

Disabled travelers to benefit from settlement with Web travel agents

Travelers with disabilities can now reserve hotel rooms with accessible features says Public Justice.

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In a victory for disabled travelers, Hotels.com and Expedia.com, two of the world's leading online travel companies, have agreed to revamp their travel reservation systems so that millions of travelers with disabilities can reserve hotel rooms with accessible features.

The settlement ends a lawsuit filed in California alleging that Hotels.com's refusal to guarantee a reservation for wheelchair-accessible rooms discriminated against people with disabilities. Hotels.com had been treating accessibility as an optional "amenity," like a king-sized bed. Individuals with disabilities could not find out whether an accessible room was available until after they traveled to their destination and checked in at the hotel.

The suit was filed on behalf of two disabled women by Public Justice, the Washington, DC-based national public interest law firm renowned for championing civil, environmental, consumer and detainee rights; and Disability Rights Advocates, a non-profit law center based in Berkeley, Calif., specializing in high-impact lawsuits on behalf of people with disabilities.

"For years, travelers with disabilities have been unable to take advantage of the convenience and low-cost options of booking hotel rooms online," said plaintiff, Bonnie Lewkowicz. "Now, for the first time, I will be able to reserve a hotel room online that meets my needs, just like anyone else."

Lewkowicz and co-plaintiff, Judith Smith, are members of AXIS Dance Company, a not-for-profit company of professional dancers with and without disabilities based in Oakland, Calif. Both Smith and Lewkowicz rely on wheelchairs for mobility.

As part of the settlement, Hotels.com and Expedia.com will gather information about hotels' accessibility features, and will then incorporate that information into their Web sites so that travelers can both search for hotels with rooms that offer the particular accommodations they need, and make special requests online to book those accessible rooms. Wheelchair users staying at a hotel need wide doorways, grab bars and accessible bathrooms. People with visual or hearing impairments also need accessible features, such as Braille signage or a text telephone.

Each special request will be given individual attention by a trained customer service representative, who will work with the customer to accommodate his or her needs. The new Web site features will be available later this year.

"By adding Web site features to meet the needs of disabled consumers, Hotels.com and Expedia are showing that they are true leaders in the hospitality industry," added Public Justice Staff Attorney Victoria Ni, co-counsel for the plaintiffs. "We hope and believe that other online travel agencies will follow their lead."

In 2006, American online consumer travel sales generated $79 billion. For American travelers, the Internet is an indispensable resource for planning trips and booking lodgings and transportation. Adults with disabilities spend over $10 billion annually on travel, and almost half of them consult the Internet to support their travel needs.

The settlement is available in the Civil Rights & Liberties Case Index on the Public Justice Web site at www.publicjustice.net.

Sarah Dean is the Communications Coordinator for the Public Justice Foundation, the non-profit membership organization that supports the work of Public Justice, P.C. For more information about Public Justice or this case, visit www.publicjustice.net.

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