Hadley Presents

Traveling with Vision Loss: Tips from the TSA

Presented by Ricky Enger

Ricky Enger: Welcome to Hadley Presents. I'm your host, Ricky Enger, inviting you to sit back, relax, and enjoy a conversation with the experts. In this episode, we discuss traveling safely as COVID restrictions begin to ease. And our guests are Hadley's Chief Program Officer, Ed Haines, interviewing Supriya Raman, manager of the disability branch, civil rights, and liberties division for the Transportation Security Administration. Welcome to the show, both of you.

Supriya Raman: Thank you, Ricky.

Ed Haines: Thank you, Ricky.

Ricky Enger: I'm so glad that both of you are here to talk about a subject that I know is on many, many people's minds, whether they're traveling because they have to, or because perhaps they're ready to get out and about a little bit. We know that things have changed over the past year and a half or more, and just wanted the opportunity to come together and talk about things that people should consider as they're jumping on an airplane, heading to the airport. That can be such a stressful time, anyway, at times, just getting prepared and thinking about what people need to know. So, I'm really happy that you're both here. Before we jump into things. Ed, you're no stranger to the program, but just give a quick overview of who you are and what you do.

Ed Haines: Sure, Ricky. I'm the Chief Program Officer at Hadley, and I'm also a vision rehab therapist. I've spent a lot of my career out in the field in people's living rooms and homes, helping older adults with vision loss.

Ricky Enger: Excellent. Thank you. And Supriya, can you tell us a bit about who you are and what you do?

Supriya Raman: I am the manager for the disability branch and also the multicultural branch within the TSA's Office of Civil Rights in the Traveler Engagement division. And my role is mainly ensuring the civil rights of the traveling public are protected in the screening process at the TSA checkpoints at airports.

Ricky Enger: Excellent. And what an important job that is. So, certainly appreciate what you do. I'm very much looking forward to hearing Ed's list of questions and hearing your answers. So why don't we then jump right into that list? Go right ahead, Ed.

Ed Haines: Thanks, Ricky. And Supriya, thanks so much for talking with us today. Let me give you some context for this. People are traveling more, and we have a lot of constituents that have probably not traveled for a year and a half or so. And some of those may have actually lost some vision just in the time that they've been sequestered because of the pandemic.

So, people have some new questions as they start to travel again, particularly if they have recent vision loss. So, as we thought about this, I pulled a number of my friends and colleagues who have vision impairments and just asked them, "What are the kinds of concerns that you've felt when you've gone through a TSA line? And what might you be concerned about particularly now that there are some newer rules resulting from the pandemic? So, what could I ask someone like Supriya? What would you like to know?"

So, they sent me quite a list. So, I guess I'll start with the first question. If someone has recently lost some vision, when you enter the airport, the first thing you normally do is find that TSA line and you have to find the appropriate one. And if you can't see well enough, are there any strategies or techniques you suggest for someone with low vision or no vision to be able to find the correct line to stand in?

Supriya Raman: TSA has a program called TSA Cares. This is a program or a hotline that we have set up where you can call and ask for assistance through the TSA security screening checkpoint. That would be one way that an individual could plan ahead for their travel to the airport.

Please keep in mind that we're talking only about the TSA security screening checkpoint. It's only for the screening process that you can ask for this help through the TSA Cares line. And the phone number for that line is 855-787-2227. And this line is open from 8:00 AM to 11:00 PM Eastern Time on weekdays, and on weekends and holidays, we have live agents responding to calls from 9:00 AM to 8:00 PM Eastern Time. This call-in number would be the place where you would let our TSA know that you will be needing assistance at the airport when you're going through the screening checkpoint.

And typically, we ask individuals to call 72 hours prior to their travel, so that would allow us to, depending on the resources we have at different airports, and each airport is different in the sense that some of them are large airports. For example, like Chicago is one of the larger airports. Whereas if you're thinking about Springfield Airport in Illinois, it is much smaller. So, depending on the resources that are available, we can arrange to have assistance for you at the checkpoint.

Sometimes it may mean that the there's someone from the airport calling you a day ahead and asking you when you'll be at the checkpoint, making sure that they give you the contact information of who's going to assist you. Or in some instances, it would be that you get to the checkpoint and let them know you have made this request. And depending on what resources they have at the checkpoint; they'll make someone available to help you with going through the whole screening process.

Ed Haines: Wow, that's wonderful. And does this apply... As you said, it depends on resources. In general, any airport that has a TSA procedure would be able to offer this kind of assistance?

Supriya Raman: Yes. Any airport should have somebody that's able to assist you with going through the checkpoint.

Ed Haines: Oh, that's wonderful.

Ricky Enger: Yes, and actually, I just learned something because I never knew that the TSA had its own setup, I guess, for providing assistance for people with disabilities. Because when I go to the airport, I would always go to the airline counter, and you know and call for assistance and they would send somebody, and that person was like an escort. You know they could help me find a restaurant. Help me find food before my flight. They could get me to the gate in addition to getting through the checkpoint. And so, I always thought that, you know, when I was going through TSA that basically my only point of contact for assistance was the escort. So, it is really cool to know about this, especially because, I mean, every traveler has different needs, right?

Ed Haines: Sure, Ricky. A lot of times folks who have vision impairments have sufficient vision to do a number of things that wouldn't require a full-time escort, but they might just require assistance with just one or two tasks. One of the tasks that has come up, particularly during the pandemic, is that it used to be you could hand your phone or your ticket to the TSA agent and they would place it on the scanner. It would read the QR code or the barcode for your ticket. But now because of the pandemic, most passengers, I believe, are required to scan their own ticket or their phone. If someone can't see well enough just at that point, and that's the only thing that's holding them up, to hold a barcode, a ticket over the scanner appropriately, can they ask for assistance at that point?

Supriya Raman: Absolutely. And they can ask for that assistance, or they can ask for the officer to guide them to where the scanner is. Whichever works for the individual.

Ed Haines: There was another question too, that one of my colleagues asked about. When you enter the body scanner, there's a foot placement, there's the two little footprints there. And sometimes those are difficult to see, or they're almost worn off. Can they ask for help at that juncture for someone to assist them, to make sure their feet are in the right location?

Supriya Raman: Absolutely. And our officers are trained to assist travelers when they need that type of help. So, letting our officers know that you need assistance in orienting yourself to the machine or orienting your stuff to where the foot placement should be, would help you as well as the officer in going through that whole screening process without a problem.

Ed Haines: Wonderful. So, they've already had training on how to help individuals that need assistance. That's wonderful. Another colleague said, "There is a moment or two where I might like to let the TSA agents know that I have a disability. I might need help just in that one particular area, but I'd rather not have other travelers know that I have a disability just for safety reasons or whatever. Are there any options? Can I supply something in writing that's a little more discreet or what would you recommend?"

Supriya Raman: So, for our security screening, what we have is the TSA notification card. And that's just a card that we have created where you can fill in what level of accommodation or assistance you need with your screening, or what is it that you cannot do? For example, cannot raise my arm, or cannot stand for five minutes, or whatever it is, you can write it down in the notification card and hand it over to the officer.

In addition, we've also worked with our officers to help them understand that if an individual gives you something in writing that says, "I cannot do this," or, "I can only do this," or "I need help with something," to take a look at that particular documentation and work with the individual to figure out options on how to screen that person. So, if you are uncomfortable or do not want to say something out loud at the checkpoint, giving something in writing is absolutely acceptable.

Ed Haines: How about mobility aids, specifically a white cane or a support cane? Several folks asked me, can they just take these through the security line? How does that whole process work if they really need a mobility aid?

Supriya Raman: So, you can take your mobility aid through the security screening technology. In some instances, the officer may ask to have that particular mobility device, whether it's a white cane or a support cane, scanned. In those instances, the individual can ask for assistance to make sure they're oriented to where they are within the screening checkpoint, handover that support cane or white cane to the officer to get the screening done and bring it back to the traveler. Usually these happen very quickly, so they're not standing there at the checkpoint waiting for your support cane or white cane for extended periods of time.

Ed Haines: And this is kind of a related question, Supriya. If your mobility aid is actually a human being, if you're using a sighted guide, can they travel, go through the scanner with you? And what are your options is if they can't?

Supriya Raman: Typically, the scanners are designed to scan one person at a time. Depending on what the setup is like, the individual may be able to assist you up to the scanner and then the officer will work with you to get you through the technology. So, officers will be able to help with that.

Ed Haines: This is a question that several people asked me to ask you. People with vision impairments, you're probably aware they tend to organize their belongings in a very specific way because they can't necessarily just visually identify where everything is. And several of my friends have mentioned that particularly, they organize their luggage in a special way. They have all their cords in one spot, they have their toiletries in another, and it's all put together, so they know exactly where things are.

And several of them have expressed to me that either randomly or for whatever reason, the TSAs had to look through their bags and they interfere with that organization process. So, folks were wanting me to ask you, normally the TSA agents sort of do that away from the owner of the bag. Is there a way for a person with a vision impairment to sort of consult with the TSA agent during the searching process to make sure that everything gets back to where it belongs?

Supriya Raman: Yes. I think this is where the whole TSA Cares concept would be of help. If you call ahead of time and you have someone dedicated to assist you through the whole screening process, that individual will be the one that you would talk to and say, "Could you please search my bag and make sure that my belongings are where they're supposed to be, because that's how I orient myself in terms of my items within my carry-on?" And to let you know, the individuals that are providing the support at the checkpoint for you when you're asking for that assistance through TSA Cares, these individuals are actually TSA officers who have gone through additional training on how to assist travelers with disabilities, medical conditions, or any other unique requirements that have a need for additional options and how to screen them. We call them passenger support specialists.

So as a traveler, you can go up to the checkpoint and ask for a passenger support specialist to assist you with the whole screening process. So, that would be one option to answer the questions that your community members have raised to you, Ed.

Ed Haines: That's fantastic, Supriya. So, the TSA Cares and passenger support specialist. Just a general question. If I've called 72 hours ahead of time and I've been given the contact information for the representative who's going to meet me, where do you normally meet them? Is it at the head of the line? Are they waiting for you with a big sign saying, "Ed Haines, here I am"? Or how do people normally communicate and find each other?

Supriya Raman: So, as I mentioned earlier, it completely depends on the level of resources that the airport has. So, in some instances what we've had airports do, is call the individual and let them know, "Here's the phone number of the officer that will be assisting you through the checkpoint. So, once you get to the airport, give us a call and we will set up a location that works for all of us." And in other instances, when you get to the checkpoint, letting the individual at the start of the checkpoint know that you've asked for assistance, that would be the place to begin.

Ed Haines: Well, Supriya, this really sounds like a wonderful program. I'm just curious, how long has this been available?

Supriya Raman: Oh, we've had this program in place for a while now, and it's been on our website as well on tsa.gov. And that's where you can find the information in terms of the call-in number, as well as an option to send the TSA Cares request by email. And it also gives you the times when the phone line is open for an agent to respond to your request.

Ed Haines: That's wonderful. So, you're accessible, not only to people who can use the internet, but also folks who are still offline with that phone number. That's great. So, I guess one final question from me is, it sounds like if someone wanted to expedite their process through the TSA line, that doing TSA Cares probably would be a better option if you have a disability than say trying to get TSA pre-check?

Supriya Raman: So, let me be clear about something here. TSA pre-check is a risk-based process, and it's an expedited process based on us knowing your level of risk. So, it's different from TSA Cares, which TSA Cares is more about providing the assistance at the checkpoint. So, depending on your unique needs or your disability, you may also need assistance going through the pre-check lane as well, in certain instances. So having TSA Cares at that checkpoint also or having TSA Cares across the screening checkpoint is helpful. It depends completely on what you need. Pre-check allows you to keep your lighter, outer coat on, keep your electronics in your bag, and keep your 3-1-1 liquids in your bag, and certain other things. So, that does help everyone in terms of screening.

Ed Haines: Maybe that was a rhetorical question, but would you say that it's a better option to use TSA Cares?

Supriya Raman: The time that it takes to go through screening sometimes is quicker through pre-check. But having said that, TSA Cares is assistance-based and pre-check is more of your risk level in terms of going through screening.

Ed Haines: Thank you for clarifying that. So that means you could actually have both pre-check and TSA Cares at the same time. That's wonderful. So Supriya, that's all the questions I have. Do you have any other recommendations that you'd give to people with disabilities or people with vision loss in general about the TSA process?

Supriya Raman: The thing that I would like everybody to walk away with is that we're trying, at TSA, to find ways to make screening equitable for everybody. Any time that you have an issue, or you come across a barrier that makes screening harder for you, let us know so the feedback that we get from you helps us refine our process and make it as smooth as it can be.

And we all know that security screening at airports isn't the most pleasant experience, and I include myself in that. But we are trying to make sure that we can do what we can to make it as smooth as it can be. So, I appreciate being given the opportunity to speak with you all at Hadley Institute about the programs that TSA has for individuals with disabilities and medical conditions and other unique circumstances that may need assistance going through the checkpoint.

Ricky Enger: Thank you so much, that's so helpful. If you are listening and you didn't quite get that phone number written down for TSA Cares or the website, we'll have both of those things in the show notes. I so appreciate, Supriya, you’re stopping by and letting people know what's available, what the options are, and especially talking about providing that feedback if things don't go perfectly. We're all looking to improve things, so giving the feedback when things go well, and giving the feedback when there might be a little improvement needed, both of those things are so, so helpful. And knowing how to do that is really great. So again, thank you for stopping by, we really appreciate you.

Supriya Raman: Thank you, Ricky and Ed.

Ricky Enger: Got something to say? Share your thoughts about this episode of Hadley Presents or make suggestions for future episodes, we'd love to hear from you. Send us an email at podcast@hadley.edu. That's P-O-D-C-A-S-T@hadley.edu. Or leave us a message at 847-784-2870. Thanks for listening.