

Project VISA—Meeting the Needs of the Visually Impaired Senior Adult*

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This paper describes a model demonstration project to provide community-based services to blind and visually impaired senior adults. Services provided include: transportation; integration into on-going senior center activities; information and referral; shopping assistance; glaucoma screening; and group activities such as newspaper reading, weaving and discussions.

Background

If a person wearing eyeglasses can't see the big "E" on the eye test chart, he/she is legally blind. That means they:

- can't cross the street safely
- can't see if they are opening a can of peaches or green beans when making lunch
- can't read their own mail
- can't read newspapers, magazines, and books
- can't tell if their clothes are matched—or even if they are clean
- don't immediately recognize friends or grandchildren, even within their own home

Two out of three persons over the age of 65 report that poor vision is their biggest health problem. Blindness is becoming a disability of the aged as medical science not only continues to prevent blindness in infants and youth but also continues to extend life expectancy with its attendant difficulties, including potential blindness. For the individual, aging is often perceived in terms of diminutions: a lowering of self-image caused by the cessation of the parent, spouse, and/or productive worker role, the end of life-long friendships due to moving or death, and physical frailty and illness which bring fear and apprehension to the daily routine. Frequently, rather than ac-

commodate to the changes brought on by age and develop new modes to approach life, the individual withdraws into isolation; a barrier grows between the individual and society which neither has the ability to penetrate and to connect with the other. Compounding the situation is the deterioration of sensory capacities; particularly vision and hearing: twenty percent older persons have impaired vision and seventeen percent have partial or total deafness.

The onset of blindness, or visual impairment, even more than any other handicap, compounds the individual feeling of isolation and rejection. Many times, the vision loss is gradual, creating a constant fear that tomorrow will be worse. Frequently, older persons are intimidated by the medical profession and do not fully understand their eye problem, or what they can do to prevent further deterioration. Couple these losses with the variety of medical and emotional problems which affect the elderly, and it is easy to understand why well-meaning family members often view a nursing home as the only "safe" living alternative.

Becoming aware of the difficulties experienced by the frail or handicapped elderly is the first step in developing services to meet their needs. A simple statement, yet very difficult to achieve. In a recent study conducted by the New York Community Trust, it was found that in New York City there are 56 agencies which are concerned

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specifically with the blind.¹ Yet, no more than twenty percent of blind persons receive the services they need. The reasons for this are varied: many do not know they are legally blind or entitled to services; some do not acknowledge their reduced vision when identified; virtually all of these agencies require that the blind person go to them to receive services; and many individuals resist the stigma attached to receiving services at an agency for the blind. The conclusions in this study and its recommendations were to focus on the development of community-based services to the elderly blind.

Visually impaired and other frail senior adults are also *not* served by traditional senior center programs, due, in part, to the following:

- staff is not trained to reach out and work with the disabled person
- there is a lack of trained volunteers willing to help the blind within the center
- adequate transportation is not available to get the visually impaired to and from community centers
- there are difficulties in acceptance of the handicapped by the sighted elderly
- the blind are fearful that they will be ignored, or become lost in the community center

The response from the Associated Y's of Greater New York to this rather bleak picture for the elderly blind in New York was the development of Project VISA (Visually Impaired Senior Adults).² The major objectives of Project VISA are:

(1) To integrate the visually impaired elderly into the ongoing activities of the senior center;

(2) To identify through research an effective means of integration which could be used in other community centers;

(3) To prevent unnecessary and avoidable blindness.

After two years of operation Project VISA has successfully integrated 58 blind and visually impaired senior adults into the activities of our senior center.

How We Developed This Service

An outreach program to identify the visually handicapped persons in the community and to secure and coordinate services to meet their needs proved effective. Posters and brochures were printed and distributed to local stores, banks, and libraries; contacts were made with the eye clinics of four area hospitals; publicity letters were mailed to local senior centers, religious and community organizations, and agencies serving the blind and elderly. The director of the Kings Bay Senior Center identified a large group of members who experienced severe vision problems and had never received information about rehabilitation services.

An Advisory Committee, composed of selected participants of the project and various professionals in the field, has been very valuable during the developmental and later stages of Project VISA.

Other cooperative effort between Project VISA and other service agencies included the project coordinators for special projects being developed by the Center for Independent Living and the Jewish Braille Institute who have been most helpful to Project VISA. These three special projects have begun to meet the needs of the elderly blind each in different but complementary ways. Additionally, Project VISA has developed close links with several local eye clinics, rehabilitative agencies and support services that are frequently needed by elderly persons.

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¹ From an unpublished study of the New York Community Trust on "The Blindness System in New York City and Recommendations for Funding."

² Funded in March of 1978 by a grant from the New York Community Trust, Federation of Jewish Philanthropies and Greater New York Fund/United Way, Project VISA was established at the Kings Bay YM-YWHA in Brooklyn, N.Y.

Services Provided

Transportation: Two very common road-blocks to inclusion of blind senior citizens in a senior citizen center are the attitudes of sighted members toward them and the lack of adequate transportation. These issues must be addressed on many levels and in numerous situations. Project VISA has arranged for a community-based model transportation system to provide transportation for the visually impaired, including transportation to the Senior Center itself, to doctor or clinic appointments, special trips, and other community services. Additionally, this transportation is available to any senior citizen who is unable to use public transportation for whatever reason. Therefore any complaint that the blind are receiving special treatment is unjustified.

Integration Into On-Going Activities: The Senior Center has a wide variety of daily activities, and the blind and partially sighted participate in discussion groups, folk and line dancing, choral group, friendship club, talent show, harmonica group, weaving, newspaper reading/current events, and special events such as birthday parties, lectures, entertainment. Their experiences have been overwhelmingly positive. Many of these participants had been homebound with few opportunities for socialization before their contact with Project VISA.

In addition, several visually handicapped individuals have become members of the Community Center itself and participate in activities such as discussion groups; pottery, sculpture and yoga classes; use of the pool, exercise room, sauna, and steam room.

Information and Referral: In project VISA, the individual has a one-stop local information source, knowledgeable in all programs and entitlements for blind and visually handicapped persons. This has greatly facilitated the matching of clients and services. Follow-up contacts are made to insure that persons who have been identified or referred receive the services to

which they are entitled.

Homebound Shopping Trip: Frail and homebound elderly frequently express difficulty over doing food shopping. This task presents an even additional burden for the blind individual, who must have help to read labels and prices. A weekly shopping trip, staffed by the Community Social Worker for Project VISA, is now available to the homebound. Transportation and shopping assistance are provided to twelve homebound individuals, three of whom are visually impaired. The others have a variety of medical disabilities which make it impossible for them to shop independently. In addition to the direct positive effect of enabling homebound individuals to purchase necessary items, this service provides an opportunity for socialization with peers and mutual support, which is frequently lacking among the isolated elderly.

Additional VISA Groups: Several groups have been initiated by Project VISA during the past year. A weaving class, led by a trained craftsperson, is designed so that every individual can complete the task, regardless of visual capacity. An average of eight individuals, both sighted and visually impaired, participate weekly.

A newspaper reading/current events group is led by the community social worker for Project VISA. Again, this activity combines both sighted and blind individuals and affords the blind person an opportunity to participate on equal footing with their sighted peers. The large print edition of the *New York Times* is used in this group, and many senior citizens in this way have been introduced to it.

A weekly Discussion Group, led by a social work student, is a third addition made by Project VISA to the Senior Center. This group discussed general concerns of all senior citizens, but special emphasis is placed on issues relating to the integration of visually impaired persons into the Center. This group has significantly reinforced the efforts of Project VISA.

Prevention of Unnecessary and Avoidable Blindness: Early detection of the common eye diseases which affect the elderly can significantly reduce the number of individuals who suffer a total loss of vision. Glaucoma screenings have become a regularly scheduled service of Project VISA in cooperation with a local hospital in its Eye Clinic. Transportation is provided; follow-up contacts are made when indicated to encourage complete eye exams. Health-Fairs, speakers and special workshops are also conducted by VISA staff throughout the year to encourage proper eye care. Literature is always available on preventive eye care and the common eye diseases which affect the elderly.

Volunteers: When blind persons come to the center for the first time, they are linked up with sighted volunteers (trained by Project VISA). This enables each one to develop a relationship with a long-time center member who can answer any questions and who often suggests participation in special activities.

The successful participation of the handicapped in any program has to rely quite heavily upon the assistance of leadership volunteers. For example, lunch-time is often a very hectic time in senior centers, and our center is no exception. We had an initial problem with the blind members who couldn't find a seat in the dining room. We discussed this problem with the volunteer table captains. They offered to be responsible for the visually impaired individuals as they entered the dining room. There are other ways in which the participation of the frail and handicapped is aided by volunteers. This close interaction reciprocally serves to reduce the fears about how best to relate to or help a blind person. Our training of the volunteers stresses that blind people are first *people*, who have the same concerns and needs as everyone.

Evaluation

Since Project VISA was designed as a model demonstration project we are evaluating the ingredients of this experience with the assistance of the Florence G. Heller—JWB Research Center. A questionnaire has been designed to gather information from the blind participants as well as from the sighted members of the senior center.

In addition to the formal evaluation, many results of this project are empirical. An outstanding fact is that sixty percent of the clients served by Project VISA had never received any services related to their vision handicap. The successful integration of many individuals can only be adequately weighed through direct observation. One thinks of an example like the homebound, isolated woman whom the staff followed from her first contact with Project VISA to her now weekly participation in a weaving and discussion group.

Summary and Conclusions

The positive experience of Project VISA in integrating blind and sighted senior adults demonstrates that service to handicapped individuals within their local community center is indeed possible. The development of programs which reach out to the "hidden" and forgotten members of the Jewish community continues to be the community center agenda of the future.

Effective reach-out to the handicapped begins with questions about the services currently available to them, assessment of whether they are meeting the needs, which services are lacking, what barriers prevent the handicapped from participating in your center. Likelihood is that the barriers will be of two kinds: (1) physical barriers, such as the lack of transportation, inability to negotiate stairs, etc., and (2) attitudes of others toward handicapped people.