

## Flying fair every step of the way

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Flying could soon become a more comfortable and cheaper experience for passengers with disability or reduced mobility.

New guidelines issued by the Director General of Civil Aviation (DGCA) this week state that when a passenger with disability or reduced mobility has bought a ticket it is "obligatory" on the part of the airline to ensure he/she reaches not only the aircraft but also the arrival lounge exit without incurring any further expenditure.

Currently such passengers incur expenditure of Rs 200 for the wheelchair and Rs 2,500 for use of the ambulift for each journey on private airlines.

### IMMEDIATE EFFECT

Most of the guidelines come into effect immediately and will apply on both domestic and international airlines.

Persons with disabilities not holding any certificate shall also be provided necessary assistance as well as aids such as wheelchairs and ambulifts among others. "In such cases during ticketing or check-in the individual's degree of disability and his needs for assistance may be confirmed. Airlines shall not refuse carriage in such cases," the DGCA has said.

The airlines have been given July 31 as the cut off before when they shall have narrow aisle chairs which can move around in the aircraft cabin and be used for boarding and disembarking of passengers not travelling on stretchers. Currently most flights do not carry such chairs, thereby confining the passenger to the seat.

### ONLINE FORM

"It is most upsetting when an airline does not have an aisle chair to transfer a wheelchair passenger to his or her seat. I have experienced it in a private airline and complained about it," says Ms Sminu Jindal, Managing Director, Jindal SAW, who is also founder of disability NGO Svayam which advocates access for people with disabilities.

The DGCA has also asked airlines to incorporate appropriate provisions in the online form for booking tickets so that all the facilities required by these passengers are made available to them at the time of check-in. Right now such passengers have to request for the wheelchair after reaching the airport.

To ensure that these passengers do not face any problems at airports, the DGCA has asked airlines to make advance arrangement with other agencies such as airport management to ensure that their movement within the airports is not restricted.

### MORE CLARITY REQUIRED

"We are happy that these issues are being addressed by fresh guidelines. But we want to warn that even after the guidelines were issued for the first time by DGCA in May 2008, many airlines did not implement them, causing passengers like us grave inconvenience. Even now the issue of 'Fit to Fly' certificates is hanging fire. Several international airlines and booking agents are insisting on this certificate before issuing the ticket," said Mr Rajiv Rajan, Co-ordinator of the Disability Legislation Unit (South), a project of Vidya Sagar, Chennai. DLU had initiated the campaign to bring about these changes in June 2007.

Ms Meenakshi Balasubramanian, assistant co-ordinator of DLU, points out that certain sections of the new provisions lack clarity. "Who will decide on the individual's degree of disability? Will you take the passenger's word or will the airline insist on a panel assessing it at the airport," she asks

### GOVT MORE SENSITIVE

Ms Jindal, however, admits that she finds that the Government has been more sensitive to change than the private airlines. But implementation of the guidelines has been an issue. "When the DGCA first passed these rules in 2008, there was hardly any implementation by private airlines and we continued to