



Tech Executive  
Leadership Initiative

## POLICY BRIEF

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# TSA Cares Access Initiative To Improve Checkpoint Experience for Disabled Travelers

*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: improving and better promoting TSA Cares, an existing helpline that provides disabled travelers assistance in the security checkpoint process.*

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

To improve the experience of disabled travelers going through Transportation Security Administration (TSA) security screening, we recommend that the Department of Homeland Security **implement an initiative to support TSA Cares called “TSA Cares Access.” This new initiative would make it easier for airlines and other partners to promote TSA Cares and simplify the request process for travelers.** An overview of our recommendation can be seen in Table 1. TSA Cares Access would significantly increase awareness and use of TSA Cares, with the result of improving the security experience and reducing complaints, particularly from disabled travelers.

## BACKGROUND

Our team was asked to propose one solution to help TSA improve the traveler experience at airport security checkpoints. We chose to focus on the experience of disabled travelers<sup>1</sup> because this group includes up to 1 in 4 adults in the United States and accounts for significant complaint volume about airport security checkpoints. In 2019, the last full year of data before the pandemic, [63% of the top 6 discrimination complaints against TSA](#) were related to medication, medical supplies, or mobility (e.g., wheelchairs, scooters, etc.).

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Passengers may be dissatisfied with TSA security interactions for many reasons, including limited understanding of why certain security procedures are necessary, particularly when additional screenings may be required. For some, this scrutiny can feel personal and lead to feelings of being targeted or disrespected, even when the process is standard procedure for Transportation Security Officers.<sup>2</sup>

The TSA Cares program is one mechanism designed to reduce dissatisfaction with the security screening experience. [TSA Cares](#) provides personalized assistance for travelers, helping them prepare both physically and emotionally for potentially stressful interactions. TSA Cares offers guidance for travelers on what to expect during screening and how to prepare. The program can also provide Passenger Support Specialists who can go through security with travelers needing a higher level of personal assistance.<sup>3</sup>

However, [awareness of TSA Cares is limited](#): In 2022, the program had 46,000 total requests while TSA screened 736 million passengers, answered 1.9 million traveler calls and email messages, and responded to 2.2 million questions through “AskTSA.”

Many travelers who fit the definition of disabled but do not define themselves as such – for instance, a person with a broken bone or traveling with an infant – may not realize that they are eligible for assistance through TSA Cares.

## RECOMMENDATION

To mitigate stressful interactions for disabled passengers, we propose that TSA adopt a new TSA Cares Access Initiative. TSA Cares Access would be a 2-pronged approach to (1) ensure that disabled travelers are aware of the TSA Cares program and (2) make it easier for trusted partners to pass requests directly to TSA on behalf of the traveler. An overview of our recommendation can be seen in Table 1.

First, the initiative would provide **an easy-to-use creative toolkit for airlines and other partners** to incorporate promotional information about TSA Cares into the flight booking process and other experiences. This could be used by airlines and advocacy groups, such as medical or disability organizations, to promote TSA Cares as a source of reliable, up-to-date information to prepare for their travel. Airlines often provide services and support for disabled travelers, but currently do not directly promote the existence of TSA Cares. See Figure 1 for an example promotion ad in this toolkit.

Second, the initiative would provide a **secure electronic data transfer process** to allow trusted partners such as airlines to pass requests to TSA Cares automatically, without requiring the traveler to make a separate request. This would send the request into the *existing* TSA Cares form request flow, therefore requiring no additional process management. See [operational plan](#) for more details on the technical interface.

Today, even when airlines refer a traveler to TSA Cares, they have no way to pass that request directly. Instead, they share the website URL or give the phone number to the traveler. The traveler then needs to take the extra step to contact TSA Cares on their own. For someone who is disabled, this additional hurdle is one more challenge in a process that is already difficult and time-consuming.

By making it easy for partners to promote TSA Cares, DHS would reduce confusion about who is eligible for the program and how to make a request. And helping partners pass requests directly to TSA Cares would allow DHS to remove an unnecessary step in the request process and aid airlines and other partners in serving travelers who need support.

If both the promotion and the technical integration are addressed together, travelers will be both better informed and more likely to get the help they need from TSA Cares. Removing these barriers to access should result in higher satisfaction from disabled travelers.

### TSA Cares Access

This proposal helps raise the awareness and use of TSA Cares to ensure that disabled Americans are prepared for airport security screenings.

#### Goal #1: Enable promotion of TSA Cares

Ask: DHS should share the creative toolkit so that airlines and advocacy groups can let customers and other stakeholders know about the TSA Cares program.

Images and text can be used in websites, newsletters, brochures, or anywhere else. Formatted for the most common promotion spaces, these can be downloaded and used by any partner.

#### Goal #2: Enable trusted partners to pass requests directly

Ask: DHS should make the current system to submit TSA Cares requests directly available to airlines and advocacy groups, so they can make TSA Cares requests on behalf of their customers.

This can be integrated into the airline ticket purchase or customer support processes.

Requests would be processed exactly as if the traveler had submitted the request through the TSA Cares online form.



Figure 1: Sample promotion advertisement

## OPERATIONALIZATION

In our attached [operational plan](#), we propose that TSA develop the TSA Cares Access Initiative in 7 steps:

1. Establish and staff the initiative;
2. Develop and deliver the Creative Toolkit;
3. Share the Creative Toolkit with airlines and advocacy groups;
4. Enlist an airline partner for the TSA Cares pilot and develop an initial data transfer protocol;
5. Evaluate the success of the TSA Cares pilot efforts;
6. Scale the initiative to include additional partners; and
7. Maintain initiative momentum.



## Tech Executive Leadership Initiative

We estimate that a pilot of the program would cost about \$146,000. One possible source of funds is the fiscal year 2023 TSA budget for the Innovation Task Force.

For more information on our proposal, please see:

- ▶ [Operational plan](#) on implementation and budget;
- ▶ [Creative toolkit](#) for promotion of TSA Cares; and
- ▶ [Functional overview](#) of secure data transfer for TSA Cares requests.

### 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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### ENDNOTES

1. This broad definition of “disabled” includes travelers who have disabilities, medical conditions, or other special circumstances regardless of whether those travelers require any special accommodation or assistance at security checkpoints.
2. Government Accountability Office, [Aviation Security: TSA Should Assess Potential for Discrimination and Better Inform Passengers of the Complaint Process](#), November 2022.
3. TSA, [“Passenger Support,”](#) accessed May 11, 2023; and interview with MC, the mother of a disabled child who used TSA Cares services for travel, March 3, 2023.<sup>8</sup>