COVID-19 Economic Recovery and Accessibility

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# Introduction

People living with sight loss often experience barriers that prevent them from participating fully in society. As restaurants, retail stores and municipalities begin to reopen and introduce new operating conditions and procedures to stop the spread of COVID-19, the CNIB Foundation is providing recommendations to help remove barriers and ensure that indoor and outdoor spaces are accessible for all.

Together, with your support, we can transform our communities into beacons of accessibility and inclusion, where everyone can live, work and play without barriers.

# What is Blindness?

Blindness is a spectrum, and each person’s experience is unique. Not all people with sight loss are identifiable – some people do not use a guide dog or white cane. Blindness has many causes, and each one affects vision differently:

* Retinal diseases, including age-related macular degeneration, tend to create distortion or blind spots in the central vision.
* Glaucoma and retinitis pigmentosa may impact peripheral sight, creating “tunnel vision.”
* Genetic conditions (e.g. albinism) can cause low vision and make people highly sensitive to light.
* Eye conditions like nystagmus affect how the eyes move and coordinate, reducing vision and depth perception.
* Some congenital conditions may impair sight, leaving someone with only light perception.
* Damage to the optic nerve, which sends signals from the eye to the brain, or an injury to the part of the brain that processes information from our eyes can affect the ability to perceive or recognize objects or visual information.

# Physical Distancing

While physical distancing is everyone's responsibility, individuals who are blind or partially sighted may need to rely on their sighted peers to ensure they are distancing properly.

* Many people with sight loss feel comfortable navigating all kinds of places independently. But there are still times when being guided by a sighted person can be helpful. When people with sight loss need a sighted guide, both the person who is blind or partially sighted and the sighted guide should be wearing a mask.
* Guide dogs do not understand physical distancing; they are not trained to follow arrows on the floor.
* Human rights legislation prohibits discriminating against a person with a disability who is working with a service animal. Discrimination includes denial of access to any premises where the public would normally have access—penalties under human rights legislation range across the country, from $100 to $10,000.

# Recommendations for Outdoor Spaces

## Accessible Use of Sidewalks

As municipalities allow for sidewalks to be used for temporary patios and line-ups for retail spaces; the following measures should be taken to ensure people can navigate public spaces safety and independently:

* Sidewalks should be prioritized for vulnerable populations such as people with sight loss, other disabilities, seniors and people using strollers. Keep sidewalks clear and free of hazards such as A-frame signs and inflatable signage.
* Sidewalks should have adequate space for pedestrians to pass by one another. A pedestrian clearway of two metres will allow for physical distancing and ample space for people who use a white cane, guide dog or mobility aid.
* For storefront retail locations with dedicating waiting areas outside of their doors, the outdoor line-up to the store should be easily detectable. Dedicated waiting areas (where appropriate) should not infringe upon the pedestrian clearway of the sidewalk.

## Public Space for Expanded Patios

Some municipalities are examining or piloting the closure of streets and parking lots for the expansion of restaurant patios and cafes. The following measures should be taken to ensure people who are blind or partially sighted are aware of such instances:

* Restaurant patios should be semi-permanent, meaning the configuration does not change on a daily basis.
* Restaurant patios should be sectioned off by a cane detectable fence with adequate space for pedestrians to pass by one another.
* Restaurant staff should be trained to recognize the pedestrian right of way when delivering food and drinks to tables.

## Recommendations for Accessible Use of Closed Streets

As municipalities work together to adapt public spaces to make way for physical distancing, some cities have temporarily closed major roads and expanded cycling networks. The following measures should be taken to ensure people who are blind or partially sighted can navigate public spaces safety and independently:

* If roads are closed (fully or partially), cyclists should be required to keep the sidewalk clear for pedestrians, and municipalities should be enforcing rules for cyclists. Where cycling is permitted alongside pedestrians during road closures, municipalities should require cyclists to follow the same rules as with multi-use paths.
* If road closures prevent the use of bike lanes for cyclists, the information should be shared publicly with signage that is large, with good colour contrast, and the use of plain language.
* If roads are partially closed, there should be a discernible and tactile way to indicate when the road opens for vehicles to prevent pedestrians from wandering into traffic.
* Designated crosswalks should always be free from barriers. Curb ramps, tactile warning surface indicators (TWSI), accessible pedestrian signals (APS) and zebra or ladder stripes in the pedestrian crossings are all essential aids that are relied upon by members the sight loss community to cross the street safely and independently.

# Recommendations for Indoor Spaces

As businesses gradually reopen and adapt to new operating conditions and guidelines, in-store changes and safety protocols must be properly communicated. The following measures should be taken to ensure people who are blind or partially sighted can navigate indoor spaces safety and independently:

## Store Layout

* If the layout of the business has changed (i.e. directional arrows on the floor, plexiglass barriers, etc.), let customers know when they enter the space. Consider offering sighted guide assistance to the patron with sight loss, installing directional signage that is high contrast and tactile, or Bluetooth enabled beacons that relay directional information.
* If businesses have implemented new check-out procedures, lanes should be clear of obstacles and detectable by white canes. Customer line-ups that are marked by rope or stanchions can cause confusion and injury for people with sight loss, especially if their white canes cannot detect it.

## Communication and Signage

* If businesses have installed new posters or signage, let customers know when they enter the space. Not everyone will be able to see or read the signage.
* Posters or signage should be created in large print, with good colour contrast and in plain language. Signage could also include QR codes that link to a webpage describing the content of the signs.
* Braille signage should be disinfected multiple times a day.
* Information on store signage should also be regularly announced on store speakers. This announcement should be clear, thorough, and loud enough for patrons to understand.
* If information is relayed on television screens, it should be continuously looped in large print, with good colour contrast and in plain language.
* All information that can be found or heard inside a store should also be found online. This website should be compliant with W3C accessibility standards.
* For further advice on making signage accessible, please refer to the [CNIB's Clear Print Guidelines.](https://www.cnib.ca/sites/default/files/2020-08/Clear%20Print%20Guidelines%202020.pdf)

## Plexiglass Barriers

* Staff should identify that a plexiglass barrier is being used at check-out. Identify where the opening of the plexiglass barrier is, and what is on the other side of the barrier.
* Because plexiglass barriers are clear, some people may have a problem visually identifying them. Consider high contrast and bright tape around the edges, especially around the bottom opening, to identify the plexiglass.
* If a patron must pass their payment card through the bottom opening of the plexiglass, staff should explain this process.

## Staff Training

* All staff, regardless of position, should be trained on how to properly provide sighted guide assistance. The sighted guide technique is a great way to safely and respectfully guide someone who’s blind. [Watch our video series to learn all the ins and outs of being a sighted guide](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tl62s2MlKEw). If a staff member is offering sighted guide assistance, they should wear gloves and a face covering.
* When interacting with a person with sight loss, give them choices and options. Be as descriptive and communicative as possible.

# Final Thoughts

Together, we can create a better Canada – a barrier-free Canada – where everyone can fully participate in the world around them. If you have any questions or concerns, please contact the CNIB Foundation at advocacy@cnib.ca.