

Accessible Customer Service for Emergency Responders

An Emergency Management Ontario E-Learning Utility

Tips for Interacting with a Person who is Deafblind

Approach and Introduction

- A person who is deafblind is likely to explain to you how to communicate with them or give you an assistance card or a note explaining how to communicate with them. Remember that not all deafblind people communicate the same way.
- When talking about an object, help the person to understand what it is you are talking about by describing it clearly and if possible letting them touch the object itself.
- Remember to communicate. Don't just move the person or hand them objects without explaining and if you must move them suddenly for safety, explain after.

Communication

- Speak directly to the person, not to the intervenor.
- A deafblind person may respond in a number of ways indicating how s/he prefers to communicate. If the person has some degree of hearing, s/he may respond with "Who are you?" If this happens, identify yourself and offer assistance. The person may also use communication cards, large print notes, print-on-palm, voice, sign language, tactile finger spelling or the two-hand manual alphabet to communicate. If you don't know the method that the person uses, try the print-on-palm method, which is simple to use and understood by many people who are deafblind. Print large capital letters right into the palm of the person's hand with the tip of your index finger, pausing between words.

Behaviour

- If you are guiding a deafblind person, try not to leave him alone. If it is necessary to leave for a few minutes, make sure the person knows where he is and when you will return, and have him wait in a safe area, such as on a bench.
- Remain aware that the person cannot hear; he may not hear environmental sounds, a siren, traffic, or even your voice.

Physical contact

- The universal sign for an emergency is an X on the back. In an emergency, draw a large X with your finger, covering the person's entire back. This should alert him that he should follow you. You are now his sighted guide and responsible to

guide him to safety. Provide a more detailed explanation if possible as soon as you are able.

- When guiding a deafblind person, follow the usual sighted guide procedure, but instead of verbally offering your assistance, you can initiate the greeting by lightly touching the person's hand or shoulder. It is important that you maintain contact until your presence is acknowledged. Otherwise, the deafblind person may think your touch was accidental.
- To compensate for the hearing loss, the person will rely on his sense of touch, and the movements and direction of the guide. At times it may be necessary for you to gently place the person's hand on an object, such as a chair or railing. Instead of saying, "The railing is on your left," you may gently guide or place the person's hand there.

Environment/Surroundings

- Communication may be improved by being in an area with good lighting and reduced background noise.
- If you are in the home of a deafblind person, leave everything as it was. It can be very confusing and frustrating for a deafblind person to try and locate something that was moved.
- If you are guiding a deafblind person, try not to leave him alone. If it is necessary to leave for a few minutes, make sure the person knows where he is and when you will return, and have him wait in a safe area, such as on a bench.