



Hearts For Sight (HFS)

Volunteer Sighted-Guide Training

Welcome to the Hearts For Sight Eco-Therapeutic Program for the Blind and Visually Impaired. We appreciate your openness to learning more about our community and experiences, and for contributing support towards the health and wellbeing of visually impaired people (VIPs).

Description of Activity and Role of a Sighted-Guide

During our sighted-guide training, you will be working in collaboration with members of our blind and visually impaired community to create a safe, engaging and fun recreational experience. Your role as supporters and allies begins with an openness to understanding that there will be a spectrum of experiences and needs expressed by this community. This means that your role and responses will vary from participant to participant. Our aim during this training and practice session is to impart you with information that will facilitate appropriate and meaningful engagement while we navigate through disabling perceptions and environments together.

Some General Information About Our Blind and Visually Impaired Community

- Our community and experiences are complex and diverse.
- We encompass diverse levels of sight, ocular conditions, disabilities, and orientation and mobility experience.
- We encompass various ages, genders, ethnicities, sexual orientations and social classes.

Some Do's and Don'ts

Below is a list of Do's and Don'ts that will hopefully help to introduce some important needs and values of our blind and visually impaired community:

- DO understand that the blind and visually impaired community contains a wide spectrum of abilities and independence that are not directly related to quantity or quality of sight.
- DON'T assume that a person with a white cane needs a sighted-guide.
- DO respect the bodies, personal space and choices of people who are blind or have low vision.
- DO approach the person, introduce yourself, and ask if they need a sighted-guide.

- DON'T grab the person you are guiding by the hand, arm, shoulder, or cane and try to steer them.
- DO allow the person to manage their white cane or guide dog.
- DON'T grab the person's cane or the handle of a guide dog's harness.
- DO use directional and descriptive language such as straight ahead, behind you, on your left or right, in 5 feet, at 2 o'clock, or even cardinal directions for more advanced navigators.
- DON'T point, or use "sighted language" such as, over there or over here, right here or right there, that way or this way.
- DO provide a clear picture when describing things to an individual with vision loss. Include details such as color, texture, shape and landmarks.
- DO touch them on the arm or use their name when addressing them. This lets them know you are speaking to them, and not someone else.
- DON'T assume an individual with sight loss knows you are talking to them. Address them by their name when speaking to them.
- DO respect that guide dog users know how to manage and take care of their companions.
- DON'T pet, feed, or talk to guide dogs when they are in harness.

Sighted-Guide Practices and Techniques

Below are detailed instructions on how to guide a person who is blind or has low vision while remaining in contact. Sometimes you will encounter a highly experienced white cane user who prefers contactless guiding. In these instances, please refer to instructions provided by the individual seeking guidance.

Approach

- Approach the person calmly, introduce yourself, and ask if they need a sighted-guide.

Positioning & Initiating Contact

- Ask the individual which arm they prefer to hold on to.
- Position yourself alongside them with your guiding shoulder in front of, and in line with their opposite shoulder.
- Place the back of your hand to the back of their hand, and wait for them to grasp the back of your arm.
- The guide always stays about a half a step in front of the person being guided.

Grasps

- The standard grasp is similar to how one would hold a cup, and is located behind, and just above the elbow.
- The person might choose to hold on to your shoulder, especially if there is a significant height difference.
- If the person has balance or certain physical disability needs, they might choose to hold on to your forearm.

Pace

- Communicate that you will begin walking by saying something like, “Here we go.”
- Begin at a pace that is comfortable to you, but do your best to match the pace of whoever you are guiding.
- After a minute or so, ask if the pace suits them, or if you should slow down or speed up.

Cane Use

- A cane user will often choose to continue to hold on and use their white cane while being guided.
- Each individual will decide how they will use their cane.

Narrow Passages

- While guiding a person who is blind or visually impaired, it is very important to always make sure there is enough room for both people to safely walk.
- When there is not enough room for both people to walk safely, communicate to the individual being guided that you are about to pass through a narrow passage.
- You can either tuck your guiding arm behind you so the person can walk behind you while they extend their arm straight and hold on to your wrist, or they can trail their free hand to the middle of your back, and walk behind you with their arm extended straight to minimize tripping.

Curbs

- When approaching a curb, slow down and communicate that you will be approaching a curb up or curb down.
- Depending on the preference of the person, you can either slow down at the curb to allow them time to feel it with their cane and continue walking, or you can stop at the curb, step down first, then allow them to step down, while still holding on to you.

Stairs

- When approaching stairs, make sure to slow down and stop at the foot or top of the stairs.
- Communicate whether the stairs are going up or down.
- Try to keep to the right side of the stairs whenever possible.
- Communicate if there is a handrail that they can use and help position them so that their free arm is on the side where the handrail is located.
- If there is no handrail, and they prefer to be guided up/down the stairs, keep the grasp, begin going up/down the stairs making sure to stay one step ahead of them.
- Communicate when you have reached a landing and/or the end of the staircase so they know they have one more step before the landing.

Communication

Sighted-Guiding is a team effort. Most people that are blind or have visual impairments are not passive participants. They are feeling your body movements as you turn, change pace, stop, and even when you hesitate. At the same time, every person with a visual impairment has different levels of experience moving through the world. This means clear and effective communication is crucial.

While you are guiding, we encourage you to talk about:

- A person's degree of vision loss and their guiding preferences.
- Personal interests and topics that allow you to get to know them as individuals.
- What you are seeing, as well as what they are experiencing.
- Relax and have fun getting to know someone new in your community!