



hidden mobility disabilities
Making the Invisible Visible

**Accessibility Issues for Persons with Hidden Mobility Disabilities
Air Transportation**

Submitted by the Hidden Mobility Disabilities Alliance

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Persons with a hidden mobility disability (HMD) are independently mobile but can only walk a short distance or stand unsupported for a brief time without serious health consequences.

Primary access barriers:

- Having to walk more than 10-12 metres without sitting down to rest
- Having to stand more than 1-2 minutes

Health consequences of standing or walking beyond a comfortable range:

- Passenger with HMD may become immobilized by pain and literally unable to walk further.
- Passenger with HMD may be incapacitated for at least 24 hours after forcing themselves to walk further than is comfortable.

Checking in at an Aairport:

1. Distance from curb to wheelchair assistance
 - a. Wheelchair assistance needs to be within 10-12 metres of a HMD passenger's point of entry. Both YYZ and YVR have special assistance at the back of the Departures hall, a very long distance for HMD passengers to walk.
 - b. Signage needs to clearly direct the HMD passenger to wheelchair assistance so that they do not walk unnecessary distances trying to find it.
 - c. In U.S. airports, wheelchair assistance is often available at curbside, wheeling the HMD passenger into the Departures lounge.
2. Ability to use check-in kiosks sitting down
 - a. Airlines have moved primary check-in to kiosks that have to be accessed standing up. It usually takes longer than 1 minute to use the kiosk, leaving the HMD passenger in considerable pain.
 - b. Kiosks could be outfitted with little benches that fold down if needed.
3. Ability to be seated (or with wheelchair assistance) at the check-in counter
 - a. By the time the HMD passenger is at the check-in counter, they will probably already have walked as far or further than they can without severe pain. Either the HMD passenger should be provided with wheelchair assistance prior to (rather than after) check-in, or a fold-out bench for seating needs to be available at the check-in counter.
4. Accommodation while waiting for wheelchair assistance
 - a. If wheelchair assistance is not provided prior to check in, then there is typically a wait period until a wheelchair arrives. The HMD passenger needs to be seated during this

time, without having to walk more than 5 m to seating (assuming they have probably already walked at least 10 m to get to check-in).

- b. If the HMD passenger is asked to sit down to wait for wheelchair assistance, the HMD passenger should be seated within the line of sight of airline staff so that the HMD passenger can attract attention without needing to walk if the HMD passenger needs assistance (all too often the seating is behind the staff).
5. Access to wheelchair assistance to get through security
 - a. Often airlines either provide transportation by cart to security and then by another cart after security, or they expect the HMD passenger to walk to and through security and then get on a cart. Either scenario adds too much walking.
 - b. Airlines should provide wheelchair assistance continuously from check in to the gate, allowing HMD passengers to request a pat down (to avoid standing and walking).
 6. Provision of wheelchair assistance right up to seating at the gate
 - a. Airlines have shifted from individual assistance to group assistance by cart. Use of a cart should not require a wheelchair-assist passenger to walk more than 5 m.
 - b. Any cart assistance should be on carts small enough to drive into gate areas and decant HMD passengers at seating within 10 m of the gate podium.

Assistance at the gate:

1. Seating passengers needing wheelchair assistance in the line of sight of staff working the flight
 - a. Passengers are often brought to a gate before the staff working the flight arrive. HMD passengers should be seated conspicuously so that they do not have to walk distances to gain staff attention.
 - b. Passengers needing wheelchair assistance are listed on flight manifests. Staff should speak to each listed passenger – going to them rather than calling them to walk up to the podium [which typically what happens] – to determine what they need.
2. Arranging for assistance down the jet way
 - a. In order to ensure that HMD passengers have plenty of time to get to their seat and get settled, wheelchair assistance should be available at the time of pre-boarding.
 - b. Airlines should ensure that wheelchair-assist passengers indeed have wheelchair assistance down the jet way [I have had this denied to me by Air Canada staff].

Assistance on board the flight:

1. Assistance with entering the aircraft and placing carry-on in overhead bins
 - a. HMD passengers often have to walk some distance to get to their seat. Flight attendant assistance with carry-on luggage can allow them to support themselves on seat backs as they move down the aisle.
 - b. HMD passengers are challenged to maintain balance and also place carry-on above their head. Flight attendant assistance with placing carry-on in the overhead compartments is very helpful.
2. Checking with the passenger during the flight
 - a. By the time a HMD passenger arrives on board, they have typically walked far enough to be in considerable pain. Checking on passengers periodically during flight can be very thoughtful.
3. Access to nearest restroom

- a. In a plane where the HMD passenger is seated near the front of the economy class cabin (to avoid walking a long distance) and the distance to the washroom at the back of the plane is well over 10 m, allow wheelchair-assist passengers to use the closest restroom (which is probably in business or first class).

Assistance deplaning:

1. Avoiding delay in deplaning
 - a. Air Canada is one of very few airlines that does not provide wheelchair assistance until the entire plane has deplaned, which can take up to 20 minutes. [I have flown internationally on more than two dozen airlines, and only Air Canada makes me wait until the plane is empty before a wheelchair is available. If one is paying to fly Business/First, this is particularly irritating.]
 - b. Require that airlines have wheelchair assistance available when the flight arrives so that passengers can deplane in proper sequence and have wheelchair assistance immediately available.
 - c. Plan to have wheelchairs at the end of the jet way rather than expecting (and pressuring) passengers to walk up the jet way unaided.
2. Monitoring deplaned wheelchair-assist passengers from smaller aircraft that do not use jet ways for boarding or deplaning
 - a. Deplaned HMD passengers should not be left unattended by crew while crew secure the aircraft or complete unloading baggage. [I have been left unattended on a dark snowy night on the tarmac for over 10 minutes.]
 - b. Deplaned HMD passengers should not have the wheelchair parked outside the terminal but rather should be taken to a place inside the terminal where they are out of the weather and within speaking distance of airline personnel. [I have been left just inside the terminal door at the end of a long empty corridor with no assistance in sight.]
3. Assistance from the plane to ground transportation
 - a. Just as wheelchair assistance needs to be available from check-in to the aircraft door, so too wheelchair assistance needs to be available from the aircraft door through to either the gate of a connecting flight or to ground transportation. [I have been decanted by Air Canada staff at the entrance to the baggage claim hall at YYZ and expected to make my own way walking to the baggage carousel and then out to ground transportation.]

A suggestion:

Because passengers with hidden mobility disabilities can walk, they are often confused with passengers who have no mobility limitations but would simply like cart assistance for long distances. It might help if a clearer set of code categories were developed:

1. Don't want to walk long distances, but can walk up or down the jet way and stairs
2. **Need wheelchair assistance from check-in to aircraft door, but can walk to own seat and walk up or down stairs**
3. **Need wheelchair assistance from check-in to aircraft door, including up or down stairs, but can walk to own seat**
4. Need wheelchair assistance from check-in to aircraft door, including to and from the cabin seat