

## **Simple Guidelines for Courteous and Effective Interactions**

### **With People Who are Blind or Visually Impaired**

#### **Avoid assumptions**

Be aware that the “legally blind” population ranges from those with the total inability to see, to the large majority that has some degree of vision. Many with low vision carry a white cane for use in specific situations, such as locating a curb or navigating stairs. Even the use of a guide dog does not always denote total vision loss. The ability to navigate through one’s environment does not necessarily mean that the individual is able to recognize faces or even common objects. In most cases, the person is familiar with living with diminished sight and with helping others assist with their needs.

#### **Initial Contact**

Immediately greet blind or visually impaired persons when they enter a room. Identify yourself by name and if appropriate, by position or title. Speak directly to the person, not through their companion or guide, using normal conversational tone, volume and speed. Address the person by name or use a light touch on the arm to avoid confusion, especially in crowded areas. If assistance seems appropriate, simply ask “May I be of help?”



## **Common Conversation**

Feel free to use everyday words that refer to vision, such as look, see and watch. Visually descriptive language such as that referring to color, shape and design is also acceptable. Use precise, accurate and thorough language when describing places, objects or people. When referring to persons who are blind or visually impaired, refer first to the person and then the disability. Say “the man at the counter who is blind”, instead of “the blind man at the counter.” Stay in one place, if possible, when you speak. When you are leaving, tell the person you are going and say good-bye with a touch on the shoulder, a tap on the person’s arm or a handshake to avoid the embarrassment of someone speaking when no one else is present.

## **Offering Guidance or Assistance**

Offer to guide a blind or visually impaired person by asking if he would like assistance. If the person declines, respect their desire. If accepted, allow him to take your arm just above the elbow. Walk slightly ahead of him, pausing briefly at stairs, the edge of a curb or at a doorway to explain what you are about to do. If you separate from him, be sure that he is in contact with a wall or other part of the physical environment.

When assisting with seating, offer to show him the back of the chair and gently place his hand on the chair back. Be aware of potential physical obstacles. Do not leave doors ajar and keep all entrances, halls and stairways free of clutter. If an imminent safety concern arises, a specific instruction such as “stop” is much more helpful than “be careful” or “look out.”

## **Around Town**

At a restaurant, offer to read the menu. When doing so, start with the list of categories. Be sure to include the price of each item. When the food arrives, ask the person if she would like to be told the position of each item on the plate. Although it is never in bad form to offer, the person will usually request help if needed to cut the food or move it from a serving dish to her plate. In the case of buffet service, she may prefer that you bring the food to the table or choose to accompany you through the serving line.

When giving directions, use specific terms. Do not point or refer to landmarks, signs or street numbers. Specify direction using right, left, forward and back and accurately convey the number of streets or blocks.

To orient the person to a restroom, use similar descriptive language, such as “when facing the sink, the toilet is on the right. When seated on the toilet, the paper is on the left.”

Visually impaired people identify currency by either folding the denominations in different ways or placing them in different areas of a wallet or purse. Bills should be individually identified and counted as they are handed to the person. It is not necessary to identify coins. The different sizes and edges of coins provide aids to identification for the visually impaired person. Credit cards should be handed back to the person, not simply laid on a counter or table.



## **Additional Guidelines**

Do not touch or remove mobility canes unless requested to do so. If it is necessary to remove a cane, tell the person you are removing it and where it can be retrieved.

Never distract a working guide dog. As the handler's safety depends on the alertness of the dog, always ask permission before petting or offering food.

The universal sign for communicating an emergency to a deaf blind individual is by drawing the letter X on the back of the person with the fingertips. Stay calm and guide the person at a normal pace.

**Remember that Earle Baum Center of the Blind is YOUR local resource. Do not hesitate to contact us if you would like any additional information.**