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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 this meeting to order.

Welcome to meeting number 105 of the House of Commons Standing Committee on Transport, Infrastructure and Communities.

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

Today's meeting is 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*]

Colleagues, although this room is equipped with a sophisticated audio system, feedback events can occur. These can be extremely harmful to interpreters and can cause serious injuries. The most common cause of sound feedback is an earpiece worn too close to a microphone. We therefore ask all participants to exercise a high degree of caution when handling the earpieces, especially when your microphone or your neighbour's microphone is turned on. In order to prevent incidents and safeguard the hearing health of our interpreters, I invite all 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.

I would now like to welcome our witnesses for today.

For our first panel, from Air Canada, we have Michael Rousseau, president and chief executive officer, by video conference. Welcome to you, sir. He is joined by David Rheault, vice-president of government and community relations; Tom Stevens, vice-president of customer experience and operations strategy, by video conference; and Kerianne Wilson, director of customer accessibility.

For the second panel today, from Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act Alliance, we have with us Professor David Lepofsky, who is the chair. From the Council of Canadians with Disabilities, we have Heather Walkus, who is the national chair, joining us by video conference.

We'll begin with our first panel. For that, I will turn the floor over to Mr. Rousseau for five minutes of opening remarks.

The floor is yours, sir.

Mr. Dan Muys (Flamborough—Glanbrook, CPC): Is he offline?

The Chair: Perhaps someone else from Air Canada—Mr. Stevens, Mr. Rheault or Ms. Wilson—would like to provide the opening remarks on behalf of Mr. Rousseau.

We will suspend for two minutes to ensure that we have no issues in relation to Mr. Rousseau. We will give him a chance to take his chair and we'll check the AV.

• (1100)

(Pause)

• (1105)

The Chair: I call this meeting back to order.

Once again, I will turn the floor over to you, Mr. Rousseau. You have five minutes for your opening remarks, sir.

Mr. Michael Rousseau (President and Chief Executive Officer, Air Canada): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

[*Translation*]

Good morning, everyone.

[*English*]

Let me assure the committee, people with disabilities and the Canadian public that Air Canada takes very seriously its obligations to ensure that our services are accessible. We want to be the preferred airline for people with disabilities.

[*Translation*]

We're already investing significant resources in accessibility, and we'll do even better.

[*English*]

Each year, Air Canada successfully carries hundreds of thousands of customers who require mobility assistance or other accommodation. We invest significant resources in accessibility. We have been and will continue to be a leader. In January, we became the first carrier in North America to adopt the Sunflower program for customers with non-visible disabilities, and we were also the first in Canada to enable customers to track their checked mobility devices in real time. In addition, we have updated our policy around priority boarding and storage of mobility aids.

Also, at the start of 2024, we created a customer advisory committee comprising representatives from four Canadian accessibility groups. We were a key participant in drafting the Canadian Transportation Agency's "Mobility Aids and Air Travel Final Report". We are proud of the contribution to this government-led initiative. Air Canada was one of the first airlines to waive liability limits in international treaties to pay the full cost for damaged mobility equipment. I sit on the board of the International Air Transport Association, which represents 250 airlines worldwide. Air Canada was a key member of its mobility aid action group.

We endorsed the Accessible Canada Act and its goal of a barrier-free Canada by 2040. As part of this, we publicly filed a three-year accessibility plan, which we are currently implementing. Our plan includes 145 far-ranging new initiatives based on a year of research, expert consultations and feedback from travellers with disabilities who took over 220 flights. We would be pleased to provide a copy to committee members for your review.

Our employees, third party international contractors and the entire leadership team have a high awareness, a strong work ethic and deep empathy for this very important customer segment. Hundreds of thousands of customers requiring assistance successfully travel each year.

In 2023, across our network, we received nearly 1.3 million special assistance requests from our passengers. Based on the number of incidents reported, the vast majority had a positive experience. In terms of those requiring wheelchairs and mobility devices, in about 0.15% of these instances customers contacted us to report a negative experience. Overall, our records show that in 2023 about 100 accessibility-related complaints were filed with the CTA related to our services.

This is not to minimize the number of incidents, nor the serious impacts the disruptions had on the individuals involved, but it is important context that indicates, first, that we do a good job and, second, more importantly, that we need and will continue to get better. Our industry is more complex than others; however, I believe that if all our partners work together, we can remove all barriers for air travel.

While the causes behind these negative experiences differ, we have concluded that the chief issue is inconsistency, and the best remedy for this is to provide our people, who all want to do a good job of serving customers, with more and better tailored training and tools so they can succeed every time.

For example, our 10,000 airport employees will receive extra disability-related instruction as part of a new recurrent annual training program. Apart from reinforcing processes, it will promote better understanding. In addition, our frontline and management groups are required to complete a specially designed training program put together with expert advice, which includes content on the principles that all persons must be treated with dignity and barriers removed.

A good parallel is airline safety. Incidents still occur, but aviation today is the safest mode of travel. This was achieved through our industry's willingness to examine and learn from mistakes, con-

stantly refine processes, adopt new technology or add redundancy, and through continual and better training.

We are well aware of the effects a disruption has on our customers with disabilities. When we fail, we are incredibly disappointed, because it affects a person's quality of life. In these cases, we apologize and we take responsibility. However, what we hear is that our customers' overriding concern is always that we act to make sure that whatever happened to them does not happen to others.

• (1110)

This is why our leadership team and all employees at Air Canada are committed to improve and we are striving each day to deliver a positive experience for every customer. We know we must and can do better.

[Translation]

We're ready to answer your questions.

Thank you.

[English]

Thank you.

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

Before I turn the floor over to Mr. Strahl, I want to apologize to one of our witnesses today. I believe I mispronounced her first name. It's Kerianne. I want to make sure that I get that on the record.

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

Mr. Strahl, you have six minutes. The floor is yours, sir.

Mr. Mark Strahl (Chilliwack—Hope, CPC): Thank you very much, Mr. Chair, and thank you to the folks at Air Canada for being here today.

We've heard, obviously, from a number of Canadians who have had difficult experiences. We kicked off this study because of the high-profile case of Stephanie Cadieux being without her specialized wheelchair for a time when it was left behind, and she talked about the difficulties this brought upon her.

We've heard, again, from numerous people that a mobility aid is not simply like a piece of luggage. It is an extension of a person. It is what allows them to have independence. We've heard how upsetting this is, both physically—it can take days to recover from having to use a non-specialized piece of equipment—and mentally, as there is also a mental component. Once again, those folks are being subjected to being second-class citizens.

I want to understand, from Air Canada's perspective, how you are going to ensure.... I heard the stat that you shared. It was 0.15%. How are you ensuring that it gets down to zero?

Second, as part of that, what is the response from Air Canada when this happens? You say you had lessons learned. What happens when this is such a high-profile case? You say that you have already taken steps to increase training and have sensitivity towards this issue. What happens when Air Canada employees fail in their duty to serve a person with a disability? Is there a reprimand? What are the steps that are taken to ensure that this is treated with the seriousness it deserves?

Mr. Michael Rousseau: Thank you for the questions. I agree with you on your points.

In regard to the first question, about what we are doing, many of these situations happened before we initiated a number of changes as part of our accessibility plan, which was posted last June.

In terms of mobility aids, we've now changed our policies to be much more customer-friendly. One, if we can put the mobility aid in the cabin of the plane—if it's foldable and it can fit—we will put it in the cabin of the plane. If it can't fit in the cabin of the plane because it's too large, it will go in cargo. It will go in as priority, so it will go in last and come off first. Two, customers will have the ability to go to a mobile application and monitor the status of their mobility aid in the cargo to make sure it's on the plane. Three, to protect the mobility aids, in many of our planes we put them in different compartments by themselves. In the planes that don't have separate compartments, we pack it separately, so it's not part of the other cargo on the plane.

We believe these measures will minimize and, hopefully, eliminate some of the situations you've heard of in the past.

On the second point you made, first of all, we call all customers who contact us with a negative experience. Kerianne can certainly expand on that. She speaks to them about their experience and gets feedback, and then we incorporate that in our lessons learned.

With regard to employees who make a mistake, as in safety, we want employees to tell us what's going wrong, and that's a non-punitive issue. We will train those employees to a greater degree. We'll put them through special training and re-enforce the training. If those employees are not great at that job, or do not continue to improve, we might reassign those employees, but we want to first start by training those individuals to make sure they understand the processes and are sensitive to the needs of the customers, and then we'll monitor the performance of those employees on a going forward basis.

• (1115)

Mr. Mark Strahl: One of the things we've heard in this study is that different models are used around the world, including the European model, where it's actually the airport that is responsible for getting an individual who requires extra assistance from the curbside to the airplane. Do you feel that this approach and that sort of system would prevent some of the failures we've seen over the last number of months, in that there are perhaps fewer opportunities for someone to be lost in the hand-off from security, etc.?

Right now, I assume that at airports like Pearson or Vancouver there are dozens of airlines that each have a different approach to a person with a disability. What is your view on going to an airport service delivery model, as opposed to every airline having a different approach and having that responsibility to get the individuals onto the aircraft?

Mr. Michael Rousseau: It's a very interesting concept. Of course, Air Canada, in flying around the world, has experience with both models, here domestically and outside of Canada. Again, it has merit. I think it certainly has merit for smaller airports in Canada to consolidate services. We'd have to spend more time thinking about the larger hubs, where there's much more activity. It would require a different level of coordination between different partners: the airport and the airline. I think those are all areas that we should spend some time looking at to improve.

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

Next we have 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 witnesses for appearing before us today.

We've heard time and time again at this committee and in the news that it's not a surprise to anyone that there have been incidents where passengers with disabilities feel that their experience was not what it was sold to be. I'm interested to find out from you what you have added to your training for your employees that is different from before 2023. What is your new training program right now? I heard in your testimony, Mr. Rousseau, that it's annual training. Are there any thoughts about perhaps increasing the frequency of that training? Also, what specifically are they being trained on?

Mr. Michael Rousseau: Thank you for the question.

It is annual recurrent training. If we require more training, then certainly that's an option for us to put in place. Certainly, all new employees would receive the training, and all existing employees—10,000 at least—would receive the annual recurrent training.

As to the actual details behind the training, it's basically two different buckets. One is process: what has to happen to ensure the customer has a positive experience. Two is sensitivity: the needs of that customer and the fact that the mobility aid is critical to that customer. Those two aspects are the two areas of focus.

If I may, I can easily refer the question to Kerianne, who's much closer to the training program and can provide you with a little more detail.

• (1120)

Ms. Kerianne Wilson (Director, Customer Accessibility, Air Canada): Thank you very much for the question and for the opportunity to speak before you.

As Mr. Rousseau explained, it really is those two categories, but something that we think is important to point out is that the regulatory requirement is only every three years, and this is a decision that Air Canada has made to go well above and beyond, because we believe that it's really important to keep hard skills and soft skills fresh.

We're also trying to take a more holistic view, so that it's not just a training session that people attend. We really want it to permeate throughout their jobs. We've started looking at different ways to allow our staff to interact with customers. One example is that we had a customer workshop a couple of weeks ago. We had two customers come in and meet directly with a wide range of staff, management, frontline managers and frontline staff to really have that personalized connection to our customers, to understand what it is to travel, in this case, with a power mobility aid.

It's about understanding that human aspect of it. We're really looking at how we can scale up that kind of training approach for all of our employees.

Ms. Annie Koutrakis: For the longer term, for Canadians with disabilities travelling on Air Canada, I'm looking for some insight as to what your business plans are and what they include for future aircraft infrastructure. We've heard from passengers with disabilities that they are calling out the industry for not considering the needs of passengers with disabilities in the design of aircraft.

In particular, it's duly noted by many advocates that washrooms are not designed for use by anybody who is not in perfect physical condition, and they are certainly not wheelchair accessible. These same advocates also speak loudly of the need for aircraft to be able to accommodate passengers to stay seated in their own mobility devices. As you can imagine, for passengers who are travelling with these disabilities, it speaks to their dignity.

What kind of commitment can Air Canada make today when they're considering the design of their future fleet so that they can help these passengers fly with the dignity they deserve?

Mr. Michael Rousseau: It's a very complex area and a very important area to take accessibility to another level.

There are many safety issues with putting wheelchairs on planes. Regarding seats, we go through a very complex regulatory review of the interior of the plane to make sure that it's safe for all customers, so that's one aspect that we always have to adhere to.

On the one that you mentioned about washrooms, you're absolutely right with your comment. Our team, Kerianne and her team, are speaking to Boeing and Airbus, the two principal manufacturers of airplanes, especially about our narrow bodies, which are those smaller planes that are more difficult to get into, and about re-designs to allow a customer with a wheelchair or a disability to more comfortably get into that washroom. That work is under way right now. We're committed to continuing to work with Boeing and Airbus to see if we can find a solution on future planes or maybe

even remodel existing planes in the near future to satisfy your question.

The Chair: You have 35 seconds, Ms. Koutrakis.

Ms. Annie Koutrakis: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Very quickly, I was just wondering if you'd be able to talk to us a little bit about the resolution of complaints. What happens from the minute someone makes a complaint to the resolution?

If you don't have time to answer during this meeting, perhaps you can send this information later. How many complaints have you received since 2023, and how many have been resolved?

Mr. Michael Rousseau: Again, based on the 1.3 million requests for accommodation, we received about 2,000 complaints overall in 2023. Each of those was resolved in different ways, either personally through Kerianne or through our customer relations department, but certainly we can send you a more detailed process list of how we handled those issues.

• (1125)

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Rousseau.

We would very much welcome that information.

[*Translation*]

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 would like to thank the witnesses, especially Mr. Rousseau, for joining us today.

We're speaking with you today because, in recent months and over the past year, there have been many cases of people with disabilities facing accessibility issues. These issues seem even more prevalent at Air Canada. You must be familiar with the cases. However, I still think that we should go over them quickly.

A number of incidents were reported in the media, including the following. A lift fell on a passenger's head, causing her ventilator to disconnect. Staff failed to bring a customer's wheelchair on board. A man was dropped and injured by Air Canada staff when they failed to use a lift, as requested by the customer. A man with spastic cerebral palsy had to drag himself off an airplane because no assistance was provided. Paralympic athletes filed complaints and reported a widespread problem at Air Canada.

In your opening remarks, you said that these cases accounted for 0.15% of situations. I'm wondering about the difference in perception between your statement that these cases account for a mere hundred or so complaints, and the fairly significant number of recent cases that received media coverage.

It seems that the incidents are much more widespread than suggested by the 0.15% statistic.

What are your thoughts on this?

[English]

Mr. Michael Rousseau: It's 0.15%, 15 basis points. I take your comments, that it's probably under-reported. I understand that, but that's not the issue. Our issue is that we know we need to get better and we're putting a number of initiatives in place to minimize, if not eliminate, these occurrences. We run a very complex industry, as I spoke about in my opening comments. It is very emotional at times as well, because I'll see customers who want to get somewhere with everything they brought to the airport.

My belief, and certainly the team's belief here, is that we will get better, and we are getting better with the initiatives we have already put in place, which we've outlined. We are now putting customers with disabilities on the plane first. We are putting them at the front of the cabin, so that makes their situation much easier. As I mentioned earlier, we're dealing with mobility aids much better than we have been in the past, and we're training all our people. We've put in the Sunflower program for hidden disabilities. We're continuing to consult with well-respected disability groups to get better.

This is a continuous improvement process, but again—

[Translation]

Mr. Xavier Barsalou-Duval: Speaking—

[English]

Mr. Michael Rousseau: —I think we do a good job to begin with, but we need to do better.

[Translation]

Mr. Xavier Barsalou-Duval: You're talking about the need to do better. You spoke about the failure to declare certain disabilities. I think that there may be more issues than what people are declaring.

A witness came to speak to the committee. She said that, as a person with a disability, she expected to face issues just about every time she flew. She didn't wonder whether she would face issues. She was fairly certain that she would. I find that quite fascinating.

In terms of the cases reported by the media, we can see that, in any event, Air Canada features prominently on the list. We must applaud the initiatives that you referred to and that you want to implement. Some are already in place. I think that this should be acknowledged.

However, we also saw that you were in court quite recently to contest the Canadian Transportation Agency's request to allow wheelchairs on airplanes and to find airplanes that can accommodate travellers if, for example, the reserved seat doesn't work. This would mean moving the person from one airplane to another to accommodate the wheelchair on board.

How can you explain the fact that you claim to be making an effort—based on your message—but you're also contesting the agency's orders that would help people with disabilities?

• (1130)

[English]

Mr. Michael Rousseau: The case you're referring to goes back to 2016, when Mr. Rose wanted to go to Cleveland, and we couldn't

fit his wheelchair in the small plane we had at that time. We wanted to accommodate Mr. Rose. We actually worked with him to see if we could put him in a limo to another airport. We looked at another flight, and we looked at alternatives for him to get there with his wheelchair, so when the CTA came out with their ruling, we disagreed with it. It's nothing about Mr. Rose or about our commitment to getting customers with disabilities to their intended destinations. It's that we didn't agree with the CTA's ruling, so the only option we had was to go to court and appeal that ruling.

Again, you need to separate those two issues: our commitment to getting customers with disabilities to their intended—

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

Next we have Mr. Bachrach.

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

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

Mr. Rousseau, in your opening, you chose to cite the percentage of trips taken by people with disabilities that resulted in a complaint, and you cited the number of 0.15%. It makes it sound like a small problem and it seems to diminish the importance of the issue. I'm wondering why you made that choice in your opening remarks.

Mr. Michael Rousseau: We want to be transparent with the facts that we have—that was one of the purposes and one of the objectives of coming to the committee—to anyone we speak to about this very important situation.

I think that right after I presented the numbers, my next comment was that I am not diminishing this issue. We are spending time and effort, and investing, to get better. We know, despite the numbers I presented in my opening comments, that we need to get better.

Again, I've given this committee at least half a dozen significant process changes that we've put in place in the last six months and that will make it better. We'll continue to make process changes and invest in training especially, to ensure that we minimize, if not eliminate, the mistakes that are made.

Mr. Taylor Bachrach: I am wondering, Mr. Rousseau, why you didn't start by saying, “We have a big, serious problem.”

How much money did Air Canada make in 2023?

Mr. Michael Rousseau: In 2023, we made roughly \$2 billion.

Mr. Taylor Bachrach: How much money did Air Canada invest specifically in improving the experience of people with disabilities?

Mr. Michael Rousseau: That's a fair question. I don't have that number—

Mr. Taylor Bachrach: Does Ms. Wilson have that number, perhaps?

Mr. Michael Rousseau: No, we don't have the number. The reason for that is that, certainly, we have numbers where we've invested in equipment and we have a labour force that's dedicated to this to some degree, but there are also many other costs that are built into other costs, like technology and training, that we'd need to pull out to get a fair number.

I would estimate that if it's not in the tens of millions, it's certainly in the high millions of dollars of investments per year.

Mr. Taylor Bachrach: Do you track those investments?

You said earlier that you're investing significant resources. That statement must have been based on something.

Mr. Michael Rousseau: We're training 10,000 people a year now, recurrently. That is a significant investment, for one example.

We're buying new equipment—more Eagle lifts, for example—for more airports and for more redundancy. That's another investment we're making.

Beyond all that, there is a series of technology improvements that we're making as part of other overall programs. That is hard to pull out, but again—

Mr. Taylor Bachrach: Mr. Rousseau, would you be willing to pull those numbers together and table them with the committee? I think it would be very edifying and useful for our study.

Mr. Michael Rousseau: I think that's a fair question. I'll take that back and see if our finance and other groups can pull together those numbers where it makes sense.

• (1135)

Mr. Taylor Bachrach: Thank you.

Later in this meeting, we're going to be hearing from two representatives of prominent disability advocacy organizations in Canada. Neither of them has been contacted to provide input on Air Canada's accessibility plan.

Would you be willing to meet with these individuals personally?

Mr. Michael Rousseau: Again, we've put together a committee of four well-respected disability groups: Barrier Free Canada, Brain Injury Canada, Spinal Cord Injury Canada, and Kéroul.

Certainly, we're willing to speak to other groups as well, whether it's me or Kerianne, who is obviously our leader in this area, as our director of accessibility. We would look forward to meeting with anyone, including your next two guests.

Mr. Taylor Bachrach: That would be fabulous, Mr. Rousseau.

I had a chance to meet Mr. Lepofsky from the Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act Alliance. I notice he's wearing the Order of Canada pin. We're also joined today by Heather Walkus from the Council of Canadians with Disabilities. I know both of them would very much like to meet with you and discuss your company's plans, so if you could arrange that, it would be much appreciated.

The last question for this round is around voluntary versus obligatory actions by airlines. We heard from WestJet at a previous meeting, and we've heard from Air Canada today, that there are voluntary actions that the airlines are taking. My question is whether that's enough to ensure a consistent experience for people travelling with disabilities.

Should we not consider strong national regulations that are properly enforced, so that there aren't laggards in the industry that aren't taking these voluntary actions like the ones you and WestJet have outlined?

Mr. Michael Rousseau: That's a difficult question for me to answer. Again, I'm looking at it from Air Canada's perspective. We're committed to this. You've heard about all the actions we're putting in place and our commitment to continue to improve. Hopefully, other airlines follow our lead; we're certainly willing to share our processes with them, as well.

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

Thank you, Mr. Bachrach.

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

Mr. Muys, the floor is yours; you have five minutes, please.

Mr. Dan Muys: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

My question is for Mr. Rousseau.

Yesterday, Canada's Minister of Transport jumped to his feet and said, "I know, I know; we'll have a summit." That has worked so well, of course, with auto thefts—which, as we heard from the police chief in Toronto today, are actually up again.

According to his own words, the minister conferred with a cabinet colleague and they said that there must be action now. They set a date of May 9—two months from now—for this action, which one can imagine will result in a report with a fancy cover and logo, perhaps on September 9, followed by the implementation of some recommendations, perhaps by March 9 of next year.

What would you see as the point of a summit? You've already talked about some of the actions you've taken; we've heard from WestJet about some of the actions they've taken. We can sit here and question whether that's enough, whether that's fast enough, whether you care enough or whether you are taking it seriously enough. However, what is the point of a summit two months from now to take immediate action, other than a photo op to make it look like the Liberals are doing something about a problem they should have dealt with years ago and are pretending to care about?

What are your comments about that? What is the value, other than a photo-op?

Mr. Michael Rousseau: I think there's value. There's always value in sharing information among participants, not just airlines but other modes of transportation as well. We can all learn from each other. Although I believe this important area has a very high awareness level and will continue to maintain that high awareness level, again, I think that sharing information, processes and lessons learned is always a positive thing.

Mr. Dan Muys: Okay, so I guess in two months we'll share some information.

Ms. Wilson, it was referenced that you actually call and take feedback from those who have had negative customer experiences, and I imagine some actions are taken in response to some of those. Maybe there's an illustrative example that had a good outcome and you think would be a good one. Could you expand on that a bit just so we understand some of the processes and the steps?

• (1140)

Ms. Kerianne Wilson: It would be my pleasure.

If I hear about an incident, either through one of my airport colleagues or another colleague who's received an email and it gets sent to me, I take a first glance, and then I always have help figuring out what happened by getting feedback either from the airports involved or from someone on board the aircraft. I reach out either personally or through one of my senior colleagues in customer relations. We have a very dedicated team that works on accessibility.

The point of having those phone calls is really to understand directly from the customer what the impact of the incident was on them. Often, even though I've seen some of these incidents before, I learn something new that I've never heard.

For one example, I spoke with a customer who put it extremely succinctly. This is someone who uses a power mobility aid. Whenever they travel on vacation, their vacation doesn't start the same way it does for us, when we turn on an out-of-office message, for example. They are not on vacation until they arrive and they have been reunited with their power chair. The value of that small explanation of reality from a person with a disability often comes from my ability to then take those examples back and share them with all of my colleagues. It really changes how we view things.

Mr. Dan Muys: Do you use any specific examples in the training, and do you give feedback to the Air Canada staff that have been involved in that situation?

Ms. Kerianne Wilson: I'll just repeat the question for the recording: What do I do with that feedback? What I will do is make sure that any staff involved are given that feedback. We often validate that this was the experience for the customer. It might not have seemed that way to you, but this is how they lived it. I will often look at the training curriculum and see whether there is something missing in the training. In some cases, as we spoke about earlier, it's a matter of the frequency of training or the way the training is delivered. Often, we'll see that the point in question was covered in training but perhaps not in a way that really resonated.

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

Thank you very much, Mr. Muys.

Next we have Ms. Murray.

Ms. Murray, the floor is yours. You have five minutes. Go ahead, please.

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

Thank you to the witnesses for being here today.

Congratulations on Air Canada's leadership on the Sunflower program. I was happy to hear that. As well, Mr. Rousseau commented about how we need to get better, especially with respect to process changes and training. Third, there is a commitment to being a leader in accessible travel and employment on your website.

Mr. Rousseau, what are the metrics for being a leader in accessible travel and employment that you have identified, and within what timeframe are you aiming to achieve them?

Mr. Michael Rousseau: Thank you for the question.

Certainly from a customer perspective, we are looking at two areas. First, obviously, is the number of complaints as a percentage of the number of customers travelling with disabilities and continuing to improve that year over year. The second area we are exploring is looking at doing some surveys of our customers with disabilities. As you heard, Kerianne speaks to many customers, but we would like to speak to as many as possible to get their feedback. The scoring of that survey would also be an internal benchmark to let us know how we're doing and, more importantly, how we are improving. That's certainly from a customer perspective.

From an employee perspective, one of the measures we look at is the percentage of management who have a disability. We measure that internally. We ask our employees for that information. It's probably under-reported. Today, roughly 5% of our management group has a self-declared disability. I think that's another important measure from an internal perspective.

• (1145)

Hon. Joyce Murray: Thank you for mentioning that, because that is my second question.

How many of your personnel and contractors in the training activities—whether design, planning or delivery—are persons with disabilities? Of course, they would naturally have an affinity with the trainees and probably be effective.

Mr. Michael Rousseau: Again, thank you for the question.

I don't have the exact details with respect to how many training staff have self-declared disabilities. I can tell you that overall at Air Canada roughly 2.2% of our staff of 39,000 employees have a self-declared disability. We think that's under-reported. It is higher than the average for the air transportation area, which I believe is roughly 1.9%.

I can certainly get back to you with information specific to training staff, the people who are involved in training others, and how many of those people have a self-declared disability.

Hon. Joyce Murray: Thank you.

Congratulations on having that be something that you measure.

To what degree do you have goals in your hiring? What are your objectives in terms of percentage of personnel at Air Canada with accessibility challenges?

Mr. Michael Rousseau: Here at Air Canada we have a very strong DEI program that looks to improve hiring practices to ensure that we have strong representation of all minority groups, including those with disabilities.

I don't have all the statistics right in front of me. We do measure ourselves against the greater air transportation industry on all of the DEI dimensions. As far as I remember, we are currently doing okay, but we need to get better. There will be changes to hiring processes to ensure that we do get better.

Hon. Joyce Murray: My last question on that—

The Chair: Unfortunately, Ms. Murray, we don't have time for another question.

Hon. Joyce Murray: Okay.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Murray.

Thank you, Mr. Rousseau.

[*Translation*]

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

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

Mr. Rousseau, I must confess that I'm disappointed by your response, despite your announcements. Air Canada's commitment seems serious, or at least Air Canada seems to have realized the need to address shortcomings in service for people with disabilities.

That said, people are taking legal action because they simply want respect for their human dignity. It's odd to see the unwillingness to respond to orders from government agencies that ensure that the system has a modicum of efficiency.

I think that Air Canada is conveying a strange message. I can't say that I'm satisfied with your answer to my last question.

Before wrapping up, since I don't have much time, I also wanted to address another topic.

Not long ago, the Commissioner of Official Languages tabled a report showing, for example, that he assessed about 30 complaints against Air Canada and made recommendations concerning service in French. Serving customers properly also means serving them in French. Yet we learned that Air Canada failed to implement any of these recommendations.

I gather that you're learning French. However, shouldn't it go without saying that Air Canada must implement the recommendations made by the Commissioner of Official Languages? Shouldn't it go without saying that the Canadian Transportation Agency's orders must be followed?

• (1150)

[*English*]

Mr. Michael Rousseau: I'll address the second part first.

Certainly, we're very proud to support both official languages and to be the only carrier in Canada that provides services in both official languages. This area, obviously, is very important to us, as is accessibility, but they are different. We will read the commissioner's recommendations, and we will have a discussion with the commissioner as to what we think of those recommendations, but that is a completely different course of action versus accessibility.

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

Next, we have Mr. Bachrach for two and a half minutes, please.

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

Ms. Wilson, I know Mr. Lepofsky provided you with a brief prior to this meeting. In that brief, there are 19 recommendations from his organization, the Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act Alliance.

Have you had a chance to review the 19 recommendations?

Ms. Kerianne Wilson: Yes, I have. As was alluded to before—perhaps that was in a private conversation—Mr. Lepofsky and I have known each other for a couple of years. It was great to hear from him. I appreciated the heads-up on the brief.

It was only yesterday, so I did read them over. There are some that we have already started working on, so it was quite encouraging to see that we're aligned. The best way to accomplish something real and exciting in accessibility is to work hand in hand with the disability community.

Mr. Taylor Bachrach: Mr. Rousseau, there are other jurisdictions that have stronger regulations, in some respects, when it comes to people with disabilities. For instance, the committee has heard that in the United States, all of the complaints that are submitted to airlines are handed over to the federal regulator. In Canada, there's no such obligation, so we essentially have to take your word for it, when it comes to complaints data, and every airline reports it differently. We know there are many instances that go unreported. This is what we've heard from disability advocates.

Should Canada not have a system of reporting and transparency that's at least as strong as that in the United States?

Mr. Michael Rousseau: I think that's a worthwhile venture to explore. Obviously, there would have to be some conditions around this. How is the data put together? It has to be consistent, not just across the airline industry but also across other industries that provide customers with disabilities the ability to travel. It's unfair to point out only the airline industry. There should be others included in that, if we want a full view of customers with disabilities who want to travel.

As with safety, the information that's provided must be provided in a non-punitive manner. Our joint objective here should be to improve the travel experience for customers with disabilities. That information should be transparent to all, and new initiatives will come out of that information that will improve travel. Being non-punitive is also a very important aspect.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Rousseau.

Thank you, Mr. Bachrach.

We have eight minutes left, and I'll split the difference.

Mr. Strahl, you have four minutes for your questioning, please.

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

I'm going to use my time to move a motion that members of the committee would have received on Friday.

The motion states:

Given that:

- (a) There is very limited transit infrastructure in rural Canada.
- (b) Electric vehicles are often not a feasible option in rural Canada.
- (c) Rural Canadians often have no other option than to drive gas and diesel-powered vehicles in order to commute and operate their businesses.
- (d) The Liberal government plans to increase the carbon tax by 23% on April 1st.

The committee report to the House that it recognizes the disproportionate impact that the carbon tax has on rural Canadians and calls on the Liberal government to spike the hike and axe the tax.

Mr. Chair, this is one of two meetings that we have in the entire month. It's one of the last meetings before that 23% carbon tax hike comes into effect on April 1. We know that we do have Minister Guilbeault coming before the committee to explain his "no more new roads" policy, which will also have a disproportionate impact on rural Canada. We think that we can have a vote on this motion to send a strong message from this committee that we believe that the government's 23% carbon tax hike will have a disproportionate impact on rural Canadians. We don't want to see that happen, so I think this is a good opportunity for members, especially those of us who represent rural Canadians, to let our views be known and send that message back to the government.

Thank you, Mr. Chair.

• (1155)

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

Mr. Badawey.

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

I disagree. I think it is bad timing on the part of Conservatives to bring up such a motion. We're trying to concentrate on the disability community, as well as Air Canada, to deal with an issue that has been front of mind for many people throughout the past few years, especially because of the latest incident.

Mr. Chairman, I don't think we have time for that today. I think we want to stick to the issues at hand that this meeting is here for. Maybe Mr. Strahl wants to entertain that at a more appropriate time.

I move to adjourn debate on this motion, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Badawey.

(Motion agreed to: yeas 7; nays 4)

The Chair: We'll continue with our line of questioning.

You have two minutes and 30 seconds, Mr. Strahl.

Mr. Mark Strahl: Thank you very much.

Mr. Rousseau, a lot of the incidents involving Air Canada that we heard about, some of the most high-profile incidents.... The one I'm thinking of happened at the Las Vegas airport, where there was someone, I believe, who had to drag himself through the cabin to get out. Obviously, you're dealing with—I assume—a contractor outside of Canada.

How have you revised your approach to dealing with the foreign private contractors that you have to rely upon? Have you changed your approach, and if so, how?

Mr. Michael Rousseau: There are a couple of aspects. You're absolutely right. Outside of Canada, everything is third party contractors. We've strengthened the contract with our third party contractors so there are clear standards to perform.

Just to provide some insight, I will say that with regard to that situation in Las Vegas, that contractor—not just for that mistake they made but also for others—was terminated, and we brought in a new contractor. It's really about training and ensuring that we have a strong contract that has penalties and standards of care that are consistent with what we're trying to do in Canada.

Mr. Mark Strahl: Thank you very much.

The final question I have for you is this: When will you be reporting back on the progress of all these initiatives you have? Obviously, we've heard that the desire of this committee is to have information provided to us on some of the progress, some of the investments and spending that you've made. How do you report back internally and publicly on whether these initiatives are actually meeting their goals? We heard today from the Auditor General that well-meaning programs are fine but that the reporting and the measuring of the impacts are also important.

How are you reporting back to Canadians on whether or not the things you're putting in place are actually making a difference for passengers with disabilities?

Mr. Michael Rousseau: Thank you for the question. It's a very interesting one.

Internally, certainly, our senior leadership group, including me, gets data on a regular basis on how we're doing in terms of the initiatives being put in place, adherence to those initiatives and, of course, the number of complaints, which is hopefully declining as a result of these initiatives. That's internal.

Regarding external reporting, we haven't talked about it much internally. It's a good reminder to me to look at that situation as part of an annual report, or part of a proxy, or part of an AIF or all the other public documents we provide, so the public knows we are doing better. We certainly have some literature in some of our public documents now about accessibility, but it does not include many numbers, if any. I think your point is well taken. It should be enhanced as time goes on with some numbers, as well.

• (1200)

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

Thank you, Mr. Strahl.

The four minutes remaining are yours, Mr. Badawey.

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

I'm going to start off with a statement, followed by a question, Mr. Chairman.

What I'm most interested in, Mr. Rousseau, is the harmonizing of procedures based on the harmonizing of standards. Frankly, it's not just about the airlines. It's an end-to-end experience for the customer. That includes all partners, from the time the individual gets to the curb until the time they land and get to their destination. With that said, there's an expected level of service. All providers are going to be at the table with that. Once again, harmonizing those procedures based on harmonized standards is extremely important.

Although Mr. Muys and the Conservatives don't value public consultation and consultation with the partners, we do. This is the reason why, on May 9, we are going to have that consultation. Call it whatever you want—an accessibility summit or public consultation. The bottom line is that we're going to be discussing, with all partners, the level of service expected and, with that, reaching for those outcomes we want to establish.

Mr. Rousseau, do you feel that this process—for airports, CATSA, CBSA, international partners, airlines and, of course, most importantly, the disability community—would be an opportunity to, in fact, work towards harmonizing those procedures based on the standards established, having a strategic plan and action plans and, of course, executing the deliverables established out of those action plans?

Do you think this will in fact accomplish that?

Mr. Michael Rousseau: I think it's a good start. A lot of work is going to come out of that, because, as you said, it's complex. Certainly, better coordination among the partners will result in a better experience for customers with disabilities. I firmly believe that.

Mr. Vance Badawey: How much time do I have, Mr. Chair?

The Chair: You have two minutes.

Mr. Vance Badawey: Great.

I want to emphasize this. This is about two things: caring and respect. At the end of the day, we want to ensure that, before the iron fist comes down with respect to decisions that can be made—like the motion that was just brought forward—we consider the consequences of decisions and recognize that mobility aids are not just luggage. Rather, they are extensions of one's body, as well as independence.

My second question, Mr. Rousseau—and I'd like to get a bit granular—is this: What have you moved forward with now that is tangible, and what can you bring to the table as part of your sector, with other partners, in order to move forward with reaching those outcomes expected by the disability community?

Mr. Michael Rousseau: First, in terms of mobility aids, what we've done recently is change our policy. We are allowing as many mobility aids as we can into the cabin, so the customers have them close by. That's in place right now. Second, we built a technology application through which customers can monitor where their mobility aid is and ensure it's in the cargo bay.

Within the cargo bay, there are two important aspects. One, mobility aids will be treated as priority. They'll go on last and come off first, so they're available for the customer when the customer comes off the plane. Two—and this is an important area—we have changed our internal processes to try to isolate the mobility aid so it does not get broken or damaged. As you know, planes hit turbulence once in a while, so we want to make sure the mobility aid is strapped into the cargo bay, either by itself or away from any other cargo that exists, in order to minimize the risk of damage.

I think those are four strong initiatives we've already put in place. We'll continue to look at more, while working with our partners and experts.

• (1205)

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

I would like to thank you, Mr. Rheault, Mr. Stevens and, of course, Ms. Wilson for your testimony today on this very important study.

I'm going to suspend the meeting for two minutes to allow for our team to set up the next round of witnesses.

This meetings stands suspended.

• (1205) _____ (Pause) _____

• (1210)

The Chair: I call this meeting back to order.

Colleagues, for the second panel, we have appearing before us, from Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act Alliance, Professor David Lepofsky, who is the chair. Mr. Chair, I want to thank you for being here. From the Council of Canadians with Disabilities, we have Ms. Heather Walkus, who is the national chair. She is joining us by video conference.

We will begin with opening remarks.

I'll turn the floor over to you, Mr. Lepofsky. The floor is yours.

Mr. David Lepofsky (Chair, Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act Alliance): Thank you.

I want to thank the excellent team of law students from the law school at Western, who've provided tremendous support for what I'm going to say. Anything that's wrong is my fault. Anything that's right is their fault.

Enough is enough. As a blind person, I dread entering Canadian airspace. I never know whether the service I'm going to get—for basic accommodation needs that are well known and easy to provide—will be reliable or pathetic.

We heard from Air Canada today that they're doing a good job, that they've put in place measures that are needed to fix this, that the problems are few or infrequent, and that all they really need is more education or training for their staff. Every single one of those statements is wrong, and the fact that Air Canada's leadership said this is proof that we need far more systemic solutions. Let me offer you some.

Number one, the U.S. has the Airline Passengers with Disabilities Bill of Rights, so why don't we? It is absurd that, on a flight to Atlanta three weeks ago, my email from Air Canada told me about the American bill of rights, but nothing about the services available to me as a blind passenger in Canada, even though I'm on record and file as a blind passenger.

We need a new regulatory agency to oversee accessibility of air travel. The Canadian Transportation Agency has had this mandate not for years, but for decades. They have failed, and they are failing, and it's because they're too close to the airlines. Keep leaving it with them and you're going to keep getting the same results. How surprising is it that so few of us file so few complaints with their process? If you read the accessible air travel regulations they passed in 2019, they are more loopholes than rules. The fact of the matter is that they read like they were written by the airlines.

How about another basic solution that's easier than changing the regulatory agency? How about requiring airlines to automatically tell us passengers with disabilities what services they offer so that we're not having to go running around their websites, one airline at a time, hoping we can find it, hoping it's up to date? That's assuming we have a computer and can afford it, and have adaptive tech and can use it.

How about mandatorily requiring something like the U.S. bill of rights for passengers with disabilities? How about telling us, in every notification, whom to call for support, whom to call for curbside assistance? This is not rocket science, but they don't do it.

How about having one-stop support? How about having a fast-action, fast-service disability hotline at each airline? You phone it and you don't wait on hold for an hour, and you don't have to listen to miserably nerve-racking music; you just get someone who can route you through to the solution. It could be the way to request services and to file complaints. How about requiring the airlines on our flights and the airports in their announcements to regularly announce the availability of that hotline? If more people knew how to complain, the CEO of Air Canada wouldn't be coming here telling you how few complaints they get.

How about requiring the regulator to deploy secret shoppers so we have independent monitoring of how their services are? You heard from the CEO of Air Canada that they now announce pre-boarding for passengers with disabilities—not on the Air Canada flight I was on last night to come here.

• (1215)

How about having an assured front desk check-in at a large airport, like at terminal 1 in Toronto, where you don't have to try to brave a phalanx of stanchions and check-in machines, and other confusing signage and so on, so you can check in right inside the door? Air Canada didn't have it. Let's just say somebody got an interesting idea, and eventually they did have it, but then they killed it. I asked them to restore it. They didn't. I then heard that they did, but only for some flights and not others. If you can't figure it out, imagine how I feel.

How about requiring that one person will guide you through the whole airport, rather than being passed from one person to the next—sometimes as many as three or four—like you're a baton in a relay race?

We heard about the need for training. Can I tell you—I'm just giving you my experience; lots of people with disabilities can tell you the same—how many of their ground assistance persons assigned to guide me I have had to teach how to guide a blind person?

Did I mention this is not rocket science? These aren't bad people. They're in a bad system that needs to be fixed.

Let me wrap up by telling you there are a lot more things we can require. How about standards for new aircraft design?

I was on a plane just two weeks ago. Do you know that call button to let the flight attendant know you need help? It's always been a physical button, but more and more, it's a touch screen that blind people can't operate. Did they just invent blind people? This is ridiculous.

Now, I don't want to make it sound like it's all Air Canada. These things need to be done and measures need to be across the board. Air Canada is not the leader that we want airlines to follow. We need them all to become leaders and to change their practices.

Thank you very much.

The Chair: Thank you, Professor Lepofsky.

Next we'll go to Ms. Walkus.

The floor is yours.

Ms. Walkus, unfortunately you're on mute. I will wait for you to unmute yourself and then we'll restart the clock for you.

Ms. Heather Walkus (National Chair, Council of Canadians with Disabilities): Thank you for letting me know that. Many people like to use the mute button with me.

Thank you for having me here.

I have been involved in the federal transportation industry and disability since 1979. I was so happy when we finally got regulations, not voluntary codes of practice, which went into effect on June 25, 2020. Let me tell you, for someone who's been involved internationally and nationally around disability and travel, I thought, "What could possibly go wrong now?" In 2019, it looked like we were going to get there in one year, right in the middle of the COVID shutdown.

Do you think the airlines and the airports stopped at that point? No, they asked for exemptions, exceptions and extensions for putting in mandatory regulatory areas that they had to deal with, which they had a full year ahead, and all of a sudden, because of COVID, they couldn't do it.

We had to take the disability community and fight that request of the federal cabinet, and we had to have a global reaction to that. We should have been looking after our own people during that time, but we couldn't. Our people were hungry, they couldn't use cash, and they couldn't get proper health care assistance. We were hurting in the disability community, yet we mounted a campaign against the airlines to stop taking away the regulations we had fought for for dozens and dozens of years.

This is not new. We tried everything to make change with the industry. Now, we're not just talking about Air Canada; we're talking about interprovincial buses, interprovincial ferries and Via Rail. We have had to fight every inch of the way.

I noticed last month that some of the discussion was around "one person, one fare". The Council of Canadians with Disabilities was the one that went to court against Air Canada to ensure that we had one person, one fare. Then one of our members followed that up with another court case to allow room for guide dogs and service dogs to be able to stretch out, because they immediately have to work after getting off a carrier.

Since those times and since those very important court cases, we've also gone against Via Rail because they were buying inaccessible rail cars. We fought them, and we won that, and the big principle that came out of that legal fight was that you cannot end a barrier by creating more.

We have regulations that embody some of those legal precedents that we set from the disability community. We didn't get any help. We had to do that on our own. We're still doing it on our own, and the biggest issue right now is that systemically it is not accessible.

If a person wants to utilize one person, one fare, every carrier does it differently. Every carrier wants a doctor's certificate. Every carrier uses a different type of certificate. They undermine what has already been won. I call it a death by a thousand cuts. Every time we try to enact what is already in place, there's some new barrier to change, which we have to then fight. It's like whack-a-mole. Every time you try to do something, it hits.

I'll tell you about the ridiculousness that David was talking about. I met up with a person who had just started on the accessibility desk for Air Canada at YVR. She was shaking. It was the first time she'd ever met a person with a disability. It's a good thing that I'm a nice person, because I helped her through it. I spent more time supporting her, but she, through two weeks in a classroom, had never met a person with a disability.

• (1220)

The question I have is, why is it that everyone is talking about us and everybody is doing their best for us without us? We've been here. We are always here. We are not stakeholders. Stakeholders come in and set the parameters, rules, of what they're in charge of. We are rights holders. When you look at the Constitution and section 15, you can see that people with disabilities are in there. We're at the very end, because in the first draft we weren't included. We had to fight for that, too, but we're there.

Every time we have to mount yet another campaign or another legal challenge, it takes people away from their families and from their regular lives, and we are all volunteers. We are not paid to do this. I am the chair of the largest and oldest disability rights organization in this country. We are 48 years old. We have been and are run mainly by volunteers, and we have made great strides to get us to where we are, but we need you.

We need this committee—and I'm so blessed to be here—not just to give recommendations but to follow them through. I would have loved to be able to sit in this morning and ask Air Canada questions. This big summit that's happening in a couple of months, the disability community has never been consulted about that. We need to be at the table with the same authority and to speak from that same authority to ask questions of Air Canada. They wove a pretty picture this morning, and some of it is pretty—they have done some good work and they have great staff—but systemically, when you try to get through to them, it's impossible.

I want to leave you with a very ugly picture. At WestJet, when a person is larger than the seats will allow within one person, one fare—that legal fight saw obesity as a disability—the demeaning process is that you have to have your butt measured. You have to put it on paper. A doctor has to sign off on it—try finding a doctor—and then you have to send it in. WestJet has an algorithm that they spent a lot of money on. It is proprietary. They take those numbers and they decide whether or not you get the extra seat. It is demeaning, embarrassing and expensive, and it is why many people with disabilities are not travelling anymore, because they're harmed. They're harmed through the process.

The Chair: Thank you—

Ms. Heather Walkus: I'll leave it there for now. I'd love to answer any questions.

• (1225)

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Walkus. I didn't want to cut off your opening remarks. I just want to make sure that all the members here are able to ask you questions and get your point of view and expertise on the record.

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

Mr. Strahl, you have six minutes.

Mr. Mark Strahl: Thank you very much.

Mr. Lepofsky, I found your comments about being handed off three or four times in an airport—like “a baton”, I think you said—to be interesting. We've been talking about making sure that people are treated with respect and dignity and are provided a good service from the time they get out of their vehicle, or whatever transport they've used to get to the airport, until they're seated in the aircraft.

Your comments were focused largely on Air Canada. I assume that's the one you've had the most experience with. Has it been any different when you've travelled with any other domestic Canadian airlines? You referenced the United States. I see in some prepared remarks here that you also travel to Israel, etc. Where have you had the best experience, and with which airline, in terms of not being passed from person to person through the airport?

Mr. David Lepofsky: Thank you.

Number one, I've talked a lot about Air Canada, but it's not limited to Air Canada in terms of my experience in Canada.

Number two, my better experiences are anywhere outside this country. I'm sorry to say that, and I'm embarrassed as a Canadian to say it, but it proves that others can get it right. Why the heck can't we?

I talked about being passed like a baton. For the longest time—for decades—in terminal 1 in Toronto, you came through with one person taking you from the airplane all the way through customs to getting your bags and getting you out the door and into a cab. Now, because some geniuses put their heads together and thought this was a better thing, for the last 10, 15, 20 or maybe 50 metres, you have to be passed to an airport authority person—literally, for the last few metres. You spend more time having the two ground officials taking your boarding pass and scanning, as you're leaving one and being passed to the other one, than it takes to get out the darned door. Try that after a 13-hour flight, when you just want to get home and go to bed.

When you come in at Toronto, again, at Pearson terminal 1.... I'm just going to give this as an illustration. We haven't audited right across the airport—we can't; we're volunteers. However, it's important for you to understand this. You come to the counter, and then they tell you to sit and wait, sometimes upwards of an hour. However, the seats aren't right next to where the staff are. You're sitting there for an hour. You can't ask somebody where the bathroom is. A couple of flights ago, I actually thought they had forgotten me. There was no one to ask, so I just stood up. I heard someone that sounded like an airport.... How's this for dignity? I was standing up and bellowing, “Excuse me. Do you work for the airlines?” Why should we have to do that?

Similarly, on the way out—again, depending on this baton passing—you could be escorted from the aircraft to a seating area before you go through customs and then you are told to wait and that someone would come and get you. You ask, “How long?” They don't know, and they leave. There is no staff there to ask. I've sat there hearing somebody in another seat next to me saying, “I need help. I need to go to the bathroom.” This is an adult, in public, in an airport. Welcome to Canada.

This is not the way we should be treated.

• (1230)

Mr. Mark Strahl: In all of these experiences, obviously, when you've booked your ticket, you have informed the airline that you require extra assistance, and they're still unprepared to deliver a seamless service.

Mr. David Lepofsky: It's totally inconsistent. The people are nice—don't get me wrong. They're not surly. They don't need sensitivity.... They need sufficient staff and a system that works, from the aircraft all the way out the door. Some do it. It varies from day to day and from flight to flight.

Yes, in my file, before I do a booking, it's automatically set out that I have a vision disability and that I need ground assistance. Usually when I book the reservation and I get the electronic ticket, it says it right there. However, it doesn't tell you whom to call for help.

I have one last thing. Why should just getting from the front curb into the airport be so complicated? Why can't there be a one-stop phone number to call? Instead, you have to figure it out. Different airlines do it differently. If you have the wrong number, there's nowhere to call to get the right number.

Anyway, none of this is tough.

By the way, I want to focus on this just for a minute, sir, if I may. Senior executives of airlines need to be held personally accountable. They can't just hire a Kerianne Wilson—who's a really good person and really dedicated—and then tell people like me to go talk to her. That's what he told you when he was pressed about it. With me it was, "Well, it's me or her—it would be good to talk to her." They need to not be shielded by people. They need to talk to us directly—and I'd be happy to, if he would be agreeable to that.

The Chair: Thank you very much, Mr. Strahl, and thank you, Mr. Lepofsky.

Next we have Mr. Rogers.

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

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

Welcome to our guests today.

Ms. Walkus, and then Mr. Lepofsky, maybe you can make some comments, after the fact, to the question here.

We've heard from WestJet and Air Canada, from airlines, from airport personnel and from CATSA, who've all claimed they have some sort of assistance program in place. Yet, we've seen and heard the stories of mistreatment and neglect in your travels, some of which you've alluded to today.

Ms. Walkus, can you speak to the end-to-end service and potentially share where you think the gaps are in the airline industry?

• (1235)

Ms. Heather Walkus: In the airline industry, there are gaps right from the time you try to get online and book a ticket.

Most of us have to then go to the medical desk. Depending on who's on that desk and how they feel that day, there is no consistent way that the regulations are even looked at. They look at their own personal policies. That will determine whether you actually get a seat that you need. They predetermine everything, from whether you get the second seat for a guide dog to whether you get the second seat for a support person. By the way, they charge you taxes on that seat. They're not allowed to, but they do anyway. That needs to be resolved.

When you get to.... As David alluded to, every airport is different. Winnipeg now has a kiosk when you get to the curb. Unfortunately, it has a flat screen, so someone like me, who is blind, can't use it. At Vancouver airport, you call the main number, but it

doesn't have a code for accessibility so that you can just call someone. If you call the Ottawa airport, they do. They say, if you're coming to the curb, press 3 and we'll get somebody. Somebody actually answers the phone, talks to you, arranges what time you'll be there approximately by taxi, and they're there waiting for you. As David said, there's no consistency.

Not every airline that flies out of this country follows the rules of Canada, because they're all domestic. We need to change that. I don't think Global Affairs should make a decision on what is right for Canada, whether we're going to make changes so that those regulations are also for international.

I personally have spent four hours parked at a gate waiting for a flight. No one comes to see me. There's no way to contact anyone. I have to go to the washroom. I can't get something to eat. I cannot use any of the airport services. We're moved like luggage from one end to the other. Sometimes, as David said, there are four or five people involved.

The way they move us is really demeaning. Sometimes you have to climb up onto a golf cart that, physically, you may not be able to get up on. They put their hands on your hips and they push you up onto it. Then when you get to the other end, they might park you somewhere and you have to wait for a person to show up with a wheelchair. Then that person will take you to another section where they drop you off again.

It's this constant going through and not being able to even grab a bite to eat because most of the people helping you are not assigned from the airlines to help you. They actually have to run back.

Mr. Churence Rogers: Ms. Walkus, can I ask you if some of the training that's been alluded to by the airline people is improving the situation any?

Ms. Heather Walkus: I think it is. The attitude is different. I've noticed that in the last few months that I've travelled.

What I'm noticing, too, is that they're not empowered to make decisions on the ground when something comes up with a person with a disability. You say, "I need this", and they say that they don't know if they're allowed to take you to get something to eat. They have to check. They're not empowering their frontline people and making them feel like it's okay that they made a decision that was best for that customer.

Mr. Churence Rogers: Thank you very much.

Mr. Lepofsky, could you elaborate on some of the things I referred to there?

Mr. David Lepofsky: Sure.

With respect to training and all the other things Air Canada said, they're doing all this, but we are still having the same problems; ergo, we need substantially more legislated, enforced systemic solutions. That's the 19 that are in our brief.

Number two, let me say that with respect to the issue of training, here's another systemic problem. I've had somebody guiding me recently in an airport and I asked if this was their full-time job. They said no; they rotate them. Sometimes they're on the front desk or the check-in desk, or sometimes they're elsewhere. If they're trained, they may not actually put that training into effect until much later. If we train them, which we seem to have to do too often, they may get rotated somewhere else after. Why not have a team of people where this is what they do?

Again, do they need a retired lawyer and part-time law prof to tell them how to do this stuff? What are they paid for, seriously?

• (1240)

Mr. Churence Rogers: Ms. Walkus, I'll come back to you again.

You believe that companies like WestJet and Air Canada—which made \$2 billion last year, according to the CEO—should be investing in new aircraft and new technology to better serve Canadians and passengers with accessibility needs.

What kind of equipment or things have you thought about to promote to the companies?

Ms. Heather Walkus: One of the things is the flat screen in front of you, when you are seated in the airplane. I can't use it. It has 90% of the information about what's going on on that airplane. It isn't a talking screen, and it's flat. There are no buttons to push. I pay the same fare as any other customer on that plane, yet I can't use that.

The Chair: Thank you very much, Mr. Rogers, and thank you, Ms. Walkus.

[Translation]

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

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

I want to thank both witnesses for joining us today.

In their opening remarks, the Air Canada officials said that customers were dissatisfied in only 0.15% of cases, or had at least filed complaints about flights—

The Chair: Mr. Barsalou-Duval, I'm sorry to interrupt you. I just want to make sure that Ms. Walkus understands what you're saying.

[English]

Ms. Walkus, are you getting the translation?

Ms. Heather Walkus: Yes.

The Chair: Okay, I just wanted to confirm that.

[Translation]

Mr. Barsalou-Duval, you have the floor.

Mr. Xavier Barsalou-Duval: I was saying that, according to the Air Canada officials, complaints were filed in only 0.15% of situations that involved people with reduced mobility or disabilities.

Ms. Walkus and Mr. Lepofsky, you seem to be fairly regular users of this type of transportation.

Do difficult situations occur only 0.15% of the time when you fly, for example? How often do these situations actually occur, in your experience?

[English]

Ms. Heather Walkus: For me, it's 95% of the time. In fact, I can't remember one trip where there wasn't a major issue for me, either almost missing my flight or being parked somewhere. It's almost every time. Again, as David said, we are spending an inordinate amount of time training the staff.

[Translation]

Mr. Xavier Barsalou-Duval: Mr. Lepofsky, what are your thoughts?

[English]

Mr. David Lepofsky: I will tell you that every person with a disability I talk to about this—and I get lots of feedback in my leadership role with my coalition—has had problems. I don't mean all the time. I don't even know if it's most of the time. Whenever we get on a plane, we never know what we're in for, and we have to be ready for the worst.

Let's take that statistic, and let's tear it apart. Most of us, I think.... I can certainly say for myself that I have not filed complaints about 99.9% of the incidents. I wouldn't have time to eat, sleep, or do anything else if that's all I did.

Number two, I dare say most people don't know how or where to file complaints, even if they want to. That should be announced at the airports. That should be announced on every flight. That should be included on every ticket.

Number three, many people travel on our airlines but end up outside Canada. When they get back to their home country, if they've had a bad experience, do you think they're calling to find out which regulatory agency deals with the problems they've faced and how to file a complaint, and getting involved in some long legal process? I don't think so.

When Air Canada or any other airline comes up with those numbers, forgive me, but they're, in effect, trivializing what we're facing. In fairness, the CEO of Air Canada said he knows it's under-reported, and he knows there are more, so I want to be fair about that. However, to be able to say you're doing a good job, and these are the numbers, is to be shockingly out of touch with our experience. Either it's just a huge coincidence that the only people with disabilities who happen to talk to me about this are people who have had these problems, or it's a bigger problem. I leave it to you to decide which it is.

• (1245)

[*Translation*]

Mr. Xavier Barsalou-Duval: Thank you. That certainly answers my question.

Mr. Lepofsky, in your opening remarks, you spoke about the Canadian Transportation Agency, with which you seemed dissatisfied. Could you explain why? Have you ever dealt with the transportation agency?

You said that you don't necessarily file a complaint every time an unfortunate situation arises. What's the problem with the transportation agency's approach to handling complaints from people with disabilities?

[*English*]

Mr. David Lepofsky: The first problem is that there's no rapid solution. If you file a complaint, you'd better be ready for a very long process. To be honest, life's too short. We can't live that way and have a life.

The second problem is that they are too close to the airline industry. It's a classic example of the recurring problem of regulatory capture. It's not unique to the CTA. It's not unique to regulators in Canada, but it's obvious.

For example, if you read their regulations, which they passed in 2019—in our brief, we have a link to our critique of those regulations when they were under consideration—they really read like they were written by the airlines: “You have to do this, except....” or “You're required to do *x*, except....” There are all these loopholes that are bigger than the rights.

This is the final point. Even if you were to disagree—and I'm not saying you do, but if we assume for the moment that you disagree with everything I just said—the bottom line is that they are mandated to regulate airline accessibility. They've had that mandate for decades. It didn't come with the Accessible Canada Act; they've had it for decades. These problems have existed for decades. In significant ways, they have not gotten better, and in some ways, they've gotten worse. The regulator has failed to achieve the results that we are entitled to.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Mr. David Lepofsky: If you keep going back to them, I suspect you're going to get the same results.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Lepofsky.

[*Translation*]

Thank you, Mr. Barsalou-Duval.

[*English*]

Next we have Mr. Bachrach.

The floor is yours. You have six minutes.

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

I want to thank you again, Professor Lepofsky, for being here and for stating so clearly and adamantly what the problem is and the urgency of making progress on this.

I'm trying to decide where to start and how to add to this conversation with some questions. It seems, from listening to you, that the two themes that have come up are consistency and accountability.

I share your frustration, because this committee hears from many corporations that come here and tell us about their good works—by very well-meaning people—and it feels, after many meetings like that, like it's too great an expectation to expect these companies to proactively and voluntarily address these systemic issues.

Where does the buck stop when it comes to accountability?

Mr. David Lepofsky: Number one, it's with a regulator that's holding them accountable. Number two, it's with the CEOs. Number three—and I'm not partisan when I say this—it's with the right ministers and a government that have the authority to do it.

Excuse me, but a summit is a photo op. They may discuss things and they may come up with good stuff, but they don't need to wait two months for a summit to deal with the 19 issues that are in our brief. The 19 recommendations are not something that we somehow magically innovated and that they couldn't have thought of—like having people know what rights they have in order to get service from the airline. My theme, again, is that it's not rocket science. What we need is concrete action.

The other thing is with respect to the airlines and the CTA having consultative committees. That's great—they bring in some people with disabilities and they ask questions—but these are recurring problems. I'm not saying anything that people with disabilities—and, I believe, the airlines—haven't known about for years and decades. It's not that they need to hear more from us. They need to actually do something about it.

It would be wrong for this committee to recommend—and I'm not saying you're going to—and to think that the solution is to tell each airline to set up a disability advisory committee, so that we have to volunteer our services to these for-profit companies to keep telling them, one after the other, the exact same thing.

The solution is to legislate the requirements effectively and enforce them, and that's what we've listed in our brief.

• (1250)

Mr. Taylor Bachrach: It's effective legislation that's effectively enforced, and the buck stops with the minister who is responsible for the regulator and for setting the parameters within which the airlines operate.

Mr. David Lepofsky: And the CEOs.

Mr. Taylor Bachrach: And the CEOs.

Mr. David Lepofsky: Absolutely.

I'm not trying to be personal toward the CEOs of any airlines. There was one here today. I am sure they're all well intentioned—in the disability world, everybody is well intentioned toward us—but we keep facing the barriers.

The solution is having the CEO of each airline say to their airline, “No more passing people like a baton and no more seating people where they have to call out to strangers if they need to go to the bathroom. Let's give everybody a single number that they can call for help and it will actually get answered in five minutes and not an hour.” If they all do that, and if they say there are consequences down the line if these things don't happen, they can happen.

Mr. Taylor Bachrach: Mr. Lepofsky, why do you think the minister seems to be so reluctant to take that decisive action that you've just described?

Mr. David Lepofsky: I've never spoken to the minister. I've had no contact with him. I can't comment on it. My only reason for focusing on it is the news release yesterday about a summit.

I don't want to make it sound like whatever they do is wrong and all of that stuff. We're not like that. It's just that we need action, not photo ops. If they do a photo op and take action, we'll say yay. Don't get me wrong.

Mr. Taylor Bachrach: In your view, the government knows what needs to be done. They've had lots of time to do it.

In response to this litany of horrifying stories involving people with disabilities trying to travel, we heard testimony from the chief accessibility officer, and she very much echoed what you've said, which is that every single person she knows who has a disability and travels has had problems.

Given the severity of that situation, do you think that the government has all of the information that it needs to act? Is that what I'm hearing?

Mr. David Lepofsky: It does, as do the Canadian Transportation Agency and every airline. They have models from elsewhere in the world that they can turn to. Not everybody does it as badly as we do. That's why I dread entering Canadian airspace. Others do it better. I'm not saying they're all 100% either, but they're more reliable than here.

Mr. Taylor Bachrach: Who are the international leaders when it comes to the regulation and enforcement you're talking about?

Mr. David Lepofsky: I can't give you specific regulatory codes and those specifics. I'm not prepared for that today. I apologize.

I can just tell you that I don't recall a trip anywhere to the handful of countries I've been to where I've had to worry like I have to worry when I come here.

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

Thank you, Mr. Bachrach.

Next we have Mr. Muys.

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

Mr. Dan Muys: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you to both witnesses for their very passionate advocacy and some practical solutions that I know are being captured by the analysts as we look to the report on this.

I just want to pick up on the thread from my colleague Mr. Bachrach.

Mr. Lepofsky, you said right off the top that in the United States there's the Airline Passengers with Disabilities Bill of Rights. That's obviously something that we should look to. We don't want Canada to be an airspace that you dread.

The question was asked about what other jurisdictions are leaders on this. You weren't prepared for that today, but would it be something that you'd be able to table to the committee afterwards?

Mr. David Lepofsky: If we can find something, we'd be happy to provide it.

Mr. Dan Muys: Sure. Obviously, we should look to what are far better examples than what you're experiencing in Canada.

Mr. David Lepofsky: I mean, the CTA is paid to try to know this stuff. The federal government should have people who can come before you and give you this.

Mr. Dan Muys: That's fair.

Mr. David Lepofsky: You shouldn't need lay volunteers.

I'm not faulting you for asking; don't get me wrong. I'm delighted—

Mr. Dan Muys: No, I appreciate that.

To that very point, in terms of the airlines collaborating with advocates like you, I'll ask the same question of Ms. Walkus.

Ms. Walkus, you spoke about the fact that you talked to someone, and it was the first time they'd ever talked to someone with a disability. It's shocking that that's the case.

We've heard the case being made for the CTA to be a better regulator and for the minister at the summit two months from now to look at some concrete action. All of that is absolutely necessary. What can the airlines do in addition to working better with advocates like you to get some practical solutions?

• (1255)

Ms. Heather Walkus: Having advisers from the disability community is not the answer. One of the problems with advice is that they can take it or leave it. It doesn't empower the community of people with disabilities to bring forward the solutions or identify the barriers and expect them to change that. That doesn't happen. We've been doing this for decades and decades. This is not new.

All of these issues have been on the floor for every government since I remember back in the seventies. This has been sent to the next group, the next group, the next group. Here we are again, coming to you saying that not much has changed, because people are trying to find the least amount of effort, the lowest cost, to deal with what they perceive is the barrier. We are not at the table in power to say, no, that's not okay. We need to have an open discussion in public, as you're doing today, with us at the table asking them so they're on record with us. Otherwise the only place we have is the courts. Quite frankly, I'm 68 years old. Can we not just have a common-sense way of dealing with this?

The transition we need to make is... Where something stops, there's a gap to the next piece, whether that's legislation, regulation, or who is responsible for what. The biggest issue is that there are no teeth in it. A fine of \$100,000 to Air Canada is the cost of doing business. They're not going to change anything, and that money doesn't come back to the disability community. It goes in government coffers. How is that assisting us to move this forward? We are the poorest group, with the least amount of power, and yet every single case of movement forward has happened because the disability community has moved it forward.

With you, we can move it even further forward.

Thank you.

Mr. Dan Muys: Thank you, and I'll say you look far younger than 68.

Ms. Heather Walkus: Thank you.

Mr. Dan Muys: One thing that has been fairly consistent in your comments, as well as Mr. Lepofsky's, is the inconsistencies in the treatment at airports and airlines. Could you, in the remaining seconds, comment on how that can be remedied?

Ms. Heather Walkus: You have to have oversight with teeth.

Mr. David Lepofsky: You have to have specific rules. Again, there are inconsistencies, in part because people don't tell us where to go if we want to get curbside assistance or have one-stop shopping. They don't have that hotline to call when you're at the airport. If you're trying to get the airport to go to a higher level to solve a problem that the front desk person can't solve—because they don't have authority—you can't find anyone. You need that one-stop shopping phone number with somebody with authority to fix it. You need these to be announced regularly. I think that if airline staff and airport staff heard those announcements—"If you have a disability-related complaint, call this number"—it will wake people up a little more to say they should do better.

I want to emphasize this. I'm going to gamble that a lot of the frustration I'm describing would be echoed by flight attendants and ground staff, because when I've talked to them about it, they've echoed that they've seen the same problems we have and that they as individuals find it enormously frustrating.

The Chair: Thank you very much, Mr. Lepofsky, and thank you, Mr. Muys.

Next we have Mr. Iacono.

M. Iacono, the floor is yours for five minutes, please.

[*Translation*]

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

I want to thank the witnesses for joining us this morning.

I want to thank them for their very poignant remarks. It was also disturbing to hear them describe what they experienced on their journeys. It's unbelievable that, in 2024, passengers with accessibility needs can't get better service.

Mr. Lepofsky, you have been through a whole range of situations. I don't need to go into all your difficult experiences. I'm very disappointed to hear that they took place. I apologize on behalf of the government.

That said, can you share the simplest way to address this issue? Many measures should be taken. However, I would like you to identify a measure that could make a difference right now. You spoke of one-stop service. Would this be an ideal solution?

You said that you had 19 recommendations. Did you base them on all your travel experiences, both in Canada and abroad?

Could you elaborate on this?

• (1300)

[*English*]

Mr. David Lepofsky: Thank you.

I'll tell you that we designed those based on our research and on feedback that we've been getting from people. As a community coalition, we get feedback on barriers all the time. We're called by the media about stories and are asked to comment on them and so on. It's kind of an aggregation of that and just travelling and looking around and trying to figure out what works.

Of course, my own personal experience is provided. I gave you illustrations from my life, not because I'm the only game in town or in any way important, but because they will make it come alive for you in a way that I think is especially compelling.

We've just tried to apply common sense, like offering this idea that if it's really hard to get from the front door at Pearson terminal 1 all the way through this phalanx of obstacles over a long distance to find where the check-in desk is—and there are so many—why don't you just have an entrance right inside the door? It's something that Air Canada did, then undid, and then redid but limited it as to who can use it. Again, you shouldn't—

Mr. Angelo Iacono: Would that be the ideal to start off with?

Mr. David Lepofsky: That was just one example in a big airport. You might not need it in Ottawa, because it's a shorter distance to the counter, but in a bigger airport that would be an illustration of something that's good.

There isn't one solution alone, but what I will tell you about the 19 in our brief.... The one that I realize would require the most dramatic move is removing the accessibility mandate from the CTA and creating a new agency to deal with it. I realize that's a bigger fish to fry, but the other things in there are all, I'd propose, quite easy to do, and it's not just one of them—

Mr. Angelo Iacono: Thank you, Professor.

Just before my time is up, is it possible for you to share what those 19 recommendations are?

Mr. David Lepofsky: Yes. They're in the brief that we filed with you.

Mr. Angelo Iacono: Okay. In it, do you have the examples of where you picked them up, those 19 recommendations?

Mr. David Lepofsky: We just invented them.

Mr. Angelo Iacono: No, no. I'm sure you didn't invent them—

Mr. David Lepofsky: No, but we explain them.

Mr. Angelo Iacono: Is there a reference to where this is being done today so that we have a better picture of where to go to see how these practices are being done?

Mr. David Lepofsky: No, there isn't. We can look to see whether we can do that. If we can, we will.

Mr. Angelo Iacono: Thank you.

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

Thank you, Mr. Lepofsky.

[*Translation*]

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

Mr. Xavier Barsalou-Duval: Thank you, Mr. Chair. I'll build on this topic.

Mr. Lepofsky, in your opening remarks, you said that the legislation should include rights for people with reduced mobility, as is the case in the United States. In Canada, there have been air passenger rights regulations since 2019.

What's the difference between the legal situation in the United States and the legal situation here? If things are better over there, how can things be changed here?

[*English*]

Mr. David Lepofsky: We actually quote it, I believe, in our brief. There's just a short list of categorical, clear rights. Now, if we were writing one for Canada—if you, this committee, or the government decided to draft one—we might add to it and vary it. We don't need to just carbon-copy it. We should take into account some of the problems that this committee has seen. The idea of having that bill of rights, having it be enforceable, having a hotline and having it mandatorily notified to all passengers when they book a ticket with the airline and so on would help to move things forward.

It's not hard. It shouldn't be full of the feast of loopholes in the CTA's 2019 regulations. That's what I'd suggest.

• (1305)

[*Translation*]

Mr. Xavier Barsalou-Duval: If I understand your proposal correctly, it's a list of rights guaranteed to people. It isn't, for example, a bunch of complicated regulations, which can be full of loopholes.

In other words, a better result is achieved by establishing simple rights subject to broad interpretation. That sounds a bit like broad principles.

Is that right?

[*English*]

Mr. David Lepofsky: Yes.

Well, you know, it doesn't even have to be principles. “The airline shall tell passengers with disabilities what services are available and what number to reach them at.” That's not a principle. It's just a clear direction. It doesn't have to be kind of lofty and aspirational. It can be concrete entitlement.

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

[*Translation*]

Thank you, Mr. Barsalou-Duval.

[*English*]

Finally, for today, we have Mr. Bachrach.

Mr. Bachrach, the floor is yours. You have two and a half minutes. Go ahead, please.

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

Mr. Lepofsky, you started by recognizing the law students at Western who've contributed to this work. I want to take a quick moment to recognize my staff, especially Margaret Crew for her work. I understand that you were in touch with her in preparation for today's meeting.

It seems as though one of the aspects we're talking about is trying to define the scope and the scale of the problem we face. While we could take actions, such as the ones you've recommended, in the absence of precise and accurate data, it strikes me that it would be useful to be able to track progress over time. To do that, we need better information about how the problem is doing.

Is that a fair assumption? If it is, what would you recommend in terms of data collection and reporting so that we can have a good sense of whether progress is being made on this issue?

Mr. David Lepofsky: Yes, it's a good idea.

We don't need to wait for data to know these are problems. We don't need to wait to see how many times they've failed to announce pre-boarding, as they did on my flight last night, to know that we need a measure to ensure they announce pre-boarding.

However, there are these measures. Number one is to have secret shoppers, not as part of the airline but as part of an independent regulator that is auditing on site what's going on. Number two is to require that the airlines file with the regulator all the complaints they receive. They could, of course, be anonymized. Number three is to require the airlines and airports, as I said earlier, to publicly announce a simple, easy-to-access phone number, as well as an email address and a mailing address to register complaints, because we'll hear from more people if we tell them in real time where they can do that.

If all those things are provided to the airlines, not just some statistics but what the complaints are.... In fairness to the airlines,

just because someone complains, that doesn't mean those are the facts, but you could at least look at them to see what kind of recurring patterns you see. If you get all those complaints—even if you assume that half of them are inaccurate, but you still see a huge trend—that tells you where you need to take regulatory action.

Thank you.

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

Thank you, Ms. Walkus and Mr. Lepofsky, for being here and for sharing your expertise and your testimony with us. I'd like to thank you on behalf of this committee for your steadfast advocacy and service to Canadians with disabilities.

That concludes our testimony for today. This meeting is adjourned.

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