

THE ACCESSIBLE ENVIRONMENT



- a review of laws, programs, and issues
affecting the disabled community -

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Accent Awareness—Blindness and Visual Impairment

I. BRIEF OVERVIEW

What is an attitude? None of us are really sure that an attitude can be measured or identified distinctly. But attitudes result in action, and this we can measure. An action can be studied, discussed, and changed. A woman who stares at a blind bus passenger, a clerk who remains quiet behind a counter when a blind shopper approaches, a well-meaning man who insists on helping a blind pedestrian across a busy intersection—all these actions represent negative attitudes towards people who are blind or partially sighted.

Historically, blind people were considered to be exceptional. They were thought to be unclean, evil, contagious, and perverse. As early as the Fourth Century, society shunned blind persons by putting them in institutions. Blind persons were thought to possess strange supernatural powers. Persons with visual impairments are often portrayed in literature as poor street beggars, worthy of pity.

It is very hard to break away from centuries of misinformation, superstition, and discomfort. Even today, well-educated and intelligent people avoid contact with citizens who are blind, due to their lack of knowledge about and exposure to blindness. This article will attempt to enhance awareness about blindness and visual impairment, so individuals may interact more positively with blind and visually impaired persons.

II. BLINDNESS OR VISUAL IMPAIRMENT—What are some of the differences?

Definitions:

"Legally blind" defines a person who, with best correction, can see at 20 feet what someone with normal vision can see at 200 feet. Peripheral vision is at an angle less than 20 degrees. (This is a legal/medical definition used in legislation.)

"Partially sighted" defines a person who, with best correction, can see at 20 feet what someone with normal vision can see between 199 and 70 feet. Peripheral vision is at an angle less than 30 degrees. Images are fuzzy.

PEOPLE* A national health interview survey indicates that about 11.4 million people have some visual impairment, even with glasses. It is estimated that 1.4 million people are severely visually impaired (cannot read newspaper, even with glasses). According to the National Society for the Prevention of Blindness, about 500,000 people are registered as legally blind, and 80 per cent of them have some usable vision. Therefore, approximately 100,000 people in the United States are totally blind. One million of all severely visually impaired people are of working age; approximately one-third are presently in the labor force.

CAUSES

People can be born blind (congenital blindness) or can become blind later in life through an accident or disease (adventitious

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blindness). The leading cause of new cases of visual impairment in this country is diabetic retinopathy, a disease where blood vessels break on or in the retina. The direct cause is unknown. Other common causes include cataracts (cloudy lens), glaucoma (high pressure inside the eye), retinitis pigmentosa (damage to the retina), and macular degeneration (hardening of the eye area responsible for fine vision). In about one-third of the cases of blindness, the cause is unknown.

III. COMMON MYTHS ABOUT INDIVIDUALS WHO ARE BLIND

Myth: Some jobs and activities are especially suited to blind persons.

Fact: Blind people, as do all people, vary widely in ability and interest. There are no "special jobs" or "activities" in which all blind people excel over sighted people. Many employers have tried to stereotype blind individuals in certain types of jobs, like a darkroom technician or a dictaphone typist. This is nothing but a disservice to many blind people who are capable of performing a wide variety of jobs (i.e., lawyer, teacher, executive).

Myth: All blind people are alike.

Fact: Blind people are people who happen not to see. As a group there is no single characteristic that applies to all visually impaired people. For example, some blind persons choose to use a white cane as a mobility aid, while others may choose to use a dog or a new sonic device. Blind people enter into as many varied professions, leisure activities, and lifestyles as do sighted people.

Myth: Blind people can hear and feel things no one else can; "they" seem to have a "sixth sense."

Fact: Blind people's senses are, in general, more highly developed than those of sighted persons, simply because blind persons rely more on certain senses, but there is nothing mystical about it. For example, the soft humming of a water cooler may, for the most part, go consciously unnoticed by sighted persons. However, that water cooler, with its soft hum, may provide a blind person with a cue as to where (s)he is. Therefore, the blind person relies on the sense of hearing to indicate where the water cooler is and proceeds from that point.

Myth: Blindness means living in a world of darkness.

Fact: Those blind people who have literally no vision do not see black. It is believed that congenitally blind persons, or those individuals with no memory of visual images (called visual memory), see literally nothing at all. This is hard to imagine, but try this: Visualize what the word "the" means. . . not the letters, but the meaning. What do you see? Nothing. Some persons who have lost their sight after age six (the point at which one is no longer considered congenitally blind) see various colored lights and shapes before their eyes. Some individuals whose visual memory is extremely good can picture in their minds activities that they do on a daily basis. Many people who are considered to be blind have some usable vision. Some people see light, others see shape, while still others have vision which is good enough to permit safe travel without the aid of the dog, cane, or sonic device.

IV. AIDS

A variety of assisting devices are available to blind and partially sighted persons to assist them in functioning as independent, fully-participating members of society. None of these aids restores sight; instead, they use partial vision and/or other senses to enable the visually impaired person to read, write, or participate in visually oriented activities. Only a few are described here to give you an idea of what is available.

Braille is used by about 45,000 people who are legally blind. Braille is a system where the person can read words by running his fingers over a line of raised dots. A braille user can read at about half the speed of an average sighted person. A blind person can also take notes and write in braille, using a slate and stylus or a braillewriter. There are many braille writing aids such as braille paper and devices which produce braille labels on plastic tape.

Reading Aids. The Optacon is a machine which changes a printed letter into a vibrating, tactile letter that a blind person can read with his/her index finger. Another device is the Kurzweil reading machine, which can scan a printed page and read it aloud through a computerized speech synthesizer. Most blind people also have individuals who read correspondence and other printed matter to them. For partially sighted people, large print materials and devices are available, as is a magnifying, closed-circuit TV that enlarges

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words and images from 4-60 times their original size.

Listening Aids. Because relatively few people read braille, most blind people have written materials read onto tape recorders. For example, "Talking Books" (a free service provided by the Library of Congress) enables millions of visually impaired people to read printed materials on tape. Also available are talking calculators that announce input and output, and computerized tape recorders, called speech compressors, that enable people to speed-read by ear.

Mobility Aids. Blind individuals most commonly use sighted guides, canes, or dog guides as aids when traveling. The choice of aid is personal, based on the individual's needs, lifestyle, and abilities. A group of newly developed aids use ultraasonic waves to guide the user by bouncing a sound signal off objects around the wearer of the device. For more information on mobility, the American Foundation for the Blind, Inc. has an excellent booklet called, "How Does A Blind Person Get Around?," which describes the above aids in detail.

V. WHAT DO YOU DO WHEN YOU MEET A PERSON WHO IS BLIND?

1. If a blind person seems to need help, go ahead and offer your assistance. But do not help unless the individual says you can. Always ask before you act. If you aren't sure exactly what to do, ask the person to explain how you should assist him/her.

2. To guide a blind person, let him or her take your arm. Don't grab the person's arm, as this is dangerous as well as insulting and frightening. The blind individual will walk about half a step behind you, following your body motions. If you encounter steps, curbs, or other obstacles, identify them. In places too narrow for you to walk two abreast, bring your arm back and let the guided person follow you.

3. When talking to a blind individual, use a normal tone and speed of voice. Shouting or speaking to an adult as a child is very insulting. Blindness does not affect hearing or intelligence. Speak directly to the blind person, not to a third party. When you are leaving a room, say so. Anyone would feel foolish talking into thin air. Don't avoid using words like "blind,"

"look," or "see;" blind people use them, too.

4. When giving a blind person directions, be as clear and specific as possible. Make sure to point out obstacles in the direct path of travel. Since some blind people have no visual memory, be careful of using descriptions containing numbers of feet or yards (i.e., 50 feet ahead). If you're unsure of just how to direct a blind person, say something like, "I'd be happy to give you directions. How should I describe things?"

5. When guiding a blind person to a chair, simply guide his/her hand to the back of the chair and tell the person if the chair has arms. In a restaurant, it is also polite to read the person the menu and prices.

6. Resist the temptation to pet a working guide dog. If the dog is distracted from its work, its owner can be in danger. Always ask permission of the owner before interacting with the dog.

7. Use common sense and sensitivity. Most blind people's hearing is fine; comments like, "Isn't she brave!" or "Isn't it a shame (s)he is blind." are usually heard and not appreciated. A blind person is just like you, only without sight. Give him or her the same respect as you would a sighted person.

8. When working or socializing with blind persons, don't exclude or excuse them from participating because you feel their blindness would be a problem. Let them make that decision. Don't lower your expectations (work load, social activities, etc.) of what the person can do. He or she may surprise you. Give a blind person the chance to succeed or fail, just like anyone else.

VI. WHAT CAN YOU DO ABOUT ATTITUDES?

1. Include blind citizens on task forces dealing with community planning (recreation, transportation, education) so that the community will meet the needs of all people.

2. Be sure that blind employees have a voice on planning committees that have employee representation.

3. Make sure meeting places are architecturally accessible to blind participants (e.g., raised elevator numbers). Provide alternatives to printed materials (cassette tapes, large print, braille, reader) which sighted participants receive.

4. When you read or view a presentation that reflects a positive image of blind people (e.g., as productive citizens), write a complimentary comment to the publication or station carrying it.

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5. If you have a child, friend or relative who is blind, talk to other people who are blind. In many cases, your concerns and fears can be overcome and corrected by sharing information with others.

6. When you read or view a presentation portraying blind people in a negative, stereotyped, or condescending way (sick, maladjusted, non-productive), write a letter of disapproval to the involved newspaper, magazine, or television station.

7. Answer children's questions about blind people. Questions are normal. Remember that children get their information and attitudes from your behavior. Kids learn through imitation.

8. If a blind person feels (s)he can do something, but you can't understand how, ask the person. Talking things over makes things a lot clearer.

9. Experience is the best teacher. Get to know blind people and you will see your misconceptions disappear.

ISSUES AND ANSWERS FOR IMPLEMENTING SECTION 504. (From the Nat'l Assoc. of College and University Business Officers--NACUBO)

Q. What are the institution's responsibilities with regard to the provision of brailled or taped materials to blind students? How much lead-time is appropriate?

Position: Although the institution has a primary responsibility for making such aids available, it must be emphasized that institutional responsibility for producing brailled and taped materials is not primary unless and until existing sources are exhausted. As a standard procedure, institutions should be prepared to advise blind students of resources available for transcribing textbooks and other materials into braille or onto tape.

By referring blind students to appropriate community, state, and national organizations that offer such services on a regular basis, or maintain collections of such materials, the institution will in most cases be fulfilling its primary obligation to make such aids available. Using already existing sources for such materials eliminates waste and duplication, ensures the quality of the aids, and familiarizes the student with existing channels and the procedures for obtaining braille and tape independently.

It is important for the students who need the materials transcribed to be fully

involved and responsible for obtaining the necessary services on their own. Institutions, in fact, would assist in furthering the knowledge and experience of blind students by establishing procedures that involve acquisition of braille and tape by the individual.

Again, the primary institutional responsibility lies with making certain that such aids are available. This responsibility may carry with it the obligation to maintain a familiarity with existing sources and to refer blind students to them, as appropriate. But only after existing sources are exhausted need the institution be concerned with the production of such aids on their own.

The lead-time necessary to deliver aids effectively may vary from locale to locale. The most important consideration in this regard, in addition to making certain that lead-time does not compromise the "effectiveness" of service delivery, is being certain that all interested parties--teachers, librarians, and blind students--know precisely what the lead-time is. Full communication on this issue will minimize the disruption in academic programs.

"N.B."--It must be emphasized that these positions have not been formally cleared as positions of the federal government. They have not been formally approved by HEW. However, they have been reviewed by and discussed in great detail with representatives of HEW's Office for Civil Rights (OCR), and there is agreement that the positions conform to the intent of the statute and implementing regulations. NACUBO and the American Council on Education have submitted these positions to OCR for formal approval and endorsement.

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VII. FOR MORE INFORMATION

There are many organizations of and for persons who are blind and partially sighted. Most of them disseminate materials about visual impairment.

American Association of Workers for the Blind, Inc.
1511 E. St., NW, Suite 637
Washington, D.C. 2005

Library of Congress
Division for the Blind and Physically Handicapped
1921 Taylor Street NW
Washington, D.C. 20542

American Council for the Blind
1211 Connecticut Avenue NW
Suite 506
Washington, D.C. 20036

National Association for the Visually Handicapped
305 East 24th Street, #17-C
New York, NY 10010

American Foundation for the Blind, Inc.
15 West 16th Street
New York, NY 10011

Blinded Veterans Association
1735 DeSales Street NW
Washington, D.C. 20036

National Federation of the Blind
1346 Connecticut Ave. NW, Suite 212
Washington, D.C. 20036
(for Handbook for Blind College Students, write "Student Division")

For information locally, write or call:

State Services for the Blind and Visually Handicapped
Duluth District Office
14 West First Street
Duluth, MN 55802
723-4600

Lighthouse for the Blind
2701 West Superior Street
Duluth, MN
624-4828

Handicapped Student Services (HSS) has an extensive resource file on Blindness and Visual Impairment. Contact John Kulick, Library 135, or call 726-7965 for more information.

CAPTIONED TV FOR HEARING IMPAIRED

On March 23, 1979, Joseph A. Califano, Jr., Secretary of HEW, announced a system of "closed captioning" for television. The Public Braoadcasting System developed the technology; the National Captioning Institute, Inc. (a private, non-profit organization) will provide the captioning; Sears Roebuck will manufacture and sell the decoders through its 1980 catalog. The decoders are about the size of a cigar box and must be switched on for captions to show. The cost will be approximately \$225-250 installed. Sears is also planning to begin production of a moderately priced TV set with a built-in decoder.

PBS will provide approximately 10 hours of captioned programming a week by the end of 1980, while ABC and NBC will air about five hours per week. (CBS is exploring a different system.)

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that I would like to submit to this newsletter.

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