA). They also do not apply to parts of the airport terminal itself, such as retail stores that are covered under the ADA.

The rules at this point are fairly simple. They say that air carriers must ensure that people who have a hearing loss have timely access to information that the carriers provide to other passengers. You must identify yourself as a person with a hearing loss who needs the information. Personnel can provide access themselves, by alerting you to the changes, or the airline can use alternative formats, such as visual messaging. Examples of what must be provided include information concerning:

- Ticketing
- Flight delays
- Schedule changes
- Connections
- Flight check-in
- Gate assignments

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- Checking and claiming of luggage
- Aircraft changes
- Safety briefings presented to passengers on airlines
- Warnings to passengers to use the restrooms more than half an hour before arrival

The rules also state that services animals must be permitted to accompany an individual with a disability, and the carrier must allow the traveler to sit in any seat on the airplane unless the animal obstructs the aisle or emergency exit.

HLAA Comments and Objections
HLAA filed comments with the DOT regarding these regulations. We requested DOT make the rules stronger creating greater accessibility for passengers with hearing loss across the board. When DOT published the revised rules that will become effective May 2009, they did not accept all our suggestions for change.

DOT did clarify the rule, indicating that “timely access” to information should mean “prompt access” to information provided to all other passengers. However, the requirement for prompt access will cover only the gates, ticketing areas and customer service desks. Information about baggage must be given no later than when it is transmitted to all other passengers.

We do hope that change will make a difference to consumers. We are concerned that someone who does not know that an announcement was made because they never heard it will not be able to let DOT know whether or not these events were timely, prompt or not at all.

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Tell DOT All is Not Well

If we are going to see changes in airline accessibility, we must do the work ourselves. When we succeed in getting access, we’ll know it was our own hard work that made it happen.

HLAA will continue to work with DOT to press our issues and raise concerns about accessibility. But we can’t do it alone. At our last meeting with DOT it was clear that they are not receiving enough consumer complaints directly. We found out that the air carriers are not required to provide copies of complaints to DOT, just the numbers. DOT will see, for example, the number of baggage complaints or the number of complaints related to service animals, but they won’t know if an individual was forced to move to another seat because airline personnel wrongly thought all service animals must be seated at the bulkhead.

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How to File a Complaint

HLAA has created a form that you can take with you to the airport the next time you fly to make it easy to file complaints with DOT. That form can be found on the HLAA website at www.hearingloss.org. Go to the Advocacy link. If you don’t get the information even after you’ve identified yourself as a person with hearing loss and you have asked to be notified, use the form to write down the who, what, when, where, why and how.

When you come home, you can fill out the official DOT form by visiting the DOT web page at http://airconsumer.ost.dot.gov/forms/382form.pdf. You can send this form directly to DOT:

U.S. Department of Transportation
Aviation Consumer Protection Division, C-75-D
1200 New Jersey Avenue, S.E.
Washington, D.C. 20590

When you send in your complaint, send a copy to me (lhamlin@hearingloss.org or to the HLAA postal address). Or, if you have any trouble at all, HLAA will help you file your complaint. HLAA

Lise Hamlin is director of public policy and state development. She joined the staff in April this year after being a long-time advocate and HLAA Board member. She formerly worked at the League for the Hard of Hearing and most recently, the Northern Virginia Resource Center for Deaf and Hard of Hearing Persons. Lise lives in Rockville, Maryland, and can be reached at lhamlin@hearingloss.org.