The Honorable John Thune  
Chairman  
Senate Committee on Commerce, Science, & Transportation  
512 Dirksen Senate Building  
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable Bill Nelson  
Ranking Member  
Senate Committee on Commerce, Science & Transportation  
512 Dirksen Senate Office Building  
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable Bill Shuster  
Chairman  
House Transportation & Infrastructure Committee  
2251 Rayburn House Office Building  
Washington, DC 20515

The Honorable Peter DeFazio  
Ranking Member  
House Transportation & Infrastructure Committee  
2164 Rayburn House Office Building  
Washington, DC 20515

June 22, 2016

Dear Chairman Thune, Chairman Shuster, Ranking Member Nelson and Ranking Member DeFazio:

The undersigned organizations are writing in support of four provisions (Sections 3106, 3116-3118) included in the Senate Federal Aviation Administration Reauthorization language (H.R. 636) that would increase access to air travel for millions of Americans with disabilities. All four provisions enjoyed bipartisan support in H.R. 636 and the final bill passed by a vote of 95-3. Accordingly, our organizations, which represent a diverse stakeholder group serving individuals living with different types of disabilities, urge their inclusion in any reauthorization or extension of the FAA’s current operating authority.

The ability to travel by air has a critical impact on many aspects of life—from the kind of job you can have, to where you can live, to whether you can access a provider or participate in a clinical trial that is far away from home. As the 30th Anniversary of the Air Carrier Access Act (ACAA) approaches, we celebrate the great strides that have been made to increase air travel accessibility. We are also, however, reminded of the ongoing challenges faced by passengers with disabilities and appreciate that there is still much work to be done. Some areas for improvement are highlighted in the Secretary of Transportation’s annual report to Congress on disability related air travel complaints. According to the 2014 report, more than 27,000 such complaints were filed—representing an increase of approximately 9% over the volume reported the previous year.
Notably, of the complaints filed in 2014, almost half were related to “failure to provide adequate assistance to persons using wheelchairs”.

The four disability provisions in H.R. 636 would improve air travel for passengers with disabilities by (1) identifying best practice standards in airport accessibility, (2) undertaking a study on use of in-cabin wheelchair restraint systems, (3) examining training policies regarding assistance for travelers with disabilities to identify best practices, and (4) creating an advisory committee with diverse stakeholders to investigate and report on the needs of passengers with disabilities.

Best practices in airport accessibility would be identified and reported to Congress under section 3106, which would promote learning across geographic regions and market segments and identify opportunities for improvement in airport accessibility.

The study set forth in section 3116 would explore ways that wheelchairs could be accommodated in-flight through the use of cabin wheelchair restraint systems. The potential for passengers with disabilities to remain in their wheelchair in-flight is critical as such travelers must currently transfer multiple times—even when taking a direct flight. For a seemingly simple direct flight, a passenger with disabilities must first transfer from wheelchair to aisle chair, then from aisle chair to airline seat, then from airline seat back to aisle chair, then from aisle chair back to wheelchair. Multiple such transfers can be especially challenging—or even impossible—for many travelers with disabilities. The potential for a traveler to remain in his or her wheelchair in-flight is imperative to study as such an approach could not only potentially enable safer travel, it could also significantly decrease damage that occurs to wheelchairs when placed in luggage/stowage areas for transport.

Also important is the review of airline and contractor personnel training and the dissemination of best practices for assisting air travelers with disabilities as set forth in section 3117. As noted above in the Secretary’s report to Congress, significant issues exist regarding the assistance of travelers who rely on wheelchairs, and this provision would address these issues. It would also highlight other training issues that impact all travelers with disabilities.

Finally, section 3118 would establish under the Secretary of Transportation an Advisory Committee to consider and report on the air travel needs of passengers with disabilities. The Committee would be comprised of representatives from key stakeholder groups including passengers with disabilities, national disability organizations, air carriers, airport operators, and contract service providers.

These provisions are critical to improving the experience of passengers living with different types of disabilities and represent a balanced and thoughtful approach to investigating ways in which access to air travel may be improved. For these reasons, we strongly support the provisions, and urge the inclusion of Sections 3106, 3116-3118 in any reauthorization or extension of the FAA’s current operating authority.
Respectfully submitted by:

ALS Association
Easterseals
CureCMD
Cure Duchenne
Cure SMA
Muscular Dystrophy Association (MDA)
National Down Syndrome Society
National Multiple Sclerosis Society
Paralyzed Veterans Association
Parent Project Muscular Dystrophy
The ARC of the United States
United Spinal Association

If you have any questions or concerns or would like additional information, please contact Kristin Stephenson, Vice President Policy & Advocacy, Muscular Dystrophy Association (MDA) at kstephenson@mdausa.org or Heather Ansley, Associate General Counsel, Paralyzed Veterans of America, heathera@pva.org.