

Volunteering as a Sighted Guide for Hiking with the Sierra Club and Hearts for Sight Foundation

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Role as a volunteer:

Many visually impaired hikers require the assistance of a sighted guide at all times. (Others have partial sight or use a guide dog). So most trips require as many volunteer guides as there are visually impaired participants (VIP). Serving as a sighted guide is easy and intuitive. But it does require some attention and patience.

These hikes are primarily organized to allow people to get outdoors and get some exercise in a safe and sociable manner. As with any group hike, all participants should work to improve the experience for each other. That can include avoiding divisive topics or opinions. We don't need to agree on every issue to agree to have a good time together.

Taking a big group on a hike can involve special logistics challenges. Simple tasks like checking paperwork or passing out snacks become time consuming as the size increases. Volunteers can make things go more smoothly by taking on some of those roles.

Suggested roles: (Adapted from "ICO Hikes: Many Possible Tasks and Roles for Volunteers")

Pre-hike: Check with a leader if you are able to help ahead of time. Some tasks are:

- Research past and current info on hike area.
- Plan aspects of the hike or related activities.

Start of Hike: Check with a leader about ONE way to help. Some tasks are:

- Assist with check-in.
- Check with all participants about their water/food/packs.
- Share nature or history knowledge you have about the area.
- Discuss with other volunteers about ways they can participate.

During Hike: Check with a leader about ONE way to help. Some tasks are:

- Help with distributing snacks or lunch items.
- See below for guiding suggestions.
- Take pictures. Even blind people may enjoy sharing pictures of their hike with sighted friends and family.

Post-hike: Check with a leader if you are able to help afterwards. Some tasks are:

- If you can, please assist participants to find their paratransit vehicles.
- Share photos, write an article or edit video footage.
- Conduct short interviews with individuals or small groups on video.

Aim:

Some suggestions to facilitate safe hiking for people with visual impairment in the L.A. area. Everyone should have access to the benefits of hiking in nature. Experience adventure with caution.

VIP hiking & guiding tips:

- A search on Google will bring up many web pages and YouTube videos describing the simple process of being a “sighted guide”. Those are a good place to start, but they’re mostly intended for dealing with stairs, doors, chairs, and other things we don’t find on hikes.
- Ideal VIP hiking routes are: wide, smooth, quiet, and uncrowded. Paved roads are good, but a dirt road that’s smooth can be better than a poorly paved road. Ramps are easier than steps. Droppings from dogs, horses, or ducks can be a problem. Short sections of rocky obstacles can be overcome, but quickly get tedious.
- Access Services paratransit will not go to many trailheads. They will only go to places with clear addresses that are within about 1/3 mile of mass transit lines.
- It’s important for a guide to announce obstacles, hazards (potholes, ditches), sharp turns, sudden changes in slope, and slippery surfaces. It’s helpful for a guide to provide additional information. Describe the natural environments to the best of your ability. VIP want to know what is surrounding them. Progress on a long hike or a big climb is hard to gauge without visual clues, so giving progress reports, time and distance estimates, and noting landmarks makes it clearer. Relevant signs, especially warnings might be interesting. Water fountains, bathrooms, break spots, and other functional locations could be useful. Describe the topography. Point out plants and other items of sensory interest.
- Descending can be harder, slower, and more perilous than going up. Budget time and energy accordingly.
- The cane arm may tire out before the legs do. Techniques that reduce effort will pay off. Worn, pointed cane tips may catch on small cracks. Newer, rounded tips may glide more smoothly but are heavier.
- A few VIP hikers prefer to use a pair of trekking poles instead of a long white cane. Trekking poles provide much less information about the terrain than a cane, but they provide more stability. So, a user is more likely to stumble, but less likely to fall.
- A sighted guide can wear microspikes to make noise while walking, especially on pavement. That allows a VIP to follow by sound alone and hike freely. Microspikes attach to regular footwear and are meant for walking on icy sidewalks. Models with chains or studs seem to last the longest on pavement, while those with wire-wrapped rubber break the fastest. Full mountaineering crampons make more noise on dirt, but are clumsy on pavement. Any other noisy footwear (cleats?) or add-ons (ankle bells?) may serve the same purpose.

Guiding phrases:

When a hazard or obstacle appears imminent a sighted guide should give an alert. Standard, brief words are better and quicker than long descriptions. They may require an altered tone to communicate urgency, since they may interrupt an ongoing conversation.

- Curb (or lip, step) down/up: pause and find with cane
- Rock/Roots/Bump/Branch: tripping hazard, lift feet
- Pebbles/Gravel: slipping hazard, bend knees
- Turd/Poop: fouling hazard, stop instantly ["Shit!" is too ambiguous.]
- Arm: complicated terrain, take my arm or shoulder
- Free/Safe: no immediate hazards, walk freely
- Towards me/Away from me: less likely to be confused than left/right. Referencing a clock to describe direction can also be helpful. For example look to your 3 o'clock or 9 o' clock.

General hiking tips:

Folks who aren't used to hiking should start with easy hikes, such as 3 miles and 500 feet of gain or less. On individual hikes, warm up by starting slowly. The first half-mile is the hardest. Comfortable footwear is very important and a good tread helps. Don't bring new shoes or boots. On the other hand, old shoes with worn soles may be slippery. If hot spots develop then stop and fix right away.

Bring water, snacks, a hat. Don't forget to drink the water, eat the snacks, and wear the hat! Dress in layers, depending on the season and time of day. Prepare for being alternately hot and cold. And bring a pack that can carry all your gear for when you want to shed layers.

A whistle is the first emergency gear to carry.

Even when hiking with sociable people, it's nice to stop talking occasionally. A few minutes of silence allow one to enjoy the quiet sounds of the place. It's refreshing.