

## When you need a companion to help you get from here to there

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Article Created: 02/10/2008 02:42:23 AM PST

AS SOMEONE who has an almost-91-year-old father with two bad knees and a yen to occasionally travel, I am well aware of the difficulties that elderly and disabled people have navigating airports and recreational destinations.

Dad, who's terribly hard-of-hearing now, too, walks with a cane (or two) around the house and can make his way down the aisles of Costco by leaning on the grocery basket for support. But there is no way he can stand in a long line for the security checkpoint and then walk through an airport to a departure gate. Ditto for walking from an arrival gate to retrieve his luggage and then on to a waiting taxi, shuttle or grandson's car to take him wherever he is going.

So, on trips, he gets around in a wheelchair. With advance notice, airlines are accommodating, providing wheelchairs and attendants to push them (for a \$10-\$15 tip). Outgoing, at check-in, the attendants send Dad's luggage onto the plane, get him through security and then to the gate waiting area.

Incoming, an attendant meets him at the airline door, gathers his luggage, and wheels him out to the curb.

Sometimes I travel with him, to family events such as Thanksgiving. We still use the wheelchair service. And I take over the job of keeping track of such things as his jacket, snack, identification papers, tickets and — uh-oh — departure gate changes. I am

also there to translate in an amplified voice whatever somebody says to him.

It almost breaks my heart and I keep my fingers crossed when he has to take a flight by himself (a friend or relative always meets him at the other end), although he's spirited enough to want to do it.

Because of his situation, I suppose, I am especially alert to the seems-to-me-growing number of people who are also traveling in wheelchairs or with canes or walkers.

So when I recently received a press release about something called Flying Companions LLC, I blinked.

I am aware that everyday caretakers and temporary personal attendants such as nurses accompany clients and patients on trips when necessary. But I hadn't thought about there being a resource just for that occasional purpose.

The Atlanta-based company (888-350-8886 or <http://www.FlyingCompanions.com>) has been in business only since May, said its president, Doug Iannelli, in a telephone conversation.

It provides people who "need a little extra assistance" with a travelmate to personally and exclusively take care of virtually everything involved, from researching and booking a trip, if needed, to accompanying the client every inch of the way. If doing an entire trip with a client isn't necessary, the companion will only accompany him or her during the actual transit part of a trip.

The travelmate, who regularly keeps friends or family members informed by phone or e-mail during a trip of what's going on, will even provide on-board flight amenities, such as a pillow, games and/or a DVD player with movies.

Company founder Iannelli, 38, holds a degree in aviation management, has worked for several airlines and tour operators and as a travel agent. (He still is affiliated with a travel agency, he said, but Flying Companions is entirely his own enterprise.)

When a friend had a stroke and needed to fly somewhere for special medical treatment and had no family members to accompany her, Iannelli went. "Then I got to thinking, and something just kind of clicked about the need for such a service," he said. He decided to start it himself.

Persons of any age who need assistance may engage the service, although the company was originally aimed at seniors, Iannelli said. It was started "to allow seniors ... the freedom to continue to fly without fear ... to remain independent."

In fact, one of his recent clients was a woman in her 40s from Seattle who needed to fly to Buffalo, N.Y., and was scared to death of flying. She needed someone to guide her through the "whole concept" of traveling by air. Iannelli took care of everything, and it worked out so well that she is hiring him again for an upcoming trip.

So far, Iannelli is the sole companion at the company, and has served about 15 clients. But he has back-up people (among them nurses who are experienced travelers, he said) if there is a scheduling conflict and for when the company expands (he's hoping to have people based all over the U.S. and possibly, long-range, to franchise the service). He provides proof of his insurance and licensing and references to clients upon request.

Iannelli picks up clients at their homes or at an airport to start a trip, depending on their preference. He will accompany a client to any national or international commercial airport in the world. (He's soon leaving on a weeks-long trip to

Naples, Italy, with a client).

Because Iannelli lives in Atlanta, unless a client lives nearby, Iannelli can't meet face-to-face until the trip. He and the client have to talk by phone to determine if they would be compatible travelmates if the job is more than transit assistance and involves spending multiple days or weeks together.

However, Iannelli said that if a flight-only companion trip brought him to the Bay Area and a potential future client here wanted to meet face-to-face before committing to hiring his service, that could be arranged.

So how much does all this cost?

Iannelli said there is no "specific rate," that he presents "an entire package price" based on destination, airfare, how long a trip is for, hotel costs, car rentals, food, special requests and other travel fees. These depend on such things as particular days and seasons of travel, for example, as airfares and hotel rates fluctuate.

He gave an example of a past charge: He accompanied two people from San Francisco to New York on a one-way flight. He charged them \$1,281, which included his airfare, other travel fees, food and hotel room for one night. (The clients had already arranged their own airfare).

Yes, it costs, but to my mind it's not outrageous if someone otherwise might have to make two roundtrips himself to get an elderly or disabled relative who can't travel alone to their city for a visit or special occasion such as a wedding.

No doubt many seniors who have the money to pay would still prefer to pay a friend or relative to help them. But there are not always friends or relatives



who can do so. And rather than missing out on a family celebration, a senior might find it worthwhile to engage such a service as Flying Companions.

Maybe, even, a group of family members could share the cost of bringing grandma to them.

E-mail your travel tips to

bbrenner@bayareanewsgroup.com . You may also write to Bari Brenner at 4770 Willow Road, Pleasanton, CA 94588. Please include your name, city of residence and telephone number.