

## ACCESS HOUSTON AIRPORTS MOBILE APP

### Guidance

<p><b>Purpose</b></p>	<p>The purpose of this document is to provide guidance and best practice examples for stakeholders aiming to introduce similar initiatives related to accessibility and assistance to persons with disabilities in an airport environment.</p> <p>The case study is not intended to endorse any technology or provider, but rather provide details of the key considerations as well as various implementation models which could be adopted.</p> <p>The intended audiences may include but are not limited to: Airports, Airlines, Technology Providers, and Regulatory Bodies.</p>
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<p><b>Scope of this Guidance</b></p>	<p>This guidance is provided as a source of information to help and support industry players to implement initiatives related to accessibility and assistance to persons with disabilities in and airport environment.</p>
<p><b>The Case Study Template</b></p>	<p>In some situations or jurisdictions, a prescribed case study template may be necessary that meets the local requirements of a particular business, organization, or regulatory body. For this guidance document, the following sections provide the general steps involved in developing a business case and/or case studies, including a brief explanation of their purpose, benefits, and considerations.</p>

# CASE STUDY

## BACKGROUND/BUSINESS NEEDS

Houston Airport System (HAS) is comprised of two primary commercial airports and one military/general aviation airport/spaceport (Ellington Airport (EFD)). George Bush Intercontinental (IAH) and William P. Hobby (HOU) airports combined serve approximately 60 million annual passengers, providing non-stop services to more than 170 destinations, including 35 international destinations.

Beginning 2017, HAS undertook an effort to be more inclusive and informed of people with disabilities and their needs. According to the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), approximately 20% of Americans have a disability. Based on 60 million annual passengers, this equates to 12 million annual passengers, or 33,000 daily passengers.

This case study will focus specifically on the development of a **free mobile app to assist travellers** with intellectual/developmental disabilities (I/DD) and their caregivers, and to offer the ability to have a preview of the entire airport experience before they travel. The **Access Houston App** is designed to ease anxiety for these families and provide information and resources that will make their visit to the airport an engaging and meaningful experience. According to the U.S. CDC, approximately 13% of the U.S. population has an I/DD, such as autism spectrum disorder (ASD). Based on 60 million annual passengers, this equates to 7.8 million annual passengers, or 21,000 daily airport users.

The key project objectives are summarized as follows:

- Partner with the stakeholders, such as airlines, airport tenants, and airport security affiliates, groups representing people with disabilities and families of people with disabilities to identify resources available to best serve the needs of individuals using HAS airports.
- Provide all passengers, including those with I/DD and their caregivers, with a preview of the airport experience at HAS before they arrive at the airport.
- Encourage people with I/DD to feel more confident when travelling.
- Share global awareness of HAS efforts at an airport level as well as on a national level, to be most accommodating to people with disabilities and serve as a model for others to emulate.

In addition to the development of the Access Houston App, we would also like to highlight the following initiatives provided by HAS to meet the needs of people with disability:

- Development of a service dog training program. A program designed to prepare perspective service dogs for worldly experience, such as the airport environment, before they begin formal service dog training around the age of two years old.
- Development of "Disability Awareness and People First Communication Training". A one-hour program designed to highlight the advent of disability law in the U.S., as well as to discuss the prevalence of disabilities in the U.S., types of disabilities, and effective and respectful communication and assistance to people with disabilities.
- Partnership with Aira ([www.aira.io](http://www.aira.io)) to provide free 1:1 live, remote assistance to Aira subscribers who are blind/low vision (BLV). Via the Aira app, people who are BLV (explorers) have the ability to contact a highly trained individual (agent) to provide live, verbal navigation assistance using broadband Internet and the camera lens of a smart phone or smart glasses. HAS pays the explorers usage minutes while within the footprint of the airport. This enables BLV travellers to participate in more of the airport experience, including food/beverage and retail, and other airport aesthetics providing a sense of place which is Houston, Texas, USA.

## BENEFITS

Being that “Make our Passengers Happy” is one of our strategic pillars. It is no longer good enough to simply say “Houston Airports pledges a world-class experience”. We must go beyond that by embracing a hospitality service model that puts our customers, passengers, meeters/greeters, and well-wishers at the centre of everything we do to make them feel our guests.

We want to exceed the needs and wants of our airport guests by consistently going above and beyond their expectations. A guest experience brand promise was written for all Houston Airport System employees as well as for our airport community stakeholders. To embrace this guest experience brand promise, a high-level commitment of delivering seamless, hassle-free, and even enjoyable airport travel journey through each airport from the roadway to the runway are required, regardless of who is responsible for delivering these world-class services.

Ultimately, our guest experience programs and initiatives have a profound impact on how we make each guest feel throughout their airport journey. The goal is to have each guest (each customer) walk away with a positive and delightful experience. This is the human element of excellent service that has the biggest impact on the guest experience.

Houston is the fourth most populated city in the United States. We recognize that passengers often have a choice of airports when they travel, particularly when making connections, and we want to make sure their choice is IAH or HOU. The Access Houston Airports App not only assists travellers with I/DD and their caregivers, but all users of the airport.

In order to have everyone on board, this app was designed in consultation with the following stakeholders:

- The Arc of Greater Houston
- The Arc of Ft. Bend County
- The Down Syndrome Association of Houston
- United Airlines
- Southwest Airlines, and the
- Transportation Security Administration

The app and other initiatives to increase accessibility of our facilities and services send a message attesting to our inclusivity.

The Access Houston Airports app is a game-changer for people with I/DD and their caregivers. It will not only allow greater access to Houston’s airports, but also to the world.

## CONSTRAINTS

There are no existing regulatory requirements for HAS to have the Access Houston App to assist I/DD passengers. Therefore, the only constraints identified were finding the time and the human and capital resources to design, plan, and execute the roll out of the app.

Since the free app is available in the App Store and Google Play, we had to conform to some of this platform's administrative requirements. However, no problems were encountered in this respect.

## TECHNOLOGY, PROCESS, AND INFRASTRUCTURE REQUIRED

### Project Description

Houston Airports rolled out free technology aimed at enhancing the airport experience for children with intellectual and developmental disabilities (I/DD) and their caregivers. The airports partnered with Infiniteach to introduce the **Access Houston Airports** mobile app to help families prepare for their trip.

With the app, families will find an array of tools to transition through all phases of the airport experience. From arriving to the airport, to departing the airport and everything in between, the app's comprehensive approach aids in improving passenger comfort.

Many families raising a child with developmental disabilities report struggling to engage in society and feeling socially isolated. Houston Airports introduced the app to ease anxiety for these families and provide information and resources that will make their visit to the airport an engaging and meaningful experience.

While the app was designed for people with intellectual and developmental disabilities, the app benefits anyone preparing for a trip through one of Houston's airports.

Specific app features include:

- explorer guides, picture stories that describe each space in the airport
- schedule function, a visual checklist that can be customized
- communication icons, to assist those who are less verbal in talking or asking for help
- caregiver supports, including terminal maps, tips and more to help in planning a visit to the airport

Since the app encourages using a mobile device, we designed a "pop socket" promoting the app to affix to the back of mobile devices.

### Production

By partnering with Infiniteach (<https://infiniteach.com/>), an app developer specializing in autism accessibility, we were able to deliver the app affordably and quickly, with the assurance that we were incorporating the tools proven as best practices for the autism community.

The app was developed over a four-month period and rolled out at media event held in conjunction with the *Wings for All* event, an event to encourage air travel for people with I/DD to travel via air. Houston Airports was selected by Infiniteach to serve as a pilot project and therefore, was not charged directly for the app development.

Earned media resulted in reaching 151 million people, an important objective achieved toward increasing awareness. Clearly, strides toward improving accessibility resonate with people, based on the media interest we experienced. While we are pleased with that ROI, an even more vital objective was for passengers with disabilities to respond by downloading and most importantly, finding the app useful.

- The press conference on 1 October 2019 resulted in 122 downloads
- Within the first 48 hours, the promotion of the app was picked up by 75 unique media outlets, **reaching 56 million people**
- October-December 2019 averaged 1,000 monthly/33 daily users of the app. While this could seem insignificant in the grand scheme of 140,000 daily Houston airport travellers, these 33 users and their caregivers may not have been comfortable or even able to travel, prior to this app. This is INVALUABLE!

- Over the first year of the app, 3,300 free app downloads have occurred through the App Store and Google Play. This equates to 269 downloads/month. \*
- CNN was made aware of the app and sent a video crew to develop a story for its airport travel programming network. The 60-second infomercial was developed free of charge and aired for three months at 60 airports and 2,400 gate-hold rooms across the United States, **reaching an additional 95 million people.**

*\*It should be noted that air travel dropped by 95+% in March 2020, six months after the launch of the app.*

### **Video and promotional material**

Houston Airports was selected by Infinitech to serve as a pilot project and, therefore, was not charged directly for the app development but did incur some production costs.

Video and other promotional materials include:

- 60-second video, videographer The Editing Company
- CNN video, CNN provided at no cost
- Flyers, printed 2,000 in-house for launch event (Wings for All), distribution to seven organizations serving people with disabilities, airline partners, and to attendees at the State of the Airports address, featuring Houston Airports Director, and the Mayor's Office for People with Disabilities event
- Event backdrop
- Retractable banners
- Promo item, pop socket
- Digital advertising, distributed throughout digital advertising network at HOU and IAH, created in-house, no cost to run on airport digital media platforms
- Logo design, created in-house, approximately two staff hours
- Design services by third party, prepared artwork and copy for flyers, retractable banners, T-shirts, and event backdrop

Other in-house support:

- Media advisory, news release, press pitches, and press conference resulting in the two news segments, handled in-house, approximately 20 staff hours collectively
- Posts in social media channels and e-newsletter story, handled in-house, approximately five staff hours collectively

## LESSONS LEARNED

We learned a great deal on our Access Houston App, and the following are some takeaways:

1. We needed to educate just about everyone, from new hires to senior leadership, on disability awareness, definition of disability, types of disabilities, prevalence of disabilities, disability law/rights, and effective communications for people with disabilities.
  - A training module was developed, and more than 500 employees and stakeholders participated in the one-hour training, conducted over ten sessions for three months.
2. We sought collaboration in building this product tapped into existing partnerships, and created new partnerships with groups representing people with disabilities to help champion the development of the app.
  - Group representing people with disabilities are extremely eager to help as they are not used to being included in public processes. They were and continue to be very loyal to Houston Airports because of our inclusion.
3. Involve the media in your process, especially if you engage your stakeholders and users of your product and let them tell the story.
4. Try and time your initiative delivery to national awareness days, or events focusing on the disability you are attempting to assist. In our case, we timed it to roll out with our semi-annual Wings for All event that provides a real-time, practice run of the entire airport experience for kids and young adults with I/DD at IAH and HOU airport.
  - We shared the app with the Wings for All participants in advance of their visit to the airport. This was also a good hook to garner media participation and coverage.

## VIDEOS AND PRINT MATERIAL

Videos and Print material listed below can be found in attachment

### Videos

1. Access App CNN
2. Access App KPRC News - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0GQ8NHX22rQ>
3. Access App 60 second Infomercial
4. Access App FOX 26

### Print

1. TX Governor Abbott endorsement
2. Access App Flyer
3. Access App press release
4. Access App pop socket with flyer

