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Standing Committee on Transport, Infrastructure and Communities

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• (1105)

[Translation]

The Chair (Mr. Peter Schiefke (Vaudreuil—Soulanges, Lib.)): I call this meeting to order.

Welcome to meeting number 103 of the House of Commons Standing Committee on Transport, Infrastructure and Communities.

Pursuant to Standing Order 108(2) and the motion adopted by the committee on Monday, November 20, 2023, the committee is meeting to study accessible transportation for persons with disabilities.

Today's meeting is being held in hybrid format, pursuant to the Standing Orders of the House of Commons. Members are attending in person, in the room, or remotely using the Zoom application.

[English]

Although this room is equipped with a sophisticated audio system, feedback events can occur. These can be extremely harmful to interpreters and can cause serious injuries. The most common cause of sound feedback is an earpiece worn too close to a microphone. We therefore ask all participants to exercise a high degree of caution when handling the earpieces, especially when your microphone or your neighbour's is turned on. To prevent incidents and safeguard the hearing health of our interpreters, I invite participants to ensure that they speak into the microphone to which their headset is plugged into and to avoid manipulating the earbuds by placing them on the table away from the microphone when they are not in use.

I'd now like to welcome our witnesses for the first hour.

Appearing before us today, we have, from the Canadian Transportation Agency, France Pégeot, chair and chief executive officer; and Tom Oommen, director general, analysis and outreach branch. From the Department of Employment and Social Development, we have Stephanie Cadieux, chief accessibility officer; and from the Office of the Auditor General, we have Karen Hogan, the Auditor General of Canada; Milan Duvnjak, principal; and Susie Fortier, director.

Welcome to all of you joining us here and virtually.

We'll begin with opening remarks, and for that, I will turn it over to Madame Pégeot.

The floor is yours. You have five minutes.

[Translation]

Ms. France Pégeot (Chair and Chief Executive Officer, Canadian Transportation Agency): Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

Good morning, Chair and committee members.

Thank you for your invitation to discuss accessible transportation for persons with disabilities.

The Canadian Transportation Agency has three main responsibilities. Firstly, we help ensure that the national transportation system runs efficiently and smoothly, in the interest of all Canadians.

Secondly, we provide consumer protection for air passengers.

Finally, we protect the fundamental right of persons with disabilities to an accessible transportation network.

The agency is an independent regulator and a tribunal. Specifically, we are the economic regulator of the Canadian transportation system. As a regulator, we make and implement regulations after consultations with the minister. We also monitor compliance and enforce legislation and regulations.

We are, as well, an administrative tribunal. In that capacity, we resolve disputes between regulated industry stakeholders, users of the transportation system, and communities.

Accessibility has always been and continues to be a priority for the CTA. Our approach to accessibility has always been holistic and includes a variety of tools—from discussion to guidance to decisions to regulations to enforcement. This is in recognition of the fact that improving accessibility has to be tackled on multiple fronts.

Our most important regulations on accessibility, the Accessible Transportation for Persons with Disabilities Regulations, or ATPDR, developed out of previous CTA decisions, regulations and codes of practice, and came into force in phases between 2020 and 2022. The ATPDR apply to large transportation service providers. These large transportation providers include large airlines, airport operators, and entities like Canada Border Services Agency and the Canadian Air Transport Security Authority. They provide services to the vast majority of passengers transported in the federally regulated transportation system.

[English]

The accessible transportation regulations require, among other things, that federal transportation service providers provide assistance to persons with disabilities in boarding, locating their seats and transferring between a mobility aid and a seat; accept and safely transport mobility aids; and provide temporary replacements and repairs, if required, due to delays or damage. It also ensures that employees who may be required to provide physical assistance receive training to carry out those functions, such as transferring a passenger between a wheelchair and a seat, handling mobility aids and using special equipment such as a lift.

The regulations also include a number of provisions that are considered world leading, for example, allergy buffer zones and the one-person, one-fare requirement for domestic travel. Indeed, while there is certainly room for improvement, as we have witnessed recently, the Canadian regulatory framework for accessible transportation represents a very strong foundation for accessibility.

The agency, like other regulators, uses different tools to achieve compliance, including the issuance of fines or administrative monetary penalties. The agency, as an administrative tribunal, also hears complaints from passengers who believe that a transportation service provider hasn't respected its accessibility-related obligations. In many cases, the agency is able to help resolve those complaints through an informal mediation process, while other complaints are adjudicated by the government in council appointed members of the agency who are like administrative judges.

As the Auditor General noted in her audit of the accessibility of transportation system, we have made enough progress, but there is still work to be done. We are, of course, implementing the recommendations of the Auditor General for accessibility of the transportation system.

Transportation, particularly air transportation, is international by nature. Even as we try to make Canada more accessible, we've looked beyond our borders to try to shape the accessibility of the international air transportation system. For example, since 2019, in collaboration with the National Research Council and Transport Canada, we've led a number of international initiatives to conduct research and develop consensus on how the transportation of mobility aids could be improved. It was very gratifying to see that much of this work led by Canada was incorporated into the policy guidance of the International Air Transportation Association to its member airlines on the transportation of mobility aids that was published in 2023.

In all of our work, we strive to engage representatives of persons with disabilities and the industry to advance accessibility of the sys-

tem. The Canadian Transportation Agency's accessibility advisory committee includes representatives of both persons with disabilities and industry, and provides a very useful vehicle to receive advice and to share information.

Let me end by sharing with you that we have just obtained the Rick Hansen Foundation gold certification for accessibility for a brand new building. We are very proud of that, and this is another testament of our commitment to accessibility.

Thank you very much.

I am pleased to answer your questions.

● (1110)

[Translation]

The Chair: Thank you very much, Ms. Pageot.

I now give the floor to Ms. Cadieux for five minutes.

[English]

Ms. Stephanie Cadieux (Chief Accessibility Officer, Office of the Chief Accessibility Officer, Department of Employment and Social Development): Thank you.

[Translation]

Good morning.

It's a pleasure to be with you.

[English]

I'm working on my French, so the rest will be in English today.

Thank you for inviting me.

I'd like to start by saying that accessible air travel is an issue that can't wait. Action is needed now. It's already overdue, and I know that this committee knows that, as you're taking a closer look at what is needed.

When airlines treat people with disabilities as problems instead of as people, this has a profound effect and causes harm, not just financially, but also in loss of time, and physically and emotionally. All too often when something goes wrong—a mobility aid is lost or damaged—there is very little empathy from staff and no understanding that it isn't a piece of lost luggage.

Many mobility aids are custom fitted and replacements are not optional. It is tantamount to arriving at your destination without your legs. That person has lost a part of their body, their independence and their safety and well-being, so it is not an inconvenience: It's a catastrophic failure. I shouldn't have to explain this, yet I do time and time again, as do others with disabilities.

When these failures happen, the person who has been harmed is left to cope with the situation without adequate assistance from the airline. They are left to fight for a resolution that comes as too little, too late. It is ableism. It's pervasive. It runs through our culture. It's reflected in the way that people with disabilities are "other" all of the time, not just in air travel.

People with disabilities, though, are people first, and by that I mean that we are customers, we are passengers and we deserve equitable service. A friend of mine has a good line that he uses. He says: "I'm disabled. My money isn't." That is to say, why is it expected and provided for that you have access to a washroom on a plane, but I do not?

Changing the culture so that this is deeply understood at all levels of air travel organizations is critical, because until that understanding is fostered, cultivated and embedded in operations, change isn't going to happen, regardless of the regulations.

In my role as chief accessibility officer, I'm an independent adviser to the minister responsible for the Accessible Canada Act. I also monitor, champion and challenge the progress being made under the act. I am not responsible for standards or regulations, compliance or enforcement.

I issued my first report as CAO two weeks ago. In it, I make a number of recommendations for mandatory training on accessibility and more regulation to ensure that organizations understand what they absolutely must provide. I talk about the need for more and better data. Also, as I follow the work of organizations under the act, I'll be looking for concrete progress on barrier removal year over year.

I'm not suggesting that it's easy. Accessibility is complex. No two people are the same, and what's perfect for me as a wheelchair user is not going to work for someone who is blind or someone who is deaf. Accessibility requires a lot of thought.

Planning for the longer term means looking to include things in infrastructure—the construction of planes for an accessible future fleet—and, for that, the signal from governments, ours and others, needs to be that this will be a requirement. This needs to be happening today.

Lots of good efforts are under way, and I do want to acknowledge the work, but more is needed and faster.

As CAO, I'm looking at what's happening in the industry in other jurisdictions and in the short term and the long term. What are the complexities of the issues and in finding consistent permanent solutions? Ultimately, the issues of accessibility go far beyond mobility aids. There needs to be a focus on the whole travel journey—inclusive of services and service providers—for travellers with the full range of disabilities and service requirements.

Time is limited today, of course, and I am just scratching the surface for you, but if I can summarize very quickly the key things that I think are priorities for action, they are data at a much more granular level and publicly available; air passenger protections specific to accessibility issues; training to focus on customer service; and an inclusive culture and mobility aid handling—finding ways to get it right every single time.

Thank you very much. I look forward to your questions.

• (1115)

The Chair: Thank you very much, Ms. Cadieux.

Next we have Ms. Hogan.

Ms. Hogan, the floor is yours. You have five minutes, please.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Karen Hogan (Auditor General of Canada, Office of the Auditor General): Mr. Chair, thank you for this opportunity to discuss the findings of our audit of accessible transportation for persons with disabilities, which was tabled in the House of Commons in March 2023.

I would like to acknowledge that this hearing is taking place on the traditional unceded territory of the Algonquin Anishinabe people.

Joining me today are Milan Duvnjak, the principal who was responsible for the audit, and Susie Fortier, the director who led the audit team.

Every person has a right to participate fully and equally in society. Some people in Canada have to constantly fight for rights that others take for granted as basic rights. More than one million persons with disabilities who travelled on a federally regulated mode of transportation in 2019 and 2020 faced a barrier. When access to basic human rights is delayed or denied, the impact is that some members of society are left behind.

This audit did not directly examine airlines or airport authorities. It examined the Canadian Transportation Agency, which is the federal regulator, and VIA Rail and the Canadian Air Transport Security Authority, two Crown corporations that provide transportation services. We looked at whether these three organizations worked to identify, remove, and prevent barriers for travellers with disabilities.

[*English*]

Overall, we found that all three organizations had taken steps to identify, reduce and prevent barriers faced by persons with disabilities, but there is still much more work to do. While our report included findings and recommendations related to rail transportation, I will focus my remarks on air transportation, which is the subject of the committee's study.

The inspections of transportation service providers that the Canadian Transportation Agency carried out as part of its oversight of all transportation modes served to identify and remove some barriers. However, the agency was limited in the type and number of inspections it could conduct. It did not have the authority to access service providers' complaint data to improve its oversight. This means that some barriers could be missed and remain, and that new ones could be introduced.

The Canadian Air Transport Security Authority conducted an open consultation on its accessibility plan and developed training programs. However, at the time of our audit, improvements were still needed in important areas. For example, the authority's website was not fully accessible. It also was not using complaint data to improve the identification of current barriers or to prevent new ones.

To further improve the accessibility of trains, planes and other federally regulated modes of transportation, we recommended that organizations broaden their consultations with persons with disabilities, make their online content fully accessible and use complaint data to identify, learn about and prevent barriers. This is necessary to achieve the federal government's goal of a barrier-free Canada by 2040.

Mr. Chair, this concludes my opening remarks. We would be pleased to answer any questions the committee may have.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you very much, Ms. Hogan.

To begin our line of questioning today, we have Dr. Lewis.

Dr. Lewis, I will turn to the floor over to you for six minutes, please.

Ms. Leslyn Lewis (Haldimand—Norfolk, CPC): Thank you.

My first question will be for Ms. Stephanie Cadieux.

I want to thank all of the witnesses for coming here today. I especially want to thank you for the time you're taking to appear before this committee and to share your very personal experience. I believe it will help edify our committee and let Canadians know about an aspect of travelling that's very disheartening to hear about. I believe these kinds of stories will help shine a light on an issue that persists. I wish it were a new issue we are talking about. Unfortunately, this is an old issue, and it's one of dignity and compassion.

You highlighted just how difficult it is for people to realize that a mobility aid like a wheelchair is an extension of your body. It facilitates your independence. It's really like losing a part of person's body in transport. Do you think there's enough training so that employees can understand the compassionate side of what really is transpiring to ensure that accessibility is more prevalent in the federally regulated transport sector?

• (1120)

Ms. Stephanie Cadieux: Thank you for the question.

The short answer is no. I think there are good intentions, and I don't think, necessarily, that the content of the training is bad. I think the content, in most cases, is probably good. I think this is a situation where it needs to be repeated and repeated again. Also,

there needs to be some enforcement and follow-up if it's not working, and some change if it's not working.

However, it ultimately comes down to customer service and human interaction, and some of that can't be regulated and or trained. Some of it is about the people, and I can tell you that there are lots of really good people doing this work and lots of really good experiences that people have. The unfortunate challenge is that unless it happens every time, we still have problems.

I'll give you an example very quickly. A couple of flights ago, I was sitting, waiting for the crew to put my chair on the plane—which they are doing now and which I appreciate. However, there were other crew members—baggage handlers—standing on the bridge behind me. They said something like “What's taking so long? Why don't they just strap the wheelchair on top of the plane like they do with bikes on cars?”

It's that kind of insensitivity that allows for mobility aids to be tossed, dropped and left behind. It's an insensitivity that training might address—or it might not. However, if it doesn't, I would argue that there needs to be more training and that it needs to be repeated.

I think that's the piece we have to get at, and it's difficult. It takes time.

Ms. Leslyn Lewis: When you discovered that your wheelchair wasn't on the flight to Vancouver, what steps did Air Canada take to rectify the situation?

Ms. Stephanie Cadieux: Well, after a difficult evening, and once I was back home the next morning, Air Canada notified me that my chair was in Vancouver and it was having it delivered to me. I had my chair back by about one o'clock the following day.

Ms. Leslyn Lewis: How did you get home without it?

Ms. Stephanie Cadieux: Luckily, I was at home and not travelling away from home when I arrived in Vancouver, and my husband picked me up at the airport. Once I was transported in an airport wheelchair to my car and was able to get home, my husband was able to assist me. I had a spare wheelchair at home, luckily. Many people do not.

As traumatic as it was—and I really didn't realize how traumatic being without my chair would be—my experience was rectified quite quickly by the airline, in my case.

Ms. Leslyn Lewis: Did Air Canada and the CTA give you any assurances that this wouldn't happen to anybody else, and what mechanisms have they put in place to ensure that?

Ms. Stephanie Cadieux: They can't, I would say, ensure that it won't happen to anyone else—at least not yet. However, they are working on it.

Since that time, Air Canada has made a number of changes that it's trialing and testing whether or not mobility aids like mine, that can be taken apart or folded, can be carried in the cabin with me so I can be assured it's there. It also has an add-on on its app that will track a mobility aid when it's being put on the plane so that the passenger can see that his or her chair has been loaded.

It is making good attempts to ensure that this doesn't happen. It will remain to be seen how well that works over time.

• (1125)

The Chair: Thank you, Dr. Lewis.

Thank you, Ms. Cadieux.

Next we have Mr. Rogers. The floor is yours. You have six minutes, sir.

Mr. Churence Rogers (Bonavista—Burin—Trinity, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Welcome to our guests today. It's great to have you talking about this particular issue.

I do a lot of travelling on aircraft as an MP. Many of these aircraft are different sizes, of course. With some of the smaller ones, like those prop planes and so on, I often wonder how people with disabilities manage to access these aircraft. There are narrow ramps, for example, that aren't wide enough for a wheelchair. The narrow aisles are difficult to manoeuvre in, even for somebody without a wheelchair.

When I think about the challenges that people with disabilities face, I often wonder and shake my head about what it is that airlines are not doing that they could be doing, such as modifying aircraft and doing different things that would make these aircraft accessible for people in wheelchairs and for people with disabilities.

Would you agree that accessibility is not just a feature or an afterthought and that it is a necessity that must be at the forefront of any travel experience?

I'll put that question to Ms. Cadieux first, and then to Ms. Pégeot.

Ms. Stephanie Cadieux: Yes, ultimately, accessibility does need to be considered from the start. Unfortunately, I would say that the incident—my incident—thrust this issue into the spotlight, and if that had to happen, I'm glad it happened.

The Accessible Canada Act is forcing organizations that are regulated by the federal government to take a look at this and to actually start to put that plan in place to get accessibility to the forefront, to ensure that organizations are building it in and are understanding that 27% of the population has a disability and needs some form of accommodation and that we can't be leaving those people out anymore. This will take some time.

Infrastructure, as I mentioned in my opening remarks, is one of the things we need to be looking at going forward. In air travel, there will always be challenges. We have to be realistic about that. However, we could do better if we were planning ahead and if we were making it a priority. I have spoken with some of the folks at Boeing and other aircraft manufacturers, and I know they're working on these things. They do believe that there are ways to do it, but

they have to be asked to do it by the folks who buy their planes. Ultimately, that rests with the airlines. I think it also rests with governments to signal that this is important and will be a requirement down the line, like the U.S. has done now in making it clear to the airlines that accessible washrooms will be required on single-aisle aircraft in the future.

These things take time to implement. We're talking about 10 or 15 years down the road, now that they've made that commitment, so it is something we need to be thinking about, for sure, and it will take time. Thankfully, I do believe that, with the Accessible Canada Act in place, those conversations are going to continue to be part of the urgent discussion.

Mr. Churence Rogers: Thank you.

Ms. Pégeot, I'd also ask you to comment on that, but before I do.... In your comments, you mentioned accessibility being a priority, of course, and that there needs to be social change and change in corporate culture, and that there is more work to be done, obviously, to make more progress.

Keep in mind the first question and those comments, and I'll give you an opportunity to comment as well.

Ms. France Pégeot: Of course, I would agree with you that accessibility has to be at the forefront, and we have many tools to advance accessibility. These include guidelines that we provide. We provide training materials on our website, especially for small transporters. We have dispute resolution whereby we resolve a lot of our complaints through mediation, and we have, of course, enforcement tools. All of this, I would say, helps and contributes to our advancing our mandate with regard to accessibility. Hopefully it also changes, I would say, the environment in which transportation companies operate and how they view accessibility.

I certainly support Ms. Cadieux when she says that it's also part of the culture of an organization. Every time I meet with the CEO of an air company, I raise the issue of accessibility. We are also working together with people with disabilities and with the industry to make sure that there is good communication and that people are sensitized the right way to improve accessibility.

Just this summer, for example, we were working with small transporters, and we took people with us who have disabilities. We used some small transporters to Whitehorse, to Dawson City and to Sept-Îles to make sure that we understood their reality. This is certainly something that is very important, and we want to do it.

I want to acknowledge that the work the committee here is doing is actually very helpful in advancing the culture of companies and of the overall transportation system with respect to accessibility—and, I would say, in putting accessibility at the forefront. You have heard from Air Canada and from WestJet about some of the measures they are taking, and I think that the work you're doing is certainly helping.

• (1130)

Mr. Churence Rogers: Thank you for that.

I'll follow up with another question.

The Chair: Unfortunately, Mr. Rogers, you're out of time for this round.

Mr. Churence Rogers: Thanks, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Rogers.

[*Translation*]

Thank you, Ms. Pégeot.

I now yield the floor to Mr. Barsalou-Duval for six minutes.

Mr. Xavier Barsalou-Duval (Pierre-Boucher—Les Patriotes—Verchères, BQ): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I thank the witnesses for being with us today.

I'd like to thank Ms. Cadieux in particular for her testimony, which made us a little more aware of what people living with disabilities go through. At the very least, it makes us, who have two arms, two legs and all our means, realize just how little we grasp the trials people with reduced mobility and disabilities encounter in trying to travel.

We were given concrete examples, including the toilet, an example I find striking. I can't imagine someone spending six or ten hours on an airplane without being able to go to the toilet, or having to be accompanied there by someone, a situation that risks infringing on their privacy. I can't imagine how these people feel. It can't be easy. Thank you again, Ms. Cadieux, for your testimony.

This brings me to a question I'd like to ask you. I don't know if you've been following the committee's work so far, but at one of its previous sessions, someone representing an organization said they couldn't understand why some airlines were forcing people who were taking up a lot of space to pay the price of two tickets rather than one. This pricing policy is in force on international flights, but not on domestic flights.

I'd like to know how you would feel, as a person with a disability, if you were asked to pay twice the fare because you have reduced mobility.

[*English*]

Ms. Stephanie Cadieux: I appreciate that Canada is leading the global air travel world in this space, with the one-person, one-fare policy. It is not the case in other places. This is something that is unique to Canada.

I will recognize that inter-jurisdictional issues and business competition issues add complexity to this, but from a purely accessibility perspective, I would suggest that, at a minimum, if a carrier requires a person with a disability to travel with a caregiver, then that person with the disability should not be financially disadvantaged by that requirement of an airline.

It is difficult to balance all of the challenges here, but yes, people with disabilities are often faced with additional costs. The costs of their equipment alone are different from what someone else would deal with. The cost of travel is definitely often more than for others.

Certainly, if the requirement to have a caregiver attend is the requirement of the airline, then it should be at their cost.

• (1135)

[*Translation*]

Mr. Xavier Barsalou-Duval: Thank you.

On this subject, it would be interesting to hear the point of view of Ms. Pégeot, from the Canadian Transportation Agency. It would give us a better understanding of the agency's position.

Ms. France Pégeot: Yes, of course. Thank you very much.

I'll come back to what Ms. Cadieux just said. Canada is indeed, to our knowledge, the only country that imposes a fare. Internationally, air transport is governed by a series of bilateral agreements between countries. This is essentially what allows Canadian aircraft to fly into other airports. It's really the framework within which international air transport evolves.

There's a provision in these agreements that says we're not to regulate ticket prices—essentially, that airlines are to follow the laws of the marketplace and have the freedom to set their ticket prices. An organization like the agency can't intervene in this. If we were to make the “one person, one fare” policy mandatory, it's highly likely that some countries would reject it. Following consultations with Transport Canada and Global Affairs Canada, the decision was made not to regulate in this sense. In this context, the agency has decided not to deal with the complaints submitted to it.

Mr. Xavier Barsalou-Duval: Thank you.

For my part, I find this situation sad nonetheless. I wonder whether the interpretation of international practices must necessarily define the end result, or whether it's possible for action to be taken. I'm thinking of air passenger regulations, for example, which are not the same from one country to another. In my opinion, with a little courage, it would be possible to put policies in place. At least, that's my point of view.

This brings me to another question for the Canadian Transportation Agency.

What is the agency's role when it comes to ensuring that people with reduced mobility have access to the services they need at airports? They sometimes have trouble getting assistance from competent people to help them board the plane and stow their equipment. Is it up to the airport or the airline to provide these services?

What is the Transportation Agency's role in overseeing all this? Do you only have a complaints-handling role, or do you put rules in place? Do you monitor this? Are there people who make sure these services are available?

Ms. France Pégeot: First, I'd like to complete my previous answer.

I assure you that we are working internationally, in particular with the International Civil Aviation Organization, to encourage other countries to take measures like ours.

As for your last question, essentially, the regulations prescribe that between the time the person with a disability arrives at the airport and the time they check in, it's the airport's responsibility to provide the services. Between check-in and boarding, it's the responsibility of the airlines.

We respond to complaints when they are submitted to us. In some cases—

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Pégeot. Unfortunately, time has run out.

Ms. France Pégeot: I understand.

[*English*]

The Chair: Next we have Mr. Bachrach.

Mr. Bachrach, the floor is yours. You have six minutes.

Mr. Taylor Bachrach (Skeena—Bulkley Valley, NDP): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you to all of the witnesses. This is an important study and you've already contributed to it in a big way.

I will also start with Ms. Cadieux.

Thank you for being here to share your personal perspective, and your professional one.

I'm not sure if you had a chance to either read or watch the committee's previous meeting on this topic. I know it's not viewed as highly rated entertainment by many Canadians.

One thing we heard from the airlines when they testified on this topic was that the high-profile cases we see in the media represent a very small fraction of the total number of flights taken by people with disabilities. I raise this because, to me, it stands in stark contrast to the message you've shared with us today, which is this: as long as we see these stories in the media and as long as people with disabilities are experiencing trouble on flights, we have a problem that we need to fix.

What do you make of that testimony by the airlines?

• (1140)

Ms. Stephanie Cadieux: Thank you. It's nice to see you.

You spoke at the last meeting about a number of distressing examples that have happened. The responses certainly express care, but I think they lack the required urgency. The defensive insistence on returning to language about 99% of passengers travelling without incident unfortunately minimizes the 1% who are experiencing debilitating and dehumanizing situations.

The data is a challenge and that's one of the reasons why I pointed to it in my report across all areas of accessibility. The challenge that I know exists in the data is this: When we talk about any person with a disability who might travel.... It's a very wide range of situations. Somebody might need assistance through the airport but not on the plane. Somebody needs to be manually transferred. Someone has an allergy. I'm sure many people travel without incident. However, I had three incidents last year alone where there were issues. I know there were 16 more faced by people I know very personally in my very small circle that happened within a six-

month period last year. Many more reached out to my office after my incident. Certainly, I don't know all the people who have travelled. However, if that alone is the situation, it concerns me. I don't know anyone with a disability, personally, who hasn't had an issue travelling.

That data matters. That's why I talked about the need for much more discrete data. How many people with disabilities travelled? How many people travelled with manual wheelchairs? How many people travelled with power wheelchairs? How many people with one of those filed a complaint? How many of those people who didn't file a complaint had damage to their chair that was fixed but wasn't captured in the complaints? The complexity is there.

Mr. Taylor Bachrach: On the topic of data—and this seems to be a very important point for the committee's inquiry—it seems that right now Canada is relying on data self-reported by airlines. Some airlines are willing to share data and some aren't. We know from Ms. Hogan's recent report that when the office looked at CATSA there was an extraordinarily high percentage of complaints that had been miscategorized.

Correct me if I'm wrong, but we don't know what percentage of complaints at the airlines are miscategorized, because there is no transparency of data.

Is that something that should be remedied?

Ms. Stephanie Cadieux: I believe better data is needed everywhere. Certainly I understand that's difficult. Data is always interesting from that perspective. If you don't ask the right questions, you don't get the right results. I think it is important that we have the data, because I think it's clear. They do a lot of things right. If they're doing a lot of things right then those aren't areas in which we need to fix things. But where are those pain points?

We're going to find those only if we have much more specific data.

Mr. Taylor Bachrach: The United States has a different system. In the United States, the airlines are required to report the data according to specifications outlined in the regulations. They report that data to the FAA. It's publicly transparent, so people can see where there's improvement and where problems remain.

Should Canada not take a lesson from our American neighbours in this regard?

Ms. Stephanie Cadieux: I think we often do things differently for good reason. I think it's important that in whatever we do we are clear about whether or not we're comparing apples to apples and oranges to oranges. I think it's necessary for us to move towards having more data available. I think we can do an even better job than the United States does at working to ensure we're getting the information we want and need from the data to ultimately change for the better the experiences of people with disabilities.

Mr. Taylor Bachrach: On this specific point around data, who leads internationally? Whom should we be looking to?

Ms. Stephanie Cadieux: From my outreach and from what I've been hearing so far, I don't know that anybody has it right yet. The reason I say so is that I spoke at the IATA conference in October, where it was clear that airlines and the air sector know that accessibility is an issue everywhere. It's now on the agenda, and that's the first step. That's really important, as is our being here at this committee. The fact that we're talking about it is a good first step. I think we have an opportunity to lead in terms of how we respond.

• (1145)

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Bachrach and Ms. Cadieux.

Next we have Mr. Muys.

Mr. Muys, the floor is yours for five minutes. Go ahead, please.

Mr. Dan Muys (Flamborough—Glanbrook, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you to all of the witnesses for taking time for this important study.

I have some questions for the Auditor General, but first I want to ask a question of the CTA as a follow-up to the line of questioning by Mr. Barsalou-Duval. We had a discussion at the last meeting about this policy of one person, one fare. I would challenge the answer you gave, because to me this seems like a no-brainer. There's a very clear discrepancy. These are Canadian airports, Canadian airspace and Canadian laws, and yet this double standard still persists wherein internationally we're not applying that policy. That seems like a very easy thing to remedy. Perhaps what's missing is the will of the CTA and the government to actually do it.

Ms. France Pégeot: Thank you for your question.

As I've mentioned, there are international agreements that govern all the air transportation that is happening. That would constitute a problem with those agreements. If we were to—

Mr. Dan Muys: As a result, with international conventions like the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, to which Canada is a signatory, we're not following through.

Ms. France Pégeot: For sure.

That's why we work a lot with ICAO, the International Civil Aviation Organization, internationally. We're supporting the development of a compendium that highlights best practices across various countries with respect to people with disabilities. We certainly talk about one person, one fare when we go to international forums to encourage other countries to take such measures. Those countries have not even taken this measure domestically, within their own country.

Mr. Dan Muys: My time is limited, so I'll switch gears now and go to the Auditor General.

You indicated that in your study of transport, air transport wasn't the primary or singular focus of the issues that you were studying. I'm wondering if the lack of significant fines has caused bad behaviour to persist. Did you look at the level of fines being levied by the CTA and whether they were at the appropriate level or at the level that would change behaviour? Was that part of your study at all?

Ms. Karen Hogan: I guess to explain my mandate a little, I cannot audit private corporations, and airlines are exactly that. While they are federally regulated, I can only look at federal entities. In our audit of the transportation authority, we did not look at fines levied. We looked at the oversight and inspection of the regulations.

Mr. Dan Muys: It was not the fines levied by the federal regulator.

Ms. Karen Hogan: No. We did not cover that.

Mr. Dan Muys: Is that a future potential matter?

Ms. Karen Hogan: There's so much to do in the area of accessibility. We'll take it under advisement, absolutely, but this was our first chance looking at it, since the accessibility act was so new. It's definitely on the horizon to revisit at some point.

Mr. Dan Muys: Okay. Thank you.

Maybe I'll go back to the CTA and ask about the fines levied. Do you feel they're appropriate to change behaviour? If they're not working, is there an escalation? How does this work?

Ms. France Pégeot: We do believe that to improve accessibility, we need to use various tools. I've mentioned the information and training available on our website, etc. For sure, enforcement is a key aspect of it.

As with other regulatory agencies, enforcement is used to achieve compliance. It is not a punitive measure. That being said, over the last year we've increased our enforcement capacity. We've increased, more than tripled, the number of inspections we've done. When we look at the administrative monetary penalty, we've increased it so far by 270%.

• (1150)

Mr. Dan Muys: Can I ask what the maximum fine levied thus far has been for an accessibility issue? You've heard the stories of anguish. This is not insignificant.

Ms. France Pégeot: Yes. The maximum fine we've given so far is around \$100,000. The way it works is that there is always an increment. If the same type of violation were to happen, then we would of course give an increased fine.

Mr. Dan Muys: How many of those have been levied?

[*Translation*]

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Pégeot.

[*English*]

Thank you, Mr. Muys.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Koutrakis, you now have the floor for five minutes.

Ms. Annie Koutrakis (Vimy, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

[English]

Thank you very much to all of our witnesses who are here today. We've heard some very important testimony. I'm very encouraged to hear that you find the work we're doing here at this committee to be very helpful to you. This is indeed a very important study, so thank you for taking the time to be here with us today. To follow along from what my good colleague Mr. Bachrach said earlier, we may not be the number one entertainment, but I'm sure the folks here today do follow us very carefully and diligently.

At a previous meeting, WestJet was here. They assured us that they have training programs in place. Documentation shows us that they do have training, but the training they spoke of happens once every three years.

I'd like to start my questions with the Auditor General and the team from her office.

Do you think once every three years to receive training is adequate? If not, what should it be?

Ms. Karen Hogan: The current regulation does require training to happen within 60 days of someone beginning their role, and then a refresh every three years. The answer, honestly, on how often it should happen is that it depends. Because there's such constant turnover, and you would hope there are folks moving to different roles and different positions, there is likely a need for training on a much more regular basis than just once every three years. I worry that when there's a requirement like that, it's sometimes treated as "we've done it" instead of really caring about what it is.

I think the regulations right now are such, but I would hope that folks would see the need to do it in a more focused way. With new equipment or specialized equipment, or as new fleets are introduced and new methods are brought about, those refreshers are likely needed more regularly.

Ms. Annie Koutrakis: Ms. Cadieux, would you like to offer some insight as someone who has faced those challenges? Just by the examples you shared with us, it clearly demonstrates, to me, anyway, that there is a lack of training. What types of training should be in place throughout the entire ecosystem, and who should be responsible for what?

Ms. Stephanie Cadieux: It is complex and the system is complex. It's not just the airlines, but it's the ground crews, the airports and how all of those interact. An airline might have their own crews in one location but not in another, and that certainly is the case internationally. When we fly outside the country, into Europe, for example, or into the U.S., the crews there are not staff of the airline, so while they can influence training and can demand a certain response, there is a complexity. I think it's important to recognize that.

With that said, it doesn't excuse it, and we need to find better solutions. Training and retraining are important, but so are the consequences when things go wrong. If there are no consequences to problems, then that allows them to repeat. I think that's a really important thing to remember.

And it's not just about how we handle mobility aids—that's one thing—but how do we ensure customer service for somebody who

is blind, to give them the layout of the lavatory so they don't have to pat around the whole area to find the flush button? These things are also important, and how do you handle all of that in the training? Role-specific training is important.

I can't say enough about the need for training, but ultimately it comes down to that human element, and that customer service mentality. Do we want to be the best or not? That will vary among airlines, airports, and countries.

• (1155)

Ms. Annie Koutrakis: In all of my professional career in finance before finding this new role in my life, I was always involved in an industry that aimed to deliver superior client service, so when I hear you comment about receiving the client service and the standard not being there, I have to tell you that I almost feel like rolling up my sleeves and saying, "Okay, how can we do better? What can I do as a member of Parliament to make sure that happens, because that's incredibly important."

It adds to providing end-to-end service, which leads into my question. What types of things are we putting in place to make sure that end-to-end service and the overall client experience is there, not for the average passenger, but for those with disabilities, who do need that extra help? What would you say the CTA could do to make sure that is applied throughout the system?

The Chair: You have time for a 15-second response, please.

Ms. France Pégeot: The current regulation prescribes for end-to-end service, and we certainly respond to various complaints with respect to that, but we also have our inspectors who monitor the situation.

[Translation]

The Chair: Thank you very much, Ms. Pégeot.

Mr. Barsalou-Duval now has the floor for two and a half minutes.

Mr. Xavier Barsalou-Duval: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I'd like to come back to Ms. Pégeot, from the Canadian Transportation Agency, about the "one person, one fare" principle for people with disabilities. Since the previous round of questions, I've been informed that, in the Air Transport Agreement between the Government of Canada and the Government of the United States of America, Article 6, point 1.a. clearly states that aeronautical authorities may intervene for the "prevention of unreasonably discriminatory pricing or practices."

In my opinion, when you decide to charge someone two plane tickets because they're a bit heavier than someone of average weight, or because they have reduced mobility, or because they need someone to accompany them, that seems pretty discriminatory to me. To my mind, it's clearly a question of political will. This agreement clearly states that the government could act.

I'll turn to another subject straightaway, as I don't have much speaking time.

I'm going to talk about the famous Air Passenger Protection Regulations, which were due for reform. On April 20, the Minister of Transport at the time, Mr. Omar Alghabra, announced that there would be major changes to Bill C-47, which received royal assent on June 22.

These changes were to include, for example, reversing the burden of proof, requiring airlines to process complaints within 30 days, and empowering the Transportation Agency to charge airlines for complaints. This would include compensation for all flight disruptions.

The government also mentioned in that same release in April that the new complaints resolution process would be implemented on September 30, 2023. We are now approaching March 2024. That's a long time. What's going on? Why is it not in place yet?

Ms. France Pégeot: The law that was passed by Parliament is certainly a step forward in the field of consumer protection. Already, the burden of proof has been reversed, and airlines must respond within 30 days. So these two measures are already in place.

We carried out a preliminary consultation on the draft regulations last summer. We are confident that we will be able to publish the proposed regulations in Part I of the Canada Gazette within the next few months.

Mr. Xavier Barsalou-Duval: We often hear about the number of complaints that are filed with the Canadian Transportation Agency and the processing times. The latest data available to us indicates that there are approximately 61,000 unprocessed files.

Where are we currently in terms of the number of unprocessed files and processing times?

Ms. France Pégeot: We now have around 65,000 unprocessed files, and the processing time is around 18 months. It's certainly a situation we're working on. In fact, we've hired a lot of people. Last year alone, we received 40,000 complaints. This year, it's likely to be the same number. This year, in January alone, we received 4,000 complaints.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Barsalou-Duval.

I'd like to ask a question about this, Ms. Pégeot. You received 40,000 complaints compared to how many passengers last year?

Ms. France Pégeot: Well, that's a good question...

The Chair: Could you provide this information in writing to our committee?

Ms. France Pégeot: I can send it to you, of course. I can also tell you about how the situation has evolved. About five or six years ago, we were getting 7,000 to 8,000 complaints a year. There's really been an explosion in complaints over the last two years.

The Chair: Thank you very much, Ms. Pégeot.

[English]

Next we have Mr. Bachrach.

Mr. Bachrach, the floor is yours for two and a half minutes, please.

Mr. Taylor Bachrach: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Ms. Pégeot, would the CTA be willing to table with the committee information about all of the fines that have been issued with respect to accessibility challenges or complaints—obviously with the privacy data redacted? I think the committee would really benefit from seeing how many fines have been levied, for what amount and in what kinds of different scenarios.

• (1200)

Ms. France Pégeot: Oh, absolutely. It's already on our website.

Just last year, we gave \$146,000 in fines, and so far in this year alone—and we're just talking about accessibility here—we have given \$536,000.

That being said—

Mr. Taylor Bachrach: They sound like big numbers to Canadians, I think, but these are very large corporations for whom paying that kind of fine seems to be the cost of doing business. The question is always about whether the fines are achieving any sort of objective in terms of improving behaviour, but I'll leave that for now because I only have two and a half minutes.

I'd like to follow up on this one-person, one-fare issue. It's been pointed out by my colleague that these international treaties expressly permit the prevention of discriminatory pricing practices. It would seem that one person, one fare falls clearly into that category. It's a discriminatory pricing policy to require someone with a disability to purchase two fares for one trip. The APPR, Air Passenger Protection Regulations, apply to international flights. It's Canadian law, and the CTA applies it to international flights both arriving in Canada and departing from Canada. Why not the one-passenger, one-fare rule?

Ms. France Pégeot: Most countries have air passenger protection regulations, but the one-person, one-fare rule is actually only in Canada. We're the only country with it. For example, the United States does not have these types of measures; it doesn't even have measures like we have. We provide pain and suffering compensation and reckless behaviour compensation to individuals. That's something we have here in Canada that is not there—

Mr. Taylor Bachrach: I guess what I'm trying to drill down on is whether the CTA is claiming that there's a legal reason they can't apply the one-passenger, one-fare policy to international flights. Are you claiming that we're simply not doing it because other countries don't do it, and we don't want to get out too far ahead of other countries?

Ms. France Pégeot: No. What I'm saying is essentially that because other countries don't have one person, one fare, it would impose other pricing issues that would go against international agreements, and this has been—

Mr. Taylor Bachrach: But the bilateral treaties.... Mr. Barsalou-Duval read out the section of the bilateral treaty with the United States, which expressly says that it's permitted, that intervention in pricing to prevent "unreasonably discriminatory prices or practices" is fair game. Why doesn't the CTA take that up?

Ms. France Pégeot: This is certainly something we have to look into, but the advice we have received from Transport Canada and Global Affairs, which are really the ones managing those international agreements—

Mr. Taylor Bachrach: It sounds like we should bring them to committee.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Bachrach.

Next, we have Mr. Strahl.

You have three minutes, please.

Mr. Mark Strahl (Chilliwack—Hope, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Ms. Cadieux, I only have three minutes, so I will dive right in.

It was mentioned in passing by one of the airlines—WestJet—at the last meeting that in the European model for persons with disabilities, the airport authorities are responsible for ensuring accessibility. Requirements are met from the time the person parks their car or is dropped off to the time they're actually seated in the aircraft. That's what I've read.

It seems to me that is something that's worth examining in Canada.

Have you done any work like that? Could you perhaps give us your professional opinion? Would you have any personal advice as well, as we look at that?

It seems to me that there are fewer hand-offs if an airport—which is responsible for the parking lot all the way to the gate, to the bridge and to all of it—is actually responsible. Then the airline concentrates on helping individuals when they're actually on the aircraft.

What are your thoughts on that? Have you studied that model at all?

Ms. Stephanie Cadieux: I haven't studied it. I have experienced it. Certainly from my conversations with other advocates and individuals with disabilities from other countries who travel, I'm not sure that any of the systems are great at this moment. I would say that if you talk to individuals from different countries, what they are most comfortable with is the one that they're most used to.

That said, I think everything is on the table in terms of how do we do this better. Accessibility Standards Canada is looking at developing a standard on accessible journeys and what that looks like.

Ultimately, whatever solution the sector comes up with, as long as it provides consistent, safe, dignified service—service that looks essentially the same for me as it does for you—would be the right solution.

• (1205)

Mr. Mark Strahl: Have you or the people you've talked to in your circle experienced that those hand-offs, if I can call them that, are a place where there are breakdowns or have you found that those are pretty well navigated?

Ms. Stephanie Cadieux: It definitely is a place where there are breakdowns. It's mostly reliant on, I would say, whether or not there has been adequate planning and staffing.

This is an area where I think there's room for government and the sector to sort of work together.

There's also a piece that is important, which is for people with disabilities to know about how they participate in this process in terms of letting an organization know they're coming. If that is in place, then organizations can ensure the staff are there. If they don't know, that obviously creates challenges for them.

I think there's room for the airlines and government—the regulators—to come together to help inform and educate on both sides of the equation.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Strahl, and thank you, Ms. Cadieux.

Next and finally for this round, we have Mr. Badawey.

The floor is yours for three minutes, please.

Mr. Vance Badawey (Niagara Centre, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

First off, I want to say thank you to all of you for being here today. There's no doubt that it's going to add to the testimony, which we'll then add to the final report and, of course, the response from the minister.

I had the opportunity to go to the GTA and tour the airport last Thursday and to discuss with them their accessibility action plan 2023-26: their processes, the internal action plans, the communications and their long-term goals, as well as the overall experience and environment they're trying to provide for the customer and, quite frankly, for their employees.

I'm going to dive right into it and ask Ms. Hogan about this.

First off, many of the recommendations were directed directly to the sectors. However, they were not granularly directly directed to the airlines. You do mention Via Rail a few times, but ultimately, for the airlines, you basically tend to recommend based on sector.

My question for you, Ms. Hogan, is, from your discussions, what recommendations would you actually make—being a bit more granular—to the airlines, etc., within those sectors, any regulatory actions, whether it be government or whether it be the CTA or others?

I would only assume, for example, that you had discussions with the CTA with regard to applicable accessibility-related legislation—and I'll underline this statement—to encourage being proactive versus reactive, which the CTA often is, with a whole-of-sector approach, including the airlines. Hopefully, once we have that discussion and those recommendations, those with a disability won't need the CTA because we're being more proactive than reactive. That's question number one.

Question number two is, how important is it for the airlines to be required to release their disability-related complaint data ASAP so that we recognize the scope of their problem? Therefore, as well, the CTA can be involved, if need be, to react to those complaints. To add to that question, will Bill C-52 be an enabler to this?

My last question sort of goes outside the scope of today, but it's something that I often have to deal with in my riding. Do you think there is a need to expand the study to include the effects of airline and rail operations—underlining “operations”—on disabled people?

Ms. Karen Hogan: I hope we've taken good notes.

I'll start off with the first question. I cannot make recommendations to airlines. They are not a part of the federal government. My mandate stops and starts with auditing the federal government and Crown corporations, which is why Via Rail—

• (1210)

Mr. Vance Badawey: Just to that, Ms. Hogan, but you can make recommendations to those who can make recommendations to the airlines.

Ms. Karen Hogan: I can absolutely make recommendations to the Canadian Transportation Agency—

Mr. Vance Badawey: Exactly.

Ms. Karen Hogan: —as we have, but I cannot recommend policy. That's for policy-makers. I look at how policy is implemented and put in place by federal organizations.

When it came to the Canadian Transportation Agency, we made a few around their inspections and better access to data. When it came to inspections, we found that many of them were just looking at the design of an inspection.

On paper, it might look like the service was really well laid out and designed, but it's the actual implementation and lived experience of a person with a disability that needs to be looked at, so we recommended that they look more at the sort of operating implementation. These are on-demand services, right, not something that someone might provide every single day, so actually seeing it in action is a better way to improve: “Are the regulations the right thing and is our follow-up the right thing?”

When it comes to complaint data, linked to your second question and then linked to airlines, we definitely saw it as a gap that in the United States, for example, Air Canada would be required to report a certain complaint or damage to a wheelchair, whereas in Canada it's only if the individual chooses to report a complaint to the Canadian transportation Agency that they would be made aware of it. Not having access to complete data I think limits the opportunity to decide if regulations are enough, or if inspections are enough—so

obviously better data.... I echo many of the comments that Ms. Cadieux made, and I would tell you that it's even about intersectionality, and the more data and the better data that folks can have to play with is always good.

Then, when it comes to the effects that all of this has, well, I think understanding the lived experiences, getting consultation with individuals with disabilities, will only improve regulations and inspections and so on. In part of the accessibility regulations, one of the key lines is, “Nothing without us”. That needs to happen at every stage, even when you're designing a new regulation—not once it's in place—to see the impacts of it. I think it's a full-spectrum analysis that's needed.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Badawey.

Thank you, Ms. Hogan.

I want to thank all of our witnesses for giving their time so generously today and contributing to this very important study for all Canadians.

I'm going to suspend the meeting for a few minutes to allow the clerk and her team to welcome the next round of witnesses.

• (1210)

(Pause)

• (1220)

The Chair: I call this meeting back to order.

We will now continue with our testimony and turn it over to our witnesses who are, from the Canadian Airports Council, Monette Pasher, president.

Welcome.

From the Greater Toronto Airports Authority, we have Kurush Minocher, executive director, customer experience and airline relations, joining us by video conference.

Welcome to you, sir.

From the Vancouver Airport Authority, we have Tamara Vrooman, president and chief executive officer, once again joining us by video conference.

We'll begin with our opening remarks. For that, I will turn it over to you, Ms. Pasher.

You have five minutes, please.

Ms. Monette Pasher (President, Canadian Airports Council): Thank you, Mr. Chair and members of the committee, for the invitation to appear today to discuss the current study on accessible transportation for persons with disabilities regulations.

Before I begin, I would like to acknowledge that we are on the traditional territory of the Algonquin Anishinabe people, and I pay respect to elders past and present.

I am pleased to be appearing here today and to have my colleagues Tamara and Kurush here with me virtually.

Canadian Airports Council represents over 100 airports, including all the national airports system airports and most passenger service airports in every province and territory that handle all of the nation's air cargo, international passenger traffic and 90% of our domestic passenger traffic as well.

Accessibility in the travel journey is more than regulatory compliance. It is about ensuring that all passengers, regardless of a need, have a seamless, respectful and dignified experience. This really is our north star, and we are shaping our objectives and activities as an association around this goal. Certainly there are imperfections, and things can go wrong, and they shouldn't, but we want to learn, improve and aim higher for all passengers in Canada's airports.

With this objective, over the last several years, the CAC and Canada's airports have focused our attention on taking action. Over the last year, the CAC has collaborated with learning management system experts, Harper Learning, to design a new national training program on accessibility in Canadian airports. The goal is to offer a nationally consistent program to train all airport authority employees not just on the regulatory requirements but on how they can best assist a person with a disability at every step of their journey through the airport.

Further, we have also begun work to develop a five-year road map on accessibility for our airports in order to move forward on the broader goal of barrier-free travel in Canada by 2040.

As it stands, Canadian airports have many innovative programs in place that also follow the regulatory requirements established by Transport Canada and the CTA in order to make the passenger journey a better one for people with disabilities, but most airports really do go above and beyond the CTA requirements. Airports care deeply about making tangible improvements to continually raise the bar and better serve passengers.

In addition, the CAC leads an accessibility working group with subject matter experts on the passenger journey and operations. This working group meets monthly to discuss current issues and challenges faced in our airports and helps provide peer guidance and best practices in planning and implementation so we can learn from each other on accessibility efforts in airports from coast to coast.

With over 100 airports, CAC members range from YVR and YYZ, whose representatives are here with me today, but also Hamilton, Nanaimo and many small airports across the country.

When it comes to the larger airports, they have the technology and infrastructure to be some of the most accessible airports in the

world, and that is the goal of many. Some of them are now working on world accessibility accreditation in that program, and a number of them have it as well, so we are taking those global steps.

For Pearson, it's about crafting an experience that prioritizes ease and inclusivity. For Montreal, it's about fostering meaningful progress with partnerships with both industry professionals and individuals with disabilities. For Winnipeg, it's about continuing to develop programs and initiatives such as passenger rehearsal programs, pet relief stations and increasing signage containing Braille.

Regional and smaller airports continue to strive to upgrade technology, infrastructure, staffing and communications for travellers with disabilities. Many are working with the Rick Hansen Foundation and going through their audit program. This program is national in scope and rates meaningful access based on users' experience of people with varying disabilities affecting their mobility, vision and hearing.

The Canadian Airports Council and our member airports are ready to work with the members of this committee to strengthen the journey for all passengers.

We look forward to your questions and the discussion.

• (1225)

The Chair: Thank you very much, Ms. Pasher.

Next, we have Mr. Minocher.

The floor is yours. You have five minutes, sir.

Mr. Kurush Minocher (Executive Director, Customer Experience and Airline Relations, Greater Toronto Airports Authority): Thank you, sir.

Thank you to the committee for the opportunity to appear as part of this important study into accessible transportation for persons with disabilities in Canada.

My name is Kurush Minocher. I'm the executive director of customer experience and airline relations at the Greater Toronto Airports Authority. We're the operating authority of Toronto Pearson International Airport.

We're always happy to work with the committee on issues related to our sector, and I look forward to our questions today.

As Canada's largest airport, Toronto Pearson has worked hard to identify, remove and prevent barriers for travel for all persons with disabilities both visible and invisible. In a typical year, we see more than one million passengers with disabilities pass through the airport. Implementing accessible and inclusive programs and services not only enriches the travel experience for all of our passengers but also cultivates a supportive and positive work environment for our employees. Above all, our vision is to make our airport the most accessible. Whether you're travelling with family, accompanied by a caregiver or making your way independently from curb to gate, our commitment is to ensure the journey is seamless as well as welcoming and enjoyable.

I'd like to take this opportunity to talk about what the GTAA is doing to ensure an accessible travel journey for everyone at Pearson.

In 2023, we launched our three-year accessibility plan. It's our road map to creating and maintaining impactful accessibility in our policies, programs, practices and services. We worked to proactively identify, prevent and remove barriers to offer meaningful access at Pearson. Our action plan is organized into several key areas and includes the built environment, transportation to and from the terminals, technologies that support your experience at Pearson, and the design and delivery of various services. Our plan also addresses our employment and procurement policies.

While I could spend a lot of time today talking about each of these areas, I want to focus on the services and programs available to help passengers with disabilities navigate the airport experience.

We're constantly working towards ensuring our programs and services enable more choice, comfort and independence as passengers move through the airport. In anything we do, we consistently involve people with lived experience in testing our facilities, driving continuous adaptation and innovation.

For passengers with mobility concerns, there are more than 1,500 wheelchairs available for use in the terminals. For those who wish to navigate the airport either independently or with their travel companion, these are available without the need for pre-arrangement.

We're also proud to say that Pearson was the first airport in Canada to launch the sunflower lanyard campaign. This program offers a subtle means for passengers with hidden disabilities to indicate to staff that they might require a little additional assistance or time.

In collaboration with organizations like the Lions Foundation of Canada, WestJet and CATSA, we host a monthly guide dog familiarization program. This initiative helps dogs in training get accustomed to the airport environment, but it also allows our staff to gain insights on best practices directly from trainers.

As we continuously research, learn about and adopt user-friendly digital tools with built-in accessibility, we will continue to integrate them into all aspects of the passenger journey. There are hundreds of brand new, fully accessible self-service kiosks throughout the airport—for parking, check-in and customs—and these all feature the latest in universal technology capabilities. To help with wayfinding, we offer Aira and BlindSquare for passengers who are

blind or partially sighted. Aira is a free app on airport grounds that provides live, on-demand navigation assistance, while BlindSquare uses beacons for verbal navigation. To ensure there's public awareness for the services and programs available at Pearson, all of this information is available on our website, which was designed to be accessible for all.

Finally, we recognize that none of our work at Pearson would be possible without the hard work of the 1,800 staff who work for the GTAA and the 50,000 employees broadly across 400 organizations operating at Toronto Pearson. Our workforce is diversifying more every year, and we want to continue attracting and retaining talent inclusive of people with disabilities.

As a global gateway to Canada, we are excited about our progressive journey towards creating a fully barrier-free Toronto Pearson. We recognize that passengers and employees should not have to adapt their needs to have them met. We are taking steps necessary to integrate universal and human-centred design throughout the airport.

Thank you for the invitation to participate in this study. I'm happy to take your questions.

• (1230)

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Minocher.

Next, we'll go to Ms. Vrooman.

Ms. Vrooman, the floor is yours. You have five minutes.

Ms. Tamara Vrooman (President and Chief Executive Officer, Vancouver Airport Authority): Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

I am pleased to join the committee remotely from my office at the Vancouver International Airport, where we're located on the traditional and unceded territory of the Musqueam people. YVR has a deep relationship with Musqueam through our sustainability and friendship agreement, and I, too, would like to pay my respects to elders past and present.

Thank you very much to the committee for inviting me to participate in this important study and to talk a little bit about the work that we've been doing at the Vancouver International Airport.

YVR has demonstrated a clear commitment to accessibility for many years. We are the first airport in North America to voluntarily have our entire airport space audited and rated by a group of independent accessibility experts through the Rick Hansen Foundation's building accessibility program.

Going beyond ramps and lifts, the audit identified improvements in everything from the colour palette of floor tiles to the sound barriers needed in walls and the widths of corridors and counters. YVR accepted 100% of the recommendations, and they have all been implemented. As a result, in 2018 we became the first airport in the world to achieve gold accessibility building-rating standards from the RHF program, something we have maintained at YVR each and every year since.

I am pleased to say that we didn't stop there. We continue to look for ways to improve our facilities to ensure that people can move independently and with dignity throughout our airport. For example, all of our new private, single-stall washrooms also include adult-size changing benches and the latest technology for accessible features. Most recently, we were the first airport to include key boarding announcements in sign language at all of our boarding gates. With the built environment at YVR, we have gone beyond and designed important supports with accessibility consultants, community partners and customers.

We know that buildings alone cannot make travel accessible. It also requires inclusive processes and trained staff to ensure that the experience of transiting through an airport is supportive and seamless.

Travelling through an airport can be stressful at the best of times. Imagine what it must be like for people who are sound or light sensitive, who are neurodiverse, or who are on the autism spectrum. Through YVR's partnership with the Canucks Autism Network, we organize dedicated tours, and to date, these have allowed over 400 families to practice the entire pre-flight process with us in a safe and supportive environment. Having practised it, families tell us it gives them the confidence that when they do travel, often for the first time as a family, they know what to expect and how and where YVR offers supports along the way.

As we say at YVR, running an airport is a team sport. Each and every day, 26,000 people work at YVR. To create a truly accessible airport, our team members at multiple levels need to be trained and ready to serve the needs of diverse passengers. Therefore, through a partnership with the Pacific Autism Family Network and through a partnership with the work you've already heard about through the Canadian Airports Council, YVR is providing training for everyone from our fire and rescue team to our guest-experience staff and our building maintenance and cleaning staff to ensure that we have the skills and expertise to support passengers whenever and wherever they may need it.

Finally, as one of our region's largest employers, we also know that we can create meaningful employment for people with diverse abilities. In October 2023, we opened the Paper Planes Cafe here in the terminal in partnership with the Pacific Autism Family Network. Through the café, we offer individuals with neurodiverse needs up to six months of training, and then we support them in their job search in the community. The first group of trainees has completed the program and gone on to secure employment. Now we have a waiting list of new applicants.

Our journey to become a truly accessible airport started with our building, quickly moved to our staff and the services we provide,

and finally extended to our significant role as an employer. However, despite all of that, we believe that we can and need to do more.

Over the last 18 months, YVR completed a comprehensive audit of our full passenger experience. We partnered with the accessibility group Return on Disability to purchase airline tickets for over 40 individuals with accessibility needs to track the entire experience from booking a ticket through to travel. As a result, we have identified several opportunities that YVR will explore in the future.

For example, we're working collaboratively with partners to create a seamless experience from curb to gate. An immediate opportunity is for YVR to leverage our technology to track wheelchair flow and maximize availability in the airport. We're also simplifying our wayfinding and signage, and we're exploring digital wayfinding and mobile navigation tools.

● (1235)

Finally, we're working with the airport commercial and airline partners to better inform people about the range of accessibility services available at our airport.

As I conclude, I'd like to thank the committee. These discussions help us explore new ideas to ensure Canada's air transportation system remains accessible and continues to improve. I look forward to your questions.

[*Translation*]

Thank you very much,

[*English*]

The Chair: Thank you very much, Ms. Vrooman.

We'll begin our line of questioning in this round with Mr. Strahl.

Mr. Strahl, I'm going to give you five minutes. We're going to have to cut back the time to make sure we can get through all of this.

The floor is yours for five minutes, sir.

Mr. Mark Strahl: Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

Thank you, Ms. Pasher, and the two biggest airports in the country. I'm glad that you're here to talk about your built environment. These are obviously world-class facilities that have world-class facilities for people with accessibility challenges.

I'm interested to hear perhaps from Ms. Pasher. You mentioned the number of airports you represent. I am glad that YVR and YYZ are here. I am interested to hear about the smaller regional airports that don't have the same level of financing or the same programming ability.

What is the Airports Council doing to ensure that a passenger who isn't travelling through Vancouver International or Pearson is getting the same level of care, respect and service at an airport that perhaps doesn't have the same level of resources?

Ms. Monette Pasher: Thanks for that question. I'm happy to take that on.

Many small airports across the country, and regional airports, are part of the accessibility regulations. Some of the new regulations that rolled out need to be implemented by June. Many of our airports have already taken these measures and implemented them—things like pet relief areas, hearing loops, signage in the airport, implementing change tables where they can.

I think the biggest challenge we see for some of the small airports is that we're looking at infrastructure that's 60 years old. Some of our airports are municipal airports. It can be more challenging to make those infrastructure changes. I think many of them are adopting the technology, and the programs and the signage and the things that we can do operationally within the airport, but the infrastructure piece is a challenge.

To get to that Rick Hansen gold-certified level is quite difficult when you're talking about an old building and needing to change many things about the structure—that's cost. I think that would be probably the biggest barrier for small airports. I think you'd be surprised to see the number of initiatives they've taken on—from Autism Aviators to the Sunflower program. There are so many, and they really are downsizing them and making them fit.

Mr. Mark Strahl: Thank you.

I want to go quickly to Ms. Vrooman.

The airport I travel through the most is yours. We often hear about luggage or handling—in this case mobility aids. I assume that is a shared responsibility between the airlines and the airport. Am I correct in that?

Could you tell me, from the time someone who requires a mobility aid wants to get on an aircraft, what role does YVR play in that? How are you working to ensure that things that are not simply luggage, but necessary for the respect and dignity of that person with a disability get on to the aircraft? We've heard even today of some unacceptable examples.

What specific steps have you taken to upgrade your performance in that regard?

• (1240)

Ms. Tamara Vrooman: Thank you very much for that question.

You are correct that it is a shared accountability.

It works this way at the airport: The airport provides the infrastructure that takes the baggage, when you drop it off, through to the apron, where it's then picked up by the baggage and ground handlers and loaded onto the aircraft. On the way out, when baggage is unloaded, it's the responsibility of the baggage handlers—who are contracted by airlines—to take that baggage from the aircraft and load it through onto the carousel.

In this case, it's not baggage at all. As we heard, it's significant personal mobility aids. Often they will be transported independently, and not put through the regular baggage system, by the airlines themselves.

What we have found—as you can hear—is that there are a lot of different hand-offs and processes that will work outside of the regular way that baggage works at our airport.

I'm very pleased to say that our performance on the outbound baggage is that 99% of the time or sometimes even more, all of that baggage gets to the right place at the right time.

What we need to do is make sure we use data to connect and to make sure that the irregular bags that we see going through actually make their way onto the aircraft.

The Chair: Thank you very much, Ms. Vrooman.

Next, we'll go to Ms. Murray.

The floor is yours. You have five minutes, please.

Hon. Joyce Murray (Vancouver Quadra, Lib.): Thank you very much.

I welcome the testimony of our guests today.

I want to start with Ms. Pasher.

We heard earlier that there is a place where there are breakdowns in the processes for supporting people with disabilities. That is in the hand-off between the airport authority's area of responsibility and the airline's area of responsibility. Ms. Cadieux, Canada's chief accessibility officer, confirmed that there's not a seamless continuity there.

Ms. Pasher, how does the Canadian Airports Council help to identify and reduce the gaps in the hand-off between the airports and the airlines?

Ms. Monette Pasher: Thank you for the question.

Certainly that is an issue that we've been talking about quite a bit.

With these hand-offs, really the airports are responsible from the curb to the check-in counter. Then the airlines and their partners are responsible from the check-in counter to the plane. When you look at that, really the north star would be a seamless passenger experience. That's what we would like to see.

I think there are many ways that we could deliver that. That's part of what we're looking at now through pilots. Mr. Strahl mentioned Europe. We're looking at everything to see what those options and best practices are. I think, as Ms. Cadieux said, there are challenges everywhere in this delivery.

We need to look at the best practices and what's working well here now. Pearson has a seamless experience that does work well.

What can we learn from our own environment? What can we learn from other environments in order to make this better? I think continuous improvement is always the goal.

Hon. Joyce Murray: Thank you.

I have a question for Mr. Minocher.

You talked about how the goal of the GTAA is to attract and employ dedicated people, inclusive of people with disabilities.

I've been seized with the fact that the federal government has some clear targets for increasing the number of people with disabilities who are employed by the government. I know Ms. Cadieux was very much part of that. The rationale is that if people with that experience are designing and developing the solutions for others with disabilities, then we will have better outcomes.

Does the GTAA have a target number of people with disabilities to be hired?

• (1245)

Mr. Kurush Minocher: We're constantly increasing across the board the number of individuals with disabilities who are brought on board into the organization and across the airport community.

Specific to designing programs that support the travel experience, we work directly with individuals with lived experience. Sometimes, they are employees. Many times, they are individuals through the communities or through various advocacy groups, like the Canadian National Institute for the Blind or the Canadian Hearing Society.

Hon. Joyce Murray: I acknowledge that not every job can be done with every potential type of disability, but in the federal government, it is clearly a pathway to better addressing accessibility issues to have people with disabilities who are doing the work in that way.

Ms. Vrooman, it's great to see you here today. As a Vancouver airport user, congratulations on achieving a gold accessibility rating and on the supports for neurodiverse people.

I'd like to ask you the same question I asked Mr. Minocher. Do you have actual targets to increase the number of people with a disability whom you hire for the Vancouver Airport Authority to bring that first-hand understanding and context into the work your team does for passengers with disabilities?

Ms. Tamara Vrooman: Thank you very much for that question.

The short answer is yes. We attempt to hire a percentage the same as or greater than is present in the population.

One of the general challenges, though, is not everybody—particularly those with less visible disabilities—self-reports, so we're also creating tools to allow people to self-identify in diverse ways so that we can track the percentage of people we have employed at the airport.

The Chair: Thank you very much, Ms. Vrooman.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Barsalou-Duval, you now have the floor for five minutes.

Mr. Xavier Barsalou-Duval: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

The witnesses on this second panel represent various airports. I thank them for being with us.

My first question will be for Ms. Pasher from the Canadian Airports Council. This question was actually raised earlier today.

Ms. Pasher, to what extent is there functional, collaborative communication with the various players in the field when it comes to reporting special needs for people with disabilities?

We know that people enter this information when they buy tickets from airlines. However, to what extent does the airport receive information about the number of people with special needs who need to be at the airport that day?

Is this information made available to you, or are the airlines the only ones to have it?

[*English*]

Ms. Monette Pasher: When someone's booking a ticket and after booking their ticket—the day of travel—they can go on the websites of airports to see what services are available, and they can plan their needs that way.

In some cases, a passenger can arrive and, if they would like, they can have curbside assistance. Some of our airports have 24-7 access. Others have an intercom through which you can get support. The support then comes out to meet you at the curbside. They'll take you in to see the airline. At the airline, you check in and then you're moving through the rest of the system with them.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Xavier Barsalou-Duval: As I understand it, there is no communication system between airlines and airports to inform you in advance of the number of people with special needs so that you can plan, for example, for the staff or infrastructure required. These people must communicate with the airport in advance, or else be taken care of using a system that exists on site.

Do you think that if there were such a system for exchanging data or important information like this, it would help you provide better care, or at least better support for people with disabilities?

• (1250)

[*English*]

Ms. Monette Pasher: A passenger books the ticket with the air carrier, so I think that is where...when they show up at the airport, there is a system in place.

Would more data sharing and information between parties be helpful? I think it's always helpful. We heard in the last testimony whether data would be helpful in this regard. I think it would be.

For smaller airports, where they don't see the accessible needs of passengers quite as frequently as they do at the large airports, it operates a bit differently. In those communities, usually, people reach out in advance. We really don't get many complaints at the smaller airports. There is that personalized service, and they're used to what is in place, so they're aware.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Xavier Barsalou-Duval: My next question is about training.

In your opening remarks, you mentioned that training services are offered by airports to airport staff, which seems quite natural to me. You also mentioned that training was given to people who look after passengers on planes, for example flight attendants—I don't know if that's the right title.

As I understand it, airports provide training for the airline staff. Do the airports simply provide additional training?

[*English*]

Ms. Monette Pasher: Thank you for asking that question, because I think that's very important to distinguish.

Our airports are only responsible for our airport training and the training of airport authority staff. Airlines are responsible for training airline staff, mobility handlers and baggage handlers in a number of different aspects of our environment.

What you were referring to would be for the airlines and their specific training, which would be different for the airports and the airport employees.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Xavier Barsalou-Duval: Thank you.

Earlier, people mentioned that there was another system, elsewhere in the world, in terms of how the takeover works. As I understand it, airport assistance stops when the passenger checks in with the airline, which is quite early in the process. It seems to me that check-in takes place at the beginning of the process, i.e., on arrival at the airport. So the role of airports is quite limited.

Elsewhere in the world, airports have a greater responsibility. In fact, care begins when passengers arrive and ends when they board.

If this were an obligation, would airports be able to meet it?

The Chair: Ms. Pasher, I would ask you to give a brief response, as the member has very little speaking time left.

[*English*]

Ms. Monette Pasher: Sure.

You know, airlines are responsible for checking in their guests. Airlines are responsible for moving those guests through that environment.

If there are other countries doing this differently, they're likely doing it with third parties working hand in hand with airlines. It is airlines that move their passengers through the airport ecosystem. That would be our experience of what's happening elsewhere.

The Chair: Thank you very much, Ms. Pasher.

[*Translation*]

Thank you, Mr. Barsalou-Duval.

[*English*]

Next, we have Mr. Bachrach.

Mr. Bachrach, you have five minutes.

Mr. Taylor Bachrach: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you to our witnesses.

I think what we've heard on this panel is that the airports, especially the big airports, are doing lots of different things. There's a lot of activity. I don't think there's any question that these organizations take accessibility concerns seriously and that there's stuff going on.

What I think the committee is trying to get at, though, is the trend in accountability. We're trying to get some line of sight on how fast that process of improvement is occurring and, when things don't go well, what the reason for that is.

I haven't heard any of the airports talk about complaint processes, so maybe I'll start there.

How are complaints related to accessibility concerns handled by airport authorities, whether or not that data is disclosed publicly? What are the trends in that data and how could that be strengthened as part of the system?

Maybe I'll start with Ms. Pasher, then go to the airport authorities.

• (1255)

Ms. Monette Pasher: I can start, but I think my colleagues would be better able to answer that specifically.

Thank you for your comments. Our airports really do care and a lot of work is under way.

Would more data on the issues being presented and how fast they're being remedied be helpful? Absolutely. I think data is always helpful in improving the system, and I talked about continuous improvement being our goal. We want to make sure everyone can access our system and do so in the way they want to experience that process.

Mr. Taylor Bachrach: Ms. Pasher, is there a consistent system of reporting complaints related to accessibility across Canadian airports?

Ms. Monette Pasher: I'm going to turn it over to them, if I could.

Mr. Taylor Bachrach: Okay.

I thought perhaps you could give me the national view on that. Your response prompted me to ask whether there's a consistent national approach to reporting complaints.

Ms. Monette Pasher: It would just be through the CTA really. I'll leave my colleagues to answer that one.

Mr. Taylor Bachrach: Okay.

Ms. Monette Pasher: I don't know if you want to weigh in, Kurush.

Mr. Taylor Bachrach: I think they're trying to decide who goes first.

Mr. Kurush Minocher: Thank you. I'm happy to take this one.

We have a number of different ways in which we solicit feedback from passengers. There's certainly a complaints area to which passengers can write with concerns they have, but we also survey passengers on a proactive and ongoing basis to better understand how our services and programs are performing and where there's opportunity for correction.

The response is directly tied to the feedback we get. Infrastructure things take significantly longer. Process changes are easy to implement, and we work directly with various parties at the airport to make those changes.

Mr. Taylor Bachrach: Mr. Minocher, in regard to my last question around there being a consistent system across Canadian airports, are you aware of a consistent system for airport authorities to report that kind of data when it comes to accessibility complaints?

Mr. Kurush Minocher: Unfortunately I can speak only for Pearson. I'm not familiar with what other airports are doing in this space.

Mr. Taylor Bachrach: Okay.

Ms. Vrooman, can you perhaps share YVR's approach on that topic?

Ms. Tamara Vrooman: Our approach is very similar to Toronto's in that we certainly have a complaints process, but, frankly, most of the time, when we get complaints about accessibility issues, we're generally cc'd on a complaint that's already going to one of our airlines. We actually receive very few complaints relating to our services. We proactively go out and solicit feedback in the same way that Kurush described, but to your specific question, there is no national system of reporting other than through the CTA.

Mr. Taylor Bachrach: Thanks for that.

I do agree that it seems as though most of the focus of these inquiries and the media coverage that we've heard has had to do with the airline experience as opposed to airport authorities.

I want to thank your team, Ms. Vrooman, for giving me a tour of YVR on a recent visit to the airport. I'm there a lot, as are my B.C. colleagues.

One of the things that were shared with me was information about the new program, under which you have ambassadors who greet passengers right at the curb and who then help them through the process to the hand-off at the check-in kiosk.

One of the topics that came up at a previous meeting was how people with disabilities or people who require accommodations identify that to personnel at the airport. Our understanding is that essentially they have to self-identify in order to obtain accommodations, and part of that has to do with privacy protections.

I wonder if your ambassadors are able to offer some sort of generic prompt at the curb to everyone, regardless of whether they have a visible disability, in order to identify people who require certain accommodations. Is there a conversation they engage passengers in around accommodating their experience?

Ms. Tamara Vrooman: Thank you for that, and thanks for the shout-out to my staff. They're very pleased, at any time, to take people through our operations.

That is a new program. It's similar to what you see in a hotel setting where you're greeted at the curb, but it's very new for airports.

Already, just in the three months since we launched this program, we have had over 2,000 people with diverse needs who have been identified and served proactively.

Our folks have special training to be able to identify but also to ask in a private but human-centred way if people need assistance. Sometimes it's obvious. Sometimes it's not. We have found significant improvement in expediting people in a personalized way through to check-in, which then allows us to forward information on and coordinate with airlines through to the gate.

● (1300)

Mr. Taylor Bachrach: Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you very much, Ms. Vrooman.

Thank you, Mr. Bachrach.

Thanks to all of our witnesses for appearing before us today and sharing your expertise on this very important study for all Canadians.

Colleagues, I'm going to suspend for two minutes as we go in camera to discuss some committee business.

I'd like to ask the witnesses to log off at their pleasure.

This meeting stands suspended.

[Proceedings continue in camera]

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