

WHITE CANE SAFETY DAY

What every sighted person needs to know if they see someone with a white cane



OCTOBER 2019

White Cane Safety Day is a national observance in the US and is celebrated on October 15. It originated in 1964 and was created to celebrate the achievements of people who are blind or have low vision and their tool of independence, the white cane. A common misconception is that the white cane is only used to identify someone who has vision loss. While it is an identity tool, it provides so much more.

It gives navigational feedback that provides users the freedom to travel safely to their destination if used properly. The tactile feedback helps identify barriers, negative spaces, varying textures and dimensions. For example, if someone is crossing the street with a white cane and feels a hole in front of them, they can change their path to avoid falling.

In order to use the white cane properly, individuals can attend orientation and mobility trainings. These trainings are available to people of all ages and can take anywhere from 6-60 hours depending on the amount of training that is needed. We live in a world that is interpreted visually 90% of the time, so training teaches individuals to hone in on other senses to increase spatial awareness. What do you hear? Do you hear cars? Maybe there is a street nearby. Can you hear the wind? Maybe there is a tree near you that is blowing in the wind. What types of textures do you feel? If you are on a sidewalk, you will be able to tell the difference between the cement and grass.

This increased spatial awareness gives individuals the confidence and freedom they need to navigate new spaces on their own. If you are a sighted person and you see someone using a white cane, make sure you:

IDENTIFY YOURSELF

If someone who is blind is in a room and you are entering, identify yourself by speaking. Say hello or announce your name if applicable. The person cannot see you come into the room. When you leave, be sure to announce that, too. The person who is blind might start another conversation thinking you are there if you don't.

ASK IF THEY NEED HELP

If you notice a person - either with a white cane or a guide dog - who appears to be lost, it is perfectly okay to approach the person and ask if you can help. The person will tell you how you can help. Usually, the person will either take your arm or simply follow behind you.

BE SPECIFIC WITH DIRECTIONS

If you are giving directions, be specific - e.g. how many doorways down the hall or how many blocks or driveways down the street. You can also make references in terms of numbers on a clock face. "Your water bottle is on the table in front of you at 2 o'clock," with an understanding that the person who is blind or has vision loss is at 6 o'clock.

SAY THE WORDS YES OR NO

Your head nod or shoulder shrug may come naturally, but it conveys no response to the person who is blind.

SPEAK DIRECTLY

Always speak directly to the person. Do not talk through someone else. For example, it would not be appropriate to say, "could you ask so-and-so if they would like anything?"



WHITE CANES NOW COVERED BY MEDICAID

A rule proposed by the Ohio Department of Medicaid to provide coverage of white canes as durable medical equipment was finalized on December 10, 2018, making Ohio the first state in the country to provide coverage for white canes!

The Medicaid rule 5160-10-30 includes coverage for ambulation aids under durable medical equipment, which previously covered canes, crutches or walkers but excluded coverage of white canes. The rule went into effect January 1, 2019.

Learn more: Clevelandsightcenter.org/WhiteCanesOhio