

Agencies Offer Many Services for Vision Impaired
by Candace Wilson

“It’s never too early to make a connection with us,” urged Marcia Appleton, Vice President, Social Services of Community Services for the Blind and Partially Sighted (CSBPS). Since 1965, people with low vision in Seattle, Washington, have been receiving help at CSBPS. The only multidisciplinary agency in the state, CSBPS started out from the roots of organizations originally begun in the early 1950’s to address the needs of blind children and their families. Now serving all ages, CSBPS devotes their efforts to promoting the independence and well-being of people with impaired vision.

Central to their services is the Low Vision Clinic and Rehabilitation Program. CSBPS sees their role as collaborating with the patient’s physician to maximize any remaining sight a person has. Following a diagnosis of low vision, patients are evaluated by the CSBPS physician to determine how the remaining vision can be used most effectively, and devices and techniques are explained. The next step involves training by rehabilitation professionals and may involve learning new visual skills to use peripheral vision, learning different techniques for performing common tasks, and/or learning to use special lenses. Assistive devices can be rented or purchased at the CSBPS store.

CSBPS was an early pioneer in offering in-home rehabilitation services, finding it boosts a person’s confidence to be trained in their own setting. Rehab training includes Activities of Daily Living (ADL), such as how to sort your laundry, how to cook an egg, how to tell time. Orientation and mobility training helps people move safely indoors and out; activities might include learning to walk to the corner store or ride the bus, grocery shopping, as well as how to “train” a sighted person to be a guide. These services are provided free of charge.

Other agencies nationwide also offer low vision clinics and rehabilitation services, either in-home or at a center. Detailed assessment of a person’s remaining sight is key to developing an individualized Plan of Care. Training programs at most agencies are individualized to help each person meet their own goals. “We ask, ‘What do you want to do? Do you want to read? Drive? Stay in your own home?’ Then we help,” said David Kamerer, Director of Communications of Envision, Inc. in Wichita, Kansas. The Center for the Visually Impaired in Atlanta has itinerant staff who help people live independently. Several agencies have volunteers to help people read their mail, balance their checkbooks, and take them shopping.

Although comprehensive agencies are more alike than they are different, programs vary by location. The Badger Association in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, offers rental housing for visually impaired applicants who fit their criteria. They also provide residential rehabilitation training as well as a strong recreational component. San Diego Center for the Blind and Visually Impaired helps people find jobs or continue in their work. “We help get people placed and work with their employer to help them adjust. We help the community accept people with low vision,” said Kim Gibbens, Executive Director. The Center for the Visually Impaired in Atlanta helps people develop job skills and coaches them in resume writing, interviewing, and job hunting. Envision, Inc. provides jobs in manufacturing, administration and retail. Profits support agency services.

Often people are reluctant to make contact. “People are afraid of the word ‘blind,’” said Kamerer, “but the services we offer are appropriate for anyone with vision impairment.” Gibbens said “People assume they need to be completely without vision, but in fact, only 10% of

those eligible for services are completely without sight.” Gibbens also emphasized agencies are prepared to help people deal with the emotional ramifications of vision loss, and encouraged early contact.

Only 4-5% of the visually impaired receive services nationwide, and many are unaware of the many resources available to them. Agencies provide community education and outreach to help spread the word. “Someone might come into the store, or might come to the clinic. The response is often delightful surprise – there’s so much here,” said Appleton.

SideBar

For more information about CSBPS, visit their website at www.csbps.com

To find the low vision agency nearest you, call Community Services for the Blind and Partially Sighted, at 1-800-458-4888.

To find agencies near you that provide specific services, consult the American Federation for the Blind listing at www.afb.org

Other websites:

Envision, Inc., Wichita, KS – www.envisionus.com

San Diego Center for the Blind and Vision Impaired, San Diego, CA - www.sdcb.org

Badger Association, Milwaukee, WI – www.badgerassoc.org

Center for the Visually Impaired, Atlanta, GA - www.cviatlanta.org