

BRSS TACS

Bringing Recovery Supports to Scale

TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE CENTER STRATEGY

Increasing Access to Treatment and Recovery Supports for People Who Are Blind or Have Vision Loss

This content is part of a set of informational sheets about improving access to recovery supports. Related topics include mobility limitations; disabilities affecting reasoning, memory or learning; deafness or hearing loss; and blindness or vision loss.

In 2015, the National Eye Institute estimated that 3.2 million people in the United States were living with visual impairments and that another one million people were experiencing legal blindness.¹ Your program may use these three general groups to better differentiate between degrees of vision loss.^{2, 3}

Low Vision describes loss of visual acuity with the retention of some vision. For example, an individual with low vision would be unable to read a newspaper at normal viewing distance even with the aid of glasses or contact lenses.

Legally Blind refers to people that have less than 20/200 vision in the better eye or a limited field of vision. People who are legally blind may have some useful vision.

Totally Blind refers to people have no vision.

People who are blind or visually impaired use a wide range of communication techniques, and one should not assume that all people who are blind are braille-literate. Providers should find out from the individual who is blind his or her preferred communication method and provide materials in that medium. The provider should be able to supply materials in braille, large print, and audiocassette. Local, state, or private agencies for people who are blind can either transcribe or help arrange for the transcription of printed material into these media.⁵

Assessing If and What Assistance is Needed

When encountering someone who may have low vision or be blind, it is best not to guess what help is needed, if any, but to use an “*Approach, Ask, Assist*” technique:

- **Approach**—Plan to greet the person, introduce yourself, and state where you are in location to the person.
- **Ask**—Inquire if the person requires help.
- **Assist**—Provide aid based on the person’s reply (which may mean no assistance is needed).⁴

When guiding someone, use descriptive language to inform the person where they are walking.

Providing Accommodations or Assistance

It is important first to know if a person has an impairment that may interfere with their engagement in services and supports. Program staff might ask directly during an intake process. Alternatively, group leaders can use written materials to ask members if they prefer to hear text read out loud or require a different format such as large print or braille. During group discussions, in order to include someone who has a visual impairment, make sure everyone states their name each time they speak.

SAMHSA’s Treatment Improvement Protocol 29: *Substance Use Disorder Treatment for People with Physical and Cognitive Disabilities* provides guidance for working with individuals who are blind or have low vision.

The American Foundation for the Blind suggests the following strategies for maintaining a friendly environment for people with vision impairments including blindness.⁶

Examples of Low-Tech, Low-Cost Accommodation include:

- Adjust lighting for alternative source and illumination type (natural, incandescent, halogen, or fluorescent)
- Use 18-point⁷ font in communications and documents; also use electronic and braille communications
- Use large print, braille labels, or tactile dots on equipment, tools, facilities, and documents
- Provide magnification devices (e.g., magnifying glasses)
- Use electronic text and voice mail communication in addition to written notes
- Assign human readers to help with printed and handwritten materials that cannot be converted electronically
- Adjust work schedules to allow for mass transit rather than car use
- Provide for sharing or switching certain job tasks
- When creating documents on the computer, add alternative text to visuals. To find missing alternative text, use the Accessibility Tracker available in many Office 365 applications, including Microsoft Word and PowerPoint.

Real World Example



There are often creative, simple, and inexpensive solutions that can make a class or activity accessible. One recovery community organization in Seattle introduced a yoga class. When a new member who is blind expressed an interest in participating, the instructor thought of a unique method to communicate various yoga postures and positions—small wire stick figures. By handling these figures, the member was able to understand the postures before attempting them, demonstrating the effectiveness of tactile cues in enhancing the accessibility of an activity.

Using Technology to Accommodate Low Vision

Routine computers settings can be adjusted to allow for magnified font sizes on all computer menus and screens, in addition to inside documents. Other settings such as color contrast can be electronically adjusted, as some people with low vision may read more easily when they see white text on black background vs. the common black text on white background.

Closed circuit television (CCTV) and video magnifiers can be connected to a computer terminal outfitted for people with vision impairments. The magnifier can read documents and project them onto the computer screen with large print for easier viewing. Software programs are available such as ZoomT ext, which allows the user to drag a mouse across the screen and magnify whatever he or she wants to see better, and JA WS, which tells the user everything that is happening on the screen and reads content aloud.

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Notes

1. National Institutes of Health, "Visual Impairment, Blindness Cases in U.S. Expected to Double by 2050," news release, May 19, 2016, <https://www.nih.gov/news-events/news-releases/visual-impairment-blindness-cases-us-expected-double-2050>.
2. Disabilities, Opportunities, Internetworking, and Technology Center, "How are the terms low vision, visually impaired, and blind defined?" University of Washington, updated June 28, 2017, <https://www.washington.edu/doit/how-are-terms-low-vision-visually-impaired-and-blind-defined>.
3. "Key Definitions of Statistical Terms," American Foundation for the Blind (AFB), August 2017, <http://www.afb.org/info/blindness-statistics/key-definitions-of-statistical-terms/25>.
4. "Tips for Assisting People Who Are Blind or Have Low Vision," Vision Australia, n.d., <https://www.visionaustralia.org/information/family-friends-carers/tips-assisting>.
5. CSAT and SAMHSA, "Chapter 1: Overview of Treatment Issues," in *Substance Use Disorder Treatment For People With Physical and Cognitive Disabilities*, 1-15.
6. "Types of Accommodations for Employees with Vision Loss," AFB, n.d., <http://www.afb.org/info/for-employers/accommodations-for-workers-with-vision-loss/types-of-accommodations/345>.
7. "Presenter Guidelines: Accessibility & Inclusion," Association of University Centers on Disabilities, n.d., <https://www.aucd.org/conference/template/page.cfm?id=50200>.