



APPLETON AIRPORT

Appleton airport marks World Autism Awareness Day

ATW features programs and amenities to ease travel stress for families

Airports can be crowded, noisy, overwhelming places, but if you have a family member with autism the experience of air travel can be even more uncomfortable. To mark World Autism Awareness Day on April 2, 2025, leaders at the Appleton International Airport (ATW) will host representatives from the Autism Society of the Fox Valley to highlight universal design features in the existing airport and the concourse expansion. They will also announce a date for the Wings for Autism event. **The event will take place at the ATW baggage claim area at 10 am on April 2.**

The Appleton airport has provided services and accommodations for individuals with sensory issues since 2021. The current terminal features two quiet rooms aimed at offering a tranquil and managed space for those who may feel overstimulated, overwhelmed, or in need of a quiet moment. These rooms are available for use both before and after passing through security checks.

“Part of our mission of creating an exceptional customer experience is to make the airport accessible to all individuals through universal design and specialized services,” said Abe Weber, airport director. “We believe people with disabilities, especially autism, should be able to navigate air travel comfortably just like any other traveler.”

Weber said ATW has been part of the Hidden Disabilities program since 2024. Airport team members wear a sunflower badge to show they have been trained to recognize individuals with non-visible disabilities and to discreetly help with additional support, understanding, or simply a little more time to get through the airport.

Travelers can also get help from a [TSA Passenger Support Specialist](#) at ATW who has received specialized training to assist and communicate with individuals with disabilities needing help through the screening process.

The new airport expansion has been completely designed around a universal travel experience for both neurodivergent individuals and those with visible disabilities. Features in the expansion include:

- The concourse will feature a sensory support room for any neurodivergent traveler who might be overwhelmed by a typical airport setting. This is one of the few airports in the nation to have space set aside for this purpose.
- ATW will have expanded restroom facilities including family restrooms that are universal gender so parents can more easily accompany children with sensory issues.
- The concourse design includes more daylighting to mimic the outdoors and decrease any sensitivity individuals may have to artificial light.
- The connector area will be on a gradual incline eliminating the need for escalators. This will make going through the airport with strollers or even wheelchairs much easier for parents.

“One of our goals in expanding the airport was universal accessibility,” said Outagamie County Executive Thomas Nelson. “The design elements in the new concourse will decrease the stress of air travel for families with autistic children to reduce stimulation caused by a potentially overwhelming environment.”

Alex and Siraya Gloudemans plan their travel through ATW specifically because of the programs and services offered. The family has three children, the oldest is non-verbal and autistic requiring

significant supports. Both parents are active in the Autism Society of Greater Wisconsin and advocate for community partners that work to support the unique needs of families like theirs.

“They experience stimuli differently than their peers so a variety of modifications and supports are needed in overwhelming environments such as airports” Alex Gloudemans said. “Personally, we travel with our wagon as a mobile safe spot, snacks, sensory toys, electronics, and medications to help him feel safe and regulated. Without travel partners that design services and accommodations for individuals like our son, we wouldn’t have the opportunity to visit relatives or take vacations like typical families.”

Part of travel preparation is why ATW will host Wings for Autism on May 17, 2025. ATW, Air Wisconsin, Autism Society of Greater Wisconsin, and the TSA will host an “airport rehearsal” specifically designed for individuals with autism spectrum disorder, their families, and aviation professionals. Families are able to expose their children to the process of walking into an airport, getting a boarding pass, going through security, walking through the concourse, and boarding a plane. The event will host two groups and families [must pre-register at this link](#).

“Air Wisconsin is proud to partner with The Arc Fond du Lac and Appleton International Airport for Wings For Autism. We continually seek opportunities to support our local community and positively impact many lives. By providing an aircraft and a top-tier crew for this event, we aim to contribute to a welcoming and inclusive experience for individuals with special needs and their families. We are honored to be involved in such a meaningful event so close to home,” stated Robert Binns, President and CEO of Air Wisconsin Airlines.

“Going through the airport and airplane boarding process helps kids process what’s going on and they learn what to expect, removing the fear of the unknown.” Weber said. “And we’re all about making travel comfortable for all people.”

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About Appleton International Airport

[Appleton International Airport](#) connects our community to the world through American Airlines, Delta Air Lines, United Airlines, and Allegiant Air. In addition to offering nonstop service to 19 destinations, Appleton Airport connects to 13 major international airport hubs from which travelers can fly to almost anywhere in the world. Using Appleton Airport, travelers can safely and more conveniently get to their destination and home again, leaving them more time for what really matters. Appleton International Airport is the third largest airport in Wisconsin according to arrivals and departures. Visit atwairport.com to learn more.