

## **AIR CARRIER ACCESS ACT**

### **The Issue**

Over 30 years ago, President Ronald Reagan signed the Air Carrier Access Act (ACAA) into law. The ACAA prohibits discrimination based on disability in air travel. Despite progress, too many travelers with disabilities still encounter significant barriers, such as damaged assistive devices, delayed assistance, and lack of seating accommodations. Access for people with disabilities in air travel must move into the 21st century. Otherwise, people with disabilities will be left behind unable to compete in today's job market or enjoy the opportunities available to other Americans.

To address disability-related complaints under the ACAA, passengers with disabilities may file a complaint with the specific airline or the Department of Transportation (DOT). In February 2017, DOT released the latest figures on complaints filed directly with airlines. In 2015, passengers filed 30,830 disability-related complaints as reported by 176 domestic and foreign air carriers, which represents a nearly twelve percent increase over 2014. Top complaints with U.S. carriers for passengers with paraplegia or quadriplegia include failure to provide assistance and seating accommodation. In 2015, passengers also filed 939 disability-related complaints directly with DOT.

Many of the difficulties that travelers with disabilities encounter in air travel are not sufficiently addressed by the ACAA and its implementing regulations. Damaged assistive devices, inadequate training for airline and contractor personnel, and inaccessible airplanes result in missed flights, injuries, and delays that lead to lost time and missed opportunities for people with disabilities. Enforcement of ACAA protections is limited to administrative action and civil fines. Unlike most other civil rights laws, the ACAA lacks a guaranteed private right of action. Consequently, people with disabilities typically receive little if any redress to their specific grievances.

### **PVA's Position:**

- ACAA enforcement must be strengthened by amending the statute to include specific protections and a private right of action.
- Airplanes must be designed to accommodate people with disabilities and airlines must acquire airplanes that meet broad accessibility standards. Improved structural access includes safe and effective boarding and deplaning processes, procedures, and equipment along with better stowage options for assistive devices.
- Policies and regulations must be reformed to improve access to seating accommodations and remove heightened restrictions for some psychiatric service animals and emotional support animals.
- Improved training for air carrier personnel and their contractors must include a focus on industry best practices to close remaining service gaps in air travel for passengers with disabilities.