



Massachusetts Association for the  
Blind and Visually Impaired

# UNDERSTANDING CAUSES OF BLINDNESS AND LOW VISION

*\*Click the arrow on tool bar or scroll down to view all slides. After you complete the unit, there will be a "completed and continue" button prompting you to move on.\**

# TRAINING OVERVIEW

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Introduction

What Does it Mean to be Blind or have Low Vision?

Breakdown of Common Eye Conditions

Communicate Effectively

# WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO BE BLIND OR HAVE LOW VISION?

PLEASE NOTE THAT THE FOLLOWING INFORMATION IS TO SHOW THAT OUR PARTICIPANTS HAVE VARYING DEGREES OF VISION LOSS. IT IS NOT NECESSARY TO REMEMBER THIS INFORMATION VERBATIM.

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# MISCONCEPTION

People who are blind have no vision at all, when in fact only a very small percentage are totally blind. There are many types of eye conditions that cause vision loss.

As a MABVI volunteer, it is important to know that the person you are matched with will have different visual acuity and fields of vision depending on their eye condition.

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# What is the difference between low vision and blindness?

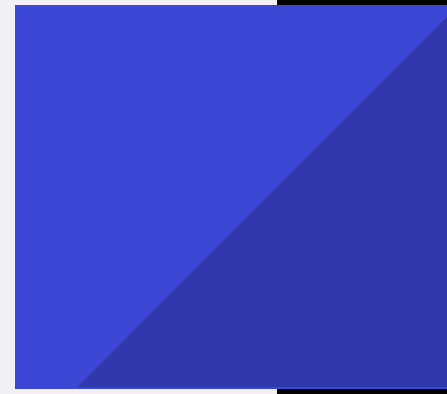
- **LOW VISION**

A decrease in the ability to see to a certain degree that causes problems not correctable by a visual aid, such as glasses.

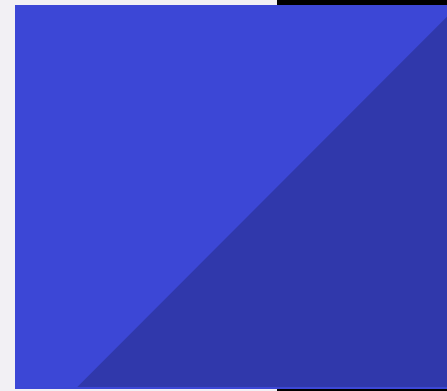
- **BLINDNESS**

The state of being unable to see due to injury, disease or genetic condition.

# DIFFERENT LEVELS OF LOW VISION AND BLINDNESS



Low Vision



Legally Blind



Totally Blind

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# LOW VISION

AN INDIVIDUAL HAS **PARTIAL VISION, EITHER IN ONE OR BOTH EYES.** ALTHOUGH, THEY MAY OR MAY NOT BE CLASSIFIED AS LEGALLY BLIND. LOW VISION IS USED TO DESCRIBE A LOSS OF VISUAL ACUITY WHILE RETAINING SOME VISION. IT APPLIES TO INDIVIDUALS WITH SIGHT WHO ARE UNABLE TO READ A NEWSPAPER AT A NORMAL DISTANCE OF VIEWING, EVEN WITH THE AID OF GLASSES OR CONTACT LENSES. PEOPLE WITH LOW VISION OFTEN NEED ADAPTATIONS IN LIGHTING AND/OR ENLARGED PRINT TO READ SOMETHING.

# LEGALLY BLIND

AN INDIVIDUAL WHO HAS A CORRECTED VISUAL ACUITY OF 20/200 OR LESS OR VISUAL FIELD OF 20° OR LESS IN THEIR BEST-SEEING EYE. IF VISUAL AIDS SUCH AS GLASSES CAN CORRECT A PERSON'S VISION TO 20/20, THEN THEY ARE NOT CONSIDERED LEGALLY BLIND.

# TOTALLY BLIND

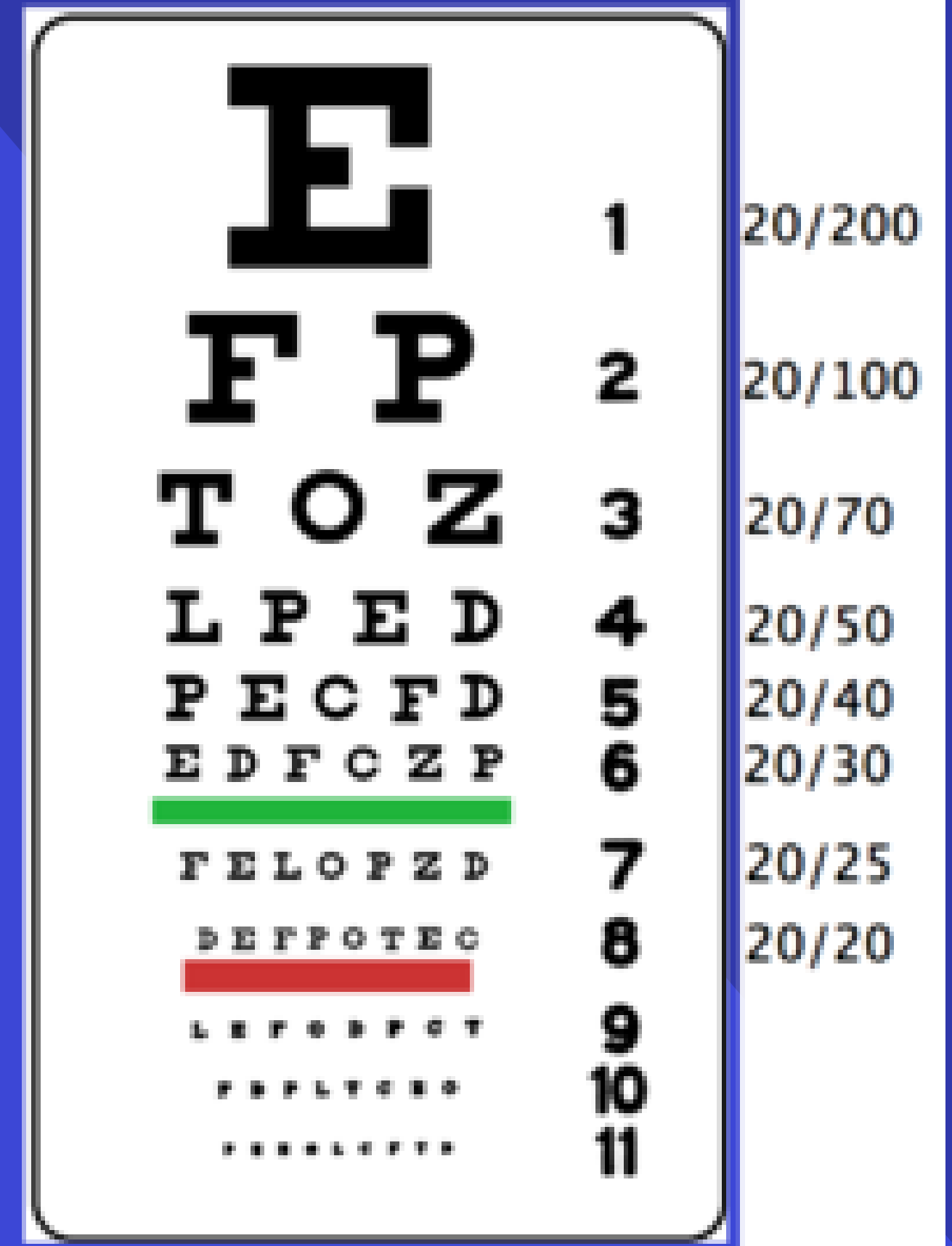
AN INDIVIDUAL WHO HAS COMPLETE LOSS OF SIGHT.

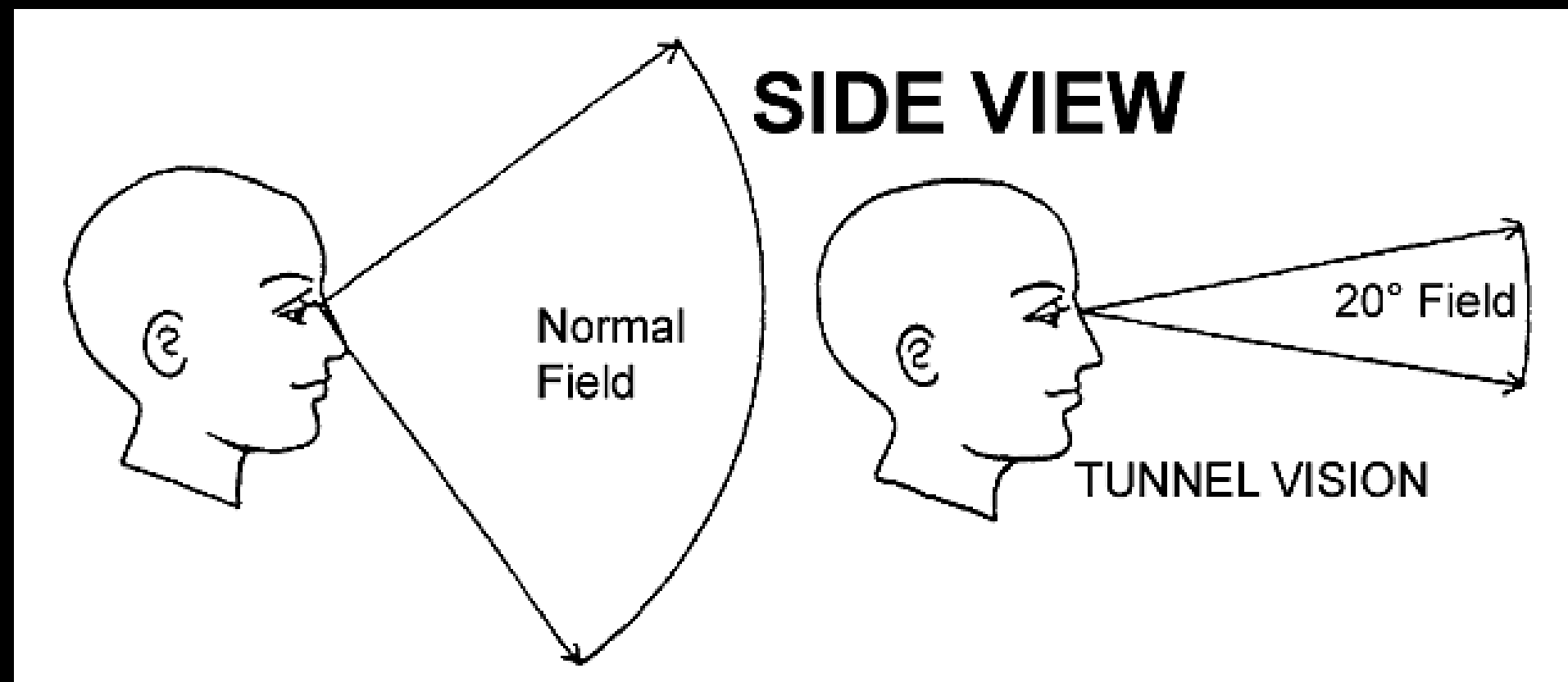


# WHAT DOES "VISUAL ACUITY" MEAN?

The measurement determined by letter chart tests we take when we get our eyes checked. The number presents your eyes clarity or sharpness.

Example: A person with a visual acuity measurement of 20/200 who is 20 feet away from an eye chart sees what a person with 20/20 vision can see from 200 feet away.





# WHAT DOES "VISUAL FIELD" MEAN?

The total field area an individual can see without moving the eyes from side to side.

# BREAKDOWN OF COMMON EYE CONDITIONS

VISION LOSS IS A DEGENERATIVE OR PROGRESSIVE  
LOSS OF EYESIGHT CAUSED BY AN EYE DISEASE.  
PLEASE NOTE: VISION LOSS CAN ALSO BE CAUSED  
BY TRAUMATIC EVENTS, BRAIN INJURY, AND EARLY  
ONSET CONGENITAL DISEASES

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# MACULAR DEGENERATION

- In people age 65 and older, Age-Related Macular Degeneration (AMD) is the leading cause of vision loss. It is estimated that as many as 16 million people in the United States have AMD.
- AMD is a condition that affects the macula, the center of the retina. The macula is responsible for our most acute vision which we use when we perform activities that require sharp, straight-ahead vision.
- Symptoms include:
  - Blurred vision
  - A dark or empty area in the central area of vision
  - Distortion of straight lines



# RETINITIS PIGMENTOSA

- Retinitis Pigmentosa (often referred to as RP) is a group of rare, genetic disorders that involve a breakdown and loss of cells in the retina - which is the light sensitive tissue that lines the back of the eye.
- Individuals with RP often experience a progressive decrease in their peripheral vision and difficulty seeing at night.
- RP rarely causes a total loss of vision.



Retinitis Pigmentosa

# GLAUCOMA



- Glaucoma occurs when a build-up of fluid creates pressure in the eye, which then damages the optic nerve
- Often goes unnoticed because it is painless and often develops with no symptoms until significant damage has been done.
- If left untreated, vision around the edge of the eye becomes increasingly restricted, narrowing the field of vision causing "tunnel vision" similar to that of Retinitis Pigmentosa.
- However, unlike with RP, total blindness can occur in those experiencing Glaucoma as a result of damage to the optic nerve.

# CATARACTS

- Cataracts is the most common cause of vision loss in people over age of 40.
- Cataracts cause clouding or an opaqueness in the lens of the eye. For people who have cataracts, seeing through cloudy lenses is a bit like looking through a frosty or fogged-up window.
- Clouded vision caused by cataracts can make it more difficult to drive a car (especially at night) to read, or read people's facial expressions.
- Most cataract surgeries are very successful in providing clear vision by replacing the natural lens with an artificial lens.



# COMMUNICATE EFFECTIVELY

LANGUAGE AND PHRASING

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**Face-to-face communication between people who are fully sighted heavily relies on visual cues.**

**As a volunteer, there will be instances when it may be necessary to adjust your language and phrasing to be most useful for the person you are matched with. The following practices may seem like common sense, but it will be helpful to keep these in mind once you begin volunteering.**



# MEETINGS AND GREETINGS

- Take the initiative and introduce yourself by name when you encounter someone who is blind or visually impaired no matter how well you think they know your voice. At the beginning of the conversation, say the name of the person you are addressing so they know you are speaking to them personally.
- Talk to the person you are matched with directly rather than a sighted companion if they happen to have one. Never channel conversation through a third person.
- In a group situation, introduce the other people present.

# VERBALIZE YOUR ACTIONS



- “I am going to put your cup of tea in front of you next to your right hand.”
- Unfamiliar room or building: Describe general layout of the furniture, location of bathrooms and exits. Give basic details and elaborate if the person you are matched with asks for more information or tells you they like having more information.
- Announce when you are about to leave a conversation or room and where you are going, if appropriate.
- “I’m going to the kitchen to get a drink of water.”

# If you don't know, just ask!

- **"MAY I ASK ABOUT YOUR LEVEL OF USABLE VISION?"**

Do not assume that your match can or cannot see something.

- **HOW WOULD YOU LIKE TO BE GUIDED?**

Never grab a person who is blind or visually impaired by the arm and push them forward. Not only is this rude, this is also a safety hazard and can be dangerous.

- **"HOW CAN I BE MOST HELPFUL TO YOU [INSERT TASK]?"**

Taking over a task without knowing if the person needs help sends a message that you think they cannot perform the task as well as you can.

# HELPFUL TIPS

- Feel free to use everyday language; you don't have to avoid using words like "see," "look" or "watch". The words "blind" and "low vision" are also acceptable in conversation.
- Speak to the person you are matched with using natural conversational speed and tone. Do not speak slowly and loudly unless they have indicated that they have trouble hearing.
- If you think the person you are matched with might need help, always ask before offering. There is no need to feel offended if they decline! Remember, MABVI's goal is to foster independence.
- Pointing or saying phrases like "over there" or "right in front of you" do not help much. Use descriptive language when giving instructions.
- Relax and be yourself!

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