**WBU 2016 GA International Travel with Guide Dogs Presentation – Martine Abel-Williamson**

# Executive Summary

The World Blind Union (WBU) Access to the Environment and Transport Working group was tasked with investigating the current reality of guide dog handlers travelling internationally with their guide dogs.

This document highlights common themes that emerged from 30 survey responses received from 8 countries. A number of barriers have been identified, and some valuable suggestions have been received that will assist in compiling a proposal to address barrier-free travel.

# Introduction:

More countries than ever before are now allowing assistance dogs, including guide dogs, to accompany their handlers, due to improved ways of animal health monitoring and strengthened veterinary care practices in the area of animal disease control, leading to increased international co-operation. Although this has made travel more accessible for some, there are still many stumbling blocks in the way of smooth or seamless travel, taking into account the preparation before-hand in terms of veterinary care related form-filling, the actual flight travel and processes around being welcomed on the other side, in the country of your destination.

Barriers identified so far through discussion with guide dog handlers who’ve been traveling with their guide dogs include:

* Financial cost: (linked with prescribed pre-travel veterinary visits and form-filling for instance when export certificates are being applied for;
* Bureaucratic systems: (in terms of a lack of communication between, and inconsistency of compliance practices by various local, regional and state departments);
* Discriminatory policies: (for example by some airlines that are still refusing access to guide dogs onto the aircraft).

To gain a better understanding of the situation, and with a view to come up with a recommendation for a standardised international approach the Working Group conducted a worldwide survey among guide dog handlers.

The survey was published in a WBU E-bulletin and sent out to email consumer groups in February 2015, and the International Guide Dog Federation (IGDF) assisted in promoting and publicising the survey.

# Survey questions:

1. If you’ve been traveling with your guide dog, what worked well for you?

2. While travelling with your guide dog, what problems were experienced?

3. If you’ve not been travelling with your guide dog, what stopped you from doing so?

4. Policies and legislation in place to ensure inclusive international travel with your guide dog. If the answer is yes, please list and attach those.

5. If required, do you have access to financial support or subsidizing schemes available to assist with the costs associated with traveling with a guide dog? If so, please describe those briefly.

6. As far as you’re aware of, are there systems and practices in place in your country internally, as well as internationally between departments from countries to ensure that various involved parties (such as airport authorities, airlines, customs departments, etc.) are working collaboratively to this regard? If so, please provide examples of policy or practice documentation and anecdotal evidence.

7. Do you have additional suggestions re what could be happening at international level to improve access to travel when accompanied by a guide dog?

# Feedback:

30 responses were received from the following countries: South Africa, Switzerland, New Zealand, Australia, Japan, Singapore, the US and Spain.

## 1: What worked well

Form-filling:

This was reported as working well in New Zealand, but most other respondents highlighted it as a problem area.

* Assistance from airport and airline staff
* Officials explaining the types and timing of the various tests that needed to be done.
* Secure relief areas at some airports
* Having the freedom of movement without always having to depend on sighted assistance. Having a guide dog gives access to whatever facilities or accommodations are available to others.

## 2: Problems experienced

1. The majority of respondents reported difficulties around the tests and paperwork:

* Inconsistent information given on the tests and forms to be completed prior to travel, depending on who you ask.
* Difficulty accessing information on tests and paperwork required before travelling. This includes long waiting time in call centre queues, and being sent from pillar to post.
* Different versions of forms exist (online and hardcopy).

1. The practicalities of fulfilling requirements:

* Getting sighted assistance to complete a myriad of forms and they sometimes get it wrong;
* Getting confirmation of guide dog status from the issuing school;
* Obtaining re-certification of blindness from a professional such a general practitioner or ophthalmologist, and a statement that the handler needs the service of an assistance dog;
* Multiple vet visits for the numerous clinical processes, blood draw and blood test, health cert and parasite control, And the local quarantines department's endorsement;
* Re-submission to the destination country’s DAFF airport of arrival's official vet officer prior to actual travel.

1. Guide dogs being refused at hotels, restaurants and taxi’s in some countries.
2. The need to have all necessary information many months in advance.

This effectively excludes persons travelling with a guide dog at short notice (e.g. emergency travelling).

1. When transiting through some countries, all appropriate paperwork must be completed to satisfy the authorities even if only going to be in the transit lounge for around an hour.
2. Hold-ups at airports, either because a vet wasn’t available to sign off the paperwork or because the paperwork wasn’t filled in correctly. This has in some instances even led to travellers missing flights and incurring related travel and hotel fees.
3. Some airports only offer wheelchair assistance and not assistance walking to the gates.
4. Some airlines insist that the guide dog handler waits until all special needs passengers can be assisted onto the plane as a group, and refuse to walk them to airport lounges which they are entitled to visit because of their frequent flyer status.
5. Some airports insist on the use of a muzzle.
6. In some countries, guide dog handlers do not enjoy legal protection for access and use of guide dogs guaranteed under domestic laws, because of regulations defining guide dogs including where to train them.
7. Prohibitive cost of obtaining an export permit, i.e. vet bills and transport costs.
8. Lack of toileting facilities at some airports, hotels and cruise ships.
9. Airline staff refusing a guide dog on board or into an airport despite all paperwork being in order.

## 3: Reasons why people chose to travel without their guide dog

* The stress, time and frustration of the double handling in the Customs bureaucracy
* The prohibitive costs of tests, vet visits and the fees some countries charge to allow the dog on shore
* Inaccessible paperwork
* Emergency travel doesn’t allow for the weeks and months lead time for the required tests to be done and documentation to be obtained
* Lack of toileting facilities
* Unfamiliar destinations would be unfamiliar to the dog, thus making guiding potentially stressful to the pair

## 4: Policies and legislation to ensure inclusive international travel

Various countries have pieces of legislation addressing this. They can change at any time, and many respondents are not confident that they will be able to obtain the most up-to-date information when they need to travel.

Even in countries that have inclusive policies in place, confusion arises when flying with an airline which operates in multiple countries where different rules apply in the countries of departure and destination.

Examples of legislation and policies include:

1. USA: The Air Access Act of 1986

It mandates a barrier-free, non-discriminatory access for disabled passengers to take a flight from any point within the US and if necessary in company of a service animal.

Also see http://www.cdc.gov/animalimportation/dogs.html

1. Australia:

Disability Discrimination Act

Also see <http://www.daff.gov.au/aqis/cat-dogs/assistance>

1. New Zealand:

See <http://www.biosecurity.govt.nz/enter/personal/pets/guide-dogs> and a downloadable document with far more information: <http://www.biosecurity.govt.nz/files/ihs/guidance-catdog.gen.pdf>. Also see [www.animalimports@maf.govt.nz](http://www.animalimports@maf.govt.nz)

## 5. Financial support or subsidising schemes

Generally, airlines do not charge extra to carry a guide dog, and some even block off the seat next to the handler to create additional space. The Australian Department of Agriculture and Forestry doesn’t charge for the issuing of an import permit.

No respondents indicated any form of financial assistance or subsidies available anywhere. All tests and transport costs are paid by the traveller, except for vet consultation fees which are often waived or reduced for guide dogs.

## 6. Collaborative systems and practices

While most respondents were not aware of any such collaboration, The Directive 1107/2006 of the European Union is putting the responsibility for adequate assistance with the airline and tour operator. The person booking a flight or a train ride should inform the Help Desk at the airport or the train station 48 hours prior to travel. The airline is responsible to inform all associated partners in the chain about the kind of assistance needed.

At both ends of the trip.

In South Africa a clear disconnect was reported, with all required blood tests not listed on the initial form.

## 7. Suggestions to improve access

1. A more streamlined process should be adopted in both paperwork and vet checks.

This should include internationally standardized airline policies and Customs rules/policies regarding guide dogs and travel.

Quarantine regulations should also be reconsidered.

1. Central repository:

An information section on the repository could include standardized forms and a list of tests and other requirements needed for entering different countries.

A logging facility on the repository site by authorized persons could allow submission of forms, travel itineraries and test results.

This will allow all stakeholders (guide dog handlers, customs officials, departments of agriculture, airport staff, airline staff, state vets and private accredited vets) to all have access to the list of requirements, the fulfilment of the requirements, the issuing of permits and the dates of travel. It will eliminate the need for back and forth communication, duplication and the inevitable miss-communication.

1. Information about countries where anti-discrimination legislation is not in place should be made available.

This will alert travellers to the fact that guide dogs might be refused at hotels, restaurants and taxis in that country.

1. Relieving stations at all major hubs:

In the case of airports, the relieving stations should be inside security since flight delays could increase the travel time significantly.

1. International certification attesting that the accompanying dog is a guide dog:

This could be done by "chipping". However, this would still exclude handlers of "self-trained" guide dogs who will probably never be able to get the necessary document from guide dog schools to confirm the training of the dog.

1. Education of all parties involved:

Address the basic human right of freedom of travel which includes a customer centric approach.

1. Address the airline concerns about taking guide dogs in the passenger cabin on airplanes.
2. Revisit the policy of disembarking all assisted passengers after everybody else have disembarked, and enable the guide dog to relieve itself soon after landing. The intent here is to reduce the time the dog is unable to relieve itself.
3. Cruise ships

* Cruise ships could provide import regulations for the islands they visit.
* Cruise ships not allowing dogs to be left unattended in the cabin could provide a “paid” pet sitting service on board so handlers could go without the animal.

Incheon Strategy implementation re the 3rd Decade of Persons with Disabilities for Asia and the Pacific:

At its Third Session, held in Bangkok from 2 to 4 March 2016, the Working Group on the Asian and Pacific Decade of Persons with Disabilities, 2013-2022, decided on the following:

Guidelines on travel by air of persons with disabilities:

1. World Blind Union, together with ASEAN Disability Forum and World Federation of the Deafblind Asia and the Pacific, to develop and circulate draft guidelines regarding passengers travelling by air with motorized wheelchairs, other mobility aids and medical devices, by the Fourth Session of the Working Group;
2. And this will include access to traveling with assistance animals.

WBU Access to the Environment and Transport Working Group Recommendations:

The Access to the Environment and Transport Forum, held 13-15 April 2016 in Auckland, New Zealand, calls upon the World Blind Union to develop and publish a policy on accessible international travel on airlines and cruise ships with a focus on guide dogs. The Forum asks that World Blind Union consider publishing a guide to help people who want to take their guide /seeing-eye dogs internationally, to understand all the complications and factors they must consider well in advance.

We recommend the policy includes:

* + Acknowledgement of the goodwill of officials and the need for countries to take protective animal control measures.
  + Development of standards to facilitate electronic exchange of information about guide dogs between countries when travelling.
  + Work with the International Guide Dog Federation to develop an internationally agreed process to recognise the legitimacy of trained guide dogs, perhaps creating a guide dog passport for adoption by its member countries.
  + Accessible application forms and correspondence throughout the process.
  + Minimise repetitive actions, form-filling and vet checks or other official appointments.
  + International Air Transport Association (IATA) to require all airlines to carry guide dogs in the passenger cabins with their handlers who book their guide dog to travel with them.
  + All countries that uphold the human rights of disabled people to ensure that all airlines allow guide dogs in aircraft passenger cabins with their handlers who book their guide dog to travel with them.
  + Airside assistance dog toileting facilities that comply with recognised standards be provided within secure areas, separate from toileting facilities for airport service animals.

In conclusion:

The WBU will need to collaborate with the IGDF and, at times, its member countries individually; in order to enhance opportunities for traveling with guide dogs, the WBU’s regional UN Advocacy Networks, set up in early 2016 could become actively involved in these efforts. This will then hopefully lead to strengthening of policies and updating of relevant legislation.