



Tech Executive  
Leadership Initiative

## POLICY BRIEF

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# Traveler Dedicated Routing System to Support Travelers with Special Accommodations

*As part of their 10-week policy training, the leaders of the Tech Executive Leadership Initiative spent 6 weeks working on a real-world government challenge. In teams of 4-5, the leaders proposed ideas to help the Department of Homeland Security's [Transportation Security Administration](#) (TSA) improve the TSA security checkpoint experience for airline travelers. Each team narrowed its focus to a specific part of the problem, conducted research, and developed solutions. Below is an overview of one team's solution: increasing support for travelers needing special accommodations in the security checkpoint process.*

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

To improve the screening experience for special accommodations travelers, we propose that the Transportation Security Administration (TSA) pilot an initiative called the Traveler Dedicated Routing System (TDRS). TDRS would implement changes to airline kiosk and counter check-in processes to enable special accommodations travelers to more easily be identified and assisted. The goal of the pilot would be to improve the airport security process by streamlining the screening experience for these travelers while improving the overall flow of all travelers through airport security checkpoints.

## BACKGROUND

Our team was tasked with looking into how TSA can improve the traveler experience at airport security checkpoints. The agency has already embraced numerous enhancements to its technology and protocols to improve the security screening process.<sup>1</sup> Beyond existing programs like [TSA PreCheck](#) and services offered by [CLEAR](#), TSA is testing additional improvements, including new scanning technology, biometric identification, and reserved times (aka “fast pass”) for security screening. If successfully im-

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plemented, these solutions promise to speed security screening for the general population of air travelers.

Outside of the general population are a variety of travelers that TSA Customer Service has identified as calling for special accommodations when passing through a security checkpoint.<sup>2</sup> These include passengers with disabilities or medical conditions, those traveling with medicines, those with religious items, and travelers who have difficulty communicating in English, among others. A Government Accountability Office study has shown that these travelers often have negative experiences in the security screening process.<sup>3</sup> On peak travel days, in part because of these travelers, the wait for all passengers increases.<sup>4</sup>

To aid these passengers today, TSA provides a website form called [TSA Cares](#), where travelers can request additional help in advance of their airport arrival. Unfortunately, the form and process are not well used by those who could benefit. Less than 1 in 10,000 travelers used TSA Cares in 2022.<sup>5</sup>

When special accommodations travelers do not use TSA Cares, they go through the same queuing process as all other passengers. TSA then discovers their special needs in an ad hoc manner once they reach the screening checkpoint, which can generate confusion and delay.<sup>6</sup>

## **RECOMMENDATION**

We propose to pilot a Traveler Dedicated Routing System (TDRS), which would increase in-airport support for special accommodations travelers who have not requested assistance in advance through TSA Cares. By operating through straightforward enhancements of existing procedures, TDRS can provide increased support for these travelers with minimal disruption to current airport and TSA operations.

We recommend focusing on special accommodations travelers to improve the security screening process for all passengers, since this is an area that has drawn numerous traveler complaints but is not being addressed by other TSA pilot proposals.

TDRS would identify these travelers as part of the check-in process and then give them the extra support they need at the airport.<sup>7</sup> More specifically, TDRS would allow travelers to self-identify as needing special accommodations as part of the check-in process by adding new screens to airline kiosks and counter check-in processes. Based on the travelers' self-identification, new special

codes (similar to the SSSS code but with different semantics) would be added to their boarding passes. Below are a sample additional screen for an airport check-in kiosk (Figure 1) and a sample boarding pass (Figure 2):

The screenshot shows the AmericaAir logo at the top left. Below it is the heading "ADDITIONAL ACCOMMODATION REQUESTS (Select one or more if needed)". The screen is divided into several sections with checkboxes:

- TRAVELING WITH YOUTH**
  - Traveling with children under 12
  - Traveling with infants, children under 8
- SPECIAL ASSISTANCE NEEDS**
  - Escort (visual/hearing impaired)
  - Mobility support
  - Difficulty standing or waiting in line
  - Difficulty following instructions
  - Mobility limitations (difficulty standing, walking)
  - Use of mobility aids or support devices
  - Traveling with a service animal
- SPECIAL SCANNING**
  - Transporting medically necessary liquids, gels, aerosols over 3.4oz
  - Holiday or special packages
- SPECIAL EQUIPMENT**
  - Crutches/wheelchair/car seat
  - Cultural, sacred items and/or regalia
  - Internal/external devices or other concerns that may effect screening
- ADDITIONAL CONSIDERATIONS**
  - Difficulty understanding and communicating in English
  - Religious or cultural items
  - Religious headwear or garments
  - Screening for transgender / gender diverse persons

A red "Continue" button with a right-pointing arrow is located at the bottom right of the screen.

Figure 1: Sample Enhanced Passenger Check-in Screen

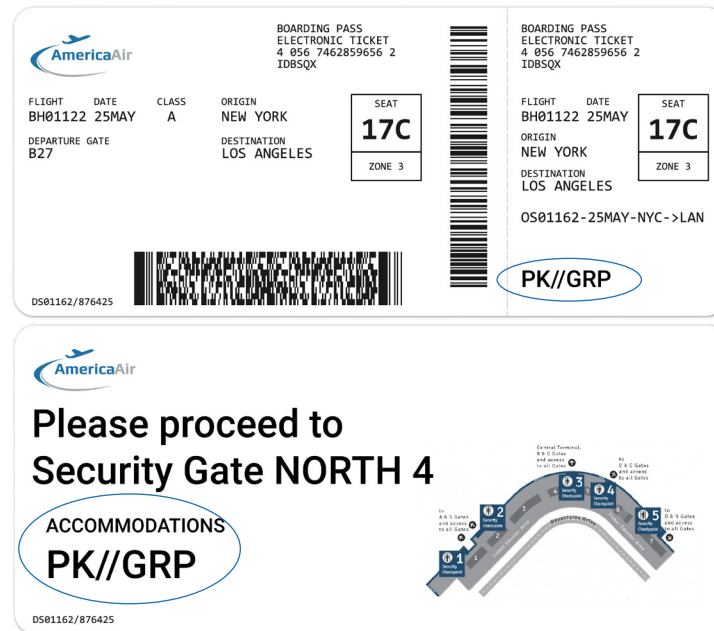


Figure 2: Sample Enhanced Paper Boarding Passes displaying sample TDRS codes.

At the end of the check-in, the enhanced kiosk screen or counter check-in agent would instruct special accommodations travelers to head to a dedicated queuing area for passengers who need additional support. This queue would be staffed by TSA passenger support specialists (officers who have received specific training on how to assist special accommodations passengers) to assist the travelers through the screening process as needed.<sup>8</sup> Similar to TSA PreCheck, the queue would also have appropriate signage to help travelers find it.

Success of the pilot would be gauged via existing TSA metrics (customer complaints and wait times data) as well as qualitative feedback from participating TSA agents and local airport and airline staff. Beyond improvements in customer experience metrics, this data would enable the agency to learn what levels of additional TSA staffing are needed, given a variety of air travel traffic levels and use of the system. This would help TSA, in coordination with airlines and airports, identify the costs and benefits of this system.

Following a successful pilot, we recommend that TSA consider additionally deploying a real-time, dynamic routing system that would queue passengers needing special accommodations to the lane best able to accommodate them.

## OPERATIONALIZATION

We estimate that a 6-month pilot program (3 months to build and 3 months for operation and assessment) would cost about \$93,200. Following a successful Phase 1, we recommend that TSA consider implementing Phase 2 of this project, deploying a real-time, dynamic routing system that would queue or redirect passengers needing special accommodations to the lane or support area best able to accommodate their needs.

*For further details on the recommendations above and steps to move forward, please see:*

- ▶ Our [operational plan](#), which offers additional information on operation of the pilot proposal and estimated budget.
- ▶ A [video walkthrough](#) of how TDRS would improve the traveler experience.



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### ENDNOTES

1 See Michelle Baran, “Getting Through TSA Will Be Easier and Quicker in 2023 — Here’s Why,” *Afar*, December 22, 2022, <https://www.afar.com/magazine/getting-through-tsa-will-soon-be-easier-and-quicker-heres-why>, which outlines a number of pilot programs running through TSA’s Innovation Task Force in 2023.

2 For a full set of situations, see “Special Procedures: Disabilities and Medical Conditions,” Transportation Security Administration, accessed May 22, 2023, <https://www.tsa.gov/travel/special-procedures>.

3 Government Accountability Office, *Aviation Security: TSA Should Assess Potential for Discrimination and Better Inform Passengers of the Complaint Process*, November 2022, <https://www.gao.gov/assets/gao-23-105201.pdf>.

4 Interview with TSA employee, February 15, 2023.

5 TSA reports 46,000 uses of TSA Cares (data shared from TSA Operations) in 2022 [amid 736 million screens](#) overall. While promoting this form more effectively to travelers could help with usage, a healthy percentage of travelers will not think of their needs until closer to their departure. This ultimately limits the effectiveness of the TSA Cares program to those who plan in advance.

6 Interviews with TSA employees, February 15 and February 22, 2023.

7 This is analogous to programs that airlines run to allow travelers who self-identify as “passengers with small children or those needing extra time” to board early. In this case, they may or may not get processed more quickly, but there is a process designed for them.

8 For what passenger support specialists do today, see Deborah Owens, “TSA on the Job: Passenger Support Specialist,” TSA blog, March 8, 2019, <https://www.tsa.gov/blog/2019/03/08/tsa-job-passenger-support-specialist>.

### ABOUT TELI

This project was completed as part of the Tech Executive Leadership Initiative (TELI), a 10-week skills-building initiative that prepares experienced technology leaders to engage effectively with public sector challenges. Learn more at [aspentechpolicyhub.org/teli](https://aspentechpolicyhub.org/teli)



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