

A Primer for Serving Workforce Customers who are Blind or Visually Impaired

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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.

This primer provides information that will assist Workforce staff working with customers who are blind or visually impaired.

Orientation & Mobility

Orientation and Mobility (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 in which she/he is traveling. 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 legally blind and seeking employment have had training in O&M by certified and 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, the availability of public transportation, etc.

What to do if 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 while using sighted guide assistance. 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.

There are many ways a person who is blind gets around

Residual vision may be sufficient to allow some customers to walk without any modifications. Other customers may use one or more of the following techniques to assist with their mobility.

- Long cane, extended in front of user. The purpose is to detect obstacles, find terrain changes, explore environment and identify user as having a visual impairment.
- Guide dog - 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, buses, apartments, schools, medical facilities, movie theaters, resorts, grocery stores, and more.

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 lying down under a table or chair.

- Sighted Guide (see description above).
- Electronic Travel Aids – there are hand held, eyeglass mounted, or software aids which provide information about one's surroundings.

Vision Rehabilitation Therapy

It is important to note that many of the O&M guidance points are relevant to Vision Rehabilitation Therapy (VRT) skills as well.

- VRT is a comprehensive service that involves the provision of training to assist the individual in achieving his/her maximum level of functioning in the areas of: manual dexterity; communication; orientation to home or work environment; home management; personal management and use of low vision aids and other adaptive devices. These services are customarily provided in the individual's home, at a private agency serving individuals who are blind, in a school setting, other community setting or workplace.
- Communication training may include instruction in Braille, use of large print or other preferred communication modes; the ability to use the telephone, including number retrieval; voice mail retrieval, note-taking, record keeping, typing, labeling, and organizing information; and the ability to use communication devices, including, keyboard, tape recorder, calculator, personal message recorder, or electronic notetaking devices.
- Home management includes training in meal planning and preparation; use of appliances and utensils; food storage and organization and home cleaning, organization and safety.
- Personal management includes training in personal grooming; clothing selection and care; child care; medication management and the use and care of non-optical and prescribed optical devices.
- Financial Management includes training in the use of appropriate financial institutions; personal budgeting and money management.

Communication

- It is important to verbalize 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."
- 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.

- Staff should be aware that communicating important information not readily apparent to a person who is blind is vital.
- As a courtesy, staff should explain things that wouldn't be apparent to someone who is blind, e.g., 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.
- Staff should be familiar with alternatives to handing out materials in regular size print and should ask the customer how they best access print materials. Alternatives to the typical 12-point font size include large print, Braille, using a reader, tape recorded material, or diskettes. Hand written notes, if acceptable to the customer, should be done with a black felt tip pen.
- Customers may need to use a signature guide when their signature is needed on a form. A signature guide is 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

- 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 negotiate. 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

- Entrances should be 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

- Elevators should have both visual and audible door opening announcements as well as audible notifications to indicate floors.

- Controls and buttons outside and inside the elevator should have raised letters and/or Braille symbols.
- Each floor should have signage identifying the floor number in both raised letters and Braille symbols.

Equipment for General Use

- Equipment to be used by customers as part of their programming should be accessible.
- Talking calculators, large print calculators, magnifiers, and Braille/large print labeling should be used when available. Labeling items in large print will allow access for customers who are visually impaired or who have low vision. For Braille readers, Braille general points of access or general use will allow for more independent use of the location.
- Computers should be accessible by all customers, and should have magnification software or screen reading software to allow access for customers who are blind or visually impaired. Please note, as with all customers, computer use skills will vary as will the customers' ability to use accessibility software.

Lighting

- 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. Ask the customer if they have any specific lighting needs or sensitivities. Be sensitive to the customer's needs when choosing seating areas. Keep the 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 of 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

- Staff should communicate with customers to understand their ability to recognize or utilize physical markers in the environment, including the recognition of key features, contrast and tactile symbols.

- Colors that provide contrast 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 be easier to see. 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

- Edges of the stairs should visually contrast with the treads and risers.
- The treads of the stairs should have a non-slip surface.
- Stairs should have continuous rails that extend beyond the first and last step.

Obstacles not detectable by a cane

- Staff should be aware of hazards that may not be detected by a long cane. 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, open file drawers, and pole-mounted objects where the object protrudes significantly farther than the base.

Signs

- Signs should be placed 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, 60 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.

If you are aware of a customer who is in need of O&M and/or VRT services or if you need further assistance, please contact the NYSCB District Office in your local area through this toll free number: 1-866-871-3000.