MCB/DDS Partnership

Orientation & Mobility/Low Vision Services
www.mass.gov/dds/visionloss

Human Guide Considerations

Choosing a Side for Use of Human Guide

There is no correct side for an individual with vision loss to be guided or for a guide to be positioned. The individual or the guide may choose the right or left side for any reason including:

- Ability: The person with vision loss may only have use of, or better use of one hand/arm.
- Safety: It may be safer for the guide to walk on the side closest to traffic or other hazard.
- Support: The individual with vision loss may need to hold the available handrail with one hand and the guide with the other.
- Functional Vision: If an individual has reduced or no vision from one eye compared to the other, it may be preferred to be guided from the side with no/reduced vision.

Switching Sides

It is common in many guiding situations that the individual will need to switch from one side of the guide to the other due to:

- Fatigue: The individual may become tired holding with one hand for an extended time and prefer to switch and use the other hand.
- Environmental Factors:
    - The individual may switch sides in order to use an available handrail.
    - The guide may request to switch sides when approaching a doorway in order to easily open the door and walk through safely together.
    - The guide may request to switch sides to walk on the side with a curb, traffic, and/ or another potential hazard.

Human Guide Considerations (continued)

Switching Sides (continued)

Safely making the switch:

- Tell the individual that you are going to switch sides and why switching sides is necessary.
- While keeping in physical contact, turn in front of the individual so that you are facing him/her.
- Reach out and contact the individual's other hand or arm so that he/she can grasp you.
- Assist if needed to release the original grasp and establish a new one with the other hand.
- Remember to always remain in contact with the individual as you are switching sides so the individual does not stand alone in free space.
- Resume your sighted guide position and continue on.
- Alternatively, the individual can cross behind the guide without losing contact:
    - The individual places his/her free hand above his/her other hand already on the guide's arm and steps behind the guide.
    - Individual moves the bottom hand across to the guide's other arm.
    - The individual removes hand from the original arm and moves to stand to the guide's other side.

Human Guide Use with a Long Cane

All of these options are at the discretion of the individual and the guide, and are based on location, ability, and/or preference:

- Individual can fold the cane and hold it in one hand while holding the guide's arm with his/her other hand.
- Individual can hold the cane vertically like a staff ("shepherd's position").
- Individual can hold the cane in diagonal position in front of them with tip on the ground (not swinging the cane), or with a reduced arc swing.
- Individual can give the cane to the guide to hold (folded or unfolded).

Human Guide Considerations (continued)

Human Guide Use with an Adaptive (Push) Cane

All of these options are at the discretion of the individual and the guide and are based on location, style of cane, ability, and/or preference:

- If the cane is foldable, the individual can hold the folded cane in his/her free hand while holding the guide's arm with his/her other hand.
- Individual can give it to the guide or someone else to hold (folded or unfolded).
- In some situations the individual may be able to leave the cane behind and then the guide can go back to get it (after safely guiding the individual to a different location).

Human Guide Use When Getting On/Off a Bus or Van with Stairs

Ideally there will be two guides to assist for safety when guiding an individual on or off transportation:

- The doorway (of a van/bus) is often narrow. One guide should be in front of, and the other guide behind the individual as he/she walks up or down the van/bus steps.

When there is only one guide to assist:

- Guide the individual to the steps and tell him/her if they are going up and into the vehicle or down and out of the vehicle.
- Assist the individual to locate and grasp a handrail or grab bar/pole.
- When going up/entering, the guide remains one step behind the individual all the way into the van/bus.
- At the top landing, while the individual with vision loss is maintaining a grasp on the handrail or grab bar/pole, the guide passes carefully in front and offers use of the human guide technique to a seat.
- When going down/exiting, the guide stops the individual at the top landing.
- The guide must carefully pass in front of the individual, and go down one step to stand in a protective stance, arms outstretched and facing the individual.

Human Guide Considerations (continued)

Human Guide Use When Getting On/Off a Bus or Van with Stairs (continued)

When there is only one guide to assist: (continued)

- The individual proceeds down the steps, maintain a grasp on one or both handrails, (or one handrail that the guides hand) with the guide spotting for safety until the individual is out of the vehicle.
- Resume use of human guide.

Human Guide Use with an Individual Who Will Not Maintain Grasp

Sometimes despite encouragement and positive reinforcement an individual will not maintain contact with his/her guide. The individual may prefer to follow at a safe distance. In this situation:

- The individual walks naturally and the guide should maintain a pace that keeps him/her a step ahead and to the side of the individual.
- The guide should frequently look back at the individual to ensure close proximity and change sides as necessary for safety.
- The guide should describe any changes in walking surface.
- If the individual is not able to visually see the guide, the guide should face the individual and provide voice guidance.
- See also **Voice Guide** section below.

Human Guide Use When An Individual Is Unsafe Using Physical Contact

If an individual is unable to hold the guide's arm an object such as a foam dowel/baton can be used:

- The individual holds one end of the baton and the guide the other end.
- The guide maintains Human Guide position in front of and to the side of the individual.
- The guide maintains a pace so that the individual is not walking faster than he/she is comfortable.
- The length of the baton should account for a safe distance as needed between the guide and individual.

Human Guide Considerations (continued)

Human Guide Use When An Individual Is Unsafe Using Physical Contact (continued)

- The foam may need to be covered in a texture that is appealing to the individual and washable. The ends may be marked to distinguish where the individual and guide each grasp the baton.

Human Guide Use with an Individual Self Propelling or Using a Power Wheelchair

When assisting an individual with vision loss who is able to self-propel his/her wheelchair:

- If the individual is learning, or knows all or part of a route to a destination, the guide should walk behind the individual. The guide should be ready to provide verbal or physical assistance as necessary for safety.
- If the individual doesn't know the route the guide can assume a human guide position by walking a step ahead and to one side of the wheelchair and offer Voice Guide assistance.
- If the individual is using a power wheelchair the guide may need to stand to the side with the controls in case assistance is needed with operation.
- See also the **Voice Guide** section below.

Voice Guide

Voice Guide is a technique where the individual follows voice cues with no physical contact with the guide. The individual can be walking or self-propelling his/her wheelchair.

- The guide should walk facing the individual while intermittently turning forward to ensure safety.
- The guide continues to talk to the individual so he/she can continue to move toward the guide's voice.
- Encourage the individual to use protective techniques when walking through open space. The individual should keep hand/arm up and across body at waist level and head level or use his/her cane or adaptive cane.

Human Guide Considerations (continued)

Voice Guide (continued)

- The guide must ensure the individual with vision loss's safety at all times with voice guidance/cues so that the individual moves safely around objects, furniture, etc.

Human Guide Use While Pushing an Individual in a Wheelchair

Consider Human Guide techniques while pushing an individual's wheelchair:

- Greet the individual and let him/her know that you will be pushing the wheelchair.
- Warn the individual of upcoming bumps or changes in terrain or direction (backward, up/down ramps, etc.)
- Travel at a pace comfortable for the individual.
- See also the **Descriptive Language** section below.

Use of Descriptive Language

It is important for the guide to not only describe an area while guiding an individual with vision loss, but also explain the location and position of items relative to the individual:

- Use of descriptive language allows the individual to make sense of sounds, anticipate changes in the walking surface, become oriented to an area, and hopefully feel comfortable walking with the guide.
- It is not necessary to describe every sight and sound, but it is important to describe anything that the individual might encounter, that would be useful for orientation, that puts the individual at ease, and/or answers his/her questions.

Human Guide Considerations (continued)

Use of Descriptive Language (continued)

Examples of descriptive/positional language include:

- Indoors:
  - "Door opens toward you and is on your right."
  - "Turning into a narrow hallway with a coat rack to your left."
  - "The sound up ahead is a man vacuuming the rug in the hallway."
  - "The furniture has been moved for cleaning so now the couch is against the left wall.

- Outdoors:
  - "The dogs barking are on a leash and walking in the park with their owner."
  - "On this street the stores are on your left."
  - "The sidewalk is under construction so we are going to walk slowly over some bumpy areas."

- Always use "left" and "right" for total communication:
  - "We're turning left".
  - "There is a tree to your right".
  - "We're going through the door on your left".

- Always use "left" and "right" for total communication: (continued)
  - Tap the object (as appropriate) to produce an auditory cue. This is especially helpful if the individual has to reach for something:
    - "The table in front of you on your left side", while tapping the table to the individual's left.
    - The handrail is on the right", while tapping the handrail.

If the individual has deafblindness use the communication system that works best for him/her: sign language/tactile sign, tactile symbols, object communication, and/or touch as appropriate.

Human Guide Considerations (continued)

Human Guide Use while Signing

- When possible the individual with deafblindness should hold the guide's arm with the non-~~pre~~dominant hand, leaving his/her signing hand free. In this way the guide and the individual may be able to communicate while walking.
- Stop walking as needed to communicate.
- An interpreter or person who signs can walk on the individual's free side to communicate.

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