

US to strengthen protections for air travelers with wheelchairs

February 29 2024, by Dennis Thompson



Air travel can be miserable for people with disabilities, particularly if an airline mishandles, damages or loses their wheelchair in transit.

Now, the Biden Administration has proposed tough new standards for how airlines treat and accommodate people in wheelchairs.

The proposed rules would make mishandling wheelchairs an automatic violation of the Air Carrier Access Act, allowing [federal regulators](#) to more easily hold airlines accountable when a person's wheelchair is damaged.

The rules would also mandate better training and improved practices to ensure that disabled passengers receive safe, dignified and prompt assistance at airports.

"There are millions of Americans with disabilities who do not travel by plane because of inadequate airline practices and inadequate government regulation, but now we are setting out to change that," [U.S. Transportation Secretary Pete Buttigieg](#) said in an [announcement](#) outlining the proposed rule.

"This new rule would change the way airlines operate to ensure that travelers using wheelchairs can travel safely and with dignity," Buttigieg added.

An estimated 5.5 million Americans use a wheelchair, the U.S. Department of Transportation (DOT) said. In 2023, 11,527 wheelchairs and scooters were lost, delayed, damaged or stolen by airlines.

Among its provisions, the new rule would require airlines to:

- Immediately notify passengers of their options if their wheelchair has been mishandled
- Repair or replace damaged wheelchairs
- Return a lost wheelchair to the passenger's final destination within 24 hours, by whatever means possible

- Make loaner wheelchairs available that fit the needs of the passenger
- Promptly assist disabled passengers through the airport terminal and on or off the plane
- Conduct annual hands-on training for employees and contractors who physically assist disabled passengers or handle their wheelchair
- Provide safe and dignified assistance to all passengers with disabilities

The rule also calls for improved [performance standards](#) for on-board wheelchairs on twin-aisle aircraft and [small aircraft](#), consistent with existing standards on single-aisle airplanes.

The DOT will take comments on the proposed rule for the next 60 days, following its publication in the Federal Register.

This new proposal follows a rule finalized last September that requires new single-aisle airplanes to be designed with handicapped-accessible bathrooms.

Back then, the DOT also announced an agreement with United Airlines that would require industry-leading actions to improve customer service for wheelchair-bound passengers.

A new feature on United's website will help passengers find flights on airplanes better able to safely store and transport a wheelchair. United will also refund the fare difference if a more expensive flight is needed to accommodate a specific wheelchair size.

The United agreement was prompted by an incident in which a passenger died after her customized wheelchair was damaged during a cross-country flight.

Engracia Figueroa, 51, died after her \$30,000 specialized wheelchair broke in the cargo hold during a United flight home to Los Angeles from Washington, D.C.

Figueroa had to sit in a broken manual wheelchair for nearly five hours at the L.A. airport while United sorted out what had happened, according to Hand in Hand, the domestic employers' advocacy group she represented.

Figueroa developed a pressure sore while she waited at the airport, and the sore was made worse by the loaner chair she had to use while she fought with United to replace her broken chair, Hand in Hand said in a [statement](#) at the time.

"The sore became infected and the infection eventually reached her hip bone, requiring [emergency surgery](#) to remove the infected bone and tissue," Hand in Hand said.

Figueroa died Oct. 31, 2021, three months after the July flight in which her [wheelchair](#) was broken.

United also agreed to launch a trial program to explore whether medical wheelchairs or other types of chairs can be used to safely accommodate passengers whose personal wheelchairs break during a [flight](#).

More information: The U.S. Department of Transportation has more about [traveling with a disability](#).

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