



Policy and Advocacy Priorities

About Guide Dogs Australia

Since the establishment of the first Guide Dog School in Perth, Western Australia in 1951, Guide Dogs Australia organisations across all State and Territories continue to provide guide dogs and other mobility aids, support services and programmes for people who are blind or vision impaired.

Across Australia, Guide Dogs organisations employ 379 full time and 263 part-time staff: including 76 full-time and 18 part-time Orientation and Mobility Instructors; 42 full-time and 6 part-time Guide Dog Mobility Instructors; 16 low vision specialist Occupational Therapists; and 8 low vision specialist Orthoptists.

All our Low Vision services are delivered by highly qualified and trained personnel with an Undergraduate Degree in Psychology, Health, Teaching, Sciences, Disability Studies or Rehabilitation. For example, BA Disability Studies (O&M); Griffith University Master of Human Services (O&M), Bachelor of Occupational Therapy, Master of Orthoptics. In addition to attaining the requisite qualifications as an O&M Instructor, Guide Dog Mobility Instructors must complete an additional rigorous three year qualification as prescribed by the International Guide Dog Federation.

Guide Dogs Australia organisations are active members of both Vision 2020 and Australian Blindness Forum, which is the peak body representing rehabilitation in the blindness sector. In addition to peak body membership, extensive consultation with peak consumer group, Blind Citizens Australia, is actively engaged in.

Guide Dogs Australia organisations deliver over 20,000 programs annually with demand for services continually growing as the incidence of vision impairment increases, primarily due to the ageing population.

Services, programs and mobility aids are provided free of charge to clients, with Guide Dogs reliant on philanthropy and community support to fund these services.

Guide Dogs Australia organisations provide a broad range of supports and services primarily to people who are blind or vision impaired. These services include:

- Breeding and training of guide dogs.
- Orientation and Mobility training, including development of skills in the use of a long cane programs, guide dogs, and other mobility aids, which allow Australians to continue to access and participate in their communities.

- Instrumental Activities of Daily Living services, which offset the impacts of vision loss through skills development and specialised equipment to ensure safety and independence in carrying out daily living tasks.
- Adaptive Technology Training and provision of specialist equipment, which facilitates continued access to information, social and community activities.
- Library Services, which provide access to essential information and entertainment in accessible formats through a cooperative agreement with the Association for the Blind (guide dogs) WA.
- Advocacy and client support.

Mission

Guide Dogs Australia's primary purpose is to improve opportunities and provision of support services for people who are blind or vision impaired to achieve their individual aims and aspirations.

This determination is enforced by a willingness to engage cooperatively and collaboratively with clients and stakeholders and work with all levels of Government to facilitate equitable opportunities for people who are blind or vision impaired.

Executive Summary

Guide Dogs Australia advocates for the inherent right of people who are blind or vision impaired to be independently mobile and have equitable access to the all facets of community, employment and social opportunities

The number of Australians with significant vision loss, (ie unable to be corrected) will increase to approximately 350,000, including about 115,000 who will be blind, by 2020¹.

Guide Dogs Australia organisations will continue to meet the rehabilitation and support needs of this growing population.

The importance on an individual approach to service and programme development, long adhered to by Guide Dogs Australia organisations nationally has been reflected in the recent and emerging Commonwealth and State based reforms to Disability and Aged Care funding and service provision.

Our services are broadly recognised for exceptional quality of customer service, with a focus on the needs of people who are blind or vision impaired. Programs, services and equipment choices and recommendations are determined based on the individual clients needs and services are delivered with a primary focus on outcomes, supporting individuals, families and carers and to actively participate in their care.

¹ 1. Access Economics report published in June 2010 by Vision2020, called Clear Focus: The Economic Impact of Vision Loss in Australia in 2009

In supporting the Commonwealth National Disability Strategy (2010 – 2020) and in continuing to facilitate the removal of barriers often faced by people who are blind or vision impaired, Guide Dogs Australia organisations work collaboratively to ensure independent and equitable access to community, social and employment opportunities.

To achieve this, Guide Dogs Australia organisations have a commitment to advancing the following policy **priorities**:

1. Provision of world-leading Orientation & Mobility services (including breeding and training of Guide Dogs) and support to people who are blind and vision impaired.
2. Increasing community awareness of access rights for guide dogs and their handlers.
3. Ensuring equality of service provision regardless of age or circumstance.
4. Ensuring provision of Early Intervention Services.
5. Achieving equity in access to information.
6. Improving access to Education.
7. Improving Employment Opportunities.
8. Improving pedestrian safety.
9. Improving accessibility of all public transport modes and infrastructure.
10. Increasing access to rehabilitation and support services for Aboriginal Australians living in remote communities.

Policy Priority 1: Provision of world-leading Orientation & Mobility services (including breeding and training of Guide Dogs) and support to people who are blind and vision impaired

Policy Statement:

Guide Dogs Australia organisations are committed to providing orientation & mobility services (including Guide Dogs) and supports to people who are blind or vision impaired to facilitate independence and participation in all aspects of life.

Rationale:

The ability to travel independently and confidently and safely access community and employment opportunities is an inherent human right.

As the nation’s leading providers of low vision and orientation and mobility services, including guide dogs, Guide Dogs Australia assists people who are blind or have a vision impairment gain the

freedom and independence to move safely and confidently around the community and to fulfil their potential.

Guide Dogs Australia organisations have over a century of expertise in orientation and mobility services and supports and is responsible for introducing both guide dogs and orientation and mobility services to Australia.

Our services are specifically customised for each individual entitled person to optimise their quality of life outcome and to ensure the optimal use of the most appropriate equipment is achieved, supports and services are planned based on individual expressed goals and disability related support needs.

Commitment:

In seeking to provide best practice and person centred orientation and mobility support, aids and training, Guide Dogs Australia organisations will continue to:

- Utilise industry leading skill to breed and train guide dogs of an exceptional and consistent standard providing consumers with a highly effective mobility aid
- Provide consumer specific and individually tailored orientation and mobility training utilising the most effective aid for the individual, be it guide dog, long cane, sonic guide etc
- Continue to improve the education and training of all staff in order to exceed current standards of service excellence.

Policy Priority 2: Increasing community awareness of access rights for guide dogs and their handlers

Policy Statement:

Guide Dogs Australia organisations collectively advocate for greater community awareness of the access rights of guide dogs and their handlers.

Rationale:

A guide dog is a vital means of independent travel for many people who are blind or vision impaired.

As a mobility aid, a guide dog is permitted by law to accompany their handlers in all public places - shops, hotels, motels, pubs and clubs, restaurants and places of worship, as well as taxis, buses and trains. These rights are enshrined by the Disability Discrimination Act 1992 (Cth) and numerous state and territory laws across Australia.

Concerted efforts of Guide Dogs Australia organisations continue to educate individuals, communities, businesses and the broader public of their obligations to permit access to guide dogs and their handlers. Regrettably, too many instances of guide dog handlers being refused entry or service still occur. These challenges to the rights of the person who is blind or vision impaired are unacceptable and continued awareness of legal, social and moral obligations is necessary.

Commitment:

In seeking to eradicate the occurrences of discrimination faced by guide dogs handlers, Guide Dogs Australia organisations will continue to:

- Provide education and advocacy around the state and federal laws which provide guide dog users better access to facilities and services
- Up skill and encourage guide dog handlers to be aware of their rights and ability to advocate for themselves.
- Work with all levels of government and all aspects of media to promote the rights of entry and broader community acceptance for guide dogs and their handlers.

Policy Priority 3: Ensuring quality of service provision regardless of age or circumstance people with vision impairment**Policy Statement:**

Guide Dogs Australia organisations collectively advocate for provision of early intervention and appropriately funded support services for older Australians who are blind or vision impaired to facilitate maximum independence and opportunity remain in their own homes and communities.

Rationale:

It is imperative that equity is achieved for older Australians who are blind or vision impaired, who have been excluded from the benefits provided through the NDIS.

The continued lack of recognition of vision impairment as a special needs group within the recent Commonwealth Aged Care Reforms is further indication that disability, in particular the loss of vision, is considered an acceptable and inevitable process of ageing.

The persistent belief by many within the aged care sector and health sector that vision impairment is a 'natural consequence' of ageing ignores the vital benefits that are achieved by investing in appropriate disability-based functional assessment, service provision and rehabilitation for older Australians, many of whom have the capacity for ongoing, meaningful participation in their communities.

Expert intervention by specialist service providers significantly improves health and wellbeing outcomes, including reduction of falls risk and maintaining engagement within the individual's natural support networks and community, reducing isolation and the subsequent risk of depression.

The support needs and service delivery modalities for people who are blind or vision impaired differ greatly from those required by people who are frail aged. The episodic nature of specific support services required by a person who is blind or vision impaired necessitates specialised consideration to the application of amended funding parameters and the broadening of the home based support programs.

Early intervention upon diagnosis or subsequent loss of vision has been proven to significantly reduce accidents or injury. Funding for early intervention for older Australians who are blind or vision impaired is severely lacking and services are primarily provided through philanthropy. When consideration is given to the logical conclusion that future cost can be reduced by early action and service provision, the fact that primarily rehabilitation services are funded through community support is unacceptable.

Commitment:

In addressing the potential inequity of service provision for older Australians who are blind or vision impaired and in seeking to maximise their independence, Guide Dogs Australia organisations will continue to:

- Actively support and facilitate a person with vision impairment or blindness to remain in their home and remain active members of their communities through the provision of specialist services.
- Provide home assessments and guidance in the use of home modifications to minimise the occurrence and impact of falls.
- Provide training and support for skills development and specialised equipment to ensure safety and independence in carrying out daily living tasks.
- Provide Orientation and Mobility Training, including development of skills in the use of a long cane, guide dog, and other mobility aids, in order to allow older Australians to continue to access and participate in their communities.
- Advocate to Government to ensure equity in funding and standards of specialist service provision to older Australians who are blind or vision impaired.

Policy Priority 4: Ensuring provision of early intervention services

Policy Statement:

Guide Dogs Australia organisations collectively recognise that early intervention services are essential in achieving positive outcomes for a person who is blind or vision impaired, regardless of the age or life stage at which they acquire their vision loss.

Rationale:

Childhood early intervention is vital to support parents as they face the daunting prospect of raising a child who is blind or vision impaired. There is a strong foundation of evidence in support of early intervention as an overarching management approach that generates significant benefits for children with disabilities and their families. The potential for early intervention to produce benefits no longer appears to be in dispute.²

² Synergy Economic Consulting, February 2012, The Economic Benefits of Early Intervention for Children with Disabilities - A Report for the Not for Profit Children's Lobby Group

Knowledge of development issues, such as the importance of reach on sound, can ensure that appropriate guidelines for effective interventions can be implemented. Programs need to be personalised according to the type and severity of the impairment.³

Infants and children who can't see can benefit from the skills and tools Guide Dogs Australia members and their professional staff provide to help them develop gross motor skills, movement, confidence and the ability to get around on their own. These tools are essential to age appropriate development in preparation for commencement of formal schooling and education.

Early Intervention is similarly essential in achieving beneficial outcomes for Australians who acquire their vision loss later in life. Early intervention upon diagnosis or subsequent loss of vision has been proven to significantly reduce accidents or injury and substantially increase safety, independence and participation. When consideration is given to the logical conclusion that future cost can be reduced by early action and service provision, the fact that early intervention and primarily rehabilitation services for people who are blind or vision impaired are essentially funded through community support is unacceptable.

Commitment:

In order to increase access to early intervention services for people who are blind or vision impaired at the onset of their diagnosis regardless of age, Guide Dogs Australia organisations will continue to:

- Advocate for and seek increased government recognition and financial support for the provision of early intervention services.
- Provide expertly trained staff to deliver early intervention services to clients and their families.
- Provide community, government and client education on the importance of early intervention services.

Policy Priority 5: Achieving equity in access to information

Policy Statement:

Guide Dogs Australia organisations collectively advocate for the provision of information in formats accessible to people who have a print disability and which incorporate the principles of Universal Design.

Rationale:

Access to information is essential to all aspects of life, including participation in educational, employment, community and social activities. Inaccessible educational materials, websites, transport timetabling, maps and public signage place a person with a print disability at a significant disadvantage in accessing their community.

³ Elisa, F., Josee et al. (2002). Gross Motor Development and Reach on Sound as Critical Tools for the Development of the Blind Child. *Brain and Development*, Vol.24, pp.269-275.

Provision of specialist adaptive technology equipment and training allows continued access to information and can be instrumental in maintaining independence and overcoming numerous information access barriers.

Whilst every effort should be made to ensure privately published material can be accessed in alternate formats or through the use of adaptive technology, it is essential that publicly available information is accessible to ensure a person who is blind or vision impaired is not subjected to direct or indirect discrimination.

Commitment:

In seeking to provide and promote provision of information in accessible formats for people who are blind or vision impaired, Guide Dogs Australia organisations will continue to:

- Ensure that all printed information distributed by Guide Dogs Australia organisations will include a statement that the information is available in alternative formats on request where deemed reasonable.
- Ensure printed information is provided in alternative formats preferred by individual clients.
- Consult with people who are blind or vision impaired as to specific information access issues they experience and assist them to address this barrier through solution based advocacy.
- Educate ICT specialists, educational providers, publishers, government and the broader community of the rights of people who are blind or vision impaired to receive information in a format accessible to them.
- Ensure all organisational websites and those linked through Guide Dogs websites adhere to best practice accessibility standards.
- Work with local councils, state and federal government to improve and enforce the use of tactile signage, audible timetabling and transport information and announcements and provision of government and community information in accessible formats.
- Work with the broader blindness sector to achieve improved access to privately published materials in accessible formats.

Policy Priority 6: Improving access to education

Policy Statement:

Guide Dogs Australia organisations collectively advocate for inclusive education and removal of barriers to effective learning and participation within the educational setting across all stages of learning from pre-school through to university.

Rationale:

Education is an essential aspect in achieving broad life skill development and future inclusion of all aspects of family, community and professional life. It is through education that skills and

knowledge are developed to facilitate participation in future employment opportunities and economic independence.

Arguably, significant progress has been made towards addressing the educational needs of people who are blind or vision impaired. Successful integration into 'mainstream' schools and the increase in technological aids to facilitate improved access to information have provided greater educational opportunities. Despite these advances, people who are blind or vision impaired continue to face additional challenges to accessing educational facilities and material.

Provision of individually tailored support programs and mobility and technological aids are essential to effective engagement within the educational environment and achieving successful learning outcomes.

Commitment:

In order to achieve successful educational engagement and outcomes for people who are blind or vision impaired, Guide Dogs Australia organisations will continue to:

- Provide expert orientation and mobility training to children, adolescents and adults in accessing their educational environment.
- Provide specialist assessment and skill development training on the use of vision and mobility aids.
- Provide advocacy for and provision of specialised training for teaching staff on providing the best access to educational materials and information for students who are blind or vision impaired.
- Provide advocacy for and provision of specialised training for all school and educational staff on facilitating inclusive engagement in all aspect of educational participation including participation in physical, social and community aspects of education
- Engage with educational institutions, Government Departments and external stakeholders in improving all aspects of educational participation for people who are blind or vision impaired.

Policy Priority 7: Improving Employment Opportunities

Policy Statement:

Guide Dogs Australia organisations recognise that engagement in meaningful and lasting employment is essential to providing social and economic security for people who are blind or vision impaired.

Rationale:

It has been well established that people who are blind or vision impaired are significantly over-represented in unemployment and underemployment statistics.

Research undertaken by Blind Citizens Australia has determined that for people who are blind or vision impaired, 59% of people of working age are not employed – 4.5 times the national average. Of those who are classified as employed, 13% are unable to find full time employment, compared

to 6% of the general Australian population, and remain underemployed and unable to achieve economic and social security. Addressing the significant challenge of unemployment and underemployment for people who are blind or vision impaired will require a collaborative and multi-faceted approach from job seekers themselves, the disability sector, government and employers.

The frustration of seeking employment is compounded all too frequently by an inability to access job advertisement and application information in accessible formats; assessment tools utilised in the interview and selection process; and regrettably continued attitudinal barriers existing around the ability of a blind or vision impaired person to be successful in a position.

The traditional methods people in the broader community undertake to gain practical employment experience, for example through volunteering and work experience placements, are often inaccessible for a person who is blind or vision impaired for similar reasons.

Commitment:

In addressing the barriers to employment faced by people who are blind or vision impaired, and in working towards improved outcomes for meaningful and long-term employment, Guide Dogs Australia organisations will continue to:

- Practice disability inclusive employment within all Guide Dogs Australia organisations, with an aim to achieving a minimum engagement of 5% of staff being blind or vision impaired.
- Work with voluntary organisations and small, medium and large businesses to encourage, promote and facilitate engagement and employment of people who are blind or vision impaired.
- Provide skills, training and practical experience opportunities for people who are blind or vision impaired to increase their confidence in pursuing voluntary and paid employment opportunities.

Policy Priority 8: Improving pedestrian safety

Policy Statement:

Guide Dogs Australia organisations collectively advocate for enhanced safety and greater community awareness of the challenges facing people who are blind or vision impaired in navigating their community and in crossing roads.

Rationale:

Blind and vision impaired people face many challenges in achieving independent mobility and travel. The acquisition of orientation and mobility skills through specialist training provided by Guide Dogs Australia organisations is vital. A person who is blind or vision impaired may have well developed mobility skills, and efficiently and effectively use mobility aids such as a guide dog, white cane, sonar or talking GPS, however, successful and safe completion of a journey is often dependent on factors outside of the control of the blind or vision impaired person.

A recent study by Monash University, Guide Dogs Victoria and Vision Australia (and subsequently verified by other state based Guide Dogs organisations) identified 48 blind or vision impaired pedestrians who had been involved in a collision or near collision when crossing a road.⁴

The introduction of hybrid and electric vehicles presents a significant danger to a person who is blind or vision impaired and relies on sound to detect oncoming vehicles.

Vehicles not stopping at zebra crossings or proceeding in front of or behind a blind or vision impaired person as they are crossing the road can be extremely distressing and disorientating.

Obstacles placed haphazardly on pavements impede efficient travel and present significant trip hazards.

In providing the skills and training to support independent travel, it is vital that external barriers and dangers are minimised.

Commitment:

In seeking to address the barriers to safe and independent pedestrian travel for people who are blind or vision impaired, Guide Dogs Australia organisations will continue to:

- Promote community awareness and drive safety campaigns.
- Educate all levels of government, infrastructure designers, planners and businesses as to the need to minimise obstacles on pathways.
- Liaise with Government and motoring authorities to increase driver and community awareness of the challenges and risks faced by people who are blind or vision impaired in crossing roads and identifying oncoming traffic.
- Work with blind and vision impaired people to increase their awareness of the potential hazards and changing traffic conditions they may face.
- Advocate for increased driver and cyclist awareness and identification of blind or visually impaired people.

Policy Priority 9: Improving accessibility of all transport modes and infrastructure

Policy Statement:

Guide Dogs Australia organisations collectively advocate for the inherent right of people who are blind or vision impaired to access public transport with minimum stress and maximum efficiency.

Rationale:

The challenges of accessing public transport and the broader community often predispose people who are blind or vision impaired to the risk of situational vulnerability and social isolation.

⁴ Monash University Road Safety Unit, December 2012, report 'Road safety for pedestrians who are blind or have low vision'

The provision of appropriate mobility training coupled with an effective aid such as a guide dog, white cane or electronic travel aid, can facilitate independent and meaningful participation within an individual's community, however, this is reliant on the public infrastructure and transport services being accessible.

State and Territory Governments have, for the most part, undertaken significant efforts across the public transport sector to implement improvements in response to the introduction of the Disability Standards for Accessible Public Transport Cth (2002) since its introduction and subsequent to the 2007 Review.

It is difficult to quantify improvements, however, as there is still a significant lack of data and reporting information available. Through extensive consultation with clients and expert observation, it is apparent that significant barriers to accessing public transport services still exist for people who are blind or vision impaired.

The ongoing delays in addressing and rectifying existing barriers to accessing public transport modes and infrastructure, including timetabling information, continue to impact on the ability of people who are blind or vision impaired to achieve equitable access to employment, community and social opportunities.

Commitment:

In seeking to address the barriers faced by people who are blind or vision impaired in accessing public transport modes and infrastructure, Guide Dogs Australia organisations will continue to:

- Engage in extensive and sustained efforts to facilitate greater knowledge of disability standards and the rights of people who are blind or vision impaired to access public services with the assistance of mobility aids, including guide dogs.
- Consult with blind and vision impaired people on their access needs and challenges, and undertake targeted and systemic advocacy to address these concerns.
- Work with Building Standards Australia to implement and apply national standards to the design of bus, rail and ferry transport interchanges and hubs, in order to facilitate greater compliance to updated standards and ensure greater consistency of design nationally.
- Work with State and Federal Government to develop a national reporting and monitoring system to address compliance and non-compliance of existing access standards.

Policy Priority 10: Increasing access to rehabilitation and support services for indigenous Australians living in remote communities

Policy Statement:

Guide Dogs Australia organisations recognise the significant disadvantage faced by Aboriginal Australians who are blind or vision impaired and living in remote communities.

Rationale:

Aboriginal Australians and those from culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) communities experience health inequity in general, including vision impairment. Aboriginal Australians are

reported to be at higher risk of vision loss than the general population, with blindness rates among Indigenous population six times those in mainstream Australia⁵.

People in remote communities who are blind or vision impaired are often isolated due to lack of generic assistance and assessment available. The impact is exacerbated by the lack of access to appropriate specialist rehabilitation services. The provision of 'early intervention' rehabilitation services is proven to significantly improve adjustment to disability and transition to increased societal participation and engagement.

Geographic isolation, inherent in remote communities, coupled with economic disadvantage, a lack of transport and a lack of access to health services, limit the opportunities for prompt identification and management of eye health problems and subsequently lead to poorer outcomes and isolation from community participation.

Commitment:

In seeking to address the lack of access to rehabilitation services for Aboriginal Australians in remote communities who are blind or vision impaired, Guide Dogs Australia organisations will continue to:

- Partner with diagnostic providers to reduce the incidence of preventable vision loss in remote communities.
- Provide referral and outreach services specifically targeting remote communities.
- Increase remote community awareness of services and assistance Guide Dogs Australia members can provide to improve the circumstances of people who are blind or vision impaired.
- Develop and promote services and programs specifically targeted to Aboriginal people and communities with regard to cultural preferences.

⁵ 2013, Australian Institute of Health and Welfare Report