

AER O&M DIVISION POSITION PAPER
Orientation and Mobility Specialists and the Provision of Travel Instruction to
Individuals with Nonvisual Disabilities

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The purpose of this position paper is to provide guidance for Orientation and Mobility (O&M) specialists who are being asked to provide travel instruction (TI) to individuals with disabilities other than visual impairment who have functional mobility limitations. All persons with any disability, whether visual or not, are deserving of exemplary instruction by a highly qualified professional to help them achieve the highest level of independent mobility for which they are capable. The AER O&M Division supports O&M specialists providing travel instruction, if they possess the knowledge and competencies identified in this position paper.

The definition of TI is “one to one instruction provided to people with disabilities other than blindness or visual impairments whose purpose is to enable safe and independent travel in unprotected environments, including on public transit” (Blasch, Wiener, Voorhees, Minick & Furlong, 2010, p. 713). The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), 2004, defines Travel Instruction (referred to as “Training”) as “Travel training means providing instruction, as appropriate, to children with significant cognitive disabilities, and any other children with disabilities who require this instruction, to enable them to (i) Develop an awareness of the environment in which they live; and (ii) Learn the skills necessary to move effectively and safely from place to place within that environment (e.g., in school, in home, at work, and in the community)” (IDEA, 2004, section 300.39). This same concept applies to adults. As with O&M, TI may be provided to children and adults in various service delivery settings, such as schools, rehabilitation agencies, and transit authorities.

The evolution of O&M instruction for persons with a visual impairment has established a standard of highly qualified, certified professionals providing individualized instruction following preferred practice methodologies. Many individuals with disabilities other than blindness and the parents of children with these disabilities desire this same high level of service. This has resulted in more requests for travel instruction, both in education and rehabilitation settings. It is imperative that individuals receive TI and that the service providers have the necessary level of education and skills needed to provide safe and effective instruction.

O&M specialists teach students of all ages who have multiple disabilities. They adapt instructional strategies for persons with physical challenges, intellectual disabilities, autism, learning disabilities, mental health issues, traumatic brain injury, complex medical conditions, and other disabilities, as well as persons who are hard of hearing or deaf. The Academy for Certification of Vision Rehabilitation and Education Professionals (ACVREP) and The Association for Education and Rehabilitation of the Blind and Visually Impaired (AER) include standards for working with consumers who

are blind or visually impaired with additional disabilities (AER O&M curricular standards).

Unlike the O&M field, which has university training programs and international certification standards, at present there are no university training programs in TI, nor are there certification standards. Over the years two universities, University of Wisconsin and Western Michigan University, offered programs in TI but both TI programs were discontinued when federal grant funding ended. Today we find high variability in the educational background of travel instructors, ranging from a high school diploma to a masters degree in special education or a related field.

In the Comments and Discussion Section of IDEA 2004, it was written:

“Discussion: Section 300.156, consistent with section 612(2)(14) of the Act, requires each state to establish personnel qualifications to ensure that personnel necessary to carry out the purposes of the Act are appropriately and adequately prepared and trained and have the content knowledge and skills to serve children with disabilities.” (IDEA, 2004, section 300.156). It is, therefore, the State’s responsibility to determine the qualifications that are necessary to provide travel training instruction.

Until individual states develop the criteria necessary for travel instructors, this position paper highlights recognized competencies and methodologies. It can serve as a guide for those O&M specialists wishing to evaluate their qualifications for the provision of TI for individuals with disabilities without visual impairment.

SIMILARITIES BETWEEN THE PROFESSIONS OF O&M AND TI

There are many similarities between the fields of O&M and TI. Both fields share the basic principle of individualized instruction provided in natural environments with the goal of independent travel to the highest degree possible. Instructional goals are developed based on students’ needs and the results of evaluations of students’ travel concepts and skills within their neighborhoods, schools, workplaces, and communities. Students are gradually required to take on more responsibilities for their travel related actions and decisions while instructors increase their monitoring distances and document progression of skill sets. Lastly, both fields endorse collaboration with the students’ family members, therapists, educational and rehabilitation staff (Blasch, Wiener et. al, 2010).

O&M specialists and Travel Instructors assess functional skills and develop instructional strategies that are tailored to each student’s strengths and needs, while considering intellectual capacity, physical capability, maturity level, and interpersonal and social skills. Both professionals teach the skills and strategies needed to:

- establish and maintain orientation with an environment, using landmarks and spatial updating to plan and to follow routes
- negotiate obstacles and other hazards in the travel path in order to move efficiently, including use of mobility devices, when appropriate
- solve problems, including reorienting when lost

- make travel decisions
- cross streets at stop signs, traffic signal controlled, and uncontrolled intersections
- use public transportation, including communicating with transit operators and handling unexpected but natural occurrences, such as missed transit connections, missed stops, and transit route detours
- interact appropriately with the public

A final similarity is that O&M and TI both incorporate opportunities to apply functional life skills for travel, such as managing time and money, and using a telephone. Some students need to be taught social skills and social expectations as they relate to accessing the community and public transit. Instruction for some students may focus on specific, repeatable routes leading to specific destinations, while for others a more comprehensive view of the environment is fostered.

AREAS OF EMPHASIS FOR TI AND DIFFERENCES IN INSTRUCTION

While there are many similarities between the responsibilities of an O&M Specialist and a Travel Instructor, there are also some differences in curriculum and areas of emphasis. First and foremost the Travel Instructor helps the student learn about the environment and travel through it by using sight as the primary sensory system. Certainly O&M Specialists are accustomed to improving visual efficiency through optical and non-optical training and teaching students to use visual information to make travel decisions, but the O&M Specialist teaches the student to supplement vision through training of the other senses. Long cane instruction and non-visual orientation are not included in the provision of TI.

There may also be a difference in the service delivery model when providing TI. While the O&M Specialist may spend weeks, months, or even years to prepare a student for independent travel within the community, the Travel Instructor may provide daily intensive instruction that will likely conclude in a shorter period of time. For school age students, TI is typically part of transition programming within the IEP during the last year or two of high school. Students receiving TI may receive 20-25 lessons along a specific route, with instruction on the days and times, including evenings and weekends, the person needs to travel to work, school, or other locations.

Strategies for soliciting assistance may be taught differently to TI students. O&M specialists teach many of their students how to solicit assistance and how to ask effective questions to obtain the most accurate information from persons in the community. Conversely, Travel Instructors typically attempt to minimize assistance-seeking behavior, particularly with students with intellectual disabilities, or teach persons to request assistance only from community workers. As a result, Travel Instructors place an increased emphasis on “stranger danger”. The Travel Instructor evaluates the student’s ability to generalize these skills through pre-arranged “stranger approaches” by plainclothes police officers or unfamiliar staff members.

An increased emphasis on problem solving and troubleshooting unforeseen events is important for TI. Students must demonstrate the ability to effectively negotiate travel

contingencies that may occur along the specific route(s) they are learning. Fewer lessons may result in reduced opportunities to practice problem-solving strategies. Thus, if unforeseen events do not happen naturally during the course of instruction, the instructor must allow for time to create them. This is particularly important for some persons with autism or those who have difficulty with changes in routine. Some of these persons may easily learn new routes, demonstrating mastery of travel skills, and following “rules” for street crossings and other travel tasks. However, any change in routine may cause significant anxiety, resulting in the inability to perform or generalize skills. Thus, it is crucial to provide documentation of managed anxiety with effective decisions in travel situations.

Challenges with impulse control, reliance upon routine, inappropriate or maladaptive behaviors, anxiety, fear of unusual things, perseveration, distraction, and unlearning previously acquired unsafe travel habits are a few of the issues that are typically prevalent with persons who receive TI. It is important to know how students function without their instructor, as some individuals may make errors in judgment, bolt, or are unable to complete travel tasks due to extreme anxiety when traveling alone. Thus, TI may include unknown observations by a Travel Instructor or other knowledgeable professional whom the student has not met. Documented progress monitoring is used during solo trips to provide factual information and reassurance to family members.

THE PROVISION OF TI SERVICES BY O&M SPECIALISTS

Because there are similarities in established competencies and scope of practice for O&M and TI, some O&M specialists already provide TI, and O&M specialists may be considered the obvious choice to provide such services (ACVREP O&M scope of practice; AER O&M curricular standards; Wiener, 2004). The readiness to provide TI services must be based on the O&M specialist having the knowledge to instruct persons with disabilities other than blindness, gained either through coursework in their O&M university program, from a related degree, or through direct experience. It is recommended that O&M specialists who choose to provide TI acquire the academic and field practice competencies unique to TI, if they are not already part of the O&M specialist’s repertoire.

Prior to providing TI, the following competencies should be obtained:

- medical and functional aspects of persons with intellectual, physical, perceptual, and specific learning disabilities, as well persons with psychological disorders, autism, traumatic brain injury, and attention deficit disorder
- use of mobility-related devices, such as wheelchairs, walkers, support canes, scooters, etc. and proper methods for device use on lifts/ramps and securements on public transit vehicles
- environmental analysis for students with intellectual, emotional, or physical disabilities who are affected by features such as the social environment, visual and auditory stimuli, and physical barriers in the travel path

- assessment, instructional methods and strategies for working with persons with intellectual, emotional, or physical disabilities, including travel skills that incorporate the use of normal vision into the teaching methodology

It is recommended that persons in O&M university programs who plan to provide TI seek practicum and internship sites that provide increased opportunities to work with individuals with an array of disabilities. O&M specialists who provide TI are strongly encouraged to read related literature, collaborate with other professionals who provide TI, and attend professional conferences and workshops in TI.

Questions have been raised about the efficacy of relying on O&M Specialists to provide TI since it might draw away needed professional resources from students with vision loss. These same issues of limited resources for O&M instruction were previously explored when universities initiated dual certification programs for O&M and Teacher of the Visually Impaired (TVI). These programs, however, have met the needs of students who have required both types of instruction. The combination of O&M and TI would afford the same opportunities in various settings. In the future it is possible that some universities may choose to develop programs that will combine both O&M and TI, with the focus being on mobility and travel skills for persons of all ages with any type of disability.

Because blindness is a low incidence category of disability, itinerant O&M specialists often travel extensively across large geographic regions. Therefore, providing mobility instruction to students with other disabilities may increase caseloads but allow for service provision in a smaller geographical area, resulting in more instructional time and availability for collaboration. In addition it may be more cost-effective to include TI as part of the workload of an O&M specialist rather than hiring a separate instructor. The Wisconsin Council of Developmental Disabilities funded a project (Blasch, 1982) to employ an O&M specialist with training in TI to provide O&M and TI for individuals with a broad range of mobility limitations. Cost savings reflected the difference between the costs for specialized transportation prior to the implementation of this O&M/TI program and the costs for public transportation required after O&M/TI had been provided. "A cost savings of \$117,540 was realized in its first year of operation based on 36 participants, after the costs of the O&M/TI specialist were deducted" (Blasch, Wiener, et. al, 2010).

At present, O&M specialists who maintain Professional Liability Insurance can be insured to provide TI to sighted individuals with disabilities. O&M specialists must include TI as a job duty and provide a detailed description of the TI and O&M services they provide on their policy applications.

The AER O&M Division supports O&M specialists in providing travel instruction. Each O&M specialist should make an informed decision about whether or not to provide TI, based on his or her knowledge, related degrees, caseloads, experience, and interest.

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