



Writing | Symposium 2021

From Cane to Canine: Ophthalmologists Need Guide Dog Training

By Christine L. Xu

Roughly 10,000 visually impaired people in the United States depend on guide dogs to avoid obstacles and navigate the world confidently and independently¹—and yet this is less than 1 percent of Americans who are eligible to benefit from a guide dog, amounting to some 1 million people.² But why are so many people falling through the cracks?

There is one striking answer: ophthalmologists are not trained on the benefits of guide dogs and the application and referral process for patients. Guide dog referrals typically come not from physicians but from orientation mobility trainers (those who teach people with vision loss how to use a cane).³ Part of the reason for this gap is that many medical residencies do not provide guide dog education as part of their programs.^{4,5,6} This is a lost opportunity and causes needless suffering.

Implementing mandatory guide-dog training in residency programs and at ophthalmology clinics all throughout California would be a step in the right direction. Residency program directors could spearhead the guide-dog workshops and hire volunteers from guide-dog foundations in the area to teach ophthalmology residents and attendings. There are three guide dog schools in California and many more across the country which frequently send out volunteers for community outreach. An added benefit to establishing partnerships between ophthalmology departments and guide-dog foundations would be more streamlined guide-dog referrals from ophthalmologists. An effective training program should cover the eligibility criteria for applying for a guide dog, proper referrals and application assistance, and guide-dog etiquette. Although I only spoke to ophthalmologists and guide-dog foundation employees in California, this lack of education has a broader relevance to the entire United States. It's time to equip ophthalmologists with the knowledge they need to properly care for their patients. People with vision loss should be given the chance to step out confidently into the world, with a guide dog at their side.

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¹ Eyes, Guiding. "FAQs." *Guiding Eyes for the Blind*, Guiding Eyes for the Blind, 28 Feb. 2019, www.guidingeyes.org/about/faqs.

² "Fast Facts of Common Eye Disorders." *Centers for Disease Control and Prevention*, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 9, June 2020, www.cdc.gov/visionhealth/basics/ced/fastfacts.htm.

³ Martinez, Carolina. "Orientation and Mobility Training: The Way to Go." *See/Hear*, 1998. www.tbsvi.edu/seehear/fall98/waytogo.htm.

⁴ "Residency Program." *Ophthalmology*, 2020, med.stanford.edu/ophthalmology/education/residency-program.html.

⁵ "Residency." *UC San Diego Shiley Eye Institute*, shileyeye.ucsd.edu/physicians/residency-overview.

⁶ "Ophthalmology Residency Training Program." *Eye Care*, <https://www.uclahealth.org/eye/ophthalmology-residency-training-program>.