**Education and Rehabilitation for Blind & Low Vision Persons**

SightFirst Long-Range Planning (SFLRP) Working Group
August 2010

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**Introduction**

Of the approximately 160 million blind or low vision persons worldwide, 80 percent live in developing countries and only one in ten have access to education or rehabilitation. Ninety percent of blind or low vision children do not attend school and the unemployment rate amongst their adult counterparts ranges from 75-90 percent.\(^1\) Entry into a continuum of services - ranging from preschool, primary and secondary education to employment-related rehabilitation – provides blind and low vision persons with the skills and opportunity to fully participate in and contribute to society.

SightFirst efforts to prevent and/or restore vision loss have traditionally focused on surgical treatments or drug therapies, infrastructure development and human resource training. Improving access to quality education and rehabilitation for blind and low vision persons will broaden the program’s reach to include support for services which often fall outside the spectrum of eye care, but which have long been supported by Lions in their role as “knights of the blind”.

This paper, prepared as part of a long-range planning effort mandated by the SightFirst Advisory Committee (SAC), provides information about the many needs and opportunities in the fields of education and rehabilitation for blind and low vision persons and specific recommendations for future SightFirst involvement.

**Education**

Education for blind and low vision children provides the traditional academic experience with the addition of specialized services to aid in the development of critical life skills for adulthood. Blind and low vision children can attend school in inclusive or integrated classrooms, with trained teachers and modest equipment and materials, or in specialized schools or centers.

**What are the needs?**

The World Health Organization estimates there are nearly 6 million blind or low vision preschool and school-aged children. Eighty percent of these children live in developing countries where less than 1 out of every 10 currently has access to education. Experts identify the following causes of the situation:

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1. Presentation to SFLRP Working Group by World Blind Union, Perkins School for the Blind & International Council for the Education of People with Visually Impairment
1. Severe shortage of trained teachers and alternative format teaching materials and equipment
2. Lack of early identification, referral and intervention for children who are blind or have low vision
3. Lack of awareness of rights by parents, children and the community for equity in access to education and;
4. Limited favorable public policy and advocacy

What can be done?

Creating awareness

In many communities, families, health care professionals and educators are not aware that blind and low vision children can successfully complete their education. Community-based awareness programs are needed to educate key constituents and create demand for inclusion of disabled students and the establishment of parent support groups.

Human resource training & materials

The majority of children who are blind or have low vision can be educated in local schools if teachers have been trained appropriately, usually through short courses taught within countries. Teachers must also be provided with the equipment to prepare teaching materials (mechanical Braille writing machines) and students must have access to tools, like a slate and stylus, and learning materials in alternative formats including a range of age-appropriate Braille or audio or large-print curriculum and low vision devices.

Some students, especially those with multiple disabilities, are enrolled in special schools or centers where additional equipment and materials are needed. Multi-disciplinary teams including teachers, therapists, orientation and mobility instructors are required to provide for the students’ comprehensive educational needs. These facilities often serve as resource centers for integrated/inclusive schools.

Training for specialist teachers ranges from short courses on the use of low vision devices and materials adaptation to comprehensive degree courses in education of children with visual impairment. Specialist teachers are trained through accredited certificate or university programs taught either in-country or in other countries if no training is available locally.

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2 International Council for Education of People with Visual Impairment (ICEVI); Global Campaign for Education for All Children with Visual Impairment
**Measures of success**

The success of efforts to improve access to education for blind and low vision children is measured by assessing: 1) the proportion of school-aged children with impaired vision enrolled in classrooms, 2) access of students to specialist services, materials and equipment, 3) retention of students for primary and secondary education, 4) equity in access to education by girls, children from rural areas and those with additional disabilities, 5) the proportion of personnel needed that are trained and; 6) the number of schools offering inclusive classrooms.

**Factors favoring change**

Launched in 1990 by United Nations agencies and the World Bank, the Education for All (EFA) movement is a global commitment to provide quality basic education for all children, youth and adults by 2015.³ The EFA goals, especially those which address universal primary education, align with the United Nations Millennium Development Goals which aim to eliminate extreme world poverty by 2015.⁴ The International Council for Education of People with Visual Impairment (ICEVI) and the World Blind Union launched EFA-VI in 2006 to increase educational opportunities for children who are blind or have low vision.

**Rehabilitation**

Rehabilitation is a wide range of clinical therapy and non-clinical training to provide blind and low vision persons with the skills and tools to maintain a safe, active and independent lifestyle. While rehabilitation cannot restore lost sight, it can help individuals maximize any remaining vision so that they, as well as those who are blind, can travel safely, take care of their needs, meet their career goals, participate in education and enjoy leisure activities.⁵

Employment-related rehabilitation services may include training with assistive technology, Braille literacy and business English skills as well as customized vocational preparatory training, secondary-level education courses, mentorship and provision of entrepreneurial opportunities.

**What are the needs?**

The World Blind Union estimates that, in some countries, visually impaired people are five times more likely to be unemployed than the general public. In many instances, their situation is the result of misperceptions about their capabilities. In developing countries, where training and


⁵ Lighthouse International; [www.lighthouse.org/clinical-services/vision-rehabilitation](http://www.lighthouse.org/clinical-services/vision-rehabilitation); Copyright 2009.
technology resources are severely limited, visually impaired individuals are often excluded from the workplace or become disheartened and forego employment, resulting in social and economic isolation.

**What can be done?**

Create awareness

In many communities, families, health care professionals and business owners are not aware of the employment capabilities of blind and low vision persons. Community-based awareness programs, led by rehabilitation service providers, governments and NGOs, are needed to increase public awareness of the employability and entrepreneurial capability of visually impaired persons, change employment attitudes and practices and create a network of mentors.

Improve employability and confidence of blind and low vision persons

Blind and low vision transition-age youth and adults require access to educational opportunities to increase their work-readiness or employability. Organizations of and for the blind, in partnership with governments and other NGOs, develop and provide a range of educational opportunities from Braille literacy and business English training to employment-related rehabilitation and leadership skills curriculum. Programs are offered in traditional classroom settings or, with access to affordable technology like refurbished computers and speech software, students can participate in distance or e-learning, webinars, chat room discussions and virtual job coaching.

A growing area of employment opportunity for disabled persons, especially in developing countries, is microenterprise. Organizations are needed to provide training and business planning assistance, mentorship and subsidies or microloans to help individuals start their own small business.

**Measures of success**

The success of efforts to improve the employability of blind and low vision persons is measured by assessing: 1) the proportion of transition-age youth and adults gainfully employed, and; 2) the existence of and access to secondary education, job training and mentorship opportunities and affordable technology.

**Factors favoring change**

The Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD), adopted by the United Nations in 2006, is the first comprehensive human rights treaty of the 21st century. It “marks a paradigm shift in attitudes and approaches to persons with disabilities”. Rather than viewing persons with disabilities as objects of charity, medical treatment and social protection, it calls on society to view them as individuals with rights, capable of making decisions for their lives based
on their free and informed consent. Rehabilitation provides blind and low vision persons with the skills to assert their independence and claim these very rights.

**Braille**

It is important to note that both education and employment-related rehabilitation for blind and low vision persons are largely aided by the availability of affordable Braille materials, books and magazines.

Braille production centers, which require equipment and materials (including paper), trained personnel and access to repair centers, are needed to increase the availability of these materials.

And, there is a significant need to advocate for the restructuring of international copyright laws to eliminate the need for the expensive re-Braille of materials between and among various countries.

**SFLRP Working Group Recommendations**

In August 2009, the SFLRP Working Group convened a meeting with education and rehabilitation experts to learn more about the specialties and discuss opportunities for future SightFirst programming. The meeting included input from Larry Campbell, International Council for Education of People with Visual Impairment (ICEVI), Penny Hartin, World Blind Union (WBU), Dr. Ivo Kocur, World Health Organization (WHO), Dr. Silvio Mariotti, WHO & SAC Secretariat, Dr. R. Pararajasegaram, IAPB Affiliate & SAC Member, Dr. G.N. Rao, LV Prasad Eye Institute & SAC Member, Dr. Serge Resnikoff, Former SAC Secretariat and Steven Rothstein, Perkins School for the Blind. Also present were PIP Jimmy Ross, Ed McManus and Phoebe Sebring, consultants for the SFLRP effort, Nicole Brown, LCIF Public Relations, and Phillip Albano, Joshua Friedman, Karim Bengraine and Gina Prendki of the LCIF Sight Programs Department. Additional teleconferences were convened with members of this group in December 2009 and April 2010. With this information, the SFLRP Working Group offers the following conclusion and recommendations for future SightFirst support of education and employment-related rehabilitation for blind and low vision persons:

**Conclusion**

There are significant needs in the fields of education and rehabilitation for blind and low vision persons. As the SFLRP Working Group consulted with experts about specific opportunities for

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SightFirst, many of the suggested projects, while valid and interesting, were smaller in scale and highly individualized, especially when compared to traditional SightFirst endeavors.

The following recommendations align more favorably with the SightFirst approach of systematic impact. However, the SFLRP Working Group would also like to acknowledge that other opportunities for Lions involvement and potential leadership exist in this area. It is recommended that further dialogue between experts and other LCIF and LCI program leadership be encouraged.

**Recommendations**

1. **SightFirst funds should be used to support capacity-building of school systems to better accommodate blind and low vision children.**

   Projects of this nature might request funding for a combination of the following elements:

   - **Human resource training:** Support for comprehensive training programs offered by proven institutions for groups of teachers from special and/or integrated school systems.

   - **Infrastructure:** Funding for the purchase of equipment, materials and/or technology for school systems with numerous integrated classrooms or for special schools which serve as regional resource centers for the larger school system. Funding for the purchase of equipment or materials for Braille production centers serving large school systems.

   *Note: SightFirst grants should support capacity-building of national or regional school systems. Support for personnel training and equipping of an individual school would be more appropriately considered through the LCIF Standard Grant program.*

2. **SightFirst funds should be used to support organizations that provide training, mentorship opportunities and subsidies or microloans for microenterprise initiatives of blind and low vision persons.**

   This might include grants to microenterprise organizations willing to partner with LCIF to establish and manage a fund *specifically for blind or low vision entrepreneurs.* Priority should be given to organizations willing to train and engage Lions as mentors. A consultant may be needed to help identify the appropriate partner(s) and develop funding criteria and processes.
3. **SightFirst funds should be used to develop and/or expand community-based awareness initiatives that: 1) advocate for inclusion of blind and low vision children in local or specialized schools; and/or 2) raise public awareness of the employability of blind and low vision adults.**

- Similar to the Lions Eye Health Program (LEHP), this might include grants to Lions multiple district/districts working in partnership with local organizations of and for the blind, ministries of education, local businesses and other NGOs to:
  - Identify target audience(s) and develop evidence-based messages, create promotional materials in multiple formats and languages and distribute materials through a variety of channels
  - Establish sustainable parent support groups and mentor networks
  - Train and support Lions and other volunteers in advocacy efforts

4. **SightFirst funds are needed for technical assistance to help develop and manage grant projects for education and rehabilitation of blind and low vision persons.**

- Given that this is a new program area for SightFirst, modest and reasonable resources are needed to engage technical advisor(s) to: 1) support Lions in the development of quality projects and; 2) aid the Sight Programs Department in the assessment of grant applications and evaluation of approved projects.

**Next Steps**

Should the SAC approve the strategies outlined above, the SFLRP Working Group recommends the following next steps with regards to implementation:

- The SightFirst grant application should be revised to including funding criteria and guidelines for Education & Rehabilitation projects.
- LCIF SightFirst staff should be provided with resources to inform regional technical advisors in all regions as well as Lions about the new strategies and grant application process.

*The SFLRP Working Group would like to thank the following individuals for their significant contributions to this paper: Larry Campbell, International Council for Education of People with Visual Impairment (ICEVI), Penny Hartin, World Blind Union (WBU), Dr. Jill Keeffe, SightFirst Technical Advisor, Steven Rothstein, Perkins School for the Blind and Chuck Young, Hadley School for the Blind.*