

Finding Services: A Beginner's Guide to Visual Impairment

Introduction

0:07

Hi, I am Karma Marshall, and I work at the National Research and Training Center on Blindness and Low Vision, or the NRTC, at Mississippi State University.

We are sharing this information so that people new to visual impairment or people who've had a visual impairment for some time but are having difficulty locating or accessing services have a starting point to begin their quest to get the services and support they need.

0:33

The information here is not comprehensive. It is provided to give you a starting point or an idea of the many types of resources available to people with visual impairments. There may be more local resources in your area.

Many of these services are not connected, so while we hope that if you contact one or a few of these resources, you will learn about the others, that's not always the case. Be persistent and ask for help in finding the resources you need. Most of the agencies we discuss here also provide links on their websites to other more specialized or local resources or services.

1:11

First, who are we? The National Research and Training Center on Blindness and Low Vision, or NRTC, is at Mississippi State University and is a federally funded center to research employment issues impacting people with blindness or low vision. We also provide professional development training to service providers. The NRTC does not provide direct services to people with visual impairments. However, we have informational videos and resource lists to support people with visual impairments, their families and employers. We developed this video because people with visual impairments who participated in our research projects said they had difficulty finding needed services.

(Image description: Screenshots of the NRTC website's "About" page, "For Service Providers" page, and "Our Products" page.)

1:57

The NRTC also operates the Older Individuals Who are Blind Technical Assistance Center, or OIB-TAC. That Center is primarily for service providers but offers some resources for people experiencing visual impairment.

(Image description: Screenshot of the OIB-TAC website.)

2:13

For example, Lessons for Living is a series of lessons that can be listened to, read

online, or downloaded, that covers topics such as understanding an eye condition, explaining how to safely complete tasks or use magnification devices, and accessing printed material, and many more.

(Image description: Screenshot of the “Lessons for Living” page on the OIB-TAC website.)

2:32

The OIB-TAC also has a website, Time To Be Bold, that offers information about standard vocabulary, how to contact various agencies, get services, and access online educational materials to increase independence and connections among people with visual impairment.

(Image description: Screenshot of the Time To Be Bold website.)

2:51

We are providing a link to websites and contact information for various agencies and programs mentioned here, including the NRTC, in a description box, and as a separate document. The resources are in the same order as in the video, with timestamps to assist you in locating them. We invite you to review our website and, if you're interested, register for potential participation in future research projects.

3:20

To begin, let's clarify a few terms and issues.

3:24

The term visual impairment applies to a wide range of visual conditions, ranging from low vision to total sight loss. Do not be discouraged by the use of the word blind when you see titles of organizations, services, or resources. Agencies may have different requirements about the level of visual impairment needed to get services, but none require total blindness. Requirements vary by agency, so if one agency does not serve you, do not assume that other agencies have the same guidelines. Agencies also have different procedures for documenting that you have a visual impairment. Some may ask you to provide a note from a doctor, while for other services, your self-report is enough.

(Image description: Slide that reads, “The term visual impairment applies to a wide range of visual conditions, ranging from Low Vision, Legal Blindness, and Total Blindness.”)

(Video description 1: Close-up shot of a doctor wearing a white coat writing on a stack of papers in his hand.)

(Video description 2: Close-up shot of a table with multiple pink and blue sticky notes attached to it with writing on them. As the camera moves along the table, a person on the left side writes on a sheet of paper while another person on the right side picks up one of the sticky notes and places it in a notebook.)

(Video description 3: A man wearing a business suit sitting at a table holds a sheet of paper and a pen and leans in to show the man sitting across from him, who is wearing a T-shirt, an item on the paper.)

(Video description 4: Close-up shot of a man wearing a tan jacket holding a cell phone and making scrolling motions with his fingers.)

4:10

Services are offered by a variety of different agencies and are not always coordinated. Service agencies do not always refer you to other service providers that might help you. Try to ask each place you contact if they know of other agencies or services that might be helpful. Even if they do not have suggestions, do not assume that nothing exists. If you do not get what you need at the first agency, don't give up. Other organizations may be able to help. Most, but not all, of these services are free. Some agencies limit their services to a particular geographic area. If you contact an agency that does not serve your area, ask for help finding one that can serve you.

Vocational Rehabilitation

4:57

Where should you start? Begin with Vocational Rehabilitation Services or VR. Our resource list contains information about contacting your state VR program and the other programs or services discussed in this video. You do not need to wait until your doctor releases you from care. You may begin using VR services and most other services while still receiving medical treatment from your doctor.

5:30

VR services do more than assist people with employment, so do not hesitate to seek services because you see the word vocational. You may believe you cannot work or may not be interested in working. However, there are likely things VR can do to help you adjust to your visual impairment. Please keep listening to learn more.

5:51

Some states have one VR agency that serves people with all disabilities. Other states have a separate agency for people with visual impairment. If you live in a state with separate agencies and you have multiple disabilities, the agencies will work together to make sure you get the services you need.

(Image description: Screenshot of the CSAVR website.)

(Video description: Close-up shot of two men shaking hands in an office.)

6:09

The primary goal of VR is to assist people with disabilities in becoming or staying employed. If you are working and your visual impairment is interfering with your ability to do your job, VR can work with you and your employer to help you keep your job. If you have concerns about how you will be able to do your job, talk to a VR Counselor. They will likely have suggestions to help you.

(Video description: Close-up shot of a woman standing next to another woman who is sitting as she shows her how to use a refreshable braille device. The woman sitting slowly glides her fingers across the device as she feels the raised dots.)

6:35

If you are new to visual impairment and you're trying to learn how to adjust and do things, VR can help you. VR recognizes that it's not realistic to work until you can do the things you need to do to take care of yourself.

6:50

VR providers refer to tasks like learning to manage your clothes and personal hygiene, cooking, doing laundry, and managing your bank account as activities of daily living. If you're having difficulty performing these or other tasks, VR can get someone to teach you how to do these things. Typically, VR will not provide these services unless you hope to work after or while adjusting and learning new skills. Learning these skills is typically a step toward greater independence and employment.

(Image description: Slide that reads, "Activities of Daily Living: manage your clothes, personal hygiene, cooking, laundry, and manage your bank account.")

7:23

It can be challenging to think about working while adjusting to a visual impairment. Keep an open mind about what your future holds as you learn to do more and more things. You may find that you may want to work in a new job where you are comfortable using your newly acquired skills, or you may want to return to your previous employment with some job modifications.

Remember that you can always change your mind. If you're not interested in thinking about work now and decline VR services, you can change your mind later. Likewise, if you participate in VR services but decide not to work, there is no penalty.

8:04

Everyone with a visual impairment must learn how to get around in their environment before going to work. VR can help you get orientation and mobility, or O&M training. O&M specialists teach people with visual impairment how to travel using a white cane. A white cane identifies you to the public as a person with a visual impairment and makes the world safer for you and others. If you're concerned about using a white cane, talking with the orientation mobility specialist might be helpful before deciding what to do. An O&M specialist can also teach you how to move safely in new places and use public transportation. What you learn will depend a lot on what you want to do.

(Image description 1: Two photos of women using a white cane outside a brick building.)

(Image description 2: Close-up shot of two women standing outside facing each other. The woman on the left is wearing sunglasses and smiling while she holds her white cane. The woman on the right is wearing glasses and speaking to the other woman.)

(Image description 3: A young man using a white cane reaches out his right arm and feels the side of an elevator frame.)

Some people are interested in getting a dog guide. Having good O&M skills is necessary before you get a dog guide.

(Image description 1: A woman walks with her dog guide on a sidewalk with flowers and large brick buildings in the background.)

(Image description 2: A young woman walks down a flight of stairs outside with her dog guide.)

8:58

Some states have center-based services where you can go during the day or live temporarily while you learn skills to accommodate your visual impairment. Ask your state agency about this and take a tour to see if you are interested in participating in training at a center-based facility.

9:15

VR is focused on helping people get jobs, but the VR counselors know that you might need a little or a lot of training and helpful equipment before you can work. Many devices, such as magnification and audio programs help people with visual impairment perform work or everyday tasks. You can learn to use your computer, smartphone, or other devices using different techniques.

(Image description: A man sits at a computer desk facing two large monitors with zoomed-in text on the screen.)

These are just some of the services that VR can provide. Consider what would help you and ask the VR counselor who works with you how to get what you need. For example, if you want to meet other people with visual impairments, ask your VR counselor to help you.

9:57

VR can also arrange an assessment to get recommendations about what will help you. VR services are free and funded by your tax dollars. Again, these services are provided with the expectation that you will get or keep a job with proper training and support.

See our video “Navigating VR Services” for additional information about what VR can do for you.

(Image description: Title screen of the “Navigating VR Services” video.)

Older Individuals who are Blind (OIB) Programs

10:26

If you do not want to consider potential employment now and are at least 55 years of age, VR also has a program for older people with visual impairments. It is called the Older Individuals Who Are Blind program, or OIB.

10:44

The Rehabilitation Services Administration funds programs for people 55 years of age and older who are not employed or seeking employment. In some states, the services associated with this program are administered directly by the state VR agency. In other states, VR has contracts with private providers to provide these services.

11:06

OIB services are free to eligible people with eligibility requirements being that you are over 55 years old, your visual impairment is a barrier to living independently, and with services, there is a reasonable expectation you will be more independent.

(Image description: Slide that reads, "OIB Eligibility Requirements: Over 55 years old, your visual impairment is a barrier to living independently, and with services, there is a reasonable expectation you will be more independent.")

11:22

The OIB programs aim to help people with visual impairments live independently in their homes and communities. An OIB service provider will visit your home or ask you to come to a rehabilitation training center.

11:35

The OIB staff will learn what functional limitations you're having because of your vision loss. Functional limitations are activities you're having difficulty doing because of your vision impairment, such as traveling independently, managing your medicine or other healthcare needs, managing your grooming and care, communicating with others, preparing meals, doing laundry, continuing your hobbies, and other homemaking activities. Discuss these with your service provider and ask for help.

(Image description 1: A woman holding an open book in her lap sits on a couch next to an older man.)

(Image description 2: Close-up shot of a woman holding a medicine bottle sits at a table with pills of various colors scattered in front of her.)

(Image description 3: Close-up shot of a woman holding a green lace shirt on a hanger with her left hand as she feels the braille tag at the neck of the shirt with her right hand.)

12:04

The OIB program will work with you to develop a plan to get you the training you need to improve your independent living skills. The OIB staff will also refer you to other programs or services that might be helpful to you.

Most OIB programs help people meet others with visual impairments through peer support groups. These groups can provide emotional support and information about other community resources.

(Image description: A group of older men and women wearing athletic wear who are all smiling stand in a semi-circle with their right arms extended and touching hands in the center.)

12:30

You may be served by VR and move to the OIB program, or you may be in the OIB program and move to the VR program. In some cases, you may be in both programs. How this works sometimes depends on the state agency. Remember that VR provides more comprehensive services because the focus is on helping you get

the skills and equipment needed to work and then helping you find and keep a job. Be sure to ask questions or ask the service providers to explain anything to you.

The VR and OIB programs are both federal-state programs, meaning that most of the funding is from the federal government and administered by the Rehabilitation Services Administration. There are differences in how states administer the programs. If you believe you're not receiving the services you need, you can contact the Client Assistance Program or CAP for assistance. Your VR agency can provide you with contact information for your state CAP, or you may find that information on the VR Agency website.

13:35

Neither the VR nor the OIB programs will provide things unrelated to visual impairment. For example, they do not provide nursing services or meals. However, VR staff may refer you to agencies or resources to help you get needed services that they do not offer.

Blind and Visual Impairment Rehabilitation Services (BRS)

13:56

For veterans or individuals currently serving in the US Armed Forces, the Department of Veterans Affairs, the VA, provides blind and visual impairment rehabilitation services. BRS assists eligible veterans and active-duty service personnel with visual impairment in developing skills for personal independence, community life, and family adjustment. BRS provides a continuum of care consisting of case management, outpatient services, assessments, and intensive instruction to promote confidence and skills.

(Image description 1: Transition slide that reads, "Blind and Visual Impairment Rehabilitation Services.")

(Image description 2: Screenshot of the "Blind Rehabilitation Services" page on the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs website.)

Veterans may receive services from both the VA and VR.

Blinded Veterans Association

14:36

Another resource veterans should be aware of is the Blinded Veterans Association, or BVA. This nonprofit organization promotes the welfare of veterans with visual impairments. Members mentor other veterans and advocate for veterans with visual impairment.

(Image description: Screenshot of the Blinded Veterans Association website.)

Your visual impairment does not need to be associated with your military service. Membership is for anyone who honorably served or serves in the Armed Forces. You do not have to be legally blind to join; having a significant uncorrectable visual loss qualifies you for membership.

15:11

BVA also helps families of veterans. There is a one-time membership fee to join. BVA has a team of ambassadors who serve as liaisons between veterans and the

Veterans Service Program. The ambassadors provide information and advocacy, including helping veterans access assorted services.

BVA has a program called VetTech that can help determine what type of technology would be helpful to you and advocate for you to receive it. Contact BVA and talk to a representative or visit their website to learn more about how veterans can get help.

Private Agencies

15:51

Many states have one or more private agencies that provide services to people with visual impairment. You may recognize them with names like Lighthouse for the Blind, Guild for the Blind, or a similar name. Each private agency is typically a nonprofit entity with a director and a governing board.

The services private agencies offer vary and may include teaching people how to do things with reduced vision, such as daily living skills or orientation and mobility. Most coordinate support groups to help people adjust to visual impairment. Some help with job skills training and job placement.

(Image description 1: A young woman walks through a crosswalk using a white cane in an urban setting with many cars parked along the street in the background.)

(Image description 2: Close-up shot of a woman using a refreshable braille device while sitting at a table.)

Many of these agencies have contracts with their state VR programs to provide some services to people with visual impairment. This means that the VR agency may be paying that agency to help you learn skills or receive other help. When contacting a private agency, ask what services they provide and who will pay for the services.

Private agencies may serve people of various ages depending on their mission and funding sources. Some of these agencies limit their services to a particular geographic area. If you contact a private agency and are informed that you are outside its location, request a referral to another service provider.

National Library Service for the Blind and Print Disabled (NLS)

17:15

If you are a reader and have difficulty with printed materials, the National Library Service for the Blind and Print Disabled or NLS will be beneficial.

(Image description: Screenshot of the NLS website.)

Each state operates a library for people with difficulty reading regular print because of a permanent or temporary visual, physical, or reading disability. These services are free. To receive services, complete an application from your state library services or go online. If you are working with the OIB or VR program, the service provider there should be able to assist you with the application.

17:54

A favorite service of NLS users is BARD Mobile, an app that allows you to download

and listen to books on your smart devices. The BARD app includes an extensive music collection and magazines.

(Image description: Slide that reads, "BARD Mobile" with an image of a man holding an electronic tablet with the BARD Mobile app loaded on the screen.)

18:06

NLS also provides a talking book player with large buttons and braille markings. It has a sleep timer and built-in audio instructions. You can order books of your choosing that are mailed to your home and that you return by mail with no shipping cost. This can supplement or be used instead of the BARD app. The talking book player and the app are easy to operate, and YouTube instructions assist you.

(Image description: Slide that reads, "Talking Book Player" with an image of a talking book player and an open case containing a cassette tape.)

18:32

Braille readers may also get books and magazines delivered to their home at no cost, and the library can lend refreshable braille displays to eligible readers.

(Video description 1: A woman sitting at a wooden table opens a braille book from NLS titled "Cooks" and starts adjusting the spine of the book as she prepares to read it.)

(Video description 2: Close-up shot of a man using a refreshable braille device.)

Other Resources

18:45

Now, we will give an overview of other major resources.

Hadley

18:52

We begin with Hadley. Hadley is a nonprofit organization that provides free resources to help people learn what they need to cope with a visual impairment. Information is available online, by phone, and through the mail. They aim to help people with visual impairments thrive in their homes, work, and communities. Hadley's resources provide practical help and connections with others with similar experiences.

(Image description: Screenshot of the Hadley website.)

19:17

Hadley has a very user-friendly website, and you may also contact Hadley by phone or e-mail.

Hadley has online workshops, podcasts, instructional videos, and discussion groups and allows you to chat with someone to ask questions or get help. Topics include daily living, adjusting to vision loss, recreation, technology, braille, and working.

(Image description 1: Screenshot of the Hadley website.)

(Image description 2: Slide that reads, "Topics Include daily living, adjusting to vision loss, recreation, technology, braille, and working.")

19:41

Many people find it helpful to learn a little or a lot about how to use braille. People can learn braille at any age. Some use it only for labeling items like canned goods or medicine, while others become braille readers.

19:55

People new to visual impairment may find the Hadley site particularly helpful as it has links to short audio podcasts about the impact of vision loss on friendships, coming to grips with vision loss, adjusting to using a white cane, how to choose and use a magnifier, and many other topics.

American Printing House for the Blind (APH)

20:18

Other resources that may be helpful include the American Printing House for the Blind. APH is a nonprofit organization empowering people who are blind or have low vision by providing accessible materials, services, and resources.

(Image description: Screenshot of the APH website.)

Within APH, the APH ConnectCenter is a free online resource hub empowering those who are blind or have low vision, along with their support networks and professionals in the field, with a wealth of free information.

(Image description: Screenshot of the “ConnectCenter” page on the APH website.)

20:45

The ConnectCenter information and referral line provides life-changing telephone and online support, recommendations for adjusting to blindness or low vision, finding support groups, independent living resources, career resources, and more.

The online Directory of Services offers over 2000 listings of agencies, resources, and services specific for people who are blind or have low vision.

21:12

CareerConnect focuses on career readiness for job seekers of all ages and offers an online job seekers toolkit, blogs, and webinars.

(Image description: Screenshot of the “CareerConnect” page on the APH website.)

21:21

FamilyConnect supports parents of children who are blind or have low vision and offers blogs, webinars, and getting started guides for families.

(Image description: Screenshot of the “FamilyConnect” page on the APH website.)

21:31

VisionAware is a free, easy-to-use informational service for adults who are blind or have low vision, caregivers, health care providers, and social service professionals.

Peer advisors share their personal experiences through blogs and resources abound in articles in the Getting Started with Vision Loss Guide.

(Image description: Screenshot of the “VisionAware” page on the APH website.)

National Industries for the Blind (NIB)

21:54

Another resource that might be of interest is National Industries for the Blind. NIB has a national network of approximately 100 affiliated agencies across the country that employ people with visual impairments and is the largest employer of people with visual impairments in the country.

(Image description: Screenshot of the NIB website.)

All NIB employees at an affiliated agency provide services or manufacture items and earn at least minimum wage. Some NIB affiliates provide rehabilitation services too. Interested people can contact NIB to find out if there is a local affiliate.

(Image description: Screenshot of the “Find a Local Agency” page on the NIB website.)

American Foundation for the Blind

22:29

American Foundation for the Blind advocates for policies that promote the inclusion of people with visual impairments in all walks of life.

(Image description: Screenshot of the AFB website.)

You can sign up for AccessWorld, a free quarterly newsletter with objective information about technology for people with visual impairments.

(Image description: Screenshot of the “AccessWorld” page on the AFB website.)

AFB operates internships and apprentice programs to help people with visual impairments in learning skills and meeting employers.

AFB has resources for families, particularly parents of children with visual impairments. The AFB website includes links to various resources and information about visual impairment.

Higher Education

23:08

You may need resources for higher education.

23:14

VR can help eligible people obtain higher education with the expectation that this will increase their employment opportunities. Most higher education systems, including community colleges, have offices dedicated to assisting students with disabilities, including students with visual impairments.

Several online documents provide guidance and resource lists for students with visual impairments.

The NRTC has an app, **4to24**, that includes information about accessing higher education.

(Image description: Screenshot of the “4to24 App” page on the NRTC website.)

Organizations for People with Visual Impairments

23:50

There are two major organizations of people who have visual impairments. Check out both to see which you think fits you.

American Council of the Blind

24:01

American Council of the Blind or ACB seeks to advocate for and support people with vision impairments. Each state has a chapter. The ACB website provides information about education, resources, and peer support through blogs, online publications, and podcasts. There is a small membership fee. ACB has an annual national convention, and many states have state conventions. ACB provides scholarship opportunities for students with visual impairments or children of parents with visual impairments.

(Image description: Screenshot of the ACB website.)

National Federation of the Blind

24:36

National Federation of the Blind or NFB is a network of people with visual impairments who coordinate various programs, services, and resources for people with visual impairments of all ages. Members connect with others with visual impairment, get access to various training opportunities, and receive a monthly newsletter via e-mail. NFB has an annual national convention, and many states have state conventions.

(Image description: Screenshot of the NFB website.)

There is a small membership fee, and a donation is requested for a subscription to the *Braille Monitor*, the NFB's publication. In addition to state and sometimes more local groups, NFB has several specialty divisions. For example, there are divisions for members with hearing and visual impairments, people with diabetes, students, or people in some occupations. NFB is affiliated with several residential training facilities for people with visual impairments.

Closing

25:35

Navigating the organizations and services may feel overwhelming, particularly the alphabet soup of initials that people sometimes use. Do not be shy about asking people to slow down and explain. Please try to be persistent in finding what you need. Many qualified service providers will be happy to help you find the resources and learn new things.

25:59

Please visit the NRTC's website for additional information and reach out to us if you have any questions. Thank you for listening.

(Image description: Slide with NRTC contact information.)

The contents of this video were developed under a grant from the National Institute on Disability, Independent Living, and Rehabilitation Research (NIDILRR), current grant number 90RTEM0007. NIDILRR is a center within the Administration for Community Living (ACL), Department of Health and Human Services (HHS). The contents of this website do not necessarily represent the policy of NIDILRR, ACL, or HHS and you should not assume endorsement by the Federal Government.