

Passengers with disabilities – CHIRP Competition.

Background

In early 2019, with generous sponsorship from Cotai Ferry Company, it was decided to hold a safety competition for trainees from the Maritime Services Training Institute in Hong Kong. The trainees were invited to propose a system for ensuring the care and safety of passengers with disabilities who embark upon cruises. The three winning entries were of a very high standard, and the winners all received free high-speed ferry tickets between Hong Kong and Macau. After careful consideration, the judges awarded the following prizes:

- First: CHU Long-him
- Second: LAI Cheuk-piu
- Third: KUNG Hin-shun



Chu Long-him receives his prize

The following paper is a summary of the proposals contained in the three winning entries.

Booking Procedures

All websites, brochures and travel agencies should clearly state whether cruise ships have accessible cabins and public areas suitable for the disabled. Available technology such as text telephones and induction loop systems should be listed. In addition, potential difficulties for disabled passengers should be listed. These might include:

- accessibility issues in all ports
- areas of the vessel inaccessible to wheelchair users
- cabin details – width of doors, furniture placement, raised sills etc.
- limitations on service animals on board and in ports
- any special transport arrangements for disabled passengers

Passengers should be requested to state the nature of their disability when they make their booking, and list emergency contacts and any special needs. Those who require specific medication should be asked to bring a supply of extra medicine to be placed in a 'go bag' in case there is an emergency and passengers are required to take to the lifeboats.

Cruise lines should use this booking information to ensure suitable cabins are available, and there are sufficient crew members available to assist. It may be necessary to cap the number of disabled passengers to ensure they can all be properly looked after. Crew assistants assigned to hearing-impaired passengers should know sign language.

Embarkation

The trainees stressed that disabilities come in many forms, and dedicated crew members should be trained to assist with all of them. Whilst mobility impairment is the most common disability in the UK, arrangements also need to be in place to cater for visual impairment, hearing impairment and mental difficulties.

There may need to be separate boarding arrangements for disabled passengers and their Carers, and ship's staff should be available to assist. For wheelchair users, it might be sensible to offer them another wheelchair designed for use on board and capable of being folded and stowed in a lifeboat.

Check-in staff should go over the passenger's requirements and ensure all the details are correct, then give them a detailed briefing about the facilities on board and safety procedures. Passengers requiring medication should provide spare medicine for the 'go bag'. These bags should be made up for each disabled passenger and include warm clothes, a lifejacket and other suitable items.

Disabled passengers should be fitted with brightly coloured wrist bands so they can be readily identified in an emergency. However, the trainees rejected the idea of having a system to track the location of the wearer, citing personal privacy issues. They also pointed out that no disabled passenger should be forced to accept assistance if he or she is capable of getting around unaided.

Drills

A special briefing for disabled passengers and their carers should be held as soon as embarkation is completed. Assigned crew members should all attend and meet the passengers they will be responsible for. This meeting could be followed by a familiarisation tour of the parts of the ship accessible to disabled passengers.

During emergency drills, disabled passengers should muster in a comfortable inside space close to the lifeboat embarkation points. They should be issued with their 'go bags', don lifejackets and wait to be escorted to the boats by the crew.

In an emergency

Cabins and alleyways should have call stations in readily accessible locations, with facilities such as Braille labels and clear instructions. Exit routes should be clearly marked at a convenient height and should include Braille instructions. Lettering should be large, and all signs should have a non-reflective surface. Passengers who are unable to make their way to the muster station can then be collected by the assigned crew members from whichever call station they are using.

All call stations should have a general distress button.

All announcements should be made slowly and clearly, and repeated on a screen at each call station.

Emergency signals should be supplemented with flashing lights, which should be repeated on all call stations.

Whenever possible, a disabled passenger should have a dedicated crew member to assist them in an emergency and, if possible, should have a means of communicating directly with that crew member. Cruise companies should consider issuing an intercom device to all disabled passengers.

Disabled passengers who cannot keep low during a fire, such as wheelchair users, should have an anti-smoke mask in their cabins.

Additional use of technology

Laminated room cards for disabled passengers (or possibly their wrist bands) could operate lifts that may be closed to able-bodied passengers in an emergency.

On-screen accounts records in their cabins could reduce the need for disabled passengers to visit reception.

There are a number of new designs available which may assist in the care of disabled passengers. Wheelchairs which can easily be transformed into stretchers could be carried on board, and consideration should be given to the use of wheelchairs which can be folded into a small lantern-shaped arrangement which can easily be stored in a lifeboat.



New technology can compact a wheelchair to a manageable size

Concluding thoughts

The trainees who took part in this competition have never been to sea - indeed, one of the winners is only in his first year - but their research was impressive and many of their ideas are worthy of consideration by the cruise lines. If newcomers to our industry can come up with such good suggestions, then it should not be impossible for professionals to devise guidelines which will make it safe for disabled people to enjoy a cruise. The trainees all paid tribute to those cruise lines which already have effective policies in place, but there are many which do not, so perhaps it is time for IMO to consider this important topic.



The three prize winners with the judges and staff from the Maritime Services Training Institute