



Statement of Brian Ryks
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Before the House of Representatives Subcommittee on Aviation
“Accessible Air Travel: Addressing Challenges for Passengers with Disabilities”
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Good morning. My name is Brian Ryks. I am the Executive Director and Chief Executive Officer of the Metropolitan Airports Commission (MAC), which owns and operates the Minneapolis – Saint Paul International Airport (MSP) and six general aviation airports. I am also the Chair of the Large Hub Committee of Airports Council International – North America (ACI-NA), and serve on ACI-NA’s U.S. Policy Council. Thank you, Chairman DeFazio, Chairman Larsen, Ranking Member Sam Graves and Ranking Member Garret Graves for having me here today and providing me the opportunity to share the commercial airport perspective in today’s important conversation about improving accessibility in air travel.

In the United States, our public system of commercial service airports exists to serve the air transportation needs of the communities they serve. These communities include people with disabilities, as formally defined under the *Americans with Disabilities Act* and associated regulations, elderly travelers with mobility challenges and families with nursing children, among others.

Accessibility for all covers a wide spectrum of passenger needs. It is about working collaboratively with our traveling public, our airlines and our business partners to ensure everyone has equal access to the benefits of air travel.

The airport industry recognizes that travel hurdles can have a magnified impact when experienced by passengers with disabilities, and we are committed to fostering an inclusive air travel experience.

We strive as an industry to create a welcoming and accessible travel experience, and airport accessibility is a primary pillar of the overall customer service we provide. Airports have a great story to tell about the advancements we are making on these issues with our limited resources. MSP especially has been at the forefront of creating an accessible passenger experience through investing in technology, infrastructure, training and service.

One of the key challenges airports face relates to the definition of accessibility, since the conditions included in the definition inform the solutions we develop. Access to airports for those with mobility challenges is essential, but we must also consider the accessibility needs for

travelers facing a wide spectrum of visible and non-visible disabilities. The bottom line is that airports are committed to creating the most accessible airports for all passengers who need to travel.

Commercial service airports operate in compliance with the requirements of the *Rehabilitation Act* of 1973, the *Americans with Disabilities Act* of 1990, and other state or local standards. In general, these standards require airports to make facilities and services readily available and useable by individuals with disabilities. But airports do not stop there. We work more broadly with our government, airline, tenant, and local community stakeholders to develop aspirational accessibility goals before designing and implementing innovative solutions.

Many airports also work closely with accessibility advocates and experts to help ensure we are incorporating their diverse and important perspectives. At MSP, our accessibility journey has been informed and guided by the expertise and support provided through our *Travelers with Disabilities Advisory Committee*, or TDAC for short. Established in 2014, TDAC consists of disability advocates from our community as well as airport staff and representatives from airlines, airline contractors, and the Transportation Security Administration. The chairperson of TDAC is Andrew Palmberg, who represents the Minnesota Commission for the Deaf, Blind and Hard of Hearing.

This committee is results-oriented, providing constructive feedback on how we address accessibility complaints and improve programs or design facilities that remove barriers for those with disabilities while elevating the overall experience for all travelers and airport users. It is a key voice in our long-term planning for MSP.

A critical program we have implemented at MSP in collaboration with TDAC is the global sunflower lanyard program. The program allows passengers to self-identify that they may have a special need, indicated by wearing a green lanyard with sunflowers. The lanyard signifies to airport workers to provide additional assistance to the passenger wearing it. The global sunflower lanyard program is implemented at many airports across the country.

Assisting passengers with disabilities with self-identification upon arrival for travel or when connecting at an airport is an important way to make airports more accessible to everyone and has become an industry best practice. It is also an outcome of the Air Carrier Access Act Advisory Committee, which was created by the Department of Transportation as mandated by the *FAA Reauthorization Act* of 2018.

As an industry, airports recognize the importance of filling service gaps throughout the passenger experience, especially for passengers with disabilities. As a result, we are going above and beyond our compliance standards and achieving increased levels of accessibility by deploying new technologies, setting ambitious customer service standards, providing enhanced training to airport workers, and making important infrastructure investments to meet long-term goals.

One of the great successes in filling these service gaps has been the development of pre-flight training programs for individuals with sensory, physical or cognitive disabilities. It began with Boston Logan International Airport's *Wings for Autism* program in 2011. Two years later, MSP began its *Navigating MSP* program.

Navigating MSP is a partnership between MSP, Delta Air Lines, Autism Minnesota, and other local organizations to help individuals gain experience traveling through the airport and to prepare them for the passenger experience. We hold monthly pre-flight practice runs for participants and their families. This includes experiencing the process of going through TSA security screening and boarding a real aircraft. This year, MSP, in partnership with Delta Air Lines, also unveiled a permanent mock cabin training facility at the airport to augment the program and accommodate staff training related to accessible travel. These airport practice trips, both at MSP and other airports that offer these programs, allow individuals and their families to rehearse their experience at the airport while bringing airlines and government partners together for comprehensive passenger support and education.

Airports have also made significant infrastructure and technology investments to improve the travel journey of those with disabilities. At MSP, infrastructure investments include approximately \$120 million to build 24 state-of-the-art, award-winning accessible restrooms, as well as constructing and operating Service Animal Relief Areas in each concourse. We also have incorporated adult changing tables in restrooms since 2021, with more locations regularly added through our terminal and concourse redevelopment efforts. MSP was among the first airports to offer the Aira Airport Network at no cost to travelers. Using a cellphone app connected to a camera, Aira provides visually impaired individuals access to remote assistants to guide them as they navigate through the airport. We are also expanding our network of hearing loops for the hard-of-hearing, which employs a magnetic, wireless signal that can enhance communications for those with hearing aids. MSP was among the first U.S. airports to implement this technology.

Additional examples of accessibility services at MSP include visual screens to share public address announcements, web and phone-based interpreting services, and closed-captioning on monitors at airline gates and food and beverage venues. Beginning this month, MSP will be piloting “talk-to-text” technology that enables gate announcements to be displayed on monitors in real-time for those who are deaf or hard-of-hearing.

We understand these efforts are enhancing the travel experience for those with disabilities, and we continue to have open dialogue with the disability community to identify gaps and offer solutions to improve. However, these improvements take time and resources to implement.

As airports continue their recovery from the pandemic, one thing has not changed – substantial infrastructure investments are needed to meet the demands of all travelers, including those with disabilities. In addition to creating local jobs, new investments in airports can be valuable tools in upgrading aging terminals to make them more accessible to all.

Airports are extremely grateful to Congress for passing the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law (BIL) this past year, which provided airports \$20 billion over five years to make much-needed improvements. Included in this funding is the Airport Terminal Program (ATP), which allocates \$1 billion to airports annually over five years for terminal projects. Of the \$1 billion granted for fiscal year 2022, roughly two-thirds of the terminal projects accounting for more than \$600 million in federal funding are incorporating enhancements to accessibility and ADA compliance. In fact, at MSP, one of our federally funded terminal investment projects will improve accessibility through the replacement or relocation of six passenger boarding bridges to ensure they meet ADA slope requirements.

Demand for infrastructure investments at our airports is substantial. For fiscal years 2022 and 2023, there have been nearly \$25 billion worth of projects submitted, yet only \$1 billion is granted each year. U.S. airports have \$115 billion in infrastructure needs through 2023, according to the most recent [infrastructure needs survey](#) by Airports Council International – North America. This survey was conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic and does not fully account for all of the new airport public health-related infrastructure upgrades that have since been identified. Those needs are likely to grow when new survey results are released in early 2023.

For these ATP-funded projects, in addition to an array of other terminal, landside and airside development projects that U.S. airports have underway, accessibility is a critical consideration from the earliest stages of planning through project completion. From the sizing of restrooms to the design of public address and flight information displays to the careful consideration of walking distances – and many elements in between – accessibility needs to be designed into modern airport facilities.

As leading economic engines in communities, airports are an integral part of the overall travel and tourism industry. While the recent investment in the Airport Terminal Program is a welcome investment, the funding gap for terminal projects highlights the need for additional federal assistance to keep up with travel demands, which include those travelers who require improved accessibility.

Airports are committed to being responsible stewards of our industry and the intent to make our airports and terminals more accessible, but we need additional assistance to do so. Next year's FAA Reauthorization bill is an excellent opportunity to narrow the gap and help us achieve this goal of being accessible to all.

We are committed to working with the House Transportation and Infrastructure Aviation Subcommittee and our stakeholders to enhance airport accessibility.

Thank you for having me here today.