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COVER STORY



Making a Difference

ACA supports amputee in struggle to change airline screening methods

Paddy Rossbach and Sandra Cammaroto

by Rick Bowers

Standing in line at a security checkpoint at Tampa International Airport in Florida, Debbie Shuck worried about her elderly mother who lay sick with pneumonia in a hospital bed in Indiana. She wanted to be by her mother's side in this time of difficulty, and she was on her way there.

When Shuck got closer to the checkpoint, however, a security employee told her that she would have to go to a private screening room so that two female security employees could conduct a socket check on her prosthetic leg.

"I knew that I had to allow myself to be violated if I wanted to see my mother," Shuck says. "Otherwise, I would have fought the search with every part of my being."

In the screening room, Shuck was told to pull down her pants. One of the women then rubbed a swab (a round pad) around the top of Shuck's prosthetic socket, touching her genital area.

To some people, pulling down their pants, being swabbed, and having their genital area touched would not be such a big deal, but to others, it is extremely embarrassing and humiliating.

Shuck found it to be both, as well as terribly unfair. Why did she, just because she is an amputee, have to be searched like this when other people did not, she wanted to know.

On the plane, Shuck cried all the way to Indiana. "I couldn't tell anyone for a while," she says. "I felt as though I had been raped."

When she had to fly back to Tampa, airport security pulled her aside to search her again, and she started to cry. "I begged them not to humiliate me again," she says. "Strangely, when I told them what had happened, they were surprised at how extreme the 'socket check' in Tampa had been."

As Shuck thought more and more about what had happened to her and what was happening to other amputees around the country, her embarrassment and humiliation began to change – first to anger and then to fury. "This has to be changed!" she told herself.

An Amputee Scorned

When Shuck called a Transportation Security Administration (TSA) representative in Tampa to discuss the problem, however, he was rude and acted as if he couldn't care less, she says.

Not one to be easily dismissed, Shuck refused to let the problem be swept under the rug.

"I sent a lot of letters and made a lot of phone calls," she says. "I went through the Civil Rights people within the Department of Homeland Security and the TSA."

One person who cared was Paddy Rossbach, president and CEO of the Amputee Coalition of America (ACA).

When Shuck first contacted Rossbach about the incident, she explained the problem and asked Rossbach for the ACA's help.

An Amputee Soured

Shuck admits that before she spoke to Rossbach, she was beginning to question the ACA and its work.

"I had heard so many people complain that the ACA doesn't do enough on the legislative front and doesn't represent the amputee when it really matters," Shuck says. "And I was beginning to wonder myself."

Shuck and Rossbach shot several e-mails back and forth about the issue. Rossbach understood Shuck's feelings, but she also knew that change takes time.

In fact, the ACA had already been working for a long time with the TSA and an organization called the National Safe Skies Alliance to ensure that amputees would be able to travel with as little inconvenience and embarrassment as possible, while still fulfilling the nation's security goals.

"Unfortunately, the wheels of change turn very slowly," Rossbach says. "And that's difficult for people to understand sometimes."

Rossbach did follow up on the matter though. She let the TSA know that amputees were having problems, and she advised Shuck to send a complaint to the Office of Civil Rights at the TSA. At Rossbach's request, Shuck also sent copies of the letter to Rossbach, to Robin Stoller of the National Safe Skies Alliance, and to Sandra Cammaroto, TSA's senior disability advisor and the program manager of TSA's Screening of Persons with Disabilities Program.

The response was great, Shuck says. Cammaroto sent her a letter answering all of her questions and apologizing for the incident and for the rude behavior and lack of concern of one of the TSA representatives in Tampa. She said that many passengers with prosthetic devices had complained that the new screening procedures were intrusive and humiliating.

In response to these complaints, a meeting was held between Admiral David Stone, the assistant secretary for homeland security for TSA, and Rossbach to discuss TSA's security and customer service goals, and Stone committed TSA to finding a solution. The result: A modified screening procedure

for prosthetic devices was put in place to be implemented starting in late June 2004. Also, TSA recently posted the new procedures on their Web site at www.tsa.gov.

Cammaroto describes the new process: "Screeners are instructed to offer the passenger a private screening at the start of the process and to honor a passenger's request for a private screening at any time during the process. For additional privacy, screeners should offer the passenger a paper drape to use during the physical, visual and ETD (explosive trace detection) inspections. Previously, an ETD sample was taken from around the opening of the PD (prosthetic device) socket. These inspections now are conducted only on the accessible external area of the PD (i.e., areas that can be accessed by the passenger lifting a pant leg or shirt sleeve or by raising a skirt to knee-level). Clothing need not be removed, as the sample is taken from the accessible area only. In addition, screeners are strictly instructed not to require, nor to allow, a passenger to remove a PD."

An Amputee Satisfied

"The people at TSA were great," Shuck says. "I spoke with several great people at TSA, and I congratulate them for those people. I only had one negative experience with a TSA representative, and, considering how many people I spoke with, that isn't a bad number."

Shuck also has high praise for Rossbach and the ACA.

"All amputees should know what Paddy has done," she says. "She couldn't have been better. Amputees need to see that she went out there and really made a change. People need to be made aware that the ACA is out there doing things. As I told Paddy, it was a humiliating time for me, and, thanks to her, no one else should have to go through what I did."

Rossbach also speaks highly of Shuck.

"Debbie is a very good advocate for people because she really stands up for what is right," Rossbach says.

She believes that it was Shuck's and other amputees' complaints, along with the ACA's help, that kept the TSA focused on the problem. "I absolutely think that having an organization (the ACA) to work through made it considerably easier for them because



Debbie Shuck (r) with her mother, Audra Shuck

not only were we able to feed them the complaints, but we were able to give them some of the solutions."

Shuck learned several lessons from her struggle. She learned first that the ACA is sometimes doing work behind the scenes that everyone might not know about. She also learned that whoever said that you can't fight City Hall was wrong. In fact, she says, "You can even fight Homeland Security." ■

Following Up *ACA helps train TSA screeners and test new search regulations*

by Rick Bowers

In June, the Amputee Coalition of America (ACA) helped the Transportation Security Administration (TSA) train many of their screeners on the new airport search guidelines that were implemented beginning in that month.

After the TSA asked for help, the ACA sent outreach specialist Jim Haag, information specialist Becky Bruce, and Vance Hyndman to Nashville, Tennessee, to assist Sandra Cammaroto, TSA's senior disability advisor and the program manager of TSA's Screening of Persons with Disabilities Program. There, they helped Cammaroto with the retraining of 250 TSA screeners on the new screening procedures.