

LIVING WITH GLAUCOMA

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VISUAL ASSISTANCE WHEN YOU NEED IT

When eye-drops, medical procedures and surgery no longer hold the line for you, VISIONS, an organization located in Manhattan, steps in. On Saturday, March 15, 2014 the Group welcomed Ms. Teddy Kern, a Vision Rehabilitation Specialist to share the wisdom of “coping” that she has built up for almost 35 years. Not only does Ms. Kern help with making your home fail-safe, but she possesses a variety of skills as a Certified Occupational Therapist. In her position at VISIONS, Ms. Kern works to make life easier for multiply-challenged people of all ages.

VISIONS, an outreach agency serving all NYC boroughs, is one of the oldest rehabilitation agencies in New York City. ALL services are free, and available to people of all social and economic status. Members of the VISIONS staff visit clients at home, to assess the living space and provide suggestions and equipment, that will make it safer and more accessible, and to

help you achieve independence in daily living activities, when visual acuity begins to fade.

Their staff consists of a team of 4 professionals, one of whom (or all) might be called upon to serve your needs.

Teddy is the Occupational Therapist. Another is a Rehabilitation Teacher (RT). These highly-trained individuals are actually Visual Rehabilitation Teachers (VRT). They possess a Master's Degree in Vision Rehabilitation, and teach Braille, computer training, and many practical applications to fill in where vision is no longer available. Teddy often also wears this hat. Another professional on staff is an Orientation and Mobility Specialist (O&M.) They teach travel training, indoors and outdoors, with and without the assistance of long canes or other devices. They train clients to safely walk indoors (i.e. pick up your mail, take garbage out, get to the laundry room) and to travel outdoors and on public transportation, when requested. This may include long cane-training.

A Master's level Social Worker makes up the quartet. This individual works as an advocate to help you to do some of those pesky things required for various services to which you are entitled, such as filing applications for Medicare or Medicaid

coverage. Also, the Social Worker might help you determine and access additional benefits.

VISIONS also provides a Caregiver Program. As an example, if your caregiver is your only source of support, you may qualify for this particular program. But even if you don't qualify for this program, the Social Worker will evaluate your needs and seek to advocate for you. They may help you to determine funding streams available to you, what your needs are, and methods for reaching the right resources. As an example, perhaps you've been putting off obtaining Access-a-Ride or Meals on Wheels. The Social Worker can make the registration process easier.

Are you LEGALLY BLIND?:

To be identified as "legally blind", you must meet the following criteria: central visual acuity of 20/200 with the best possible correction and/or a visual field of 20 degrees or less. If your eye doctor advises you that you have met this criteria, request that a Mandatory Eye Report (MER) is completed, and sent to the NY State Department for the Blind and Visually Handicapped in Albany. This process starts the ball rolling. When approved and a registry number assigned, your case will then be referred to an

agency such as VISIONS. In addition to VISIONS, other agencies equipped to serve your needs include The Lighthouse, The Jewish Guild for the Blind, and Catholic Charities.

The referrals are sent out indiscriminately, but you can request a particular agency.

The services include free eye exams and glasses (when they are appropriate) and a limited number of visual aids, such as magnifiers. The team steps in to refer you to the services.

LOW VISION:

There is no formal guideline to determine low vision, but you know when you have it. Your visual fields are certainly an indicator, but you are also fully aware of your vision changing. Although low vision sufferers are not declared legally blind, many services are still available through VISIONS, and Teddy did mention that if you are in the process of diminishing vision, and you have eye pathology, then you still qualify for a different level of service.

VISIONS can be accessed easily by phone (212-625-1616), and does not require any visits to its headquarters in Manhattan. Teddy assured the group that VISIONS “never says

no". Say, you call the agency and explain that you need services of some kind. An Intake Worker will interview you over the phone to determine what can be provided. Heeding your request, they may put you on a wait-list, and although it may mean several months before they are able to send a Specialist, be assured that you will be notified by telephone (or mail) that a VISIONS team member has been assigned to your case.

Teddy gave us a "taste" of how a Vision Therapist can help. Right off, she demonstrated her own adaptation, such as her full-page-sized business card in large, bold letters with her contact information. This initial introduction can prove to a client who has given up reading that this function is still possible. Some people have computers but they are unaware of the various functions designed for the visually challenged. Simply enlarging all the features and changing the color background can make a big difference in comfort and accessibility. A bright yellow background makes it easier to read black print on the screen. Teddy suggested carrying a sample piece of yellow paper with black print to present to whomever you wish, as an example of the best way to communicate printed material to you. (How many times have you groaned

when you received a snazzy letter or document printed in a tiny font or with colored inks?)

MEDICATION MANAGEMENT:

Teddy demonstrated a large print medication box consisting of 7 cubicles. She suggested separating daytime from nighttime meds. Further separation can include days if a medication is required, for example, every other day, by night and day, and by days of the week. You can either use the medication needed daily, or keep it in the bottles or pharmacy packaging. A problem may occur if two or more medications are in the same style bottle. To distinguish one from the other, Teddy suggested using a magic marker to print the first letter of the medication on the bottle top, or use a rubber band to attach a piece of paper with the information. When that bottle is recycled be sure to repeat the markings on your new bottle, using a Sharpie. Rubber bands are always very useful identifiers. Save the ones that come with your broccoli and other veggies, and you can also color code with different colored bands. A way to identify the contents in the containers in your pantry can be to simply code a small piece of paper and toss it into the container. If you use

seeds and grains, this system eliminates guesswork. Bright labels with a string on the end can also be used as identifiers.

LARGE PRINT:

Some of us only need enlarged print to help us cope with our everyday medication needs. There is also a smaller, pocket-size medication box that you can carry with you, that contains seven day's worth of pills. The boxes contain Braille markings. There is also a small box containing only 4 spaces, for carrying one-day's worth of pills with you.

Many of these devices can be **found in catalogs such as Maxi-Aids (Senior Lifestyles Edition) and Independent Living Aids, and more are accessible on the web.** The catalogs offer a **wealth of helpful ideas that may assist you to function more effectively.** Some of these include: **Enlarged lettering on a number of items such as a phone dial, measuring cups, big print checkbooks, a big-button TV remote (only 3- buttons), and cell phones you can purchase (i.e., Jitterbug or Consumer Cellular).** And then there are many devices that **“talk” such as clocks, watches, thermometers, scales, even prescription bottles.**

In the kitchen, life can be easier with the help of a food processor or blender for chopping up food, a colander for straining and rinsing water from pasta and other foods, a device for separating yolks from the white of an egg, one for the perfect poached egg, spaghetti-measures, a tool to pop up sealed jars, a pie starter consisting of an aluminum wedge that you bake into a pie provides easy access to remove the first slice, rubberized drawer mats, high-side dishes to help you trap food, and a liquid level indicator.

Managing your money is helped with a divided wallet, or a “talking” bill identifier. Need help with writing lists and notes, etc.? There is a check-writing template (plastic card with openings corresponding to standard line spacing) available to ease this problem. Memo recorders to remind you to take you medicine...and many more. These devices are only a sample of what is available.

VISIONS staff can demonstrate the best use of these, and help you to choose those that will be most helpful. A VISIONS trainer can also show you the best way to “mark” the black on black small print or the dialog on the electronic equipment that now seems to be standard practice. As an example of this

adaptation, Teddy suggested tagging one of the washing machines in your laundry room by Inconspicuously marking it with your coded notation or a bump-dot.

One of the strengths of the Vision Therapist is to help solve frustrating problems arising from limited vision. For example, although the catalogs do carry magnifiers, one should be recommended by a Low Vision specialist who is trained to evaluate the best strength for you. Your eye doctor can recommend one.

To summarize, VISIONS categorizes the services into medication management, home and financial management, communication skills, personal and health management, labeling or organization, eating skills and meal management.

SUMMER PROGRAMS:

Yes!! VISIONS has a RESIDENTIAL summer ACTIVITY CENTER, available for a two-week stay. This free program requires an application and medical clearance, and transportation from the city by bus, to their upstate location, is provided. You may bring a spouse or significant other with you.

ADVOCACY -- Low vision services are unfortunately limited in NYC, and a failure to recognize this handicapping condition has been a concern for a number of years. In the past, our Group has made a valiant effort to include low vision in its advocacy actions, but to date, legislative policy remains unchanged. Perhaps now is the time for a committee to form to again voice a strong appeal to Albany.

FOOTNOTE:

Teddy tells an all-too familiar story of learning that she, too, has a glaucoma condition. Visiting her Optometrist for a new pair of lenses, she was told that she had glaucoma and must see an ophthalmologist immediately. She was lucky, for closed-angle glaucoma can cause a Glaucoma attack and if not treated immediately, can lead to severe vision loss.

We want to thank Teddy Kern for her most instructive address on how to access all the services available when low vision calls for action.

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Please note: The contents of this newsletter are for informational purposes only. The Content is not intended to be

a substitute or professional medical advice, diagnosis or treatment. Always seek the advice of your physician or other qualified health provider with any questions you may have regarding a medical condition.

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