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Chair: Mr. Peter Schiefke



Standing Committee on Transport, Infrastructure and Communities

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• (1100)

[*Translation*]

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

Welcome to meeting number 101 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 people with disabilities.

Today's meeting is taking place in a hybrid format, pursuant to the Standing Orders of the House of Commons. Members are attending in person in the room and remotely using the Zoom application.

[*English*]

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

Appearing before us today for the first hour, from Air Passenger Rights, is Dr. Gábor Lukács, president, who is joining us by video conference.

Welcome back, sir. It's always good to have you here.

From the Canadian Air Transport Security Authority, we have Nada Semaan, president and chief executive officer; Louise Alberelli, general manager, operational programs; and Rhoda Boyd, director, communications and passenger experience.

Welcome.

I'll turn it over to you, Dr. Lukács, so that you can begin your opening remarks. You have five minutes, sir.

Dr. Gábor Lukács (President, Air Passenger Rights): Mr. Chair, honourable members, Air Passenger Rights is Canada's independent non-profit organization of volunteers devoted to empowering travellers. We speak for passengers whom we help daily in their

struggle to enforce their rights. We take no government or business funding, and we have no business interest in the travel industry.

The right to accessible transportation is enshrined in article 9 of the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, to which Canada is a signatory.

Accessible transportation is also a matter of common sense and compassion, affecting millions of our fellow Canadians. For example, one in 10 Canadians has a mobility-related disability and one in fourteen a vision-related one. Disability rates increase with age. Two out of five Canadians aged 65 or older have at least one disability. If you do not have one yet, you may develop one sooner or later.

Yet, passengers being deprived of their mobility aids or of adequate assistance in air transportation and having to crawl on the floor as a result, is, sadly, not a new problem. The advance of technology has brought to Canadians' living rooms the footage of the all-too-common inhumane treatment of passengers with disabilities. These incidents can no longer be ignored. Canadians deserve an answer as to why these incidents keep happening and what needs to be done to stop them.

The culprit is the perennial problem of inadequate enforcement and inadequate legislation. The Accessible Transportation for Persons with Disabilities Regulations, ATPDR, codified important principles, but were not written with enforcement in mind. They do not stipulate clearly defined, predictable and significant financial consequences for violations, nor do they offer automatic compensation to affected passengers.

While the Canadian Transportation Agency has fined Air Canada and WestJet in a few high-profile cases with significant media coverage, consistent and strict enforcement is lacking. The fines in high-profile cases were in the right ballpark of \$50,000 to \$100,000. However when the media is not paying attention, the fines are insignificant. Last week, Air Transat was fined only \$11,000 for a similar violation.

These fines are just the tip of the iceberg. No statistics are available in Canada because, unlike in the U.S., airlines are not required to report any data on mishandled mobility aids or disability-related complaints they received.

The ATPDR themselves also contain harmful loopholes. The most significant loophole is the exclusion of international flights from the one-person-one-fare rule.

The one-person-one-fare rule prohibits airlines charging an additional fare if a passenger requires an additional seat for disability-related reasons. This rule is vital for providing equal access to air transportation to passengers who must be accompanied by a support person due to their disability, or who are too large to fit into a single seat or who rely on a service dog.

In 2008, the CTA imposed the one-person-one-fare rule on flights within Canada as a measure to eliminate undue barriers to the mobility of passengers with disabilities. Since 2008, however, the CTA has rejected every attempt to expand the one-person-one-fare rule to international flights. The CTA incorporated the one-person-one-fare rule in the ATPDR, but excluded international flights from this important rule.

In 2022, the CTA refused to hear a complaint seeking to expand the one-person-one-fare rule to international flights, citing incompatibility with Canada's commitments to other states. These concerns about Canada's international commitments are devoid of any merit. Canada is not only entitled but also has an obligation to impose requirements on airlines operating to and from its territory to implement article 9 of the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities and the right to accessible transportation enshrined therein.

Since the CTA is failing at protecting passengers with disabilities, it falls upon you, the lawmakers, to do so. I ask that Parliament repeal subsection 31(2) of the ATPDR and pass legislation that enshrines the one-person-one-fare rule for all who travel within, to and from Canada.

Thank you.

• (1105)

The Chair: Thank you very much.

I just want to confirm something. I should know this, because you have appeared before committee multiple times. What's the correct pronunciation of your last name, for the benefit of our members here?

Dr. Gábor Lukács: It's "Lu-catch", like you catch a ball.

The Chair: Thank you so much for confirming that.

Next we'll go to the Canadian Air Transport Security Authority. You have five minutes for your opening remarks, please.

Ms. Nada Semaan (President and Chief Executive Officer, Canadian Air Transport Security Authority): Thank you very much, Chair.

• (1110)

[*Translation*]

Good morning, and thank you for inviting me to join you today.

My name is Nada Semaan, and I am honoured to appear before this committee as president and chief executive officer of the Canadian Air Transport Security Authority, or CATSA. With me are Rhoda Boyd, director of communications and passenger experi-

ence, and Louise Alberelli, general manager of operational programs.

As I believe everyone knows, CATSA is responsible for securing specific elements of the air transportation system. We have four mandated activities: pre-board passenger screening, hold baggage screening, non-passenger screening and ID card management for restricted areas. We deliver our mandate at 89 designated airports across the country through a third-party screening contractor model.

Our goal is to provide professional, effective and consistent security screening across the country with a focus on service excellence. As part of this commitment, we strive to provide an inclusive and barrier-free security screening experience for those working at or transiting through Canada's designated airports.

[*English*]

Ongoing improvement is always at the forefront of CATSA's efforts. With this in mind, we saw the Office of the Auditor General's recent report, "Accessible Transportation for Persons With Disabilities", as an opportunity to look at what additional steps we could take to better meet the needs of those we serve.

Personally, it was a great way for me to focus on such an important topic just a few days after my appointment as CEO of CATSA.

We definitely agree with the recommendations made as a result of the report, which provided additional measures we can undertake to remove barriers for persons with disabilities.

The report contains three recommendations for CATSA. They are areas for improving accessibility of online content, implementing enhanced accessibility training and leveraging complaints data to prevent barriers to accessibility.

Today, I'll give a bit of an update on where we are in these areas.

On the first recommendation, we have taken critical steps toward ensuring that our online content meets web accessibility standards. As planned, we upgraded our content management system. Since then, we've been working on an ongoing basis to ensure that outstanding website accessibility issues are addressed. Right now, we expect that these improvements will be completed by March 31, 2024, providing an enhanced level of accessibility on our website for all travellers.

With regard to training, we have implemented a process to monitor and ensure that all screening officers receive accessibility training prior to starting to work with the public, that CATSA management and decision-makers are immediately offered accessibility training upon joining the organization, and that they complete it within a set period of time. We also introduced three new modules that screening officers, managers and decision-makers are required to complete, and all employees are encouraged to explore.

We are also working to improve the data gathering and analysis of CATSA's complaints. More specifically, we are improving how we categorize complaints to allow us to extract more accurate data. At the same time, we are enhancing our reporting of these complaints.

As noted by the Office of the Auditor General, we currently evaluate and process complaints individually. This allows us to review complaints in real time, and share information and feedback to our frontline operations team right away and to our training team. However, to improve our reporting, we are creating a quarterly report that will allow us to better analyze our data and identify potential trends that we can work to address.

CATSA actively listens and engages with passengers, airport workers, screening officers, the CATSA workforce and accessibility advocacy organizations to identify, prevent and eliminate accessibility barriers, both current and future. In fact, my colleagues and I had the enormous pleasure of meeting the chief accessibility officer recently. We voiced our support for the very important work that is being undertaken by her office, but also our commitment to continued collaboration.

We remain available to participate in various forums dedicated to the common goal of taking action today to work toward a more accessible and barrier-free tomorrow.

[*Translation*]

Even with all the progress that CATSA has made in terms of accessibility, this is an area where we will always be looking to improve. We believe that everyone deserves and is entitled to an inclusive and barrier-free experience.

We thank you again for the opportunity to speak to you today about this pressing issue. We would be happy to answer any questions you may have about our role in terms of travel and accessibility.

Thank you very much.

• (1115)

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Semaan.

[*English*]

We'll begin our line of questioning today with Mr. Strahl.

Mr. Strahl, the floor is yours. You have six minutes, please.

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

Thank you to the witnesses for appearing for a very important study.

I think that Canadians have been very troubled by some of the high-profile stories we've seen in the media, starting with the chief accessibility officer having her wheelchair left behind on one of her flights. I think that was ironic and unacceptable and led to a focus on this issue, which I think is a very important one for this committee to delve into.

I want to start with Dr. Lukács.

We've all seen the stories of passengers who have been forced to drag themselves down the aisle of an aircraft or lift themselves up exterior stairs. Both of those incidents, those two high-profile incidents—perhaps the most graphic incidents in the last number of months.... One occurred in Las Vegas, and one occurred in Mexico.

I guess my question to you is this: How should the Government of Canada—through regulation—and the airlines be forced to address this issue? What are the complications, or should it matter at all, when these incidents are happening to Canadian passengers on Canadian carriers but outside of Canada?

Dr. Gábor Lukács: In my view, it is immaterial where the incident is taking place as long as it is travel to and from Canada. Air travel does not have jurisdictional borders in the usual sense. A flight starts in Canada and ends somewhere else. The fact is that these are carriers that are licensed to operate to and from Canada, and as a condition of their licences, they have to comply with Canadian law, including Canadian human rights legislation. It is essentially the airline's responsibility to ensure that its staff members and subcontractors—whoever it is entrusting to handle passengers—are compliant with the Canadian law that airlines are required to comply with.

Mr. Mark Strahl: In addition to these passengers who were subjected to humiliating and unacceptable boarding and disembarking processes, we've heard about numerous cases where a wheelchair or a care aid is not the same as a piece of luggage. This is essential to the ability of a person with a disability to live life to the fullest. When you damage a wheelchair that costs sometimes in the tens of thousands of dollars, or it doesn't arrive and someone is thrown into an airport wheelchair, that's obviously unacceptable.

What do you believe the solution is to ensure that these disability aids are not treated like Samsonite suitcases and are, in fact, treated as extensions of the persons with disabilities? How do we ensure that they are given a priority where there's just no chance that these highly specialized pieces of equipment can be left behind or damaged? What is the response of government to ensure that this simply cannot happen to persons with disabilities who are travelling?

Dr. Gábor Lukács: I agree that mobility aids are extensions of the body of the person with a disability. That's a very important message that, unfortunately, is not sufficiently passed on to those staff members who handle those mobility aids.

There's no foolproof solution. Right now, aircraft are not necessarily equipped to transport those mobility aids in the cabin, which would be perhaps the perfect solution, although it may be an aspiration to move in that direction in the coming years in terms of engineering and what may be safe and possible.

What certainly can be done in the short-run is to impose a very significant, automatic and immediate financial consequence of over \$100,000 per each incident that happens. Once there is a high price tag, the airline will work much harder to prevent that type of financial consequence.

• (1120)

Mr. Mark Strahl: I'll move now to CATSA.

I'm interested to know how your ability to serve Canadians with disabilities is impacted, if at all, by the size of the airport that you are operating in. If you have a couple of agents who do a few flights a day, are you still able to offer the same service to persons with disabilities, or is it more difficult in those smaller or regional airports as opposed to the major airports, where you have hundreds of staff and perhaps all of the latest equipment and technology and the ability to perform those pre-flight checks in a dignified way for a person with a disability?

Could you talk to us about the challenges you might face based on the size of the airport you are operating in?

Ms. Nada Semaan: Actually, we have standard operating procedures throughout all airports, so we do provide a very consistent method.

Does the size of the checkpoint help with mobility? Absolutely, but we always make sure, when we are designing it, that there is easy access for all passengers to get through regardless of the size of the airport.

We do work with the airport authorities. If we ever hear anything—if there is ever a complaint or anything—we would address it immediately. I'm not aware of any issues in the smaller airports that would in any way hinder a person with a disability from going through. Those are our standard operating procedures, and all of our training is done by CATSA, even though we go through different third party service providers. We try to ensure consistency no matter where it is.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Next we have Mr. Iacono.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Iacono, you have the floor for six minutes.

[*English*]

Mr. Angelo Iacono (Alfred-Pellan, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I welcome the witnesses this morning and thank them for being here to enlighten us on these incidents.

Passengers with disabilities who use mobility aids, specifically those with wheelchairs or scooters that require certain kinds of tools to adjust, face inconsistent application of policy as to whether they are allowed on the plane or not. What is the policy? Can you tell us how that is communicated to your frontline staff in terms of inconsistent application of this policy?

I recall that, more than 10 years ago when I was travelling with my mom, she didn't have much of a disability, but we took precautionary measures to get her from her entry to the airport to reaching the plane by getting her transported by a wheelchair so that she wouldn't get fatigued. We were the ones to instigate that. We needed that type of service.

What happens today with somebody who has disability X, Y or Z, the moment they purchase a ticket? What are the questions asked

of them? What are the procedures that follow right after that? Where does this information go after that? Whom does it connect to? Who reacts?

Ms. Nada Semaan: I can't speak to what the airlines do when a ticket is purchased. I can speak to what happens when the person reaches the airport and the security lines, if that helps. I know that we share data, but we don't share specific data on who is coming. They share data on the number of passengers so that we have the right amount of staff for security screening.

With regard to our processes, the minute we see anybody who requires any kind of assistance, whether it is a mobility aid or not... We have family special needs lines. In the smaller airports—

Mr. Angelo Iacono: I'm sorry to interrupt you, but aren't you the ones giving guidelines to the airline companies? They have their own procedures, but are there any set guidelines that come from you as to how they should react towards disability?

Ms. Nada Semaan: I believe that Canadian Transportation Agency might have guidelines, but CATSA does not have any regulatory oversight over any of the airlines. We just provide—I don't want to say "just"—security services to ensure the security of the travelling public when they get into the sterile area.

Mr. Angelo Iacono: When you have a passenger who is hard of hearing or completely deaf, how do you communicate with them?

• (1125)

Ms. Nada Semaan: We have training on that. I'll ask Rhoda or Louise to talk about the training and what we do—if either of you want to jump into that.

Ms. Louise Alberelli (General Manager, Operational Programs, Canadian Air Transport Security Authority): Your question is what happens when a passenger with hearing loss presents at a checkpoint. As Nada has mentioned, we have very detailed standard operating procedures that our screening officers follow when dealing with passengers. Our procedures are very specific and address passengers with special needs, including hearing loss.

Mr. Angelo Iacono: Thank you.

You have some procedures in that case, but you don't have any procedures set out when it comes to people with disabilities.

Is that what I'm understanding?

Ms. Nada Semaan: No, no. We actually have procedures for people who require mobility aids. We have some for those with vision loss. We also have instructions on how to handle equipment, such as defibrillators or things like that. We also have procedures for hidden disabilities, those that you don't necessarily see.

As I mentioned in my opening remarks, we have put forward new training modules. In that training, people with disabilities actually provide us with their lived experiences and tell us what they saw. They say, “This is what could be done. If you could do this, it would be better.” We're finding that this type of training is really helping to crystalize what we really need to do to improve, because we try our best, but we also know we can always improve.

Mr. Angelo Iacono: What is the complaints procedure for passengers with disabilities who have an issue with CATSA?

Ms. Nada Semaan: We actually have our independent complaints.... She is in charge of all the complaints. I'll let you speak to it, Rhoda.

Ms. Rhoda Boyd (Director, Communications and Passenger Experience, Canadian Air Transport Security Authority): We have complaints procedures that go through our client satisfaction team. From anybody who has questions before they travel, or if they have a complaint after having gone through security screening, it comes to that team. We address every accessibility complaint as a top priority. They are given attention immediately, and any questions that individuals may have, we address those immediately.

Mr. Angelo Iacono: Thank you.

I see that you have somewhat of a system, so why, in these two cases, did that system not work at its best?

Ms. Nada Semaan: Those two cases were with airlines, not with CATSA.

Mr. Angelo Iacono: Did you guys not have anything to do with that? Do you not communicate with the airline companies? Do you not work together? Are you two different entities?

Ms. Nada Semaan: We are two different entities. We work together, but we're two totally different entities. We provide security screening at airports.

Mr. Angelo Iacono: Do you ever communicate with them? Are there any other fields in the job you do where you communicate with the airlines?

Ms. Nada Semaan: We're actually very happy to work with all the airlines and airports on an end-to-end solution for all travellers, including persons with disabilities. That's something we would love to do.

[Translation]

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Iacono.

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

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

I want to thank the various witnesses who have joined us today for this important study. I might even call the study frustrating, given what we see all over the media.

People with disabilities end up facing the same issues year after year. I was looking at news stories from 2019, 2020, 2021, 2022 and even 2023. I get the impression that the same issues crop up year after year. People with reduced mobility always seem to have trouble getting service. Airlines always seem to treat them in what I would call a cavalier and inappropriate manner.

Mr. Lukács, is there a specific reason for this? Is the situation different in other places? Should we draw inspiration from the legislative framework in other countries and adapt our own framework to address the current issues?

[English]

Dr. Gábor Lukács: When we look at the United States, it's different because there are statistics, and the public reporting of statistics. You can go on the DOT website, and find daily and monthly statistics on lost or damaged mobility aids. What the airline has done doesn't remain a secret.

We should implement a similar system in Canada. We can perhaps enhance the statistical reporting of disability-related complaints that the airlines themselves receive.

As for other matters, the one-person-one-fare rule has been a pioneering effort in Canada. I don't think we should be looking at other countries. On the contrary, we should set an example and be international leaders in accessibility. We should be expanding the one-person-one-fare rule to all flights, not only within Canada but also to and from Canada.

• (1130)

[Translation]

Mr. Xavier Barsalou-Duval: Thank you for your response, which brings something else to mind.

Not long ago, I came across some encouraging news for people who want to board aircraft in wheelchairs. A certification process is under way for certain wheelchairs that could fit on aircraft.

That said, I was surprised to see that this certification process is carried out in the United States, but that Canada would implement the process only if the United States decided it were the right step. I wonder whether it's normal for Canada to constantly lag behind the United States or neighbouring states in terms of legislation.

[English]

Dr. Gábor Lukács: No, we should not be trend-followers; we should be trendsetters. Canada should be a world leader in accessibility in transportation. We should be setting the trend. We should be setting an example and letting other countries follow us. Just because the U.S. may be lagging behind on some of these issues is not a valid excuse for us to not do everything to meet our Canadian values of accessibility.

[Translation]

Mr. Xavier Barsalou-Duval: Thank you.

In your opening remarks, you referred to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. I found this interesting, particularly when it comes to how these people should be treated and how their rights should be respected.

I was wondering why you didn't talk about the International Civil Aviation Organization, or ICAO, in your opening remarks. Do any components of the ICAO framework go further than the current Canadian framework?

[English]

Dr. Gábor Lukács: I'm afraid I didn't hear the legislation you were referring to. It was not in the translation.

[Translation]

Mr. Xavier Barsalou-Duval: It's hard for me to know which comments haven't been interpreted. I'll repeat my question.

Up until now, when you spoke about standards or the needs of people with disabilities, you referred to the rights established by the United Nations. However, the Montreal-based ICAO has also set standards that it recommends that Canada and other signatory countries apply. When it comes to people with disabilities or reduced mobility, should any ICAO standards be further explored or implemented? Does Canada currently implement them properly?

[English]

Dr. Gábor Lukács: Thank you. Now I understand the question.

The airline organizations are setting norms and standards for the airlines. Parliament's role is to set the standards in law, so the airlines have to follow what Parliament is setting. Airlines should not be dictating to Canada what the laws on disabilities and accessibility should be.

Certainly, looking at other sources as inspiration and as authority is a great initiative. However, ultimately, Parliament is sovereign, and Parliament has the authority. It should be telling the airlines what the human rights standards are that they have to meet if they want to do business in Canada, from Canada and to Canada.

[Translation]

Mr. Xavier Barsalou-Duval: Thank you.

The one-person-one-fare policy states that carriers can't charge more than one fare to people with disabilities. You said that, to your knowledge, this applies only to domestic flights in Canada. No other country does this.

In response, Canada seemed to say that it would need to contact its international counterparts to establish these types of standards, since this isn't a normal practice abroad. Is this type of policy applied in other places? Should we be the first to apply it?

• (1135)

[English]

The Chair: Unfortunately, we're going to have to wait until the next round for a response to that, Dr. Lukács. If you can hold a response, that would be greatly appreciated by Mr. Barsalou-Duval.

Next we'll go to Mr. Bachrach.

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

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

Thank you, Dr. Lukács and the team at CATSA, for being with us today.

I think we're here as a committee largely because of the atrocious, dehumanizing and harmful treatment of people with disabilities by Canada's airlines. I sincerely hope that this committee can produce a report with strong recommendations that can lead to real changes that result in the better treatment of people who fly on Canadian airlines.

I do note that Mr. Lepofsky from the Accessibility for Ontarians With Disabilities Act Alliance was supposed to be with us as a witness. Unfortunately, he had technical issues with his sound. I hope that the committee can have him back; I think he'll bring a very important perspective to this study.

I'll start my questions with Dr. Lukács.

Dr. Lukács: you've been an outspoken advocate for air passenger rights writ large. I wonder if you could start by drawing some parallels between the current government's approach to air passenger rights and the current government's approach to regulations around the treatment of people with disabilities who travel.

Dr. Gábor Lukács: The Parliament I am seeing is concerned about inadequate enforcement and inadequate legislation. There is, however, a difference. When it comes to the rights of passengers with disabilities, at least the government is showing some good intentions, whereas I could not say the same thing about passenger rights. In the case of disabilities, I would say it is more a question of poor implementation, and not direct, deliberate sabotage of the implementation of policy.

Enforcement has been a concern. It is also something that has been identified in the Auditor General's report, although I don't believe that a lack of resources explains the low number of fines that were issued, for example, to Air Transat, while the cases with significant media exposure get very significant fines.

Mr. Taylor Bachrach: What do you think does explain it?

Dr. Gábor Lukács: The explanation is that there is some intent of virtue signalling; there's some level of differential treatment based on political desires, as opposed to simply looking at violations and having a standard and consistent enforcement of a particular undesirable behaviour.

Mr. Taylor Bachrach: Dr. Lukács, you mentioned the one-person-one-fare regulations and the fact that the airlines do not feel these extend to international flights. There was recently a ruling on this topic by the Supreme Court of British Columbia, where the court found the opposite. Can you comment on that ruling and what implications it might have?

Dr. Gábor Lukács: We were talking about the preliminary ruling on WestJet's challenge to a lawsuit about the one-person-one-fare rule. Passengers were suing because they had to pay extra on international flights in particular, because WestJet does not follow the one-person-one-fare rule for international flights.

That's a preliminary ruling that paints a very damning picture of the Canadian Transportation Agency's efforts to avoid dealing with the one-person-one-fare rule on international flights. They were essentially playing hot potato and referring to non-existent international obligations that don't in any way tie Canada's hands as an excuse for their inaction.

Mr. Taylor Bachrach: You mentioned WestJet. We're going to have the CEO of WestJet appear in our second hour. How would you describe WestJet's record when it comes to the treatment of people with disabilities?

Dr. Gábor Lukács: Unfortunately, we don't have systemic statistics, so I would be a bit hesitant to paint them with a broad brush. Surely, the fact that they are trying to fight the one-person-one-fare rule on international itineraries is a concern.

In another case I have been privy to, they took a passenger with disabilities to the Federal Court of Appeal in an attempt to overturn the Canadian Transportation Agency's decision, so they are being very combative in the cases I have seen when it comes to the rights of passengers with disabilities.

Mr. Taylor Bachrach: Turning briefly to Ms. Semaan from CATSA, you mentioned the fact that disabilities present differently; many of them are invisible. I'm thinking about my own experience as an air traveller and going through security screening at airports. No one has ever asked me if I have a disability or require any special accommodations.

How do CATSA's contractors identify a need for certain accommodations for people with disabilities when they present themselves at a security screening?

When I go to a security screening, it seems that these days it's a yelling-based system. I have people barking at me to pull out any containers of liquids I have and put down my laptop. You know, there's a lot of chaos and yelling in some airports at some times. No one has ever stopped to ask if there are special accommodations that are needed. What is the procedure for that?

• (1140)

Ms. Nada Semaan: Well, if somebody presents themselves and says, "I need some help," by all means.... There's also a family special needs line that they can access specifically.

I'm really happy to announce that we are basically moving to a new contract with all of our contractors. In that new contract, we're creating a new role for what we call a "facilitator". It will be somebody whose sole job is to provide bilingual service that will help facilitate all passengers through the process, but primarily persons with disabilities and the elderly. This is a new job that will not be a screener. They will just do that.

Mr. Taylor Bachrach: So, currently, the onus is on passengers to request special accommodations?

Perhaps we could get a quick answer, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: Perhaps you can wait to ask that question in the next round, only because you've already gone over. Otherwise, I would have given you that time.

Mr. Taylor Bachrach: You're always very generous, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: Thank you.

I do want to confirm, Mr. Bachrach, that we've already reached out to Mr. Lepofsky to ensure that he will appear before the committee at another date that works for him. I just wanted to confirm that with you.

We'll begin the second round of questioning with Mr. Muys.

Mr. Muys, you have six minutes, sir.

Mr. Dan Muys (Flamborough—Glanbrook, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair, and thank you to the witnesses.

Dr. Lukacs, you were here, of course, a little over a year ago when we had that disastrous travel season. You talked then, as you have today, about inadequate enforcement being one part of the problem.

As you mentioned in your opening remarks, when the media lens is there, we see different reactions from when it's not. A year ago we were having a discussion about backlogs at CTA. Today they're far worse than they were back then, so I would submit that as the media lens looked elsewhere, that problem has ballooned.

Could you maybe make a comment on that parallel and also describe the tools that are available now that just aren't being adequately enforced?

Dr. Gábor Lukács: Unfortunately, when we're talking about air passenger rights, the government has been sabotaging its own policy. Parliament last summer passed legislation allowing for an increase in the maximum amount of fines—administrative monetary penalties—to \$250,000 as the cap, per instance, per violation of the APPR, yet the government has not amended the regulations to reflect the same.

Similarly, Parliament mandated a cost-recovery fee to cover taxpayers' expenses for adjudicating complaints that the airlines themselves caused. The consultation hasn't taken place about that, and the government has not put in place what Parliament expressly mandated.

Mr. Dan Muys: Thank you.

There's just a lack of will in enforcement, then, not necessarily a lack of tools.

Dr. Gábor Lukács: There's a significant lack of will.

In terms of how many resources are needed for enforcement, that's also a question. The rules need to be simplified and made more clear to make enforcement easier. The fewer data points you need to have a guilty verdict, so to speak, on a violation, the faster an enforcement action can take place and the less effort it takes to defend an enforcement action if the airline challenges it in court.

Mr. Dan Muys: I'm curious, since you raised the one-person-one fare, or one-fare-one-person, issue with regard to domestic versus international flights, what percentage or range of the instances, in your opinion, are international versus domestic—at least that we're aware of.

Dr. Gábor Lukács: Unfortunately, we don't have statistics on this. That's part and parcel of the problem. It's a whole larger set of problems. It's not just about disability-related issues, although those issues are prominent. If you look at the U.S. DOT statistics, it's a treasure trove of statistics. It makes every mathematician and statistician salivate, looking at how much data they have and how much research you can do on that.

We don't have anything like that in Canada. While Statistics Canada has some data, they're not allowed to release that data because of legal restrictions.

• (1145)

Mr. Dan Muys: Thank you.

Let me segue from that to questions of our friends from CATSA who are here.

I guess if I were cynical, I would ask if the new quarterly report on complaints is a reaction to the stories that we've seen, or an ongoing commitment.

To the point about lack of statistics, or at least lack of visibility of statistics, if there is going to be a quarterly report, what is the annual number of incidents, how many of those were resolved by the airlines and how many of those by CATSA? How many had to go to the CTA and be elevated?

What are the stats on that?

Ms. Nada Semaan: I can start.

Our quarterly report is to look at trends internally to see if there's anything.... We act on every single complaint as we get it. For example, for the last three quarters of last year, we had 51.5 million passengers who came through our checkpoints. We received 56 accessibility complaints, representing 0.0001% of accessibility.

Don't get me wrong, every complaint is important.

Rather than going into the details, I'll have my director who is responsible for complaints talk a little bit mope about the process. However, we call them immediately.

Rhoda, I don't know if you want add more?

Ms. Rhoda Boyd: We had 56 complaints, as Nada mentioned. We had, I believe, one that came in through the CTA.

The Chair: Thank you very much, Mr. Muys.

Next up we have Mr. Rogers.

Mr. Rogers, the floor is yours. You have five minutes, sir.

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

Welcome to all of our witnesses today.

What we are talking about today is a real concern to all of us as MPs as we hear from some of our constituents about the challenges of flying, particularly those with disabilities.

When you fly, there seems to be very little accommodation in a lot of cases, unlike what you find, for example, when taking a train

like VIA, where there are accommodations for people with disabilities in wheelchairs. We don't see that in many of the airlines.

I want to talk about the Auditor General's report, and there were three areas that were outlined for improvement. Specifically, the report highlighted three areas for improvement for CATSA. One was to meet the web accessibility standards. The second was the timelines of accessibility training and further consultations with persons with disabilities related to that training. The final one was to develop and implement a strategy to better analyze complaint data.

Can you as a group share with this committee if there's been any improvements in one or all of these areas that were identified?

Ms. Nada Semaan: I'm happy to report that there's been progress in all three of those areas.

I'll talk to web accessibility. The system that we need it for has been updated; it's fully functional. We've been moving all of our forms and everything to make them fully accessible. The plan is that by the end of March, in a month from now, everything will be fully accessible. We have already put up the really important things like what you can bring, liquids and wait times. Those are things that passengers need. Those are fully accessible now. What we are still working on, which becomes a bit more difficult, are things like our corporate plans, because there's so much in there to make them accessible. That is what we're working on now.

In terms of training, the Auditor General said that there were a couple of things. One was making sure that we can train fast, as soon as people come in, not only decision-makers but all screening officers. Regarding screening officers, when I came in, I guess, last April before a previous committee, we had 100%, and we still have 100% of screening officers fully trained. At this point in time, you're not allowed on the floor until you've had your full training on accessibility.

Then, for all of the decision-makers and management, as soon as you're hired, you're basically given a very short time frame to do all of your accessibility training. There are also refresher courses every year. Our system can monitor and measure to make sure, such that if you didn't do it, I can tell, and we send you an email to say that you have to do it. I am happy to say that I can tell you that right now I have 100% of decision-makers, managers and screening officers fully trained.

In terms of the training, one piece of advice from the Auditor General was that we work with persons with disabilities on the training. We've done quite a bit work on that. Some of the training that we've done, and new training as well, is on screening passengers with vision loss, passengers with reduced mobility and accessibility awareness. We had all kinds of people with different types of disabilities come in and talk about their lived experience, and they are part of the training. They say, "This is what I experienced. This is how you can improve it." That's helped us quite a bit not only to improve but also to teach people what they need to do from their own perspective, which has been very helpful.

In terms of complaints data, we've done all the work now in assessing how we can manage it better. We're working with our systems to see what's in the realm of the possible, and working internally to make sure that it works for everybody. Our next step is to work with persons with disabilities to make sure, if we report on it, that it makes sense to them. Then, after that, we'll be implementing it. The target date is September 2024, and we're on target for that as well.

• (1150)

Mr. Churence Rogers: It's great to hear that CATSA has done all this work and is moving forward on recommendations from the Auditor General's report and so on.

When you fly to, as Mr. Strahl said, small regional airports, and I refer to places like Gander, for example.... For me, for the past year and a half, two years, flying to the east coast is a nightmare. Most days it's requires leaving at 5:30 in the morning and I get into Gander late on Friday. It's gotten to the point where I now spend more weekends in Ottawa rather than spend the entire weekend in an aircraft or in airports.

From what I see with some of these aircraft, I wonder how we are treating people with disabilities because there are no accommodations for people in wheelchairs. There are no accommodations for anybody to be able to bring their wheelchair on board the aircraft and so on.

I wonder why it is that, with all these things that we're doing, we haven't really focused on modernizing and retrofitting aircraft to provide more comfortable accommodations for people with major disabilities.

Do you want to comment on that?

The Chair: Make it a very short answer, please.

Ms. Nada Semaan: I can't speak to the aircraft, but what we are trying to do is to work with all of our suppliers in terms of.... For example, we're trying to get walkthrough full-body scanners. They don't exist in the industry right now where they can be certified by the TSA or ECAC, but once we can get those, they will be on our plans.

As soon as we can get anybody to certify that, they will do their job. That's a priority for us.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Thank you, Mr. Rogers.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Barsalou-Duval, you have the floor for two and a half minutes.

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

Mr. Lukács, I'll start by referring to cases that have received media coverage.

A Radio-Canada article dated November 9, 2023, discusses a WestJet flight and the case of Ms. Gilliard, who claims that staff almost dropped her spouse while trying to transfer him to his seat. Another Radio-Canada article dated August 2, 2022, reports that staff from a different airline, Air Transat, dropped a passenger in

the aisle while transferring him to his seat. An article published in La Presse on February 5, 2024, talks about a third airline, Air Canada...

The Chair: Sorry, Mr. Barsalou-Duval. The interpretation isn't working. We'll stop for a bit, but I'll give you two and a half minutes again.

• (1155)

Mr. Xavier Barsalou-Duval: Okay.

The Chair: The interpretation is working again.

Mr. Barsalou-Duval, you can start over if you want.

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

I referred to three cases that received media coverage. I'll start again.

The first case, reported by Radio-Canada on November 9, 2023, concerns a WestJet flight. In the article, Lisa Gilliard says that staff almost dropped her spouse, Phil Gilliard, as they tried to transfer him to his seat. Another Radio-Canada article, dated August 2, 2022, states that Air Transat staff dropped a passenger with reduced mobility in the aisle while transferring him to his seat, and that he waited over three minutes to be picked up and placed in his seat. A third article, published in La Presse on February 5, 2024, describes a case involving Air Canada. A man was dropped and injured when Air Canada staff failed to use an elevator as requested.

Mr. Lukács, clearly these situations are almost identical and they keep happening. It seems that the staff aren't trained to look after these people, or that the airplanes don't have proper equipment. What are your thoughts on this? Why do these incidents happen? Isn't it a duty or an obligation to properly train staff to look after people with reduced mobility?

[*English*]

Dr. Gábor Lukács: There is clearly a duty for the airline to properly train staff and to ensure that its staff have the necessary tools to provide accessibility in transportation.

In my view, that duty also extends to any subcontractor the airline hires, as agents or in any other capacity, to do work for the boarding and disembarking of passengers on that flight.

Part of the problem is perhaps a cultural issue. There may be a culture of cutting corners, of "let's not do things by the book". What needs to be instilled in them is that these things do matter, and that is why significant fines would be important to get the point across that this is no joke. This is a serious matter.

The Chair: 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.

I'd like to try to fit in two questions, one for Ms. Semaan and one for Dr. Lukács.

Ms. Semaan, can I understand from your previous response that CATSA is in the process of moving from a system whereby passengers are required to identify their disabilities and required accommodations to one in which CATSA will proactively ask passengers if there is special accommodation that they need?

I can see you shaking your head, so I look forward to your clarification.

Ms. Nada Semaan: Actually, we will not ask because, from a privacy perspective, we would never come up and ask, “Do you have any disability or require assistance?”

Our screening contractors are trained to observe proactively if somebody may need assistance. They also are trained to look for the sunflower lanyard for people with hidden disabilities who want the extra help.

Coming up, what we will be doing—which is new—is having non-screening officers, people who are fluently bilingual whose sole job is to help people through the system, to help people through the security screening. If they see somebody struggling, they'll literally walk them through to the special needs line or to any line, and make sure that they're there with them throughout the process to provide them with any support they need. Those are additional resources that we never had in any previous contract, but they are there just for the support of the travelling public, specifically for persons who require additional assistance.

Mr. Taylor Bachrach: Thank you for the response.

I'll just look to the chair to see whether I have any seconds left to ask Dr. Lukács a question.

The Chair: You have 58 seconds, Mr. Bachrach.

Mr. Taylor Bachrach: I have 58. I can do it; I can do it.

Dr. Lukács, I'm going to turn to the accessibility of the onboard experience—passengers getting on the airplane and taking their seats. Does the fact that flight attendants—who, really, are responsible for assisting with that process—aren't actually paid until the airplane takes off impact their ability to assist and ensure that people with disabilities are accommodated?

Dr. Gábor Lukács: Personally, I'm finding it very troubling that the crew members don't get paid for the work that they do, and that work doesn't start when the flight takes off. I, obviously, support fair pay to the crew members.

In terms of these disability issues, I'm not sure if it directly relates to it because the physical force that is required to assist the person into their seat may not be in the possession of those flight attendants who are just trained to push a trolley and not to have to lift a person.

Thank you.

• (1200)

The Chair: Thank you, Dr. Lukács.

Thank you, Mr. Bachrach.

We'll have a bit of a lightning round here for the next two on the docket.

Mr. Strahl, I'll give you three and a half minutes, please.

Mr. Mark Strahl: Okay. I'll go straight to Ms. Semaan.

You mentioned that you wouldn't ask disability or accessibility questions. However, whenever you check in for a flight with a Canadian airline, it asks if you have an accessibility request. CATSA scans both when I enter the lineup and when I put my bags on the belt. Would that information appear to the CATSA screener? If not, do you think that is something that's possible, or is there something preventing that information from being shared?

Ms. Nada Semaan: We don't get it now. That's actually a good point. From a privacy perspective, I'm not sure if we could, but there's nothing stopping us from asking the questions and seeing if that's possible.

Mr. Mark Strahl: I mean, you get my name, and you get the flight I'm taking and all that.

Ms. Nada Semaan: No.

Mr. Mark Strahl: That, perhaps, is something that we can ask the airlines as well: if they're willing to share that data throughout the airline experience.

Dr. Lukács, you mentioned that a \$100,000 fine should be imposed if a wheelchair or a mobility aid is left behind. What are you basing that number on, other than that it's round and has several figures in it? Are there other examples in a non-travel experience where other entities—hotels or that sort of thing—that fail to provide this have been issued those types of penalties?

I guess that's my question. We can talk about large fines, which perhaps would have an impact on behaviour, but I'm just wondering if there are examples of where you're drawing that number from. Is there something comparable in other countries or in other sectors of the Canadian economy where that number might have come from?

Dr. Gábor Lukács: There are two sources for these numbers, maybe even three.

The first one is looking at the maximum fines available for disability-related violations under the current legislation, which is pegged at \$250,000. It is not going the full \$250,000 per offence, but it is still significant.

The other source is looking at the airline's revenue. If the fine is too small, it's just a cost of doing business.

The third aspect is one on which you can do a far more precise analysis. It's what I colloquially call the Kaplow formula. It is based on a textbook on analysis and law where you use probabilistic methods to gauge what kind of fine is necessary to dissuade a particular conduct, bearing in mind the potential for financial gain from that conduct and financial gain from preventing that conduct, how much it will cost the airline to take steps to avoid that particular conduct, and how often that issue gets detected. There is a science to it.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Lukács.

Mr. Badawey, the floor is yours for the final three and a half minutes of this first hour. Go ahead, please.

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

I do want to preface my comments by saying that we are attempting today to be proactive and to hopefully not get to the space where we have to react when it comes to fines. Yes, we expect regulations, procedures and standards to be put in place, but at the end of the day, we have to focus on these things not happening in the first place. Enforcement has to be a part of that. The separate discussion is reactive when it comes to fines, etc.

I will say that it disturbs me that we don't have an end-to-end process. This is a service. Bottom line, it's a service. We have to recognize that mobility aids are not luggage. They are in fact extensions of one's body and one's independence—period. That said, it's incumbent upon all of us, us as government, to ensure that we continue to analyze and improve business practices across the board. That's our job. But we can only do that with our partners, and that's you. End-to-end service by the airports, CATSA and the airlines is incumbent. With that, the goal is to extend or provide a positive customer experience end to end.

I'll ask you the same question that I'll be asking those folks back there, who don't look very happy: Why aren't you—CATSA and the airports and the airlines—working together to come with recommendations on standards and procedures, and therefore, on our part, regulations, to provide that end-to-end experience?

• (1205)

Ms. Nada Semaan: Quite honestly, I couldn't agree more that we need to do that. It's funny; we had a meeting with WestJet when I first started on board. That is something that we feel we need to do. We need to look at the entire experience.

I cannot improve the service just by looking at what CATSA can do. We need to look at it holistically for all, for passengers and non-passengers. We have been working quite closely airport by airport. Every airport is different. Depending on what they have and what they don't have, we can improve the service. We don't have a standard system across every single airport. We are working airport by airport.

We'd be more than happy to work together to create one holistic view of the passenger experience that we could improve. That was actually what I mentioned to the chief accessibility officer, that we would love to be part of that.

Mr. Vance Badawey: I think that's the goal we all want to achieve with this study. We have analysts here who will be taking a lot of notes. We'll therefore have a lot of recommendations from those notes. Of course, we will expect a response back from the minister. With that, the expectation is that we are all in this together.

Let me suggest this. I believe we have WestJet back there in the corner. Unfortunately, they didn't get here at the beginning, which would have been nice, because they could have heard this. With that said, possibly when they come up for the second part of the meeting, you can stick around to hear what will be said and discussed with them. I think that has to continue. It's too bad Air Canada wasn't here from day one. We could therefore, as we progress through this study, actually understand, hear and learn about what the others are challenged with.

With that said, all providers can come out with a solution together. It's about a person's experience the second they walk into that airport, get into the CATSA line, get onto the airplane, get off the airplane and go through the airport again until they get into the vehicle that will take them to their end destination. It's an experience, and we have to make that a positive experience. I suggest that we all work on this together throughout this entire study. Let's all pay attention to what the others are doing, how we'll react and the strategies we'll put in place so that the procedures, regulations and standards are therefore harmonized between all the providers.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Badawey.

On behalf of all members, I want to thank our witnesses for joining us here in person and, of course, by video conference. I wish you a wonderful rest of your day.

We'll now suspend the meeting until such time as we can welcome the witnesses for our second hour.

This meeting stands suspended.

• (1205)

(Pause)

• (1210)

The Chair: I call this meeting back to order.

Colleagues, appearing for the second hour today we have, from WestJet Airlines, Mr. Alexis von Hoensbroech, chief executive officer. Welcome to you.

We have Mr. Andrew Gibbons, vice-president of external affairs. Welcome back, Mr. Gibbons.

We also have Mr. Todd Peterson, director of regulatory affairs.

I thank all three of you for appearing before our committee today.

I'll turn it over to you to get us started with your opening remarks. You have five minutes, please.

Mr. Alexis von Hoensbroech (Chief Executive Officer, WestJet Airlines Ltd.): Thank you very much, Chair and honourable committee members. Good morning.

My name is Alexis von Hoensbroech. Congratulations on pronouncing it the right way. It rarely happens.

I am the CEO of the WestJet Group, and today, I am joined by two of my colleagues. You already introduced them: Andy Gibbons, VP for external affairs, and Todd Peterson, director of regulatory affairs. He is also heading our task force for accessibility issues.

Thank you for having us here today on a topic that is deeply important to me, to WestJet's entire team and to all our guests. I appreciate the opportunity to be here in person today to contribute to your study on accessible transportation.

Of the eight million Canadians who identify as having a disability, 72% reported encountering some accessibility barriers over the past year. We want to be part of improving this statistic.

• (1215)

[Translation]

I would like to speak directly to our guests and to all Canadians tuning in today. Thank you for considering or choosing WestJet for your trip. Let me assure you that we're committed to making transportation more accessible for our guests with disabilities.

[English]

Every WestJetter understands the importance of meeting our guests' accessibility needs.

In 2023, over 260,000 WestJet reservations included a request for special services related to a disability. Wheelchair-related services accounted for most of those at 230,000. This means that on average, over 700 guests every day need accessibility support as they travel with us.

Over 99.9% of those guests had a good experience. While perfection is hard to achieve, it is what we must always strive for in meeting the needs of our guests with disabilities. We also recognize that when things can and do go wrong, we must be at the top of our game to make things right as quickly and seamlessly as possible.

[Translation]

To our guests who didn't have a good travel experience with WestJet, I want to say that we're truly sorry and that we're committed to doing better.

[English]

Air travel involves a complex system of stakeholders that must work together to serve travellers. Airlines, airports, third party handlers, ground equipment manufacturers and aircraft manufacturers, to name a few, must all take on the challenge together.

At WestJet, we are doing our part through investments to make air travel more accessible. We provide initial and ongoing accessibility training to all guest-facing staff. We employ medical experts to ensure we understand and assess the travel needs of guests with disabilities. We are an active participant in industry forums where best practices are shared and advanced. We ensure our approaches are informed through engagement with international and external parties with expertise or lived experience.

All that said, we know there is more to do to remove barriers to travel for people with disabilities. We are actively seeking opportunities to provide accessible services for both our guests and our employees, and we are committed to learning and growing in this space.

WestJet has a robust accessibility plan, and I've appointed Todd to lead the internal task force that constantly reviews and implements improvements. WestJet is committed to continuous improvement and is here to be part of the solution. We can assure parliamentarians, and our valued guests, that accessibility is and will remain a top priority for WestJet.

I am pleased to take your questions. Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you very much for your opening remarks.

We'll begin our line of questioning today with Mr. Strahl.

Mr. Strahl, the floor is yours. You have six minutes, sir.

Mr. Mark Strahl: Thank you very much. Thank you to the WestJet team for being here today.

I appreciate your remarks. I read different press releases through the National Airlines Council and from your own website. Everyone is always very sorry and very committed to doing better whenever these things happen, but these high-profile incidents continue to plague Canadian airlines, including yours, with stories of a Paralympian being forced to make her way up the stairs, using her own strength. I know there was some service offered, but it wasn't acceptable to her.

We keep hearing stories about mobility aids, wheelchairs being left behind, when these are critical. They're specialized pieces of equipment. They can't simply be replaced by a rental at the other end.

We need to see where the rubber is going to hit the road here. Thoughts and prayers are no longer acceptable.

I'll stick with the mobility aids to get down to the brass tacks. What are you doing to ensure that it is impossible for someone with a mobility aid to arrive at their destination without it, and without its being damaged? What specific steps is WestJet taking to ensure that that kind of situation is simply impossible when it comes to someone taking a WestJet flight?

• (1220)

Mr. Alexis von Hoensbroech: First, let me say that whenever these cases you referred to happen, it is as bad for us as it is for those people who are exposed to this. So we sincerely apologize to them, but we equally always look at our internal process to try to understand what went wrong, because we are an organization that wants to deliver a good service. This works in the vast majority of the cases, but every case that goes wrong is one too many. We know that, and we always use this as an opportunity to improve.

Out of 1,000 mobility aids that we transport, 999 will make it safely and undamaged to their destination. That's good. By the way, that's better than we perform on normal bags, which already shows that we put much more attention on this. However, the one is also one too many, so we are going to be working through what we can do to improve this.

There are a couple of things we can do. We are about to introduce a process whereby we get positive confirmation that we can deliver to the guest that the mobility aid is on board. That's a process we're going to introduce very soon.

We also will make sure that every single mobility aid is properly wrapped. We do this on part of our network, but we will roll this out to the entire network. We have seen cases where a wheel was bent after transportation, and this creates a problem, so that's certainly another problem.

We also know that we need to be clearer within our own regulations but also towards our guests around the size and weight of the mobility aid, because some of them are pretty big and create quite a challenge to take on board.

Mr. Mark Strahl: I appreciate that.

I want to ask one more question.

When someone books a ticket on WestJet and they've identified that they have an accessibility or disability need, at what point does WestJet take ownership of that passenger for the care of the passenger?

Vance asked about end-to-end care, because we've heard of stories where there's a re-booking. People are now waiting for a flight for four hours and they're just sitting in the gate area. What relationship do you have with the airports to ensure that there's not a missed hand-off, where people are not provided care and customer service from the time they enter the airport until the time they exit your aircraft at the other end? How do you work with the airports to ensure that's happening?

Mr. Alexis von Hoensbroech: First of all, we know that we own the guest relationship, so we are at the end always accountable for making sure that they make it through the airport, into their seat and on the way out again. I can only re-emphasize what has been said before by Nada and others, that it is an end-to-end experience and that we need to get it right. This involves various stakeholders. I'm not saying this because I would be finger pointing, but we have to work together to get a seamless experience.

I think there's room for improvement in Canada. I've worked in Europe before—if you'll allow me to add this experience—and, in Europe, there was a regulation introduced about 15 years ago that

targeted this end-to-end piece by saying that all services related to passengers with reduced mobility must be provided by the airport and only by the airport end to end. This took a lot of complexity out of the system—there were no more handover points, no different parties handling wheelchairs and doing all the logistics around it—and this has dramatically improved the end-to-end airport experience at European airports.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Strahl.

Thank you, Mr. von Hoensbroech.

Next we will go to Ms. Koutrakis.

Ms. Koutrakis, the floor is yours. You have six minutes, please.

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

Thank you to our guests from WestJet for appearing before the transport committee once again to discuss this very important issue.

Unfortunately, we have all seen news items that quite a few of our fellow Canadians with disabilities do not feel they have the same travelling experience as many of us without a disability currently enjoy.

With that said, according to the statistics you shared, 700 passengers with disabilities are being serviced by WestJet every day, and I believe you when you say that you want to do better. Having said that, everything to do better stems from money. I'm just wondering if you could share with us today how much WestJet made in the last quarter and how much of that is going to be invested to make sure that passengers with disabilities are going to have a better experience?

• (1225)

Mr. Alexis von Hoensbroech: Thank you.

WestJet has always invested in delivering a superior guest experience, and I think we also have a reputation and a track record of doing so. We measure our guest experience very, very thoroughly and with data. Maybe an interesting fact to share with you is that we measure the passenger experience of both our guests without disabilities and those with disabilities. Interestingly and consistently over many, many years, we have seen that passengers with disabilities rate our service significantly better than average passengers rate our service. This is rightfully so and has to be so because every passenger with a disability deserves special attention, and they get special attention. This is a very, very consistent theme. Therefore, on the large scale of things, I don't think that we have a cultural problem or an attention problem.

Having said that, we are an organization made up of humans, and sometimes errors happen. We know that. That's in every organization. We take every error, every mistake and every terrible story that happens as an opportunity to improve our service.

Ms. Annie Koutrakis: The first part of my question was about whether you could share with us, please, how much the revenues were. I'm sure if it's online we can find it there, but I think, for the record, it would be interesting to hear the amount that WestJet made in the last quarter.

Mr. Alexis von Hoensbroech: We are a private company. We don't disclose financials, but we have said that we have been profitable every single quarter last year. That's good because that gives us the means to make necessary investments in services. At the end of the day, we need to be an organization that delivers good service to our guests and good service to all of our guests, and that is what we will always invest money in.

Ms. Annie Koutrakis: Mr. von Hoensbroech, are you committed to looking into acquiring technology and aircraft that would be more accessibility-friendly and that can accommodate wheelchairs, for instance? We've heard and seen stories that many of the passengers who are currently travelling with wheelchairs have a very difficult time. Are you willing to say to us here today that you're willing to take some of those profits to make sure that you purchase technology and aircraft that would be more accessible to passengers travelling with wheelchairs?

Mr. Alexis von Hoensbroech: I will always ensure that we have solutions that work for our guests. Again, it will depend on what kinds of mobility aids they have. There are some very complex, heavy and sizable mobility aids in some cases, and we have a fleet of very different types of airplanes. We have big airplanes like the intercontinental 787s, which have quite a lot of room on the passenger level for mobility aids. Then we also have relatively small regional turboprop airplanes, which have no space at all in the passenger cabin, but they have space in the hold to transport those. Whatever it takes to make it possible we will always do.

Part of it is or can be technology-related, but a lot of it is also process-related. The example I gave before about how we will not take off unless the passenger gets a positive confirmation that their wheelchair has been loaded is probably the most meaningful thing that we can do to ensure that the wheelchair arrives with the guest at the destination.

Ms. Annie Koutrakis: I wanted to switch to training.

You said in your testimony that all employees receive training. Is this training mandatory for all employees? How many of your employees have completed the training? More importantly, have the executive team and maybe board members of WestJet also received this training? Have you ever received this training?

• (1230)

Mr. Alexis von Hoensbroech: The way we do it is that every employee who is guest-facing and who potentially interacts with people with disabilities has to be trained, and every employee or supplier that is handling equipment has to be trained. It's mandatory, and it's repetitive, so it's constantly being updated. What we don't have is.... Not every leader and every executive no matter what their role is has to do every training at the company. For example, I don't take flight training because I'm not a pilot. However, I make sure that every pilot is properly trained. My job is to make sure that everyone who interacts with people with disabilities or with their equipment is properly trained, and that's the case. Of course, we have awareness training, which we all go through.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Koutrakis.

Next we have Mr. Barsalou-Duval.

The floor is yours for six minutes, please.

[*Translation*]

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

I want to thank the Westjet witnesses for joining us,

I'll pick up from where my colleague left off regarding the staff training issue. She put a question about this issue to the witness who appeared before you.

I referred to a number of cases in the media where people with reduced mobility encountered issues and filed complaints. It quickly became apparent that most cases that received media coverage involved staff who lacked training and who didn't know how to look after people with reduced mobility.

The case of Lisa Gilliard and Phil Gilliard, which recently received media coverage and concerned WestJet, shows the same situation again. The staff weren't properly trained. They didn't know how to look after the passenger, or at least they didn't look after him properly.

You said that all staff who interact with people with disabilities must receive training. Why do these situations occur if the staff have been properly trained?

[*English*]

Mr. Alexis von Hoensbroech: We have training and we constantly improve the training curriculum to make sure that the training always improves and that we capture those cases where we saw things going wrong.

Generally, I'm actually pretty confident that the training level of our staff is good. However, I also recognize that in some cases we are maybe not as clear as we should be about how to handle some special devices.

We have cases where there are big mobility aids that do not fit in the cargo hold. People would try to make it work with the best intentions. They would tilt it over to the side and the tilting over to the side would then cause either damage or some unintended function of the device. With this, it's doing something with good intentions to actually get it on board and let it fly with the guest, but the good intentions could actually damage the device.

These are things we saw happening and we drew our conclusions. Going forward, we'll be much clearer on what kind of devices and what sizes and weights can actually fly on a particular aircraft type and which ones cannot. This is one of the improvements that we need to make.

I'm confident that, overall, the training program is effective. We absolutely ensure that everyone performs the training.

[Translation]

Mr. Xavier Barsalou-Duval: You think that the training and instruction are sufficient, but these situations still happen. I'm not entirely satisfied with your answer, because we wouldn't see this type of situation arise again and again. This doesn't just concern WestJet, but also Air Transat and Air Canada. It seems to happen regularly.

It also seems that another situation keeps cropping up. It concerns how airlines handle complaints. We were told earlier that cases in the media seem to be treated differently. People complain, but don't seem to get a response until their case receives media coverage. In the case that I referred to earlier, we were told that, after making a complaint, the people didn't receive a response from WestJet. It wasn't until their case went public that they received answers and a call from the company offering an apology.

Are cases that receive media coverage handled differently from cases that don't?

• (1235)

[English]

Mr. Alexis von Hoensbroech: First of all, this is why I'm here. I also need to interact and hear from you what you're hearing.

However, some cases make it to the media and some cases don't make it to the media. Every case is brought to our attention. Every single case is a case that we investigate in order to improve our service. It is our ambition to provide good service.

These guests are as valuable to us as any other guest. We want to be an accessible airline. That has been our ambition from the first day.

That doesn't mean that we are perfect. No organization is ever perfect. There's no organization where no mistakes or errors ever happen. We have a good track record, even as an industry, for learning from our mistakes. If we just look at flight safety, for instance—

[Translation]

Mr. Xavier Barsalou-Duval: Sorry to interrupt you, but I have one last question.

The Canadian Transportation Agency says that it has received just under 1,000 complaints regarding accessibility over the past five years. You said that you routinely look after people with reduced mobility as part of your regular activities. How many of these 1,000 complaints concern WestJet?

[English]

Mr. Alexis von Hoensbroech: Last year, we had 260,000 wheelchair-using guests, and we had about 200 complaints.

Am I correct?

Mr. Todd Peterson (Director, Regulatory Affairs, WestJet Airlines Ltd.): There were approximately 200 complaints that we received and investigated. Some of those also involved damage to or various events with mobility devices. We fixed or repaired about 390 mobility devices.

Those are quite small numbers relative to the very large number of passengers we carry with accessibility....

[Translation]

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

Mr. Bachrach, you now have the floor for six minutes.

[English]

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

Thank you to the team from WestJet for joining our committee meeting.

I'm looking through some of these high-profile stories from last year alone involving the mistreatment of passengers with disabilities.

There's the situation involving Melanie Carlbeck's wheelchair, which was left behind on her flight. She was given a wheelchair that wasn't suitable and her own chair didn't arrive until days later.

Also in 2023, Phil Gilliard was dropped by WestJet staff who did not know how to use an eagle lift. This resulted in a bloody wound and bad bruises on his arm.

Four-year-old Blake Turnbull went without a wheelchair for over a month after WestJet damaged the rim of her wheelchair, making the brakes unusable. The staff allowed Blake to pull herself off the plane by wriggling along the floor, and proceeded to call her a salamander.

Finally, and we heard this cited earlier in questioning, former Paralympian Sarah Morris-Probert had to lift herself up the stairs of the aircraft because the only other option WestJet gave her to board her plane was to be carried up the stairs in a wheelchair, which I don't believe is a safe practice.

Perhaps your answer to the last question provided some indication of this. These are the cases that received media attention. What percentage of the overall number of cases of passenger mistreatment do the cases I just read represent?

Mr. Alexis von Hoensbroech: Thank you for that question.

Every single case that you described is a terrible case. It is always the case that we thoroughly investigate and try to understand what led up to the events that were eventually reported in the media. It's always a learning opportunity for us.

As I also said, it's about 200 complaints over 250,000 guests with disabilities that we fly, so the percentage is very low. It's 99.9% of the guests who actually have a good experience. Having said that, every single case is a case too many. Definitely for us, it's a mandatory thing to work on.

However, we all know that media is sometimes showing one angle of the story. For us, it's always important to understand what was actually happening. We have a medical team that has the dedicated job of talking to those individuals to understand what was going on and to see how we can support and help them, but especially to understand what went wrong in a particular case.

Let me just pick the example of Paralympian who crawled up the stairs in Los Cabos, Mexico. In this case, we have a contract with the airport that we always get the aircraft to a finger position so that they can actually horizontally enter the airplane. That's the standard.

On this particular day, from airport congestion, our airplane was forced to park on the tarmac, which is unusual and not how it should be. It shows that this is an ecosystem that has to work together. The seamless experience requires everyone to perform, not just the airline.

We were on the tarmac and we informed the lady that we had a challenge now to get her on board. There is, of course, always a plan B for how to get someone on board in such a situation where just stairs are available. There's a trained, approved and safe process to do this, which is carrying the guest up the stairs because that is the only option left. There's an approved process for how to do it.

Now, I understand that this is not a great process and I don't like it either, but it was the next best option or the last good option that we had. Then this particular lady decided that she didn't want it. She preferred to push herself up the stairs. Of course, this is a humiliating experience. I can't imagine how bad this was for her, but it was also her particular choice to do this.

I'm asking many questions around this as well now. Why does Los Cabos not have a proper device to lift someone up? How is the rest of our system composed in airports?

We fly to lots of airports. Many of them are not in Canada, but in Mexico, the Caribbean and all over the place. The airport infrastructure is often quite diverse.

These are the questions that we asked, but we certainly never offered an unsafe procedure to that lady.

• (1240)

Mr. Andrew Gibbons (Vice-President, External Affairs, WestJet Airlines Ltd.): I'll just add to that, Mr. Bachrach.

After that incident, Todd and I reached out to the guest personally and had a conversation with her. Then we actually scheduled a discussion with the chief accessibility officer of Canada.

It's through those conversation that we're learning. That's how we're getting more information. We're not sitting around feeling sorry for ourselves and watching these clips on the media. We're taking action, we're meeting the guests and we're meeting with the chief accessibility officer.

As we've said, this is a continuous improvement and continuous learning exercise. There is a very strong culture of care in our organization—

Mr. Taylor Bachrach: I appreciate that.

What I would add is that when the committee hears things like the number of accessibility complaints is a very small fraction of the total number of people with disabilities that are transported, it sounds like—I'll just say it—you're minimizing the problem or trying to rationalize it, when what we want, I think, is proactive action.

I want to ask a question and I know my time is running out—

Mr. Alexis von Hoensbroech: I'm sorry, but I just want to clarify.

I know it's a small number and we are proud it's a small number because it shows that our organization is taking this very serious, but nevertheless, I also said that every single case is one case too many. Every single case is a case that we have to fix.

Mr. Taylor Bachrach: Yes, I heard that as well.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Bachrach.

We'll go to our second round now. We will begin with Mr. Muys.

You have six minutes, please.

Mr. Dan Muys: Thank you, Mr. Chair, and thank you to our witnesses from WestJet.

We've had some discussion. You've talked about the fact that your procedures are being updated and obviously training has been in place for some time, which has been asked about already.

I want to ask not just about the training, but about the training that is done in terms of awareness and sensitivity. We're hearing some examples where staff walked by people who were having instances.

Has that changed given the media stories, some of which were highlighted here? How is that going to continue to change to make sure that...?

It's one thing to phone passengers and have that conversation after. What concrete actions are taking place to make sure there's a high level of sensitivity around these incidents?

Mr. Alexis von Hoensbroech: First of all, we don't care about accessibility because of the media, but because it's a genuine part of our business to be an accessible airline. That's why we constantly improve.

Maybe I can hand it over to Todd to speak to some of the actions that he, as the leader of our task force, is now taking.

Mr. Todd Peterson: Certainly to your point, when we do accessibility training, a large element of the training is role specific, of course. What you'll train an airport agent to do versus a person who works in the cabin to do would clearly be job specific.

One thing that's common across all of our training is what we call the "sensitivity" element of training. We have a very strong portion of the curriculum focusing on respectful interaction, how to identify and work with guests to understand their actual needs, and then apply our processes and procedures in a way that meets their needs.

That is very consistent and uniform across our training programs.

• (1245)

Mr. Dan Muys: I want to ask about international airports, because we heard from the last panel, and we all know, that there are certainly standards around Canadian airports, but WestJet obviously flies to many sun destinations. You just mentioned one particular incident in Los Cabos.

What is your responsibility as an airline, in working with or understanding the fact that maybe the standards are different, the equipment is different and the procedures are different at international airports, to mitigate that proactively and address it upfront?

Mr. Alexis von Hoensbroech: Of course, it's our job to ensure that we have consistent service across our entire network, not just the Canadian network. Having said that, we also have to work with the infrastructure and the way the airports that we fly to are equipped. Not every airport is the same. By the way that's also the case in Canada. If you go to some remote airports in northern Canada, it can also look pretty different from when you fly to Toronto or Calgary.

Whenever we are at an airport that doesn't have the same type of infrastructure, then we develop workaround processes that are safe and deliver the right outcome—although we recognize that sometimes they're not great, like in this example with the Paralympic athlete.

Mr. Dan Muys: We asked the last panel about the number of instances internationally versus domestically. There isn't good record-keeping or stats on that. I don't know if you could add some context on what you're seeing internationally versus domestically.

Mr. Alexis von Hoensbroech: We would have to get back to you on that. I don't have the international versus domestic breakdown on that.

Mr. Dan Muys: Do you track that? Would you be able to research that and table that with the committee?

Mr. Alexis von Hoensbroech: Yes, absolutely.

Mr. Dan Muys: You mentioned, in a brief that was sent to the committee, and today here as well, that a fulsome review of your accessibility plan is being conducted. You were hoping to have meaningful improvements this year.

When you say "this year", can you be more specific about a timeline? What are the key milestones that you would expect to see, that I think we would expect to see, to do this more expeditiously than just saying "this year"? There are 10 months left in the year.

Mr. Alexis von Hoensbroech: It's for as soon as possible, but I'll let Todd speak to that.

Mr. Todd Peterson: There are a number of items that are actively in motion. On some of the items, we're literally more like months away as opposed to "this year" away.

We would expect to be rolling out some of these solutions before summer. We're prioritizing them, especially the highest focus for us right now, the positive confirmation that the wheelchair boards with the guest. We have an existing process that we're going to apply to that. The materials and special tags that we need are already on order. As soon as they arrive, we'll be rolling that process out across our airports.

That is our highest priority, and the others will follow.

The Chair: Thank you very much, Mr. Muys.

Thank you, Mr. Peterson.

Next we go to Mr. Badawey.

Mr. Badawey, the floor is yours. You have five minutes, sir.

Mr. Vance Badawey: Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

I'll start off by saying that I'm not going to repeat myself. With respect to the comments made earlier, you were in the gallery and you heard them, so I'll cut right to it and concentrate on the establishment of standards. When I say "the establishment of standards", I'm saying end-to-end standards. I'm not just discussing this with you; I'm also discussing this with the folks who were prior to you, and, of course, the ones who are going to come after you. Of course, with that said, it's about harmonizing that end-to-end experience.

The second thing I'll say is the fact that it's also imperative that we recognize when we go into this process that the word "should" doesn't exist; it's "will". Second, the word "no" doesn't exist; it's "how". That is essentially the mindset, I guess, that we all have to have in reaching the outcomes that are expected by those who are your customers and, of course, customers of the airports.

The next thing I'll say—and again I want to emphasize this—is about this comment I made earlier on providing a positive customer experience end to end. Regardless of whether it's one person or a thousand people, it's relevant, it's important and it's a priority.

The last thing I'll say before I go to my question is the fact that it's all about service—service, service, service. With that, upon the outcome of this study and the recommendations we're going to be providing as well as the response that we're going to be expecting from the minister, it's still a work in progress to provide that end-to-end strategy. The expectation, as I said earlier, is that it's not the airlines, it's not just CATSA and it's not just the airports providing that strategy; it's end to end with airports, CATSA, airlines and others.

My question for you, Mr. Peterson, is—and it somewhat goes to Mr. Muys' question, but I want to get a bit more granular on where you're at now—is about your meeting with the Minister of Transport and the Minister of Diversity, Inclusion and Persons with Disabilities this past December, I believe. With that, both you and Air Canada have taken to the news, to the media, stating that you will be “investing significantly in new equipment at Canadian airports, such as lifts, to ensure that we can meet the expectations of our customers”—and, again, your customers are an airline as well as CATSA and the airports.

Can you provide us some details on the size and scope of this initiative and get granular on exactly what you've been doing from the time you had the meeting with the ministers until now?

• (1250)

Mr. Todd Peterson: As I was saying a moment ago, we have put a lot of effort into solving the large issue of confirming that the wheelchair is aboard with the guest. That is the first initiative we're going to roll out.

The second item we've been working on extensively is surveying our network and understanding the different pieces of equipment that exist across our network. As Alexis said, there is a variety, but we do need to get much clearer on our capability for handling mobility devices, specifically with respect to size and weight.

We think, through the work we've done so far, that we'll be able to confirm that in many cases we're able to handle devices that are larger or heavier than what we handle today. So there will be an increase in the service, but, as Alexis also said, in some cases we do need to be clearer with our guests about what our limitations are, and, in some cases, there will be some reductions. The good outcome on both ends of that is that our guests will clearly know what to expect from us.

Mr. Vance Badawey: Now, with that said, you are working with the airports and with CATSA to have that harmonization in standards and procedures, and then, secondly, the infrastructure that would be invested in. With that, are these investments based on airports or the number of accessibility services that you provide per airport?

Mr. Todd Peterson: We're looking network-wide for opportunities. As Alexis was saying, a large driver of our focus is where we've fallen down and had issues in the past. That highlights for us where the gaps are in our processes. We're not too concerned about exactly where they are. We simply want to find the most prevalent gaps and systematically close them so that we do provide that excellent customer service for all of our guests all of the time that you referred to.

Mr. Vance Badawey: Are you working with the disability community as well?

Mr. Todd Peterson: Absolutely. We have an internal task force. Of course, we're a large company and we do have people internally who have lived experience, and dealing with disabilities is part of their lives. We also work with outside organizations, such as the Open Doors Organization, to make sure that the community is heard, involved and understands what we're doing. We get their perspective to make sure that the solutions we roll out are suitable for their needs.

Mr. Vance Badawey: I guess my final comment, Mr. Chair, if I may, is that this is going beyond the meetings we're going to have here, going beyond committee and the report and recommendations that we'll bring forward and looking beyond the response to the minister. It's continuing this process with the minister as well as the group we have here. Most importantly, it's the expectation about how you as an airline, CATSA as a service provider and the airports can make it an end-to-end positive experience for the customer.

It's going to be fluid. It's not going to end tomorrow. We're not going to have all the answers. It's going to be fluid. But let's look forward to that so that the customer does have that positive experience.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Badawey.

[Translation]

Mr. Barsalou-Duval, you now have the floor for two and a half minutes.

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

This will likely be my last chance to ask the witnesses questions. I want to talk about an issue that was also raised by Mr. Lukács in the first part of our meeting. He argued that the one-person-one-fare policy, which applies to domestic flights, should also apply to all flights to and from Canada.

A few years ago, a person named Ms. Cheung filed an application against WestJet with the Canadian Transportation Agency. WestJet fought this application. It was filed by a person with reduced mobility who, I imagine, needed more than one seat. WestJet refused to apply the policy for this person. I would like to know why WestJet doesn't want to apply this policy and why its fare policies still discriminate against people with reduced mobility.

• (1255)

[English]

Mr. Alexis von Hoensbroech: Maybe just as a general comment, I agree that it's confusing. There are different regulations for domestic and international flying. The domestic is always relatively easy to organize. Internationally, you always have to think of the other airlines as well. There are other airlines that are flying, and you don't want to create more confusion. When they fly on a Canadian airline they have one service, and when they fly on a non-Canadian airline they get another one. If you have code-sharing and you have a Canadian ticket but a foreign carrier, it actually gets pretty complex.

That's why we need standards on these things. These standards need to be international—

[Translation]

Mr. Xavier Barsalou-Duval: Why can't you apply the same standards to both domestic and international flights?

[English]

Mr. Alexis von Hoensbroech: I think what we need is consistency. I'm not generally opposed to that. I'm just saying that we need consistency. Once we get into international travel, we need to make sure that the consistency is not just on the Canadian airlines but also on the other airlines. Otherwise, it becomes very complex and very confusing for the guests. I agree with you that this is a confusing item.

Todd, maybe you can speak to more details on that.

Mr. Todd Peterson: I think you summed it up well, Alexis.

We fly to Paris, for example, but so does Air France. It's very confusing for guests and difficult when there's a different rule for a WestJet flight versus an Air France flight versus our code-share on an Air France flight. This is where consistency is important.

We agree that to this point, the regulator has made the right decision. We also support the ongoing discussions at forums like IATA.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Peterson.

[Translation]

Thank you, Mr. Barsalou-Duval.

[English]

Next we have Mr. Bachrach.

The floor is yours for two and a half minutes, please.

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

Picking up on that last point, I'm a little bit confused by the statement that it would be complex and confusing for the guests. The guests are the ones who are requesting that the one-person-one-fare rule be upheld on international flights.

I would come back to Mr. Barsalou-Duval's question: What is preventing WestJet from accommodating them on WestJet's flights to and from Canada?

Mr. Alexis von Hoensbroech: I can just repeat what I said before, that it's the consistency across the entire system. If someone books a WestJet ticket but this is operated on an Air France flight, for instance, and Air France does not have this type of rule, then this is creating confusion, and we may not be able to deliver. It's confusing.

I also think a solution is needed on that, but the solution needs to be an international standard and not a Canadian stand-alone solution.

Mr. Taylor Bachrach: It seems that WestJet is fighting this in court when it could actually be accommodating people on every flight where it's possible.

I'm going to move on to another point.

You've been forthcoming about the number of complaints received from people with disabilities who travel on your flights. Would you support changes to legislation that would require airlines to provide those statistics to the CTA so that there can be public transparency?

Mr. Alexis von Hoensbroech: I would, 100%. I think that transparency is super important in our industry. We are ready to share all this information with the CTA.

I would also request transparency in the other direction. The CTA has not always been super transparent about what kinds of complaints there are and what status the complaints sitting with the CTA have. I think that transparency is definitely something that can be improved in the Canadian regulatory space. We are ready to participate for those parts that we control.

Mr. Taylor Bachrach: I'll end on that note. I appreciate that response. Hopefully the committee can include a recommendation to ensure that Canadian law in that regard is consistent with the United States, where airlines are required to share their complaint data with the FAA so that there can be public transparency and so that it can be audited.

One thing coming out of the Auditor General's work is the fact that there's limited transparency under the current regulations. I think we would all look forward to that.

Thank you, Mr. Chair.

• (1300)

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Bachrach.

Next we have Mr. Strahl.

Mr. Alexis von Hoensbroech: I'm sorry. I just want to recommend....

We provide this information when we are asked, so we don't need to be regulated to provide it. We're happy to share all of this information with the public.

Mr. Andrew Gibbons: We came here today to do that. [*Inaudible—Editor*] regulation.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

I'll turn it over to Mr. Strahl.

We're going to have to tighten the timeline a little, so I'll give you three minutes, sir.

Mr. Mark Strahl: Thank you.

There was a CTA ruling that affected Air Canada—which is being appealed—that talked about the need for the airline to perhaps provide, with enough notice, even different aircraft to service someone who booked a ticket on a flight.

Have you considered that possibility? If someone who has a power chair, for instance, books a flight and the route is normally served by a Q400 aircraft, are you envisioning a system where, with enough notice, WestJet would either voluntarily or be required to change equipment in order to accommodate that passenger in getting to a destination that WestJet serves?

Mr. Alexis von Hoensbroech: Generally we always try to accommodate and find solutions. However, if it would be a regulatory requirement to always use an aircraft that has certain capabilities, this may become quite a challenge. We have seven airplanes—just seven—that are widebodies and that have big cargo holds and big storage facilities within the passenger cabins. If an issue happens in Fort McMurray, that's not an airport that we can even fly these airplanes to. There are limits to what we can do, especially within the network that we are currently flying in with our regional airplanes.

I understand the thought behind it, but I'm not sure that it will entirely pass the practicality test.

Mr. Mark Strahl: Obviously, you can't discuss internal discussions with your union partners, but what have your conversations been with WestJet employees? They're on the front lines of this often, and they are being asked to perform a task that perhaps is not very common. Commonly, they would be loading suitcases, and then every once in a while they would have a very sensitive piece of equipment. Commonly, they would be responsible for service to guests on an aircraft and for safety, but then every once in a while they would have a very complicated case that presents itself.

Are you working with Unifor and your other union partners to...? Are they a part of this integrated system that you've come up with? Can you describe how you're addressing this with your union partners?

Mr. Alexis von Hoensbroech: Yes, one hundred per cent. We have a very constructive relationship with the unions. We discuss all these types of things with the unions wherever it's appropriate.

Let me just correct one thing. It's not a rare thing. We have someone with some kind of disability, on average, on every single flight. Our team is passionate about helping these people and facilitating their travel.

The higher customer rating that we receive from people with disabilities compared to average passengers shows that this is working really well. There are always some mistakes that happen, but for the most part this is actually working really well. They write compliments for the tremendous efforts of our team.

Mr. Andrew Gibbons: Can I just add one point?

The Chair: Answer very quickly, Mr. Gibbons, if you can.

Mr. Andrew Gibbons: We have extended this invitation to many groups, but as part of your study, we welcome you to WestJet to meet with our teams that provide these services every day to get feedback from them, hear their stories about the challenges and also about the respect and culture of care that we have.

As part of your study, we welcome you to come WestJet and do that. Come, listen and learn.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Gibbons.

We'll conclude our questioning today with Ms. Murray.

I'll turn the floor over to you. You have three minutes, please.

Hon. Joyce Murray (Vancouver Quadra, Lib.): Thank you very much. It's a very interesting conversation.

Mr. von Hoensbroech, are the 200 complaints a trend in the right direction? What was the number of complaints two or three years ago?

• (1305)

Mr. Todd Peterson: I'll address this one.

We want those complaints to be lower and lower. The ultimate goal of the work that we are undertaking is to reduce that number. We would love it to be zero. That is probably not achievable, but we will keep pushing until it goes down.

Hon. Joyce Murray: My question is, what is the trend?

Mr. Todd Peterson: Over the last several years, of course, we've had the COVID-19 pandemic and some disruption, but if we take those years aside, a consistently low number of issues relative to the number of guests we serve with disabilities is a very consistent trend. Again, it's a trend we want to see reduced over time.

Hon. Joyce Murray: Could you tell us what percentage of WestJet's employees self-identify as persons with disabilities, please?

Mr. Alexis von Hoensbroech: We'll have to report back.

It's a fair share. We are a very inclusive company, so there are quite a few, but I don't have the exact number.

Hon. Joyce Murray: I'm also interested in how many are in mid- to high-level executive positions.

Here is another question you may be able to answer: Does WestJet have targets for how many persons with disabilities it will have in its employee group? Do you have a target percentage?

Mr. Alexis von Hoensbroech: I would have to get back on that.

There are, obviously, very different types of employee groups that have certain limitations on what kind of disabilities can be accommodated. If you think of pilots, there are limits to the disabilities that would allow someone to be a pilot or a flight attendant. There are other groups where this is much easier. In those cases, we are very open and welcoming. We do employ quite a few.

I don't know the exact number, but I would be happy to report back.

Hon. Joyce Murray: I'm asking this because part of the culture change that we have done in the Government of Canada is to have explicit goals for recruitment of persons with disabilities. For example, a goal is to go from 5.3% of the workforce in 2018 to 7% in 2025. That is part of the culture of the current government's approach to public service. That means that those people can help the organization serve people with disabilities much more effectively.

I'm also interested in what kinds of support you provide for your internal employees with disabilities in terms of services and equipment to make sure they can be effective, regardless of their disability.

Do you have an explicit program for that?

Mr. Alexis von Hoensbroech: First of all, we are a very diverse company. In all diversity dimensions, we are scoring relatively high. I think we are doing a pretty good job in that sense.

I like your proposal. It is certainly something we should look at. I'm not sure to what extent we have explicit targets.

Mr. Andrew Gibbons: Yes, we're going to have to get back to you, Ms. Murray, on all of these counts, and we will endeavour to do so. I should add that in our discussions with the chief accessibility officer, this is a topic that she has raised with us and tabled with us. It's on our working list of items to tackle with her to get to the point you rightfully make about needing to have an employee group that represents the general population in order to understand things better.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Gibbons.

Thank you, Ms. Murray.

Yes, go ahead, Mr. Badawey.

Mr. Vance Badawey: On Ms. Murray's question, what I think the committee would be very interested in is those numbers.

Mr. Peterson, you mentioned the fact that they may have been one way versus the other, but if we could have those numbers provided to the committee, that would very helpful.

Mr. Andrew Gibbons: As to how many complaints there are?

Mr. Vance Badawey: Yes.

Mr. Andrew Gibbons: Sure. We're happy to do that.

Mr. Vance Badawey: And I'll go a step further: not only complaints but also incidents. Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you very much, Mr. Badawey.

On behalf of all committee members, I want to express our gratitude once again to our three witnesses who have appeared before us today from WestJet. I wish you all a wonderful afternoon.

This meeting stands adjourned.

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