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On Board with Autism Program takes off at Detroit Metropolitan Airport

--Flight rehearsal program for families that have children with autism

WHAT: Twenty-nine Detroit-area children, including 19 with autism and family members will participate in a program designed to familiarize them with Detroit Metropolitan Airport and experience all travel procedures as if they were taking an actual flight.

WHAT ELSE: Members of the media are welcome to attend the *On Board with Autism* event at Detroit Metropolitan Airport (DTW). See news release below for details and objectives of the program.

WHEN: Saturday, March 22, 2014 at 9:30 a.m.

WHERE: McNamara Terminal check-in lobby south end (closest to Westin entrance)

WHO: Representatives of the Airport Authority and Autism Alliance of Michigan will be available for interviews in the check-in lobby. **Members of the media who wish to follow the “flight rehearsal” to the gate must submit to passenger screening and present a government-issued photo I.D. Contact Michelle Plawecki at michelle.plawecki@wcaa.us with full name and date of birth.**

[MORE BELOW]

NEWS RELEASE

On Board with Autism takes flight

DETROIT, Mich. (March 21, 2014)— Twenty-nine children, including 19 with autism and their families will visit the McNamara Terminal at Detroit Metropolitan Airport (DTW) on Saturday morning March 22, 2014 to experience everything that goes along with air travel.

“For families living with autism, air travel is often an extremely difficult or impossible option. The entire experience, from the size of the airport, number of people, security protocols, noise, smells, and visual stimulation can easily over stimulate a person with autism,” said Autism Alliance of Michigan (AAoM) Executive Director Colleen Allen. “Detroit Metro Airport’s *On Board with Autism* program is an important initiative and AAoM is excited about partnering with the Airport Authority to help families feel more comfortable with traveling.”

Wayne County Airport Authority (WCAA) and AAoM teamed up to create the *On Board with Autism* “flight rehearsal” program. Many families who have children with autism avoid flying because they are unsure how their children will respond. In an effort to ease the anxiety associated with an airport visit and flying, the Airport Authority intends to offer these rehearsals multiple times throughout the year.

“Our objective with *On Board with Autism* is to provide a set of experiences which may allow families living with autism the opportunity to travel by air,” said WCAA CEO Thomas Naughton. “This program is a key airport initiative.”

The official kick-off event on March 22 will provide the valuable opportunity for children with autism and their family members to visit the airport and familiarize themselves with the terminal and travel procedures. Pre-registered families will be provided an itinerary in advance of their visit as well as directions for parking and locating the Delta Air Lines check-in counter in the McNamara Terminal. At check-in they receive their “boarding pass” indicating what gate their scheduled flight will be departing from, and will be directed to a TSA passenger screening checkpoint where they will be processed exactly as if they were a passenger. Once past security, they are encouraged to explore the terminal and all of its features such as the moving tram, light/music tunnel between A and B/C concourses, moving walkways, the water feature, etc. AAoM staff will be strategically set-up by the water feature to support and assist families with any questions or concerns, and to speak with interested travellers about

autism. Families meet at the assigned gate and wait for boarding instructions. Once on-board, with their seat belts secure, the Delta flight crew will provide the standard pre-flight announcements and instructions. Families will be encouraged to explore the aircraft, restrooms, and experience first-hand unfamiliar noises such as slamming overhead storage bins and intercom announcements. After the families de-plane, there will be a small reception in the gate area where lunch and give-a-way bags are provided. This is a great opportunity for families, Airport Authority, AAoM, Delta, and TSA staff to mingle and receive feedback regarding the program from the families.

“Delta Air Lines is proud to be partners in this successful program at Detroit Metropolitan Airport. Our core values reflect giving back to the communities we serve and we’re pleased to support with the use of our aircraft aided by our award-winning employees,” said Cookie Gonzalez, Director – Delta Airport Customer Service – Detroit hub.

Autism statistics from the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) identify around 1 in 88 American children as on the autism spectrum. It is the fastest growing developmental disability in the US, increasing 10% - 17% annually. The disorder affects more than two million individuals in the U.S. and tens of millions worldwide. In Michigan there are about 60,000 individuals diagnosed with an Autism Spectrum Disorder, including more than 16,500 children in Michigan public schools.

“Partnerships like this make a huge difference in creating a more inclusive and rewarding environment for people with autism,” said Michigan Lieutenant Governor Brian Calley. “Because of this program, more families will be able to experience more of what the world has to offer.”

Families interested in participating in future *On Board with Autism* events at DTW can e-mail Stacie Rulison from AAoM at stacie.rulison@aaomi.org or WCAA’s michelle.plawecki@wcaa.us to express interest in the program.

Sponsors of this new airport program include Delta Air Lines, Transportation Security Administration (TSA), World Duty Free and HMS Host.



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Detroit Metropolitan Wayne County Airport (DTW) welcomed more than 32 million passengers in 2013 and is one of the world's leading air transportation hubs. With service from 13 scheduled passenger airlines, Michigan's largest airport offers more than 1,100 flights per day to and from nearly 150 non-stop destinations on four continents. In 2010, DTW ranked highest in overall customer satisfaction among large airport in the J.D. Power and Associates North America Airport Satisfaction Study. With two award-winning passenger terminals, six jet runways, and an onsite AAA Four-Diamond Westin Hotel, DTW is among the world's most efficient, customer friendly and operationally capable airports in North America. DTW is operated by Wayne County Airport Authority, which also operates nearby Willow Run Airport – an important corporate, cargo and general aviation facility. The Airport Authority is entirely self-sustaining and does not receive any tax dollars to support airport operations. Visit www.metroairport.com for more information.