

## **POSITION STATEMENT**

### **COMMUNICATION ACCESS IN AIRPORT FACILITIES**

#### ***ISSUE***

The Commonwealth *Disability Discrimination Act 1992* (DDA) makes it clear that all people who are Deaf or have a hearing impairment have the same right to access information as do those without significant hearing impairment. Therefore, if a facility provides arrangements to amplify speech (such as enquiry counters or the like, and/or meeting rooms) and those arrangements use sounds to alert users to anything, then the facility should provide parallel arrangements that enable Deaf and hearing impaired people to receive the sounds and information. Failure to provide equitable access to such facilities means the person who is Deaf or has a hearing impairment is discriminated against. It is illegal to discriminate against people on the basis of their hearing disability.

If there are legislative provisions to provide particular information or sounds, such as fire alarms or emergency warnings/instructions, then that information/sounds must be accessible to all. The Building Code of Australia (BCA) and various Australian Standards indicate the specific obligations in respect of various types of buildings and transport systems. Where there are no specific other legislative provisions, the DDA still applies and makes it illegal to discriminate against people with deafness on the basis of that disability.

The Department of Infrastructure, Transport and Regional Development and Local Government advises the Government on the policy and regulatory framework for Australian airports and the aviation industry. The Department's Aviation and Airports Division manages the continuing relationship between the Government and the Civil Aviation Safety Authority (CASA), Airservices Australia (Airservices) and Australia's airlines. It also manages Australia's participation in the work of the International Civil Aviation Organization (ICAO) and provides the secretariat for the International Air Services Commission (IASC).

For the majority of work involving airport buildings, the relevant standards can be found in the BCA, as applied in the State/Territory in which the building activity is taking place. Where the BCA does not apply (eg in relation to civil engineering works such as roads and bridges, or specific aeronautical structures such as aerobridges, hangars, etc) the relevant standards will be specified in the Airport Building Controller Operations Manual. Generally these will be approved Australian standards, or where no such standard is available, a recognised international standard.

Generally State and Territory laws in respect of building approvals and planning have no effect at leased federal airports. State and Territory law with respect to the registration of builders and other construction professionals, builder insurance, occupational health and safety, and fire safety apply.



It is the opinion of the Deafness Forum of Australia that the health and safety of both staff and passengers must always be considered in all activities.

Deafness Forum believes that it is essential that architects and designers have been trained in the design issues that affect people who are Deaf or hearing impaired that there are appropriate skills in the design team and that they are appropriately briefed.

As a general principle the costs of providing assistance to passengers who are Deaf or hearing impaired at airports should not be passed directly to passengers. This is the agreed principle in Europe and the UK.

Companies should review their policies, procedures and practices to ensure that they meet the needs of passengers who are Deaf or hearing impaired.

It is a more cost effective approach to ensure that access for people who are Deaf or hearing impaired is included from the outset as part of the initial design of an aircraft and airport terminal (rather than retro-fitting) and this directly benefits all customers.

### **Out of scope**

This position statement does not cover airline travel.

## ***STATISTICS***

Currently, one in six Australians suffers from some form of hearing impairment, and this is projected to increase to one in four by 2050 (Access Economics 2006).

## ***RECOMMENDATIONS***

### **General Announcements and Individual Communications**

The anxiety created by not being able to easily communicate with personnel at counters, not hearing announcements or not understanding where a service is located, is a safety issue and a source of concern and distress to travelers who are Deaf or hearing impaired. Airport operators, air carriers and associated businesses need to increase the accessibility of announcements and communication with passengers in airports.

1. Deafness Forum **recommends** an Induction Loop system be installed in terminals to amplify announcements for passengers wearing hearing aids. This Induction Loop system must be maintained in working order and in good repair.
2. Deafness Forum **recommends** a pager system to assist passengers, visitors and staff who are deaf or hearing impaired to access fire alarm and public address information in the same way as hearing passengers.
3. Deafness Forum **recommends** the use of live text based messages on all airport display screens in addition to audio announcements.
4. Deafness Forum **recommends** that public address announcements be improved by



speaking more clearly, more slowly and where required, repeating the message.

5. Deafness Forum **recommends** that any announcement about airport services also include a description of the service location.

6. Deafness Forum **recommends** that, if passengers request it, air carriers use well-contrasted markers to write down the boarding gate number in large characters for those who have difficulties reading the information on boarding passes, to facilitate their identification.

7. Deafness Forum **suggests** that air carriers ensure that dedicated pen and paper are available at every check-in counter to facilitate communication with travelers who are Deaf or hearing impaired, in the event of other communication methods not being available. This is a fallback position and not a preferred option.

### **TTYs and other Forms of Communication**

Deafness Forum believes that access to Telephone Typewriters (TTYs), volume-controlled phones and access to the National Relay Service (NRS) are essential for travelers who are Deaf or hearing impaired.

8. Deafness Forum **recommends** that airport operators ensure that an adequate number of public TTYs and volume-controlled phones are available, in both the public area (landside and airside) and the arrival and departure area, 24-hours a day and that they be located no more than 75 metres apart by the shortest possible public route.

9. Deafness Forum **suggests** that airport operators should provide affordable internet access for use with the NRS internet relay for Deaf and hearing impaired travelers (as an alternative to an accessible phone).

10. Deafness Forum **recommends** that airport and air carrier personnel be fully aware of the location of such TTYs and volume-controlled phones.

11. Deafness Forum **recommends** that telephones including TTYs should be clearly indicated by appropriate signage.

### **Self-Identification (of deafness)**

Deafness Forum believes that many travelers do not yet understand the benefits of stating their hearing impairment to airline or airport staff. Self identification can be encouraged. If a traveler makes their communication requirements known, the staff involved can do their best to assist.

12. Deafness Forum **recommends** that airport operators and air carriers actively promote an understanding of the benefits of self-identification among travelers who are Deaf or hearing impaired.

### **Itineraries in Alternative Formats**

The need for a plain language travel itinerary, available upon request in alternative formats can be a benefit to travelers who are Deaf or hearing impaired.

13. Deafness Forum **recommends** that itineraries and individual travel information

provided by Airport operators, air carriers and associated businesses need be made available in the appropriate alternative format, including minimal use of codes and acronyms.

Air carriers are encouraged to work in concert with travel agents to facilitate these recommendations.

### **Associated services**

All services associated with the airport should provide accessibility. This can include kiosks, shops, car parks and bus services.

14. Deafness Forum **recommends** that all transport provided in conjunction with the airport includes appropriate accessibility. For example, buses to and from car parks provide destination and fare information in text format.

15. Deafness Forum **recommends** that car park booths and machines are accessible. Where information is provided in audible format (eg a beep), an equivalent visual format should be provided (eg a flashing or strobe light).

16. Deafness Forum **recommends** that where passengers have to access other services within the terminal (an example might be baggage services) all parts of this service should be accessible. For example, a passenger should not have to use a phone to contact someone inside the office. This is discrimination against people who cannot use a phone.

17. Deafness Forum **recommends** that where associated services invite payment for goods purchased, cash registers should have a visual display so that customers can see the amount owing and not have to rely on trying to hear the counter staff.

### **Security**

While travelers understand the need for heightened security, the process still needs to be accessible. People who are Deaf or hearing impaired often cannot hear when a security alarm associated with metal detectors sounds, and are often unsure of whether or not they can proceed to their gate. Visual information by way of basic diagrams are utilized extensively throughout Europe to great effect.

18. Deafness Forum **recommends** that security personnel use both audio and visual means to indicate whether or not travelers can proceed to their boarding area after passing through the metal detector.

19. Deafness Forum **recommends** that security personnel undergo deafness awareness training to ensure understanding of the issues. For example, something as simple as saying “Whose bag is this?” Or, “Is this your bag?”, or speaking to the traveler if either party is facing away – any of these situations at the security screening point can become complicated if the security guard is facing away from the Deaf or hearing impaired traveler.

20. Deafness Forum **recommends** that all airports provide training and support to their security officers and ensure that security contractors provide adequate training to their



personnel. Internationally, this principle has been embraced, an example of which is the following directive of the Transportation Security Administration (TSA) in the USA. The TSA recommendations for air travelers with hearing loss are as follows:

“If you need help from one of our Security Officers, tell him or her that you have a hearing disability and explain the best way to communicate with you. If the screening process is unclear to you, ask our Security Officer to write the information down.

If you can read lips or are hard of hearing, ask our Security Officer to look directly at you and repeat the information slowly. It is best if you wear your hearing device (hearing aid, cochlear implant or middle ear implant) while going through the metal detector. Otolaryngologist and otolaryngology surgeons say that none of our screening processes affect these devices.

If you are concerned or uncomfortable with going through the walk-through metal detector, or are uneasy with having your external component of your cochlear implant x-rayed, you can ask for a full body pat-down and a visual and physical inspection of the exterior component while you wear it.

If you use a hearing dog, you and the dog will remain together while you go through the security checkpoint.”

The Deafness Forum recommends that a similar directive be applied universally within Australian airports and that security staff be trained and sympathetic in the handling of similar issues to those which arise in the above paragraph.

## **Deafblind**

Travelers who are deafblind will generally be accompanied on their travel. However this does not preclude the need for availability of services and information for the deafblind.

21. Deafness Forum **recommends** that a bipartisan industry and consumer focus group should be established to consider service issues of concern to travelers who are deafblind.

## **Reserved seating areas**

22. Deafness Forum **recommends** that:

a) seating areas (for example in departure lounges) be set aside for people who are Deaf or hearing impaired. These areas are to be covered by a fully functional hearing loop, and with line of sight to the desk.

b) when such areas are defined for the use of the Deaf or hearing impaired that equipment in such areas must be compatible with hearing aids, have variable amplification for those who do not use a hearing aid, and some kind of text communication facility.

23. Deafness Forum **recommends** that this seating area must have adequate signage (for example the International Symbol for Deafness). However, such provision does not negate the airport's responsibility to provide adequate equality of access within all areas of the facility.

#### **Access to information**

24. Deafness Forum **recommends** that staff at the gate should identify themselves to passengers who have self-identified as Deaf or hearing impaired, and should ensure that they are kept informed when audible announcements are made.

25. Deafness Forum **recommends** that all airport personnel dealing with the public including contractors and cabin crew, including the flight crew, should receive deafness and hearing awareness training.

26. Deafness Forum strongly **recommends** that where video, or similar systems, are used to communicate safety or emergency information, captions should be included to supplement any audio commentary. Additionally, where possible, Deafness Forum recommends that sign language is also represented on screen. This approach is often utilized in airports internationally.

27. Deafness Forum **suggests** the need for captions will be minimised if the video program is produced without the need for audio commentary, ie. a video relying solely on pictures. It will also assist people with a learning disability, a first language other than English and sign language users. A concurrent audio description would, however, still be required for blind and partially sighted passengers.

28. Deafness Forum **recommends** that all emergency announcements and others relating to changes to the schedule, connections, and on board services should be made visually and orally, in all areas eg monitors in public areas, departure lounges, airline clubs/lounges, etc.

29. Deafness Forum **recommends** that **all** announcements should be made visually and orally. In this way sensory impaired people are given equal access to the information provided to other passengers.

30. Deafness Forum **recommends** that all airport and airline advertisements displayed both internally and externally to the airport terminal utilise open captioning to facilitate equitable access to all members of the community.

31. Deafness Forum **recommends** a dedicated section of the Airport and air carriers' web sites be provided to help travelers with additional needs to make the most of the range of services available before their journey.

#### **Entertainment**

Technology is advancing rapidly enabling access to television and other programs. Over time many passengers will benefit from captions and audio descriptions in airport departure lounges. The sometimes noisy environment can make it difficult for any passenger to hear announcements, whether they have a hearing loss or not.



32. Deafness Forum **recommends** that wherever televisions are switched on, they should display closed captions if they are screened as part of the program. For example, all prime time (6pm to 10.30pm) television should be broadcast with captions, as should all news and current affairs. (Audio systems should be compatible with the “T” switch on hearing aids worn by hearing impaired passengers.) This assists all viewers in a noisy environment.

### **Signage**

33. Deafness Forum **recommends** that the International Symbol for Deafness be used appropriately to identify to passengers, both local and visiting, what assistive technology is available. While other signage may be used *in conjunction with* the International Symbol, they should not be used in place of the International Symbol for Deafness.

## **CONCLUSIONS**

From the start to the end, the journey must be accessible. The lack of accessibility at an airport can seriously hamper the safety, comfort and enjoyment of a person who is Deaf or hearing impaired who is using air services.

Meeting the needs of these passengers is both a personal and corporate responsibility.

## **RECOMMENDED POSITION**

Deafness Forum strongly suggests that airports, air carriers, associated contractors and relevant government bodies adopt the recommendations outlined above to ensure that travelers who are Deaf or hearing impaired are not discriminated against on the basis of their deafness.

## **COSTS OF POSITION**

The BCA dictates, in the case of those items associated with Building regulations, that the cost must be absorbed by the respective airport operator.

## **RESEARCH BASIS**

Consultation with members of Deafness Forum during 2007 and 2008

Consultation with the Australian Government of Transport and Regional Services via phone January 2007. See also [www.dotars.gov.au](http://www.dotars.gov.au)

Consultation with Qantas Consumer Forum and Qantas management

Access Economics 2006 *Listen Hear: The economic cost and impact of hearing loss in Australia*

Access to Air Travel for Disabled People – Code of Practice March 2003 Department for Transport (UK)

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<http://www.hearinglossweb.com/Issues/Access/Transportation/atp.htm> accessed 2 January 2007

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[http://www.tsa.gov/travelers/airtravel/specialneeds/editorial\\_1380.shtm](http://www.tsa.gov/travelers/airtravel/specialneeds/editorial_1380.shtm) Transportation Security Administration accessed 3 March 2008

### ***DATE OF PREPARATION***

Approved by Board March 2008

### ***STATUS OF RECOMMENDED POSITION***

Final v1.0