Nightmare in San Francisco

Below are excerpts from a letter Diane Kirlin Murphy wrote to the Transportation Security Administration (TSA), followed by excerpts from their response. If you would like to read the letters in their entirety, go to www.post-polio.org or call PHI.

Diane Kirlin Murphy, Erdenheim, Pennsylvania

“My point in documenting this incident is not to protest the fact that it will take longer to ‘clear’ me any time I fly. ... I just need some sort of clarification.”

“I am a polio survivor and have been paralyzed since childhood which requires me to wear two long leg braces (KAFOs), walk with forearm crutches and always use a manual chair when I travel. Last August I flew from Philadelphia to San Francisco ... and breezed through the security checkpoint after a body pat-down and an inspection of my wheelchair.

“On the way home, I was told to wait for a female security screener ... while my belongings went through the metal detector. After a full body pat-down, I was told that I would not be cleared to fly until I submitted to further inspection of my legs and braces. ... I was told to drop my pants, while they offered to hold up a sheet to prevent onlookers from seeing what was going on!

“It was at this point I refused. I cannot physically stand and drop my pants while maintaining my balance. Never mind the absurdity of disrobing behind a sheet ... . The TSA would not give me my crutches or my handbag because I had not been cleared. I was then told that I could not fly that day if I did not submit to the search and ... that I could not go to the bathroom until I was cleared. This was getting out of control. By now I was swelling with outrage and in tears. I had no choice but to submit to the humiliating and demeaning strip search by two female security officers. They reluctantly agreed to allow the search to be conducted in an adjoining ladies room, and ... then I was allowed to use the bathroom, and fly home.”

Sandra Cammaroto, Disability Programs Division, Office of Civil Rights and Liberties, TSA

“At the outset, please accept my sincere and deepest apology ... . An investigation of this incident with Transportation Security Officers (TSO) management in San Francisco revealed that they applied the wrong procedure, explosive trace detection (ETD) sampling, to your metal leg braces ... .

“Whenever a person wearing a support appliance alarms the walk-through metal detector, they must undergo additional screening. A visual inspection should be conducted on the exterior accessible area of the support appliance, the areas that can be assessed by a person lifting his/her pant leg, shirt sleeve, or raising a skirt to knee-level. If no area can be assessed, a limited pat-down will be conducted to ensure that no prohibited items are being concealed. At no time during the process, should you be required to remove your support brace for additional screening or remove your clothing.

“... The exact screening procedure depends on whether the individual can stand and walk, only stand or not stand at all. TSOs are taught to offer a private screening for the pat-down inspection. A companion/assistant may accompany the passenger to the area after he/she clears screening to provide assistance ... .

“Walkers, crutches, and canes that can fit through the machine must undergo x-ray screening ... . TSOs should have allowed you to have your cane [Murphy’s letter referred to crutches] once it had cleared to assist you during the screening process; however, ... your handbag cannot be given back to you until you have cleared the screening process.

“Regarding use of the restroom once a passenger enters the screening process, he/she cannot exit it until screening is complete.”

For more information on the screening process geared for people with disabilities, visit tips for “Travelers with Disabilities & Medical Conditions” located at www.tsa.gov under “Our Travelers.”