

# **An Orientation & Mobility Primer**

## **A Self Evaluation**

### **For**

#### **Workforce Development One Stop Providers**

#### **Serving Customers who are Blind or Visually Impaired**

*(Prepared by the NYS Office of Children and Family Services  
&  
Commission for the Blind and Visually Handicapped)*

#### **Orientation & Mobility**

- Does staff know what Orientation & Mobility is, and that it is available to customers?

O&M refers to the set of skills a person who is blind uses to move safely and purposefully through the environment; basically, the ability to get where you need to go. Orientation refers to a person's mental map and understanding of the area he is traveling in. It involves directionality, using the remaining senses, and attention to cues in the environment. Mobility refers to the ability to move safely, with a method to walk in a straight line and avoid obstacles.

Most people who are visually impaired and seeking employment have had training in O&M by certified, university trained, instructors. Some people find additional O&M training helpful to facilitate learning the layout of a new building, the route to a new employment setting, availability of public transportation, etc.

- Does staff know how to guide a customer who is blind and requests assistance?

Always ask before providing assistance. If assistance is accepted, offer your arm. The customer will lightly hold on above your elbow, following a half step behind. Walk at a normal pace, with your arm relaxed. Indicate changes in terrain (stairs, curbs, ramps etc) by verbalizing their upcoming presence, and hesitating briefly when arriving at the change. The guide proceeds first. On a flight of stairs, pause at the first and last step. Indicate narrow passages by bending your arm behind your back, alerting the follower to go behind you single file. This type of assistance is called "Sighted Guide."

A customer using a long cane will transfer the cane to his free hand. The cane will be kept at the user's side or folded up. If the customer is using a Guide Dog, the dog will be "heeled," on the owner's left side, with the right hand free to hold the

elbow of a guide. The dog's harness will be dropped, indicating to the dog that it is temporarily not responsible for guiding.

For some customers, verbal directions may be sufficient, and they may prefer to walk on their own. Some customers will have sufficient residual vision to walk without any type of assistance.

- Is staff familiar with the different ways a person who is blind gets around?
  1. Residual vision may be sufficient to walk without any modifications needed.
  2. Long cane, extended in front of user. Purpose is to detect obstacles, find terrain changes, explore environment and identify user as having a visual impairment.
  3. Guide dog
  4. Sighted Guide (see description above).
  5. Electronic Travel Aids – there are some hand held, or eyeglass mounted, or software aids which provide information about one's surroundings.
- Is staff aware that state and federal law guarantees a person who is blind the legal right to be accompanied by a Guide Dog in all places where the public is allowed?

This includes restaurants, hotels, museums, airplanes, busses, apartments, schools, medical facilities, movie theaters, resorts, grocery stores, and more.

- Is staff aware of general Guide Dog “etiquette”?

When a Guide Dog is in harness, it is a working dog and is on duty. Do not pet, feed, distract or talk to the dog. The Guide Dog handler must maintain discipline to remain a safe and effective working team. Any questions about the dog or about interacting with the dog should be addressed to the handler. When the team is seated, the dog will be unobtrusive and out of the flow of traffic, generally tucked under a table or chair.

- Does staff have a basic understanding that there are many causes of blindness, most of which result in some remaining vision?

Different eye conditions influence vision in different ways. If a person experiences reduced acuity, he or she may have vision in all sectors of the visual field, but it may be distorted or blurred. He or she may have difficulty discerning fine details, reading and recognizing faces. Such a person may be able to quickly scan an environment and orient well enough to move easily through a room. If an eye condition results in restricted peripheral vision, the individual may have good central vision, but have difficulty with detecting obstacles, functioning in dim

lighting, using stairs, and quickly scanning a room. This variability impacts how a person uses his or her remaining vision.

## **Communicating**

- Is staff aware of the importance of verbalizing directions?

Use concrete terms, such as right and left, as opposed to "over there." Avoid pointing unless you know the person has residual vision to see the gesture. Refer to right and left as they apply to the person who is blind. What is on your right is on the left of a person facing you. Be specific when giving directions, e.g., "To find the conference room, go to the end of this corridor, turn right, and it's the third room on your left."

- Will staff initiate an introduction to a customer who is blind?

Staff should initiate an introduction and identify themselves by name and function. A person with low vision may not see name badges. Also, inform a customer when you leave a room.\*

- Is staff aware of communicating important information not readily apparent to a person who is blind?

As a courtesy, explain that there is a phone access system at the entry of the building, or that there is temporary construction in a common area of the building.

- Is staff familiar with alternatives to handing out materials in normal size print?

Alternatives to normal size print include large print, Braille, using a reader, tape recorded material, or diskettes. Hand written notes should be done with a black felt tip pen.

- Does staff know how to use a signature guide?

A piece of cardboard or a plastic or metal signature template can be used to indicate where a signature is required. Place the cardboard edge horizontally below a signature line or place the opening of a signature template where a signature is required.

## **Facilities**

### **Parking and Drop-off Areas**

- Is the building easy to approach?

A well-defined approach to the building is desirable. Keep obstacles (trashcans, benches, and newspaper boxes) out of the main travel path. An approach to the building that requires crossing a wide-open area, without borders, is difficult to zero in on. Keep bushes trimmed back from the sidewalk and trim any tree branches at face level on the sidewalk. Parking lot spaces must not allow car bumpers to extend over the sidewalk. Steps should have contrasting color on the edges. Shiny, reflective surfaces can be confusing. Large areas of plate glass may not provide enough contrast to be visible. There may be a need to indicate their presence by decals on the glass, or something else to provide contrast.

### **Entrance to the Building**

- Are entrances clear of clutter, well lit and clearly defined?

A firmly secured mat or a change in the floor texture will help to locate the entrance again when it is time to leave.

### **Elevators**

- Are there both visible and verbal or audible door opening/closing and floor indicators?
- Do the controls outside and inside the cab have raised and Braille lettering?
- Is there a sign on the jamb at each floor identifying the floor in raised and Braille letters?\*

### **Lighting**

- Is there adequate lighting and control of glare?

Lighting has a major impact on the degree to which people who are visually impaired can use their remaining sight. The right lighting conditions can improve ability to see, and wrong lighting conditions can distract, distort, temporarily blind, or be painful. Many eye conditions have different and opposite lighting needs. Be sensitive to each individual's needs when choosing seating areas. Keep light directed on objects to be attended to, and not shining into a person's face.

Glare may result when natural or artificial light reflects off a shiny surface, such as a large windowed wall, polished floors, or certain paper coatings. Blinds, shades, and rugs may help control glare. Customers may prefer to sit with windows behind or to the side, instead of facing them.

### **Use of Contrast**

- Is contrast used to allow for greater recognition of key features?

Colors that contrast sharply to someone with normal vision may be less distinguishable to someone with low vision. Two items of similar color may blend together. Items with exaggerated contrast will stand out more, making them easier to find. Contrast can be used to make it easier to detect doorframes, stair edges, railings, etc. Travel is easier when floors have a matte finish and are a contrasting color from the walls. Reading is easier when text has a high contrast from its background.

## **Stairs**

- Do the stair nosings contrast with the treads and risers?
- Do treads have a non-slip surface?
- Do stairs have continuous rails that extend beyond the first and last step?

## **Obstacles not detectable by a cane**

- Have hazards that are not detectable by a long cane been remedied?

A cane will not detect protruding objects above waist level. Examples include fire extinguishers mounted head-high in a main hall, mops sitting at an angle in a janitorial bucket, and pole-mounted objects where the object protrudes significantly farther than the base.

## **Signs**

- Are signs in consistent locations, with high visual contrast, Braille and raised letters and numbers, which can be read visually or tactually?

ADA guidelines call for signs to be mounted on the wall, sixty inches above the floor to the centerline of the sign, on the latch side of the door, or to the right of double doors, and out of the swing of those doors.

Nancy Levy  
Orientation & Mobility Instructor  
NYS Commission for the Blind  
(716) 847-3534

---

\* Marshall, Scott, J.D., Joffe, Elga, M.Ed., [The Americans With Disabilities Act - Communications Accommodations Project](#). Retrieved November, 2000 [www.deafblind.com/usdishma.html](http://www.deafblind.com/usdishma.html)

\*\* [Disability Initiative](#). U.S. Department of Labor. Retrieved 11 November, 2000 [www.doleta.gov](http://www.doleta.gov)