

'Crawling to my seat': Some travel experiences can be avoided with better technology

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"People who don't use the equipment just don't realize how important it is for individuals," a wheelchair user told USA TODAY.

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— Airports and other transportation services have their own apps, as do the airlines, which means information is scattered across different sources.

The worst time at an airport for Paul Choquette is waiting at the gate before takeoff.

Choquette, 57, has used a [wheelchair](#) since he was 4 following a car accident. His process for boarding a plane involves riding his chair right up to the door, then transferring to an aisle chair to find his seat while his wheelchair is stowed under the plane.

But waiting for that assistance to arrive can create stress. Choquette recalls one flight from Newark, New Jersey, to Stockholm during which airport workers couldn't find an aisle chair to help him board his flight.

"I ended up actually getting on the plane in my wheelchair—to the consternation of the staff—and going as far down the business class aisle that I could, and then basically getting on the floor and crawling to my seat," said Choquette during an interview with USA TODAY.

On his return flight from Stockholm, Choquette's wheelchair had been sent to baggage claim instead of waiting for him by the plane door. So, Choquette was pushed on what he described as a "recliner on wheels" to get to his wheelchair.

Experiences like these are a big reason why he wants better technology to track information, such as the location of wheelchairs and when assistance for disabled travelers might arrive.

"When you order food, you can see the little dot coming closer to your house," he said. "Same kind of thing. If you could have something where they could see, is the person coming or are they in the [airport](#)?"

Smartphones and technology have alleviated some of the stress of transportation for disabled travelers, from apps for people with visual or cognitive impairments to websites rating locations based on their accessibility.

But there could be better tech to make the experience smoother.

'The automated check-in machines are terrible'

Lucy Greco, a web accessibility evangelist with the University of California, Berkeley, said that while airports have made strides on indoor navigation technology and digital boarding passes, there are struggles finding accessible solutions to processes from filling out forms for service animals to using check-in kiosks at airports.

"The automated check-in machines are terrible," said Greco. "They're supposed to be accessible by now. The FTA rule said they should be accessible by now, but I don't know of anybody who's used one independently to this day."

Airports and other [transportation services](#) have their own apps, as do the airlines, which means information is scattered across different sources. For example, travelers might have a boarding pass on their JetBlue app, while other important documents are held on a separate Mobile Passport Control or Smart Traveler government app.

"There's just not very much consistency around one single sign-in for these types of apps, especially around disability and travel," said Betsy Furler, founder of the website For All Abilities, which helps businesses

support employees with disabilities.

Greco said she'd like to see airports maintain better digital signage, where airports can send a push notification to a disabled [traveler](#) through a universal app if they enter a new terminal, details on departures or arrivals, or where to find ground transportation.

When traveling by plane, Choquette relies on the apps from airlines as well as FlightAware for tracking his flight. If he flies American Airlines, he'll use their feature for tracking checked luggage to keep tabs on his wheelchair.

Choquette would like to see better tools in [airports](#) for tracking wheelchairs or other assistive devices travelers must check in, as well as digital confirmations for assistive services to "at least feel better about knowing that you're going to be able to get on the plane OK."

"I think sometimes ... people who don't use the equipment just don't realize how important it is for individuals," he said.

Top apps for disabled travelers

While some [wheelchair users](#) and those who need mobility equipment often opt for tile trackers, there is a small array of apps that can make traveling with disabilities a little more seamless. Among some of the apps Furler said can help travelers with disabilities:

Microsoft Seeing AI

The Microsoft app for people with visual or cognitive impairments uses the smartphone camera to read and recognize what it views. When held in front of short text, the app will read back what it sees. It can also

describe scenes and people, and recognize types of currency.

"When you're in a foreign country, the money is confusing to all of us," said Furler. "And it's really confusing for someone with a disability or someone who can't see it very well."

Be My Eyes

This app for iOS and Android uses crowdsourcing to help users with blind and low-vision people. More than 5 million volunteers are available to assist users through a live video call to help with tasks like reading signs or seeking directions.

Access Now

The website and app map out information on locations, providing details on the level of accessibility. You can search for specific locations and rate them based on their accessibility.

Google Maps

Two years ago, the popular navigation app introduced an Accessible Places feature so users can more easily see which destinations are wheelchair accessible.

Google Keep and Apple Notes

Furler suggests travelers consider using note-keeping apps like Google Keep for Android or Apple's Notes app to keep all their necessary documents in one place on their smartphone. "It's all in there so every single thing is in one app that they can easily access and pull up."

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