

Airport installing system for deaf, hard of hearing

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by Ben Rand

Staff Writer

Think for a second about what it takes to board an aircraft in the United States. From the time you enter the airport, you have to answer several questions and listen for numerous instructions--everything from showing identification and reporting to a specific gate to removing your belt or shoes at the metal detector.

Now imagine trying to respond when you can't hear well, or at all. It wouldn't be easy.

Making the experience less bewildering for travelers who are deaf or hard of hearing is at the heart of a significant new program at the Greater Rochester International Airport.

Monroe County is deploying technology designed to allow travelers with hearing difficulties to communicate with key airport personnel using instant messaging. Rochester's airport is believed to be the first to install this type of technology across an entire airport terminal.

The system, developed by a Henrietta company, consists of laptop-style computer devices connected by cables and software.

It allows users to enter their identities and send and display typed messages.

The airport is placing the systems at each airline ticket counter and car rental station, the Greater Rochester Visitors Association booth, the central security checkpoint, airport dispatch and airport administration--17 in all. The installation is one of several improvements designed to make the terminal more accessible to people with disabilities in connection with a \$10 million renovation.

Monroe County purchased the systems from Interprettype LLC of Henrietta. "The systems are a customer-service tool for businesses and organizations...They are the next best thing to an interpreter," said Ken Gan, president of Interprettype LLC, who developed and owns a patent on the system.

Gan is also president of Mac's II Mechanical and Collision Service in Henrietta. He developed the message terminals after getting a lot of business from deaf students who attend the National Technical Institute of the Deaf at the Rochester Institute of Technology. He noticed that communicating with the students, largely through using a notepad, was taking too much time.

Monroe County officials decided to install the devices after taking suggestions from NTID on how to improve communications for the deaf and hard of hearing.

In the past, deaf and hard of hearing travelers would have to improvise their communications with airlines and other personnel, said Terry Slaybaugh, director of the Monroe County department of planning development.

In certain instances--say for a special event or for a person with special needs--the airport would make arrangements for an interpreter to help. But on routine matters, "they were pretty much on their own," Slaybaugh said.

The airport is beginning a second set of disability-related improvements, with \$7 million slated for each terminal to update systems and make other changes, he said.

Monroe County is sending an important message to deaf and hard-of-hearing travelers by installing the technology, said Gerard Buckley, assistant vice president of college advancement at NTID.

"When I arrive at an airport and I see an alert system (for the deaf), it tells me the staff has a sensitivity to my needs," said Buckley, who estimates that he travels each month.

That's particularly important in Monroe County, which has one of the highest percentages of deaf residents anywhere in the United States. Thousands of deaf students, their families and others use the airport each year, Buckley said.

One student at NTID sees the issue as more fundamental--as a matter of equality. Abiodun Odunlami, 19, a second year student in lab-science technologies, says that now she's not being left out of important communications. "Now the airport staff can communicate with the deaf and hearing the same way," Odunlami said.

The Interpretive terminals also save time, said Kumar Singh, 22. "It's more easy and efficient" to use the terminals to communicate than to write notes, he said.

Monroe County Executive Maggie Brooks said she was glad that a local company could provide the technology. "It's another example of ground-breaking products being manufactured in Rochester," she said.

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