

Dementia Friendly Airports



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This Dementia Friendly America Sector Guide is designed for airport professionals, including leadership, frontline staff, TSA/security personnel, airline representatives, vendors, volunteers and other customer-facing services involved in the travel experience. It offers practical strategies to support a safer and more comfortable travel experience for people living with dementia and those accompanying them.

DEMENTIA FRIENDLY AIRPORTS

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UNDERSTANDING DEMENTIA IN AIRPORT SETTINGS

Dementia is a general term for changes in memory and thinking abilities that interfere with daily life. Alzheimer's disease is the most common cause, but there are many forms of dementia. It is not a normal part of aging and can affect memory, reasoning, communication and behavior.

Many travelers living with dementia also experience changes in mobility, hearing or vision, which may affect how they navigate airport environments. Recognizing how these challenges may appear in an airport setting helps staff and volunteers respond with patience, understanding and respect.

Symptom	How It May Appear at the Airport
Memory loss that disrupts daily life	Forgets where they are traveling, where the gate or restroom is located or repeats questions to staff.
Challenges with planning or problem-solving	Difficulty using self-check kiosks, reading monitors or locating the ticket counter.
Difficulty completing familiar tasks	Trouble managing luggage, travel documents or payment transactions.
Confusion with time or place	Wanders from the gate, misses a flight or becomes separated from travel companions.
Trouble understanding visual information or directions	Difficulty reading signage, following directions or navigating unfamiliar spaces.
Changes in communication	Trouble asking questions, expressing needs or matching a boarding pass to flight information screens.
Misplacing items	Leaves ID, bags, or mobility devices at checkpoints, seating areas or restrooms.
Changes in judgment	May enter restricted areas, cut in line, take items without paying or trust strangers inappropriately.
Withdrawal from social interaction	Appears disengaged or does not respond to staff or announcements.
Changes in mood or personality	Becomes anxious, agitated, overwhelmed or unusually friendly in noisy or crowded areas.

COMMUNICATING WITH TRAVELERS LIVING WITH DEMENTIA

Simple, respectful communication supports comfort, confidence and understanding:

- Speak directly to the person living with dementia and support their dignity and independence.
- Use a calm, friendly tone and short, clear sentences.
- Ask one question or give one direction at a time, allow extra time for responses and avoid rushing.
- Approach from the front and introduce yourself by name and role.
- Use gestures, visual aids, or reassurance when helpful.
- Avoid correcting, arguing, or speaking in a childlike manner.
- If a traveler appears overwhelmed or distressed, reduce distractions, move to a quieter area when possible and keep care partners or companions nearby.

CREATING A SUPPORTIVE PHYSICAL ENVIRONMENT

Airport design can support people living with dementia in navigating more easily:

- Use clear, high-contrast signage with consistent icons and colors.
- Use visual landmarks and clearly marketed routes to help travelers navigate the airport.
- Ensure restrooms are accessible, family-friendly and clearly marked.
- Communicate gate changes, delays and transitions clearly using both verbal and visual information and provide additional guidance when needed.
- Provide well-lit walkways with minimal glare or shadows.
- Reduce noise and clutter in high-traffic areas where possible.
- Offer quiet rooms or spaces near gates, seating areas, or food and retail areas.

TRAINING STAFF AND VOLUNTEERS

A dementia-friendly airport is supported by staff and volunteers who are equipped with the knowledge and skills to respond with understanding and respect:

- Include dementia awareness in orientation and training for airport staff, TSA/security personnel, airlines, vendors, volunteers and other customer-facing roles.
- Use scenario-based discussions to help staff respond to travelers who may be confused, overwhelmed, or in need of assistance.
- Develop quick reference tools and clear procedures for supporting travelers who may be disoriented, separated from care partners, or in need of additional assistance.
- Promote consistent practices that help travelers living with dementia or other hidden disabilities remain connected with care partners or companions throughout the airport journey, including during TSA screening.

SUPPORTING CARE PARTNERS

Care partners play an essential role in supporting a positive and successful travel experience:

- Support travelers living with dementia by enabling them to remain with care partners or companions during screening whenever possible. Travelers and care partners may also request private screening when appropriate.
- Gate passes may be available to allow care partners to accompany a traveler through security or meet an arriving traveler at the gate. Policies vary by airport and airline and may require advance request or notation in the traveler's reservation before travel. In the U.S., gate passes are typically requested at the airline ticket counter with a valid government-issued photo ID and are subject to airline approval and TSA security procedures.

STRENGTHENING AIRPORT SERVICES

Becoming a dementia-friendly airport does not require large-scale changes all at once. Many meaningful improvements can begin with simple, practical actions that enhance the travel experience for people living with dementia and their care partners. These actions can grow over time based on your airport's size, staffing and partnerships.

Suggested actions to enhance dementia-related services:

- Add plain-language accessibility information to your airport website and key customer service locations, including contact details, TSA Cares information, gate pass guidance and how to request support.
- Provide basic dementia awareness training for volunteers, customer-facing teams and staff in retail, food services and mobility assistance roles.
- Participate in the Hidden Disabilities Sunflower Program and train staff to recognize and appropriately respond.
- Maintain clearly signed quiet spaces, accessible restrooms and well-lit paths to gates.
- Coordinate with airlines and TSA to support travelers living with dementia throughout the travel experience, including screening, boarding and arrival.
- Consider hosting travel rehearsal days in partnership with TSA and airlines to support travelers and care partners.

COLLABORATION AND CONTINUOUS IMPROVEMENT

Dementia-friendly practices are most effective when supported across departments and strengthened through collaboration with partners:

- Establish or participate in disability advisory committees to gather feedback and strengthen accountability.
- Develop plans to support travelers who may need additional assistance or calming spaces.
- Work with airlines to ensure continuity of support throughout the travel journey.
- Invite and incorporate feedback from travelers and care partners.

DEMENTIA-FRIENDLY AIRPORT RESOURCES

Additional dementia-friendly airport resources, training materials and related guidance are available through the Dementia Friendly America Resource Listing: <https://dfamerica.org/resource-listing/>.

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

This guide builds on the work of the Dementia-Friendly Airports Working Group (DFAWG), whose collaboration with airports, TSA and community partners has helped advance more supportive and inclusive travel experiences for people living with dementia and their care partners.

To learn more about DFAWG, visit www.dementiafriendlyairports.com or email dementiafriendlyairports@gmail.com

FOR ADDITIONAL RESOURCES



Become a Dementia Friend
dfamerica.org/become-a-dementia-friend/

Alzheimer's Association Helpline
800-272-3900 | www.alz.org



Find or Start a Memory Cafe
dfamerica.org/

Eldercare Locator
800-677-1116 | eldercare.acl.gov



Scan or visit
dfamerica.org/resource-listing



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