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6 November 2018

Journalistic Article

No, me first.

Imagine getting prepared to travel to a new extravagant place for a small family getaway. You have put 10 times more thought into all the details of your trip just to make sure every single aspect of the trip is perfect. You are planning on getting on a plane in less than a week, but then all of a sudden, a flood of paperwork starts taking over your last minute plans. One moment you’re packing items in your suitcase, and then the next your filing out every sheet of paper under the sun because you have a disability. You realize you need to bring your service animal along with you because you have epilepsy and there is a chance you could have a seizure on the plane. Or you remember that there are going to be lines at the amusement park you’re going to, and your son with Autism may have a meltdown because he is standing still for too long. Traveling places with a disability is hard enough, but when there have been people that have abused the system, it makes your vacation plans that much harder. If we stop to look at this while in the shoes of someone who actually struggles with these handicaps, we might realize that the complaining and abuse of the rules that is becoming more common is absolutely absurd and uncalled for.

According to the [Americans with Disabilities Act](https://adata.org/faq/what-definition-disability-under-ada) (ADA), “a person with a disability is a person who has a physical or mental impairment that substantially limits one or more major life activity.” This means that the condition limits a person’s movements, senses, or activities. When it comes to traveling, someone that has a disability sometimes has to jump through hoops just to have an enjoyable time like someone who doesn’t have one. There is often times many different forms of paperwork that have to be complete for the smallest things. Unfortunately, since people with no disabilities have benefitted themselves for so long, people that are actually travelling with them have a much harder time.

One of the biggest reasons behind all of it is because so many other people were taking advantage of the benefits, that the people that actually need them have to go through more work. An [emotional support animal](https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC5486328/), ESA, is an “animal of any species that provides emotional support and/or therapeutic benefit to an individual with a verifiable mental or psychiatric disability.” Since there is no nationwide standard certification or registration associated with this, people often times don’t even pay a fee for the online services. When it comes to air travel, airlines have had to [crack down](https://abcnews.go.com/US/airlines-crack-emotional-support-animals-plane-cabins/story?id=56791124) on emotional support animals because there was a 57 percent increase within the years of 2016 and 2017. The increase mainly came from “the availability of false emotional support animal credentials” that happen online, which help enable people that do not truly need animal assistance to abuse the rules and surpass all airline policies for animals. While this is mainly more of an issue with ESAs, Service Animals are still animals and walking through an airport with them raises questions sometimes. The Air Carrier Access Act protects the rights of passengers with disabilities, and it encompasses both service dogs and ESAs with rules and regulations that a person with a disability must follow to have the animal on the plane. And since there aren’t Federal regulations on public access of therapy dogs and people are abusing the system, this has “caused many airlines to make a change to their [animal travel policies](https://abcnews.go.com/US/airlines-crack-emotional-support-animals-plane-cabins/story?id=56791124).” For example, United Airlines has updated their policy, requiring “customers to provide confirmation that the animal can properly behave in public and provide a health and vaccination form signed by the animal’s veterinarian,” and JetBlue has updated their policy, “requiring customers to submit advanced notification and documentation when traveling with an emotional support of psychiatric service animal.” All the paperwork is not hard and getting the documentation is not difficult if it truly is a service animal, but it is the point that this has been abused so often that airlines are having to change their policies to combat it. Then in return, the people that actually need to have the animals are left getting all of it together to fly. Even if hit with an emergency, if the airline needs advanced notification of your service animal, one may not be able to get on the quickest flight out. It makes it almost nearly impossible if given a horrible circumstance to be treated just like everyone else. In an article off [ABC News](https://abcnews.go.com/US/airlines-crack-emotional-support-animals-plane-cabins/story?id=56791124), it is stated that while airlines are continuously updating their policies, “an alternative solution may be to get rid of them altogether.” The biggest issue with that, is that if someone needs an animal to function as a human, there might be a time in the future where they will not be allowed [to ride on a plane at all](https://www.transportation.gov/individuals/aviation-consumer-protection/traveling-disability).

Two of the most traveled to places in the world are Walt Disney World in Orlando, Florida and Disneyland in Anaheim, California. As they are both amusement parks with different resorts attached, there are many different things they have to provide guests with, especially those that need accommodations for their disabilities. On the [Walt Disney World website](https://disneyworld.disney.go.com/faq/guests-with-disabilities/), there is a frequently asked questions section that focuses mainly on questions pertaining to disability accommodations. The [website](https://disneyworld.disney.go.com/faq/guests-with-disabilities/disabilities-magic-kingdom/) states that “Walt Disney World Resort theme parks provide numerous accommodations for guests with [mobility disabilities](https://disneyworld.disney.go.com/guest-services/mobility-disabilities/), [guests with visual disabilities](https://disneyworld.disney.go.com/guest-services/visual-disability-services/), and [guests with hearing disabilities](https://disneyworld.disney.go.com/guest-services/hearing-disabilities-services/).” There are people that come to these parks that need to use a wheelchair to get around, that have a service animal they need to take with them everywhere or need assistive listening systems to be able to hear what is going on around them. While some of the accommodations have been abused, Disney has tried to shut it down, but it has made some things a bit more difficult. After an interview with Mary Canter, a full-time substitute teacher and part-time Disney Vacation Planner, different accommodations were brought to light with a better understanding. One of the most used accommodations is the [Disney Parks Disability Access Service Cards](https://disneyparks.disney.go.com/blog/disney-parks-disability-access-service-card-fact-sheet/), which was previously known as the Guest Assistance Card. The Guest Assistance Card program provided “access to attractions for guests with disabilities,” but was often times abused, and the use of the cards were “growing at an alarming rate.” Mrs. Canter shared that she has a daughter with Epilepsy, so as an avid Disney traveler herself, her family has gotten the Guest Assistance Card in the past and will request a Disability Access Service Card when they travel back again in December. When asked if she knew what kind of abuse was happening with the Guest Assistance Cards, Mrs. Canter shared an example that many families have used in the past. There used to be a website that guests coming to Walt Disney World would look on, where elderly folks around the area would, “in lack of better terms, sell themselves to families. They would come with the family to the Guest Relations desk at the park and say they were a member of the family and needed a Guest Assistance Card to accommodate them in their wheelchair.” With the Guest Assistance Card, the family would have front of the line access to the rides, being able to almost walk right on to any attraction they wanted to. Mrs. Canter understands why it was so easy for guests to acquire these cards, yet the abuse that goes on is demeaning to those that actually need the card. Mrs. Canter shared how Disney has changed many of their queue lines to accommodate wheelchairs, so the main purpose the [Disability Access Service](https://disneyparks.disney.go.com/blog/disney-parks-disability-access-service-card-fact-sheet/) is to “accommodate guests who aren’t able to wait in a conventional queue environment due to a disability (including non-apparent disabilities).” Mrs. Canter shared that the most efficient way to acquire a Disability Access Service Card is to bring documentation from a doctor, not that it is necessary, but it leads to less hassle and helps in the registration process to get the card. To ensure that the program is not too abused, Disney is also making guests have their pictures taken, so they know exactly who is using the service card. On [Disney’s website](https://disneyparks.disney.go.com/blog/disney-parks-disability-access-service-card-fact-sheet/), it states that they are modifying the “current Guest Assistance Card program so it can continue to serve the guests who truly need it. The new program is designed to provide the special experience guests have come to expect from Disney.”

While the new program that Disney is providing will be more efficient, it is upsetting that guests have abused the previous program so horribly that they had to modify the program completely. One of the goals of the Disney Parks is to provide a “welcoming and inclusive environment” that can be accessible to all guests, yet it can feel as though the families that do have someone with a disability have to almost prove that they have one. For a family with a young child that has Autism, the disability may look non-apparent, but it is there and the easiest way for a family to prove that is to provide documentation. While it is not the only way to receive the accommodating services, it does make it easier on the family. It is just unfortunate that so many people have lied about having a disability just to have an easier time.

When going off to travel, everyone needs to book a place to stay in while at their destination. As it does not seem like a huge deal for most people, for someone that has a disability that has them in a wheelchair, they need to be in a room that is wheelchair accessible. Since today is much more technology advanced, most room reservations are done online through the hotel’s website. When booking a room, an “Accessible Room” is always an option, however there is no regulation as to whether or not someone can book that type of room even when they don’t necessarily need it. Through the Health Insurance Portability and Accounting Act of 1996 (HIPAA), hotels cannot legally ask for medical information, as it is a [US law](https://www.medicinenet.com/script/main/art.asp?articlekey=31785) “designed to provide privacy standards to protect patients’ medical record and other health information.” With that being said, [even with Disney](https://disneyworld.disney.go.com/faq/technical-help/special-needs-booking/), the only thing that needs to be done is to filter the rooms by “Accessible Rooms” and book the vacation online. While Disney has many different Resorts, accommodating every guest that needs an accessible room is not too difficult, but in other places, hotels and resorts may only have a few rooms that are handicap accessible. For example, a resort in Williamsburg, Virginia only has six rooms in the entire resort that is easily wheelchair accessible. The issue with a situation like this, is by booking the rooms online, there is no guarantee that if you need a wheelchair accessible room that you will get one. Even if reserving a lower level unit, there may still be stairs that either lead up or down to the room you have reserved. There are unfortunately not many ways to modify this without breaking HIPAA, except making more rooms available, or providing an alternative, like a ramp. So, depending on the destination, someone with a disability may have to change travel plans to make sure that all their needs are met, and accommodations are made.

One of the biggest issues when it comes a disability, whether traveling or not, is the acceptance of a disability that may not be seen. These disabilities are often known as [“Invisible Disabilities,”](https://invisibledisabilities.org/ida-books-pamphlets/invisibleawareness/lookscanbedeceiving/) as they are internal or mental, and not as much physical. From a website that speaks more in depth about invisible disabilities, it states that “in 1997, there were 26 million Americans considered to have a severe disability and only 7 million of them use a wheelchair, cane, crutches, or walker.” This is important to understand that not every disability is going to be something someone can physically see. It is also important not to pass judgement, as one could not know exactly what is happening. Mrs. Canter shared in her interview that “traveling with someone with a disability is difficult and traveling with a child with a disability can be even more difficult.” She explained in her interview, when asked about her daughter with Epilepsy, an incident that occurred back in 2006. On the way to Animal Kingdom at Walt Disney World, Mrs. Canter and her family were riding on a Disney Transportation Bus that was full, and the only room left was to stand. While the ride from the resort to the park was going to be about 20 minutes, no one was willing to give up their seats. Mrs. Canter’s described the event as “one minute she was standing next to my husband, leaning on him, and the next we see her start to collapse onto the floor of the bus. That was when I knew she was having a seizure.” Her husband tried to get people to back up as much as possible, but as the bus was so full, it was much more difficult than expected. “The worse part, people just sat and stared at her, no one asked if they could help. Some people even snarled and spoke under their breath about how they were upset they were going to be late to the park.” Mrs. Canter agreed that traveling with an invisible disability can be very difficult, and that is mostly because people don’t understand it, because they don’t see it.

“People tend to believe what they see; and if it can’t be seen, it simply doesn’t exist.” This quote is from [Invisible Disabilities](https://invisibledisabilities.org/ida-books-pamphlets/invisibleawareness/lookscanbedeceiving/); however it can be used to explain all disabilities. For those that haven’t been in their shoes, no one can completely understand what a person with a disability has to go through on a daily basis. Traveling to places around the world should be something all people can look forward to, not be turned off because of the work that has to be put in. By people abusing the system or receiving benefits they don’t deserve, people that actually need the assistance cannot easily obtain it, and the extravagant getaways get much more difficult to plan for.