

Wheelchair services at airports, not good enough, but getting better

I arrived at Terminal three in Toronto Pearson airport with my sister. She requires wheelchair assistance for distance walking. She's able to walk short distance, so we disembarked with everyone else. At the top of the gangway, we stopped in front of the wheelchair attendant and identified ourselves as needing assistance to the customs area. She smiled, helped my sister into a wheelchair, pushed her out of the way and asked us to wait. We waited as ten more people exited and settled into wheelchairs. There was one attendant. Her job was to get us to the elevator. I watched as she pushed two chairs at a time to a tiny elevator that holds two chairs and relayed all ten of us with bags and family to the next stage in a three step process to get to customs.

From the elevator down one storey, we are escorted on a golf cart to another staging area at an elevator where the guest is put into another wheelchair where we wait to go down in another elevator one more storey to the security area. Each stage has a different attendant that is ferrying people, and running back and forth. Wait times can seem forever.

Eventually we arrive at Canadian Customs where there is a designated area for disabled persons to use the kiosks to get their declaration into Canada. That goes smoothly and the customs officers are very kind and helpful.

My sister and I have travelled a few times over the last couple of years and I admit that this system at terminal three has improved. However, it still has a long way to go before I would say that it is efficient or customer friendly. The attendant's do not speak. They do not explain what is happening, or what is coming next, or what to expect. When you are left in a chair you are not asked to wait or told how long it may be. They just pull you up and walk away. They will not speak to family or except assistance when offered. Our first time through the process was very stressful. Our last time through the process, I was helping others by telling them what to expect.

Bad service for those needing assistance is not exclusive to Toronto Pearson, here are some other incidents I have observed:

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- A woman sitting in a chair facing the wall all by herself with no one around, left forgotten
- I asked for help with a carry-on suitcase and was told “that’s not my job”
- In Puerto Rico an attendant kicked a woman out a chair because the chair belonged to another airlines
- We were refused a wheelchair because we walked off a plane before we were given permission
- Attendants who refuse to speak to family members or accept help when offered

As the population ages more and more people will be using and requesting this service. I have seen it in my own business. My senior customers are mentally healthy their desire to travel is as strong as ever. However their bodies can’t keep up. Most seniors simply can’t make it from the check in counter to the flight gates.

The system is further burdened by the people who are using it unnecessarily just so they can take advantage of the skip-the-line security screening. I have been asked by healthy customers to book them wheelchairs so they can skip-the-line and I refused, knowing full well they will do it themselves and make people who truly need the assistance wait.

As our population ages, I don’t see this problem getting any better. Airports will have to keep improving the system with more dedicated staff, more wheelchairs, and better customer service.