

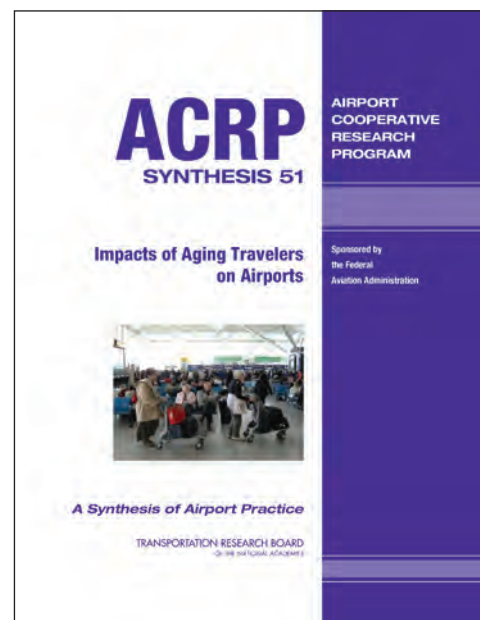
## Airports and Aging Travelers

**W**here are the restrooms? Where is baggage claim? How do I locate my rental car? How do I access Wi-Fi? These are questions most travelers ask when navigating an unfamiliar airport. Even experienced air travelers have moments when locating a service or facility within an airport becomes a challenge.

Imagine how much more challenging these issues become if the traveler is dealing with musculoskeletal problems that may limit the ability to walk through an airport terminal. Or deteriorating sight and hearing that limit the ability to read terminal signage or understand recorded announcements. Or the psychological challenges of anxiety if running late for a flight and a limited ability to adapt to change.

These are some of the challenges faced by a growing number of air travelers defined as “aging”—persons 65 years or older. The U.S. Census Bureau Age and Sex Composition Report (2010) showed the growth in the percentage of persons over 65 changed from 9 percent in 1960 to 13 percent in 2010 and is projected to be 19 percent in 2030. Additionally, the number of persons between 45 and 65 years old—the future elderly, so to speak—has increased from 20.3 percent to 26.4 percent compared to the same period.

The U.S. Travel Association notes older travelers account for 21 percent of all leisure travelers and 14 percent of all business passengers. It is also expected that the proportion of older travelers choosing to fly will increase as a result of more affluence and higher



education levels. Although healthier in some respects than earlier generations, today's older traveler is still subject to a variety of chronic illnesses that could negatively impact their ability to navigate airport terminals confidently and safely. The challenge for airports and airlines is how best to respond to the physical and psychological needs of the increasing number of aging and elderly travelers.

So, what's an airport to do? Tom Nichols, director of operations at Southwest Florida International Airport (RSW) in Fort Myers, Fla. strongly suggests part of the answer resides in the contents of the report *ACRP Synthesis 51: Impacts of Aging Travelers on Airports*.

“A large number of the passengers who travel through Southwest Florida International Airport are more than the 65 years of age,” said Nichols. “Subsequently, we have worked to make the terminal experience easier, safer, and



Above: Southwest Florida International Airport (RSW) added electronic signage (left) in its ticketing lobby to help guide passengers to the airline check-in area. Signs added to direct passengers away from escalators and toward elevators (right) help create a safer environment for aging travelers. Images courtesy of RSW.

**Airports and Aging Travelers—***continued*

more enjoyable for all travelers, especially the older traveler.”

The way Nichols and his RSW colleagues utilized *ACRP Synthesis 51* demonstrates one of the many value propositions of ACRP research—confirming what an airport has done is the appropriate course of action.

“During the past five years, we have implemented a wide variety of facility and service improvements designed with the older traveler in mind,” Nichols said. “We pick up and drop off long-term surface lot parking customers using airport shuttle buses that position right at the automobile and assist with luggage. When using this lot, departing customers are given a parking spot location note so they can tell the shuttle bus driver their car’s location upon return. Customers are also provided transportation from the long-term surface parking lot to the terminal door closest to a passenger’s departure gate to minimize walking for our older passengers. In addition, passengers who make advance reservations for commercial pre-arranged transportation can be picked up on the front curb closest to their bag carousel and on-demand taxi service is allowed to approach the front curb upon the customer’s request.”

“In the terminal,” Nichols continued, “we integrated visual paging into our new Flight Information Display System (FIDS) to accommodate passengers with hearing challenges. We added electronic digital signage in the ticketing lobby to more efficiently guide our passengers to the airline check-in area. We upgraded our free Wi-Fi service to accommodate demands from our more tech-savvy older passengers. Signs were added to direct passengers away from escalators and toward elevators, which creates a safer environment, particularly for older travelers. We increased the width of the aisles, added wheelchair storage and specially marked seats for handicapped and wheelchair travelers in airline gate areas. When the terminal was built in 2005, flat-plate baggage claim carousels were installed. As it turned out, the *ACRP Synthesis 51* confirmed that was the right decision for making it easier for passengers—particularly older ones—to acquire their checked bags.”

Once *ACRP Synthesis 51* was published, Nichols met with his team to evaluate each of the aforementioned projects vis-à-vis the guidance offered in the report and identify potential projects and/or service improvements to make travelling through

*ACRP Synthesis 51* identifies these key issues faced by aging air travelers and the efforts currently being made to address them:

- **Wayfinding**—difficulties in negotiating the complex environment presented by airport roadways, parking facilities, and terminal buildings;
- **Fatigue**—the physical effort involved in standing, waiting in line, lifting heavy bags, and walking long distances;
- **Technology and equipment**—coping with the increasing use of automation, self-service machines, TSA passenger screening process, and using escalators and moving walks; and
- **Amenities**—the challenges of using congested concessions area and constricted toilet facilities.



Above: Low profile flat-plate baggage claim carousels at Southwest Florida International Airport (RSW) allow easier retrieval of bags, particularly for aging travelers. Bags can be slid off the device to the floor rather than using a lifting motion as required for sloped plate baggage carousels installed at many airports. Image courtesy of RSW.

RSW a more enjoyable experience for the “aging” traveler.

“The *ACRP Synthesis 51* has confirmed and affirmed our approach to projects and service improvements is consistent with industry “best practices” and has helped us ensure the airport experience for older travelers at RSW is the best it can be,” concluded Nichols.

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