



OIG report: Amtrak can improve the quality of customer service it provides to passengers with disabilities

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WASHINGTON – Amtrak has no overarching strategy to guide its efforts to improve customer service to passengers with disabilities, and its current improvement initiatives in this area are fragmented and not well coordinated between departments, an Amtrak Office of Inspector General Report released today found.

Although Amtrak’s current improvement initiatives are well intentioned, it does not have full visibility over the quality of service it provides to these passengers because it does not regularly analyze key data that could provide insights, such as customer surveys, ridership figures, and internal customer service audits. For the one data source it routinely tracks—accessibility-related complaints—it does so inconsistently, the report said.

Without a strategy that establishes goals, metrics, and priorities that is informed by relevant data, the OIG found that Amtrak may not be focusing its resources on improvements with the highest potential impact for customers, and it could be exposed to unnecessary financial, reputational, and legal risks from service that does not consistently meet its standards, the report said.

The report credited Amtrak for increasing engagement with disability-focused groups in recent years, and about half of the nine groups the OIG interviewed said they had good working relationships with the company. Six of the nine groups told the OIG that Amtrak is often the preferred mode of travel for passengers with disabilities over airlines. Amtrak also has targeted initiatives underway to improve its service, such as technology to aid customers using assistive listening devices, the report said.

The OIG noted, however, that departments do not consistently involve Amtrak’s Accessibility Office in initiatives that may have an accessibility impact, and individual departments decide which accessibility-related initiatives to pursue in an ad hoc manner. In one example cited in the report, Amtrak’s Digital Technology and Innovation department modified Amtrak’s mobile application without coordinating with the Accessibility Office to consider the needs of passengers who are blind and use screen readers. This resulted in some features being inaccessible for these passengers.

OIG auditors also examined the “trip lifecycle” a passenger with disabilities would experience, which includes trip booking, station navigation, boarding, on board, and finally, deboarding the train. Auditors analyzed customer complaints and survey data, visited eight stations—both staffed and unstaffed—on four different routes to directly observe aspects of Amtrak’s customer service to passengers with disabilities, and met with disability-focused groups. Based on this work, the OIG identified three key areas where Amtrak can improve its service for customers with disabilities.

First, the company can improve the interactions that passengers with disabilities experience with customer-facing employees. The OIG’s review found that 39 percent of accessibility-related complaints in its sample were related to poor assistance at stations and with boarding and deboarding, with 22 percent of complaints being related to insensitive staff interactions. Further, the OIG observed that onboard employees were not consistently enforcing policies that can directly impact passengers with disabilities. On each of the four routes OIG auditors rode, for example, they observed seating areas designated for passengers with disabilities being used for storage.

Second, Amtrak could improve its communication of essential travel information. For example, the OIG found that passengers cannot always request in-station assistance. They also found that station-specific information is limited, and accessibility information can be hard to find on Amtrak's digital booking channels. In addition, the quality and clarity of audio and visual messaging varied widely across stations the OIG visited. Company officials noted that Amtrak has ongoing efforts to improve in these areas but acknowledged that more can be done.

Third, passengers with disabilities do not always have access to all onboard amenities, particularly food service, which is inconsistent with Amtrak's goals, policies, and customer service commitments, the OIG found. For example, representatives from many of the disability-focused groups told the OIG that passengers using mobility devices may not be able to access café or diner cars. While employees are required to offer at-seat food service to these customers, this does not always happen, Accessibility Office officials told the OIG.

Amtrak has plans to improve access to amenities on three new fleets of trains it is procuring, but until these trains enter service, access to onboard amenities will remain limited because the company has not fully assessed the costs and benefits of improvement options, including incorporating digital technology, on its current trainsets.

To address the issues the OIG identified in its report, it recommended that Amtrak develop an overarching strategy, strengthen its complaints tracking process, and analyze the data necessary to measure its service quality. It should also implement plans and processes to address challenges in the three improvement areas the OIG identified.

Amtrak agreed with the recommendations and described actions and plans it will take to address them. More information is included in the full report which can be downloaded on the OIG's website: <https://direc.to/n8xe>.

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