

TRANSPORTATION

Newark Airport's new sensory room helps travelers with autism cope with flying anxiety

2-minute read



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Amid the madness of holiday travel, Newark Liberty International Airport may be slightly less overwhelming for some of its passengers this season. The Port Authority of New York and New Jersey unveiled a sensory room at the airport's Terminal A on Monday, providing a space to help people on the autism spectrum deal with the chaos of flying.

With its beanbag chairs and multicolored carpets, the room looks more like one you would find in an art museum than at one of the nation's busiest airports.

Newark joins other air hubs, including Pittsburgh International Airport, New York LaGuardia and San Diego, in what Conde Nast Traveler magazine says is a relatively new push to accommodate travelers with disabilities.

Why Newark Airport added a sensory room

Port Authority Vice Chairman Jeffrey Lynford understands the need for the accommodation all too well: His daughter has autism.

"We had to unexpectedly spend a night in an airport due to a flight issue," Lynford said in an interview. The experience was challenging, especially for Dylan, due to the sensory overload and disruption of routine."

Lynford's wife, Tondra, a trustee of the Anderson Center for Autism in Staatsburg, New York, described a family trip that went awry two years ago. The Lynfords were traveling from a visit

with relatives on the West Coast when there was a problem with their flight that forced them to land in Chicago late at night.

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“There were no hotels left in Chicago. We were going to have to spend the night in the airport,” Tondra Lynford said. “It was summer and we didn't have a lot of warm clothing, and the airport was freezing from the air conditioning. This was the first thing that happened, but Dylan was controlling herself pretty well.”

Why travelers with autism get anxious

Changes in routine, loud sounds, voices, crowds, and bright or flashing lights, among other things, can cause a crippling amount of stress and anxiety for people on the spectrum. The news that the family would have to sleep in the airport overnight was too much for Dylan, who was 47 at the time, her mom said.

“She immediately became very, very agitated. She was pacing back and forth and gritting her teeth and waving her hands. She just kept saying, ‘I can't do that. I can't do that. It's too cold here. I can't do that.’

“We didn't have any choice,” said Tondra Lynford. “We tried to lie down on a bench. I wrapped up a sweater and put that under her head. She was terrified and said, ‘Somebody is going to hurt us if we stay here.’ And she started to rock back and forth.”

People watched Dylan in her distress as the family members tried their best to get some rest.

The new sensory room in Newark Airport “represents a significant stride in making travel less stressful for families like ours,” Tondra Lynford said.

Hours, features for new quiet room

Developed in consultation with the Anderson Center for Autism, the room is designed to alleviate sensory overload often experienced by people like Dylan in busy public spaces.

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Open seven days a week — 6 a.m. to 10 p.m. — it features soft lighting, comfortable seating, speakers that project calming sounds and even fish tanks.

“There are two aquariums in the sensory room,” Tondra Lynford said. “This has a huge impact, because water, the sound of water, and watching things floating in water, these are all things that are very soothing.”

There are also water-filled “bubble columns” to soothe anxious nerves and a mock-up of an airplane cabin — two rows with three seats apiece — to help people get accustomed to the in-flight experience before they board.

Jeffrey Lynford hopes the initiative will spur more like it, at Newark and elsewhere.

“We'd like to have larger facilities,” he said, predicting that the demand for the room's calming vibes “will be bigger than we anticipate.”

Gene Myers covers disability and mental health for NorthJersey.com and the USA TODAY Network. For unlimited access to the most important news from your local community, please subscribe or activate your digital account today.

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