

Drivers Make the Difference For Older Passengers with Vision Loss

A Training Resource



AFB American Foundation[®]
for the Blind

Expanding possibilities for people with vision loss

This is a joint publication of the National Aging and Disability Transportation Center and the American Foundation for the Blind.

Since 1921, The American Foundation for the Blind (AFB) has been a leader in addressing the most pressing needs of people with visual impairments and their families, breaking down societal barriers and promoting broad systemic change. Publisher of the Journal of Visual Impairment & Blindness for over a century and counting, AFB is also proud to steward the accessible Helen Keller Archive, honoring the legacy of our most famous ambassador. AFB's mission is to expand pathways to leadership, education, inclusive technology, and career opportunities to create a world of no limits for people who are blind, deafblind, or have low vision.

The National Aging and Disability Transportation Center (NADTC) is a program funded by the Federal Transit Administration and administered by Easterseals and USAging with guidance from the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Community Living. NADTC's mission is to increase accessible transportation options for older adults, people with disabilities, and caregivers nationwide.

Vision loss affects older adults in a variety of ways

- Age-related vision changes such as blurred vision, poor night vision, sensitivity to glare, increased time needed to adjust to bright or low light settings, reduced contrast sensitivity and reduced ability to focus on fine detail make it hard to navigate the world safely.
- People with vision loss don't all see the same and will, therefore, require various types of assistance.

They may have difficulty performing basic tasks associated with using transportation services. Some people with vision loss may not be able to see drivers' faces or read schedules but may be able to get on and off the bus and pay their fare without assistance. Others may be able to read signs but will need help finding an empty seat, depending on their type and degree of vision loss.



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- They experience higher rates of diabetes, falls and hearing loss, which increases the need for transportation services and can make providing transportation services more challenging.¹
- They may have other functional limitations which impact their ability to use transportation services such as cognitive decline, physical limitations that require the use of a walker or wheelchair, trouble standing for long periods of time, difficulty with extreme temperatures and other disabilities that may or may not be hidden.

Signs that a passenger may have vision loss

Identifying older people with low vision can be challenging. They may not look different from other riders and may not use a long white cane to navigate spaces. However, the signs listed below will help you identify who might need your assistance and help you to feel more comfortable offering help.

- Shuffling, walking slowly and appearing unsteady
- Looking down at their feet instead of ahead at their destination
- Using a support cane to reach in front of them to determine what is ahead
- Holding a fare card or currency very close to their eyes in order to read it
- Having trouble filling out a form or finding the line on which to sign
- Squinting excessively and using sunglasses even indoors
- Not making eye contact when they are talking to you

¹ Vision Serve Alliance, Vision impairment and Vision Rehabilitation in the Lives of Older People in the United States, November 2020, pp.6-7.

Techniques for helping

Drivers should first ask the rider clarifying questions to learn exactly what help they need. For example, the passenger may be able to walk from their front door to the vehicle without help or they may need to take the driver's arm to get to the vehicle safely and efficiently using the [Human Guide](#)² Technique.

Watch a [video](#)³ on this technique or [read more instructions](#).⁴ Note: many older people with vision loss are not aware of this technique and may need some prompting.

Pointers on offering human guide

1. Asking “Would you like to take my arm so I can guide you...” is a perfect way to offer help.
2. If the rider says yes, touch the back of your hand to the back of the passenger's hand or elbow. This will facilitate helping an older person who is blind or has low vision and who is aware of human guide technique to take your arm.

Giving clear verbal directions

1. What you say makes a difference, as does how you say it. A simple greeting can help someone who does not see you to realize you are nearby and to determine where you are standing.
2. Using words like, “over there” or “this way” do not help. Use “straight ahead,” “behind you” or “to your right.” Use these directions based on the way the passenger is facing. You may need to turn that same way, as giving accurate directions is harder when you are facing someone.
3. If they are moving, ask them to stand still for a moment so you can give them clear directions.
4. If they are not facing the right direction, away from the vehicle, for example, ask them to turn to their right or left, coach with “a little more” or “90 degrees” and then use the suggestions above that will get them to where they want to go.
5. Saying, “when you step off the vehicle, you will be facing...” is a good place to start. The person may have already stepped off and then turned around to talk with you about which way they should go.
6. Use concrete examples and be as verbally descriptive as possible. You may need to offer human guide assistance if the person seems confused, the path is too complicated or it looks dangerous to you.

It is important **not** to assume that an individual with vision loss needs your help. A passenger may feel offended by an erroneous assumption that they need your assistance. So when offering to help, you should be ready to accept “no” graciously. Be flexible. Try the Platinum Rule, which is a step better than the Golden Rule. Treat older passengers with vision loss how you think they want to be treated and try to delight them with your helpful attitude and superior service!

2 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AuGb4yge-ys>

3 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?app=desktop&v=AuGb4yge-ys>

4 <https://visionaware.org/everyday-living/essential-skills/an-introduction-to-orientation-and-mobility-skills/how-to-walk-with-a-guide/>



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Problems and Solutions

This section identifies problems, issues, and concerns that you may encounter when transporting older people with vision loss and offers practical interventions that are intended to help you solve the problem. You may also be able to identify additional ways to resolve these issues based on your experience and suggestions from your passengers.

Problem: Passengers are unable to find the paratransit vehicle. This situation may occur if other vehicles are nearby or the vehicle is in a parking place, thereby blending in with all the other parked cars.

Solution: Some passengers may be able to get to the vehicle on their own when given clear verbal directions to its location. Others may need additional assistance. You may need to be on the lookout for your passenger and provide whatever help is needed, such as walking with the passenger or offering human guide assistance to take them to the vehicle.

Problem: Passengers may have trouble finding the right door to get into a van or car since the side of the vehicle closest to the passenger could be either the passenger or driver side

Solution: You should provide clear verbal directions or human guide assistance to help the passenger get into the vehicle.

Problem: Passengers do not always know when they have arrived at their destination. Automated announcements are sometimes unintelligible or barriers around the driver’s seat may make it difficult to hear your announcements.

Solution: Verbal interaction between you and the passenger can help when the passenger boards. Knowing the situation, you can make a point of calling out when the rider’s stop is next or coming up soon. Timely reminders will help avoid delays that may be caused by a passenger gathering their possessions or unfolding a mobility aid. Passengers in a shared ride car need the same prompts so they are ready to leave the vehicle at their destination.

Problem: Passengers with visual impairments are at a higher risk of falls.

Solution: Warn bus riders of potential fall risks and make getting on and off the bus safer with verbal prompts. Warn them about any obstacles in their path, such as tie down straps or bags on the floor; park close to the curb to reduce the height of the step to get in or out of the vehicle and to avoid the need for riders to step off the curb when boarding; warn passengers of tripping hazards in their path when they get out of the vehicle, such as nearby poles, bicycles or other obstacles on the sidewalk.

Problem: When entering a bus, van or sedan, passengers may have problems adapting to changes in light levels, especially on a sunny day. It can be embarrassing when the passenger attempts to sit in a seat that is already occupied.

Solution: Offer simple directions to the nearest empty seat. For example, “The first seat behind me is empty,” or “The first seat facing forward on the passenger side is available.”

Problem: The requirement that passengers board or deboard using the back door of a full-size bus presents a safety hazard. The distance from the driver means they may not be able to ask directions or get needed help getting up or down the steps. You may not be able to see if a passenger trips and falls or is confused about which way to go after they get off the bus.

Solution: Go to the back door to offer help or allow passengers with vision loss to use the front door.

Problems requiring intervention through the ride scheduler

Problem: Passengers do not always know when their vehicle arrives.

Solution: When the trip is scheduled, it is important to talk with the rider about this issue. A prearranged signal by the driver such as honking the horn or a flashing side blinker may work. For those who have smartphones, a phone call or text message can be sent.

Problem: Passengers are unable to find their way to the entrance to the building when they are dropped off.

Solution: The scheduler should ask the rider about their familiarity with their destination. If driver assistance is needed, alert the driver to provide human guide or other assistance.

Summary

Older riders with vision loss may differ greatly in terms of their need for assistance. Some are new to both vision loss and using public transportation; others have been blind or visually impaired for most of their lives and have used transit services for years; still others may have had vision loss for a long time, but still have difficulty traveling independently. The bottom line is that you as the driver can make the rider's transportation journey a positive and productive experience. We hope you find the guidance provided in this publication helpful in your work.

Reference

VisionServe Alliance. Vision Impairment and Vision Rehabilitation in the Lives of Older People with Vision Loss. November 2020, St. Louis and this link: [Vision Rehabilitation and Aging Brief Final 12.14.20.docx - Google Docs](#)



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Who We Are

Established in 2015, the NADTC is a federally funded technical assistance center administered by Easterseals and USAging based in Washington, DC.

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USAging is the 501(c)(3) national association representing and supporting the network of Area Agencies on Aging and advocating for the Title VI Native American Aging Programs. Our members help older adults and people with disabilities throughout the United States live with optimal health, well-being, independence and dignity in their homes and communities. USAging is dedicated to supporting the success of our members through advancing public policy, sparking innovation, strengthening the capacity of our members, raising their visibility and working to drive excellence in the fields of aging and home and community-based services. www.usaging.org

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