

Mary Kirby: Welcome to the #PaxEx Podcast available on iTunes. This is episode 45 of the show where we talk about everything to do with the passenger experience. I am Mary Kirby and I am joined by my co-host Max Flight. Max, how are you doing?

Max Flight: I'm great. You know Mary one of the things I love about being an aviation podcaster is we have the opportunity to learn new perspectives through conversations with our guests and this episode is going to be one where I know I am going to learn a lot about a topic where I'm really lacking in knowledge and understanding so I can't wait.

Mary Kirby: Yeah me too. I am in the same boat as you, Max, I am excited about this for sure. But before we get started, we would like to thank the Jetliner Cabin's E-Book app for sponsoring this week's podcast. When you are enjoying an inflight meal or movie high above the earth, have you ever wondered about the level of thinking that has gone into your immediate living space? The contoured seatback and supporting headrest, the safety provisions, the mood lighting. The meticulous selection of sound absorbent material calibrated to block intrusive noise frequencies. Jetliner Cabins is the story of how scientists, designers, engineers, maintenance and marketing specialists have transformed the stark tubular interiors of typical airliners into unique settings each with their own defined look, ambiance and personality. This e-book app invites readers to explore the expertise, discover the details and enjoy the fascinating world of Jetliner Cabins. Visit JetlinerCabins.com to learn more and to download the app.

Now it's my great pleasure to introduce our guest today, focused on technology and transportation Mika Pyyhkala is Vice President of the National Federation of the Blind of Massachusetts and Vice President of the Association of Blind Citizens. He has attended the US DOT Air Carrier Access Act working group forums on behalf of these organizations since about the year 2000. Welcome to the show Mika.

Mika Pyyhkala: Good morning. Great to be with you.

Max Flight: Mika I am so excited to be talking to you so let's jump right in and take a look at some of the #PaxEx news stories making headlines. First a blind woman says she was recently booted off an American Airlines flight after she requested a slightly roomier seat in order to accommodate her service dog. Mika, I understand that you fly on 50-75 segments per year, are these types of situations common and do you think #PaxEx has gotten better or worse for blind passengers through the years?

Mika Pyyhkala: I mean I think the extreme incidents of somebody being kicked off a flight much like in the general public is thankfully somewhat rare but it does happen. But you do hear a lot of stories still even in 2017 of people with blindness and other disabilities talking about the hassle of air travel or how the system really hasn't yet fully caught up to speed with kind of the best way to handle blindness and disability. There was actually a case a couple of years ago with a US Air Express flight out of Philadelphia where a gentleman with a service dog was thrown off of a flight and actually all of the other passengers got off the flight sort of in support of the gentleman and they ended up canceling the flight. So that also is kind of a high profile case.

And in this most recent case of Sue Martin, she was actually attending the CSUN Accessibility conference. I think the incident happened at DCA on an American mainline flight so it wasn't commuter. Sometimes with commuter flights, or regional operations you may have personnel that don't have quite the training or the experience as someone working with a mainline carrier but as far as I know this incident happened at American at DCA on a mainline flight. And actually, Sue was interviewed in detail on The Blind Side podcast with Jonathan Mose and ... I can send you a link to that but they probably have a good half-hour to hour interview with Sue Martin and she describes the incident in some great detail.

Mary Kirby: Mika, obviously we are seeing more in the way of emotional support animals on board. We are obviously seeing of course service animals on board. Do you believe that there should be a certain sort of preference for people with disabilities? Who gets preference when you have an animal on board because we are seeing more and more?

Mika Pyyhkala: I mean our expertise and focus is really on blindness so that would involve, you know, seeing eye dogs, and guide dogs. So you know we don't really have expertise in emotional support animals ... we support obviously the full inclusion of all people with disabilities but our primary, you know, expertise and knowledge is in guide dogs and seeing eye dogs. And to that extent as well, what we sometimes see is - and this is kind of a broader concept beyond just service animals - kind of either the airlines as a whole or staff in a micro-sense kind of imagining a one size fits all [solution]. So I think in the Sue Martin case they may have assigned her to a bulkhead seat even though she had pre-reserved another type of seat. So it's kind of the best practice is really to ask the customer what they want and what would be best for them, rather than assuming one size fits all. Which might mean you might assume that everybody with a disability would prefer a bulkhead seat. Or everybody with a disability would like to pre-board, you know, which isn't really necessarily the case.

Mary Kirby: So better communication essentially?

Mika Pyyhkala: Exactly better, you know, communication with the person kind of realizing everybody is going to have different needs and wants. I was thinking over the last couple of days, something I observed a long time ago at Washington Dulles [with] United... before their merger with Continental they would make an announcement and instead of saying, you know, 'people with disabilities can pre board', they would say something like 'If you have a disability you can board at anytime.' Whenever you would be most comfortable. And I thought that was a good way of doing things and a good example of how things should be done and it happened quite a bit at Dulles. I don't know if it was just Dulles that kind of tried. It was definitely more than once so I'm curious kind of how that came to be. But it really kind of amplified the spirit of how things should be done.

Max Flight: Mika, when I think of seeing-eye dogs, these are not the smallest animals, at least that's what I think of, and so what is the accommodation in an airline? The dog has to be at your feet, is that kind of what has to happen?

Mika Pyyhkala: Yeah so the dogs range in size quite a bit. You can have really small dogs as well as larger ones and the basic requirement [is] that they can come into the cabin with the passenger but they can't obstruct the aisle. So I suppose the ideal scenario would be an empty middle seat but if that is not possible because of the load factors, these days then the dog would typically go underneath the seat in front of the guide dog handler or an adjacent space. But in particular with the bulkhead, sometimes there is less room than other seats. So a number of people kind of prefer the seat other than the bulkhead. While there might be some people with some specific aircraft types that do prefer the bulkhead.

Mary Kirby: I wonder if the problem is getting even a little bit trickier as airlines are tightening up the seat pitch, the living space that passengers have in economy class specifically. Do you think that is something that needs to be considered going forward Mika?

Mika Pyyhkala: It could be ... I mean I think it should be done in conjunction with evaluating it in terms of what extent would different types of service animals, you know, fit in this configuration or does the aircraft have some type of even 'More Space' or 'Economy Plus' type premium economy seating that might have a little bit more room but it's definitely, you know, if you make a 30" seat pitch, you've got to test out these different scenarios of 'okay how would a service animal fit in this space?'

Mary Kirby: Alas, they are not even doing real world evacuation testing of humans,

Mika Pyyhkala: Exactly

Mary Kirby: For these high-density configurations, it would be really profoundly interesting to see the FAA push forward with some real world testing of evacuations involving humans and of course service animals to boot, if anyone at the FAA is listening.

Max Flight: Mika, let me ask a difficult question and this might get me in trouble with some people but take the case of people who are exceedingly large, right, and I know some people who just would not ever fit in an economy class seat so they always have to purchase a business class ticket or better. How do we address that issue with regard to blind people? Do people come and say, "Well if there is not enough room for you and the dog, go buy a higher class seat." How do you respond to that?

Mika Pyyhkala: You know I have never really heard the suggestion that sort of blind users of service animals would not be able to purchase any type of economy ticket that anybody else would purchase. In fact, the Air Carrier Access Act and Part 382 has a lengthy section that kind of stipulates the accommodation of service animals and beyond just the legality of it, it's kind of a principle in any kind of place of public accommodation. Whether it be an airplane, or a restaurant or any place or an Uber even; people using service animals need to be accommodated. I haven't really heard that proposal, but I can almost guarantee you that it wouldn't go over well with service animal users if you said, "Hey, you have to buy a ticket that's five or ten times more expensive."

Max Flight: Of course, and just to be clear I am not recommending that at all, just raising the question.

Mika Pyyhkala: It's an interesting question, obviously those seats have more room and there has been some compressions of, in some markets, of the difference between economy and a first class fare especially with the transcon markets and bringing those fares down to around \$500 with JetBlue's expansions, but it definitely wouldn't fly if you tried to tell service animal users that they have to buy more expensive tickets.

Max Flight: Of course. Alright, let's push ahead and talk about The Guardian report. They have a report on how disabled passengers still face discrimination by airlines. The Guardian highlights several instances where passengers' mobility devices were damaged and their owners had to fight to be compensated. Now anti-discrimination laws in the US are different than those observed by European airlines. Mika, should the European Commission follow the United States lead and ensure the airlines pay the full cost when mobility equipment is damaged on domestic flights?

Mika Pyyhkala: I would say that if equipment is damaged they should pay the full cost to replace it. Again that's not my core area of expertise involving mobility disabilities but just on first cuff I know that a person's wheelchair is kind of core and fundamental to their everyday living - all aspects, you know everyday living. If it was damaged on a flight then I think it should be paid for and the carriers, just like in the US, in other locations should ensure that these things don't happen but if they do they should make it right.

Mary Kirby: You know we recently covered a piece about British women who were calling for airports and airlines to establish expert advisory groups in a bid to change the way that airline passengers with disabilities are treated in the United Kingdom, and this Guardian report also cites a number of incidents in the UK. It seems like this is a real point of concern for travelers. I have to say I am a little bit surprised; I should think that it would be a given that your mobility equipment was damaged that that would be covered. Max, I mean you have flown for many, many years; we see obviously a lot of people who need mobility equipment who obviously if you fly Southwest Airlines there are a lot of wheelchairs. Also of course waiting for passengers that are coming off of that aircraft. What are your thoughts on this?

Max Flight: Yeah, I wonder why this equipment, these wheelchairs and other similar devices, are damaged. Is it because the baggage handlers are just not sure how to treat this kind of thing or do they need to be packaged in a way that would reduce the likelihood of damage? I don't know I am curious about that. Clearly we have issues with luggage in general being stored; I don't know if mobility devices fall under the same guidelines, the same rules, the same training as the rest of luggage that is going in the bottom of the plane.

Mika Pyyhkala: I would also agree with the notion here in the US that these panels ... would be formed to kind of improve the passenger experience both in terms of airports and the airlines for

people who are blind, both in terms of training staff on the best approaches to interacting with people who are blind, as well as airports and kind of the design of new terminals and making sure that the facilities are accessible. For example, information about independent way finding. I know, for example, the San Francisco Airport did a pilot study using eye beacons to allow persons that are blind to more readily independently find gates or restaurants or other amenities but then I've heard recently that they have shut down, hopefully temporarily shut down the test. But that's anything from the design of new products and airports to just more types of forms with airports and airline staff. You know we don't really see that a lot. I mean maybe to some extent. I know JetBlue does a lot with autism, but we haven't really seen a lot of engagement with the air carriers around blindness. And just one little example of something that I hear happening is that carrier personnel or their contractors kind of think that a blind person needs a wheelchair, where as in most cases they don't. And that basic understanding and getting away from the one-size-fits-all model, and I think if blind people and people with other disabilities were regularly in the airports participating in career training and that type of thing, that would go along way. [I'm reminded of] one of our conventions several years ago in Dallas actually Southwest Airlines sponsored the convention; they were one of several sponsors. They sent a number of representatives during the week to the Hilton Hotel, kind of to meet with us and we got feedback from them and they got feedback from us. I think that needs to be done on a much larger scale and across the industry and not just once a year and not just kind of in reaction to an incident or regulation but just it needs to be kind of part of the embedded operations within the airports and airlines.

Mary Kirby: Are there any airports or airlines that you would flag up as being sensitive to these issues in a way that perhaps others are not?

Mika Pyyhkala: I mean they all have kind of their ups and downs. I'd say perhaps we've worked the most with Southwest and JetBlue and they've made some inroads for instance in trying to ensure that their Wi-Fi portals are accessible but I mean all of them really have kind of their ups and downs. The experience can really vary across airline to airline, airport to airport and staff person to staff person which I know the Air Carrier Access Act was trying to make it more consistent but you know, I think if you talk to a dozen people that took a flight you'd hear a lot of inconsistencies and some troubles that people had. In my case I fly a lot of the same routes a lot. A lot of the people know me so I feel like I don't have as many issues as if I flew all different routes more frequently.

Max Flight: Well that is an interesting point because I was going to say in these situations, awareness I think plays a big role. In your case, by travelling the same route meeting the same people, they are aware but promoting that kind of awareness more broadly within the airline industry can bring good result I would think.

Mika Pyyhkala: And I think also it needs to go beyond "we are doing [this] for compliance or because we have to. You are not going to a good job if you are doing something just because you have to do it. I mean it's more making it a part of a culture within these companies and these airports.

Mary Kirby: And, as you say, going beyond mainline and to the regionals. Of course we saw recently with this United Airlines passenger incident where the passenger was dragged off the aircraft; that was of course the United Express flight and initially, in the response to when this video emerged, there was a lot of folks in industry saying, “Oh, well that was United Express it wasn't United Mainline.” That really shouldn't matter, you know, the treatment needs to be consistent even with your regional partners.

Mika Pyyhkala: Exactly and also I think one issue we find is that it's a lot of services are contracted out and not provided directly by the carrier. A lot of times the quality of the service is lacking if it is contracted out instead of a full-time career carrier employee that has been there for a long time and is there for a long time to stay.

Max Flight: Alright we have one more item on the agenda here and since we are lucky enough to have Mika on the show, we want to get his thoughts on the US Department of Transportation's plan to issue a NPRM, that's a notice of proposed rulemaking, this summer to improve accessibility of aircraft lavatories and inflight entertainment. Now this NPRM will propose a variety of measures that were agreed to by an advisory committee that was composed of airlines and persons with disabilities, flight attendants, aircraft manufacturers and motion picture studios as well as other #PaxEx stakeholders. Mika this sounds like a good step in the other direction, are you liking what you've been hearing from the DOT?

Mika Pyyhkala: Yes in particular with the focus on inflight entertainment systems. My collage Parnell Diggs from the National Federation of the Blind served on that panel and I think the main takeaway in terms of inflight entertainment systems [is] people talk a lot in general and in the documentation about the NPRM about Closed Captioning and video description, but even more fundamental than that is the menus of the system so being able to say, “Do I want to watch CNN or Fox or NBC” and being able to select the channel that you want through an accessible interface and in the world outside aviation that's been done by Comcast; they have a fully accessible set top cable box where you can use the guide, the DVR, you know you can hear auditoriily what's playing on a station and that was championed by Tom Wlodkowski, who is their Vice President of Accessibility, who I actually [worked with] when he worked at the National Center for Accessible Media in Boston. But really, being able to access those menus is paramount. Even if you look at something like Virgin America's Red IFE system where you would use those menus even to do something like order food or chat with other passengers.

Mary Kirby: Mika, through the years we have heard a lot of complaints from deaf and hard of hearing passengers and blind passengers about the inflight entertainment situation and there is a feeling right now that you know it's 2017, it's kind of jarring that we don't have more captioned content in-flight and more in the way of oral assist. Is it frustrating for you? Do you hear the same complaints that it just seems kind untenable given how technology has advanced?

Mika Pyyhkala: Yeah, I think that the fundamental is that when these systems were conceived, developed, implemented and updated the needs of people who are blind or deaf kind of weren't

taken into account and if there is one possible silver lining is kind of the move towards using your own device. So, for instance, I can use something like a iPhone with the built-in voiceover screen reader, which is built in to all iPhones if you turn it on and then access the carrier's Wi-Fi portal and TV listings. You know, as long that web page is accessible and has been designed with accessibility and some of the accessibility standards in mind then, to some extent with bring-your-own-device (BYOD) people are able to access some of its content and that can certainly act as a bridge before we can get to a point where the embedded systems are accessible.

Mary Kirby: Yeah it is interesting. Would you accept, and this is being proposed in this DOT NPRM that I guess is going to drop in July, if the seatback entertainment screen is not accessible they would provide an iPad or another tablet that would [serve] as a replacement? We have actually heard folks that say, "Well that's unacceptable to me, I want the same experience." Do you think that that's a good way meeting halfway?

Mika Pyyhkala: I mean it sounds like a good stop-gap measure, I would want to know if the entire experience were available on the iPad or sometimes what happens is, the iPad may only have 25%, 50% or 70% of the content or the services that are available through the embedded portal. And another related thing that some of your readers or listeners may notice out there is kind of these kiosks, like iPads out in airports where you can order food and those have not been enabled, although they could with accessibility features so that people ... who are blind can access them.

Mary Kirby: Ah, so that's a real opportunity for the likes of ... OTG Management that are doing all of these iPad-based ordering systems that are at airports around the country is what you are saying?

Mika Pyyhkala: Exactly, if the iPad has the built-in voice-over technology, that they could enable with a tavo basically.

Mary Kirby: [It's a] little bit frustrating that we are not using the technology at our hands actually. Max there are a lot of horror stories also of course with the bathroom situation on board aircraft, through the years having read people crawling to the bathroom, trying to access the bathroom, especially of course single-aisle aircraft being a big issue. This NPRM it is still going to take some time. We are looking at years out before some of this stuff is resolved. What are your thoughts on that?

Max Flight: Sure, well the NPRM process is kind of interesting for people who may not be familiar with it. When the NPRM is published, what you generally have is typically 60 days for public comment. Now different agencies and different situations can lengthen or shorten that, but usually it is 60 days for public comment and you have the ability to submit your comments, your thoughts and that is the whole purpose of the NPRM. So when this is published, I think it is important on the part of those who have some interest or some experience or are stakeholders in this process to take the time to look at what the proposals are and to provide your feedback

through that. Generally you find the NPRM at the regulations.gov website. They'll show up there after they are published in the Federal Register. But again this is sort of [is] the opportunity of the public to contribute thoughts and ideas to these kinds of rule making activities.

Mary Kirby: Mika will you be weighing in at all?

Mika Pyyhkala: Yes, myself individually and through these organizations will definitely weigh in especially with regard to the IFE part of the NPRM.

Mary Kirby: Interesting the Airline Passenger Experience Association (APEX) is the organization that represents the inflight entertainment, connectivity stakeholders and other #PaxEx stakeholders at this juncture. They have been working alongside the DOT and regulators on this issue and this is all part of a kind of negotiated proposal where, from my understanding, they are suggesting a certain, as you said before, percentage of content be captioned. Would the deaf and hard of hearing community accept a 50% sort of negotiated agreement or should they expect more?

Mika Pyyhkala: I am really not sure because we haven't really focused on the captioning part of it, mainly blindness is our area of expertise, but I am sure like National Association of the Deaf or other stakeholders could provide a comment to what extent they would accept a partial phased in approach to the captioning.

Mary Kirby: What would your expectation be for blind passengers?

Mika Pyyhkala: As I said the main issue that I see, and it's gotten a little bit of attention but probably not enough, is being able to navigate the menus to even tell the system what you want to watch or listen to and to interact with other parts of the system such as ordering food, or other innovative offerings that they might offer through these platforms. As well, the expansion of the video description which is roughly analogous to closed captions for people who are blind. It provides verbal descriptions to items that are happening visually in a movie or TV Show.

Mary Kirby: Yeah, so that's the key. The visual descriptions.

Mika Pyyhkala: And the menus. If you can't access the menus you're done, I mean - how can you get to a specific movie if you can't access the menu of the system?

Mary Kirby: And it's not a comfortable situation to have to then ask for assistance from the flight attendant or fellow passengers, obviously.

Mika Pyyhkala: Exactly and we found that even when inflight Wi-Fi in the US sort of came to be, it started out using an inaccessible visual captcha, which is where you get those scrambled letters where you have to enter the letter, you know, log in and we worked with Gogo and they actually, they now have a text-based captcha so it will ask you something like, "What is 9 minus 7" and you type in your answer and it let's you in. And some airlines like JetBlue have just

completely eliminated the captcha altogether, but I understand on some international flights that there is still a visual-only captcha and that that's problematic obviously because it can't be independently used and even if you manage to get assistance once if your device drops off and you have to log back in or if you switch from your cellphone to your computer back and forth. So you know ensuring that these portals, these web portals and mobile apps, are accessible; it is extremely important.

Mary Kirby: A real message to stakeholders in the industry at this juncture. An important message. Well unfortunately we are rapidly coming to close. We would like to thank our listeners and remember you can find us online at RunwayGirlNetwork.com and on iTunes. Be sure to follow all the Runway Girl Network activity on Twitter at [@RunwayGirl](https://twitter.com/RunwayGirl) and remember to use the #PaxEx hashtag when tweeting about the passenger experience. Join in the conversation, we'd love to have you. I'd like to reiterate our thanks to our sponsor, the Jetliner Cabins E-Book app, and I'd like to thank Mika for being our guest. Mika where can listeners find you at?

Mika Pyyhkala: You can find me on Twitter [@Pyyhkala](https://twitter.com/Pyyhkala) or you can email at Pyyhkala@gmail.com

Max Flight: Very, very good. It's been a pleasure Mika and we will ask all of you to join us again next time as we talk about the passenger experience on the #PaxEx Podcast.

Mary Kirby: Take care everyone.