OPINION: Airlines break too many wheelchairs

To make travel more inclusive, listen to people with disabilities

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Robyn Powell, an attorney for the National Council on Disability, travels a lot for work. In 2014, United Airlines, US Airways, Jet Blue and Southwest broke her wheelchair. On one flight, a JetBlue captain openly blamed a delay in departure on a “cumbersome wheelchair.” On her return flight, airline workers broke the wheelchair.

Powell’s experience is not unusual. On Dec. 16, US Airways dropped George Washington University professor David Mitchell’s wheelchair on the tarmac during a trip to Hawaii. After almost two weeks of a social media campaign, the airline agreed to provide a replacement. But in the interim, Mitchell was stuck with an uncomfortable rental. Theri Pickens, a professor of English at Bates Colleges, has had her scooter broken by “every airline except Delta,” she tweeted.

Delta breaks plenty of wheelchairs and other mobility devices, though. Of the 530 formal damage complaints filed with the U.S. Department of Transportation in 2013, 28 were against Delta. Moreover, as the Center for Disability Rights’ Leah Smith said in an opinion piece for the group last year, such complaints represent only a small fraction of actual incidents. “An airline receives 100 complaints for every single formal complaint,” she wrote. “Meaning that the airlines, in fact, received closer to 53,000 complaints for damages in 2013.”

Over the last few weeks, I spoke to at least 50 wheelchair users whose mobility devices have either been broken or damaged. Frequent fliers who use wheelchairs agreed that the problem occurs too often. Many have given up on flying altogether. The result is a less inclusive society, with wheelchair users denying themselves the benefits of air travel.

But it doesn’t have to be that way. Accidents happen, but they could be reduced with better training and use of new technologies. Ground crews should be trained on safe loading and storage of mobility devices. More important, airline workers need to listen to wheelchair users. Too often, people with disabilities are treated like objects or children, hustled out of the way, patronized and ignored.

Broken chairs

Under the Air Carrier Access Act of 1986, people with disabilities have many protections when they travel. For example, airlines are required to fix or replace damaged mobility devices. To be clear, airlines do replace broken wheelchairs, regardless of the cost (powered wheelchairs and scooters can cost tens of thousands of dollars). Still, even when the customer experience is good, which does not always

happen, wheelchair users fear future incidents.

For many, a damaged mobility device presents challenges even a huge check from the airlines cannot solve. Rented wheelchairs often do not work well, as every chair needs to be carefully customized. And assistive technologies that act as an extension of the body cannot be quickly or easily replaced. Besides, chairs can be replaced, but traumas die hard.

Users liken the loss of a wheelchair to losing a part of their body. JetBlue offered Powell $150 in credit, but she wasn’t looking for money. She wanted accountability for what she described as the “equivalent to having my legs broken.”

Her complaint is not new. In 2006, United Airlines broke David Gayes’ wheelchair and offered his family $200 in credit. “While the travel certificates are a nice gesture, the offer is hollow without assurances that we can safely travel in the future,” his mother, Janet Gayes, wrote to the airline. Wheelchair users are looking for reforms, not vouchers or even apologies.

The way forward

Airlines and disability advocates are working on two possible solutions: Wheelchair restraint systems in the cabin and better training for ground crews.

Too many people who require mobility devices fly in fear of what they’ll find when they land, or even worse, they just don’t fly.

Typically, accidents happen during the boarding process, when wheelchair users are transferred from their mobility device to boarding chairs and are helped onto an airplane. For some wheelchair users, this is the only moment when total strangers physically separate them from their device and move it out of sight. The method of transport can be complicated. Mobility devices must be hoisted onto a conveyor belt to be stored in the cargo hold. Some wheelchairs have to be disassembled for safety or to remove fragile elements. After landing, the process must be reversed.

Some advocates are seeking approval from the Federal Aviation Authority (FAA) for wheelchair restraint systems in the cabin. This change would allow for wheelchair users to be strapped down safely in their personal device in the passenger cabin. An online petition by Vicki Jurney-Taylor asking the FAA to mandate wheelchair restraint systems in every commercial aircraft has more than 26,000 signatures. The nonprofit All Wheels Up is working with Q’Straint to test restraint systems for wheelchairs. The group’s president, Michele Erwin, says that a wheelchair in an airplane has never been crash-tested but that preliminary reports suggest it is possible to design a system that will work.

The FAA is open to the idea but has expressed some concerns. One potential problem appears to be that wheelchair users often modify their devices. “Airplane parts are tightly controlled under approved quality systems to ensure that the parts are and remain airworthy,” an FAA representative wrote in an
email. “Even if the manufacturer of the wheelchair had such an approved quality management system, once the wheelchair is sold to a customer, it would be difficult for the airline, the manufacturers and the FAA to ensure that the wheelchair continues to meet the standards over time.”

However, airlines are now recognizing that many wheelchair accidents can be avoided through better training even without a new restraint system. Some airlines have contracted nonprofit groups such as the Open Doors Organization (ODO) to assist them. Its executive director, Eric Lipp, says ground crews are usually eager to learn. “For the men and women on the ground crews, they don’t want to break your chair, and when they do, they feel like crap,” he said.

The ODO’s solutions include practice sessions, advice from wheelchair users and new systems. For example, in London ODO worked with Heathrow Airport to design a lift system that eliminates the need for men and women to manually hoist powered chairs onto and off the conveyer belt. This took the most dangerous moment — loading a more-than-200-pound device into a conveyer by hand — out of the equation. The result dramatically reduced the rate of accidents.

Even manual lifting can be made safer. The ODO has designed posters and cards that demonstrate safe lifting — a tool that can be used for nonverbal communication on a noisy tarmac. They have helped airlines design better tags specifically for wheelchairs. They track damage for airlines and identify problems with specific types of devices or specific crews. They have taught crews how to store chairs in a hold without leaving fragile components such as joysticks exposed. Above all, airport workers need to be patient and take the time to listen to the wheelchair users, who know their chairs better than anyone else.

Finally, when a chair breaks, airlines need prompt and respectful incident response. Some airlines are working with the Global Repair Group, a for-profit offshoot of the ODO, to make the process of getting repairs or replacements more consistent. But as Mitchell’s experience shows, the process is still terribly slow.

In the end, mobility matters. Too many people who require mobility devices fly in fear of what they’ll find when they land, or even worse, they just don’t fly. Nearly 25 years after the passage of the Americans With Disabilities Act and nearly 30 years after the Air Carrier Access Act, we’re a long way from consistent accessibility. The two bills were intended to promote laws and practices that would enable us to build a fully inclusive society. Such a society must guarantee equality of access and of opportunity. Airlines, technology leaders and lawmakers should come together to devise a system that would make air travel more accommodating for people with disabilities.

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