



### **VULNERABLE POPULATION: People with Visual Impairment**

Blindness is the condition of lacking visual perception due to physiological or neurological factors. The most common causes are accidents, genetic disease, age related, or diabetes related. Several scales have been developed to describe the extent of vision loss in an attempt to define blindness. They are:

- Total Blindness - The complete lack of form and visual light perception, referred to as "No Light Perception" (NLP).
- Abbreviated forms of blindness (two forms)
  - Only Light Perception (OLP) – describes a severe visual impairment with some variation of residual vision. The most severe of this form is when a person has only light perception with no more sight than the ability to tell light from dark and the general direction of a light source.
  - Legal Blindness due to Diminished Visual Field - This is when a person's visual field is less than 20 degrees using a 180 degree scale. Visual field is how much area you can see. People have described this as "looking through a tube" or "having large blind spots" in their vision.

The Florida Division of Blind Services (DBS) at the Florida Department of Education works in partnership with local communities, professional organizations, community advocates, and private providers to assist people with vision loss disabilities and their families. One of DBS's main goals is to ensure the health and safety of the people it represents and to assist those affected by vision loss, to maximize their self-sufficiency and personal independence through advocacy and education.

#### **Key Issues:**

- Persons with vision loss disabilities usually live independently or with family members. Some, who have co-occurring disabilities or are Deaf-Blind, may require sheltering in a disaster. Most people living with this type of disability can be accommodated in a regular shelter.
- Vision loss disabilities are usually "silent," you cannot always tell if a person is visually impaired or to what extent, just from looking at them.
- Most people with vision loss use either Braille or large print for written communication. Braille is not the same as American English or Spanish. Also, large print is at least 22 point font size, preferably using a san serif type font.
- If a person with vision loss has to go to a shelter, it is extremely important for them to tell a shelter official they have a vision related disability. Persons may request either a Braille or large print version of the county's shelter instructions as well as any materials regularly handed out in the shelters.
- People with visual disabilities should be advised to have a seven day supply of prescription medications available or any other medical equipment needed to sustain their life.
- In many cases, an established routine is what enables someone with disabilities to

function independently; once this is compromised, persons with disabilities may need additional support to stay safe and healthy.

- If the event is severe or the recovery phase is of long duration, persons with disabilities, in addition to those who support them, may require sheltering or other assistance to support both their physical and mental healthcare needs. Always remember, persons with disabilities are PEOPLE first. A number may not do well with change, loud noises, or crowds. Acting out may be caused by one or more of these issues.

#### **Planning Considerations:**

- Clients with visual disabilities should be advised of the opportunity to pre-register for the special needs shelter with their local office of emergency management. It is better for the special needs shelter staff to plan in advance.
- Persons with co-occurring disabilities should be encouraged to plan ahead and to plan for all issues they may encounter.
- Work with DBS or local Center for Independent Living to ensure required materials are available in the formats needed.
- The ability of a person to not only see but to be able to identify what they see is vitally important and varies significantly.
- Don't ASSUME if you see a person with a white cane, they are totally blind.
- Not all persons who are legally blind use a cane or service animal.

#### **Supporting Agency:**

Florida Department of Education, Division of Blind Services <http://dbs.myflorida.com>

Florida Division of Emergency Management [www.floridadisaster.org/disability](http://www.floridadisaster.org/disability)

**Additional Information:** The following resources provide more information on planning considerations for persons with visual impairments during disasters and other emergencies:

FEMA Office of Disability Integration & Coordination [www.fema.gov/office-disability-integration-coordination/office-disability-integration-coordination/office-1](http://www.fema.gov/office-disability-integration-coordination/office-disability-integration-coordination/office-1)

FEMA Guidance on Planning for Integration of Functional Needs Support Services in General Population Shelters, November 2010 [www.fema.gov/pdf/about/odc/fnss\\_guidance.pdf](http://www.fema.gov/pdf/about/odc/fnss_guidance.pdf)