

3. Assisting People who Have Visual Impairments

Keep in mind that persons with a visual impairment represent a wide spectrum of needs and conditions. For example, some slightly visually impaired persons do not carry a white cane for visually impaired persons. Each person has a level of difficulty of obtaining information different from another person. If you notice a person with a visual impairment who seems to be in difficult, greet and offer assistance.

1) Basic Points

Smile and greet

First of all, smile and greet in a warm voice in front of the person. Even if he or she cannot see your smile well, your voice can give a lot of information: your gender, your height, and some other characteristics.

Ask questions

After greetings, introduce yourself briefly, giving your name and function (title). Do not abruptly touch the person or pull the person by the hand or grab the white cane; such gestures are extremely rude.

Ask first if you can be of assistance in any way and find out what kind of support is needed and how the person wishes to be assisted.

Express with specific and objective words

Avoid using ambiguous expressions such as “this way” and “over there.” Instead, express yourself in a specific and objective manner, saying, for example, “to the left (right),” “in front of (behind) you,” and “about three steps (meters) ahead.”

Things NOT to do while guiding a person with a visual impairment:

- The white cane is the person’s “eye”; do not grab or pull it.
- Do not pull the person by the hand; this gesture demands a sudden move from the person assisted, making him/her feel anxious and threatened.
- Do not stand or walk directly behind the person you are assisting. From this position, you cannot see what is before the person’s feet, and he/she may feel anxious, wondering if you will push him/her from behind.
- Do not walk diagonally to the path you are on, whether on a flat surface or a slope. Make sure to walk always in a straight line in the direction of movement so that the assisted person can be aware of the direction (angle) of progression.

2) Basic guiding position

- ① When you are asked to guide a person with a visual impairment, ask first which side (left or right to the person) he/she wants you to stand.
- ② Stand on the desired side and half a step ahead, facing the

same direction.

- ③ Ask the person if he/she wants to hold on to you by the elbow or the shoulder.
- ④ When the person has indicated his/her preference (elbow or shoulder), say something like “May I take your hand now so that I may start accompanying you?” and then guide the person’s hand to your elbow or shoulder.
- ⑤ When the person’s hand is on your elbow or shoulder, say something like “Shall we start?” before starting to walk.

Half a step ahead and two persons’ breadth

Walk next to the person you are assisting and about half a step ahead to be able to respond rapidly upon noticing danger.

When you guide a person with a visual impairment, you must constantly pay close attention to what is happening around the space corresponding to the breadth of you two and the height of the taller of the two. In other words, take care to avoid any obstacle that may be found not only on the ground but also overhead, near the face, the arm, and along the whole body.

Keep pace with the assisted person, and serve as his/her “eye”

When walking, keep pace with the assisted person, asking him/her if the current pace is good. Verbally describe the surrounding scenery and what you see to such an extent that it does not disturb the assisted person physically or mentally.

When there is a change in the surroundings, signal it verbally each time, for example, when approaching a change in surface level, the path becomes narrower, making a turn, or stopping.

If guiding blocks for visually impaired persons are in place

- ① If guiding blocks are provided in the direction you are headed, ask the person you are assisting if he/she wishes to walk on the tiles.
- ② If the assisted person wants to walk on the guiding blocks, decide first whether he/she walks entirely on the line of tiles or keeps one foot outside the line.
- ③ At the end of the guiding blocks, verbally signal by saying, for example, “This is the end of the guiding blocks.”

Leaving the person you are assisting temporarily

When you have to leave the assisted person alone temporarily to buy tickets or for other purposes, verbally explain first: lead the person to the wall or a nearby pillar, get him/her to touch it with his/her free hand, saying “Here is the wall/pillar; please wait for me here while I [buy tickets],” and go do your chore. When you are seated and leave the seat temporarily, make sure to verbally inform the person first.

3) Walking through a narrow path

Stand right in front of the person you are assisting

Slow down or stop completely first, and verbally inform that you are going to walk in front of him/her because you are about to walk through a narrow path. Put your arm that the assisted person is holding behind yourself.

Remember to extend your arm so that the assisted person will not step on your feet. Walk slowly, while keeping an appropriate distance between you two. Once you have passed the narrow path, verbally inform the assisted person, and resume the original position.

Walk sideways

You can also walk sideways to guide a person with a visual impairment through a particularly narrow path, such as between rows of spectator seats. You can walk sideways either by holding hands or turning sideways while keeping the original guiding position.

Be flexible in determining who goes first, depending on the situation. In any case, give priority to ensuring safety.

4) Sitting down on a chair (seating furniture with a back support)

Approach the chair from the front

In the original guiding position, approach the chair from the front. Stop where the assisted person comes in front of the chair. Inform him/her verbally, saying something like “You are now in front of a chair. The seat is at the level of your knees, and the back of the chair is at the end of the seat. May I take your hand?” Then, put his/her hand on the top of the back of the chair.

The assisted person will usually feel more at ease when informed if it is a chair or a sofa; if the furniture has casters; if a table is attached, and so forth. Inform also if there are other persons seated nearby.

5) Sitting down on a stool (seating furniture without a back support)

Approach the stool and check the seat

Approach the stool in the original guiding position. Stop where the assisted person comes in front of the stool. Inform him/her that it is a stool, there is no back support, and he/she should not lean back when seated. Describe the surroundings as deemed necessary. Ask first you may take his/her hand, and then get his/her hand on the seat of the stool so that he/she

can check it and be seated there.

If the person must be seated in a certain direction, indicate it using an imaginary clock face, supposing that your current position is six o'clock (for example, "Nine o'clock is the front").

6) Guiding up the stairs

Inform verbally, before all

Approach the stairs in the original guiding position, at right angles with the width of the steps.

Verbally inform first that you are about to go up the stairs, and guide the person, staying at right angles to the steps at all times. Approaching the stairs in a diagonal line is dangerous since it can lead to tripping or making a false step.

Inform the beginning of the stairs

Put your foot of the free side on the first step, and stop. Verbally inform that the upward stairs start there. Let the assisted person feel the first step with the white cane or his/her foot. Verbally inform ("We're now going up"), and start walking up the stairs.

Keep pace with the assisted person

By this time, you probably know well the pace at which the assisted person walks. Keeping this in mind, lead him/her up

the stairs. Always be one step above the assisted person, and verbally confirm the pace (“Is this speed OK for you?” or “Aren’t we walking too fast?”), and walk at the assisted person’s pace, while constantly paying close attention to the steps.

Inform the end of the stairs

Verbally inform the end of the stairs beforehand so that the assisted person will not make a false step. Noting that the assisted person is one step below you, inform the end of the stairs at the right moment (“The next step is the last one”).

Do likewise when you come to a landing, informing that you are on a landing and the stairs will start again shortly.

Walk up the stairs along a handrail

Before starting to guide the person, ask if he/she wishes to hold onto a handrail. If the answer is yes, when you approach where a handrail is provided, take the assisted person’s hand to the handrail. Ask also his/her preference for the side on which you should stand and comply.

7) Guiding down the stairs

Inform verbally, before all

Approach the stairs in the original guiding position, at right angles with the width of the steps, taking care not to make a false step. Verbally inform first that you are about to go down

the stairs. Be extra careful since the danger of a fall is greater when walking down the stairs.

Inform the beginning of the stairs

Place your toe at the edge of the first step. Verbally inform that you are about to go down the stairs. First, let the assisted person feel the edge of the first step with the white cane or his/her foot, and then ask if you may start. When guiding a visually impaired person down the stairs, it is extremely important to have him/her be sure of where the first step is. Make sure that he/she has correctly grasped it before going down the stairs.

Keep pace with the assisted person

Remember to be one step ahead of (below) the assisted person. Verbally check if the walking pace is appropriate (“Is this speed OK for you?” or “Aren’t we walking too fast?”), and walk at the assisted person’s pace. Visually check that the assisted person is safely going down the stairs.

Inform the end of the stairs

The assisted person is always one step behind (above) you. Inform the end of the stairs at the right moment by closely monitoring his/her move (“The next step is the last one” or “You have just finished the stairs”).

Do likewise when you come to a landing, informing that you are

on a landing and the stairs will start again shortly.

Guide the person over a change in surface level likewise, considering it as a one-step stairway. Stop for a second before the level, and verbally inform that there is an upward (or downward) change in surface level.

8) Using an escalator

Ask the person you are assisting beforehand if you may use an escalator. Some persons with a visual impairment feel uncomfortable about the use of an escalator. Provide assistance as desired.

Inform verbally, before all

Verbally and clearly inform first that you are approaching an upward (or downward) escalator. This is important since persons with a visual impairment feel anxious if they are not sure if it is an upward or downward escalator.

Check who goes first

Ask the assisted person first if he/she wants you to go first or last. In general, most visually impaired persons want their companion to go first on an escalator, but there are also those who prefer to go first. In any case, do not assume, and ask his/her preference first.

Show where the handrail is

If you go first, verbally signal first, and turn your hand backward to take the assisted person's hand. Placing his/her hand on the handrail as you get on the escalator enables him/her to follow you. Watch closely his/her steps as he/she gets on the escalator.

9) Guiding to the toilet (using a toilet booth)

Guide to a toilet booth

Lead the person you are assisting in the basic guiding position to an available toilet booth. Stop in front of the door, and describe the door (whether to push or pull it to open, whether it is a sliding door, and so on).

Provide necessary information

Provide information that is necessary to use the toilet, such as the shape and direction of the stool, where the flush knob is and how to use it, the location of the toilet paper holder, if a sanitary container is provided, how the lock works, and so on. Provide such information before the assisted person enters the booth, and describe from a seated user's standpoint.

Wait

Ask the assisted person to verbally let you know when he/she is finished, and wait a little away from the booth while he/she is in, near the washstand, for example.

Guide to the washstand

Once the assisted person comes out of the booth, guide him/her to the washstand. Explain the locations of faucets, soap, and so forth. You may also guide him/her from the booth to the washstand in the basic guiding position. Ask him/her if he/she wants to be assisted that way as well. Be sure not to let the white cane fall if it rests against the wall.

10) Guiding to the toilet (using a urinal)

Guide to a urinal

Lead the person you are assisting to a urinal in the basic guiding position.

Provide necessary information

Verbally ask first if you may take the assisted person's hand to show the position of the urinal, and take his hand, and place the back of the hand on the upper center or corner of the urinal. (After this, follow the same procedure as the one for using a toilet booth.)

Relay to a staff member of the same gender as the assisted person

If you are assisting a person of the opposite gender and he/she needs to use the toilet, relay to a staff member of the same gender as the assisted person. If no staff member cannot be found nearby, seek cooperation from another person nearby.

11) Explaining locations effectively

Describe from a basic reference point

One way to explain where something is located is to fix a basic reference point and explain using expressions such as clockwise and counterclockwise.

Use an imaginary clock face

You can explain where objects are by using an imaginary clock face, supposing that the assisted person's current position is at six o'clock. Name an object, and indicate its position on the clock face, saying, for example, "The cup is at nine o'clock."

Guide by the hand

Ask first if you may take the assisted person's hand, and slowly guide his/her hand to an object. For example, have him/her touch the object, as you name it and say, "Your cup is here." Provide other important information beforehand as well if the coffee cup is hot, there is a potentially dangerous obstacle, and so forth.

12) Responding to diverse types and degrees of visual impairment

Types and degrees of visual impairment vary from one person to another. For example, there are some slightly visually impaired persons and those who do not recognize specific colors. When assisting a person with a visual impairment, ask the person beforehand how he or she wishes to be assisted.