

AEROGRAM December 2020

Wow. . . December 2020. I am not even sure where to begin as we think about 2020. We all know how hard it has been and that the hard will continue. We also all know we are all dedicated to our clients, our students and our profession. As I have been working with and observing the professionals in our state, I have seen amazing things. I have seen countless meetings in cars because it is the only quiet place. I have seen CVRTs talk through bump dots placement over the fun. I have seen EI specialists do porch drop offs as all hours to get infants what they need for vision development. I have seen all of our members and colleagues advocating to get clients the services they need while keeping us all safe. I am honored to serve in this field and alongside all of you.

Thank you for allowing me to serve as the AERO Board President. I will continue to stay involved and will be here to serve our members for years to come. I am excited to serve alongside your new President, Staci Wills and President Elect, Stephanie Welch-Grenier.

Vicki Lorenz, AERO Board President
vicki.lorenz@cincyblind.org
(513)487-4528

FACE MASK SALE

Stay safe and look good doing it!! AERO is selling some great masks (including some new holiday masks). You can see the collection and send in your order here:

https://docs.google.com/forms/d/e/1FAIpQLSfvuD7xGDq17ONOfiLc1xRUar_DM0IoRX0VL27jWRbk1YrRIQ/viewform

REIMAGINE 20/20 (& 2021)

Thank you all who presented and participated in all the webinars this year. Jessica Chandler, Past President did a phenomenal job pulling together a great group of presenters that allowed us to learn and stay safe. We offered 17 webinars worth 16 ACVREP CEUs.

As I transition into the Past President role, I will be planning some professional development opportunities in 2021. While I am still thinking through what that will look like, I am sure it will continue to look different. If you have requests, ideas or questions please reach out!

Vicki.lorenz@cincyblind.org

AER Ohio Position Paper

Orientation and Mobility (O&M): Essential Service

It is the position of the Association for the Education and Rehabilitation of the Blind and Visually Impaired of Ohio (AERO) that the rehabilitation practice of orientation and mobility (O&M) is recognized as an essential service within the State of Ohio. As an essential service, rehabilitation providers who work with individuals who are blind and visually impaired in the area of O&M will be permitted to provide in-person services during times of crisis.

Background of O&M Services for Individuals who are Blind and Visually Impaired

The U.S. Federal Government has long recognized the importance of rehabilitation services for individuals who are blind and visually impaired. Specifically, the field of orientation and mobility (O&M) was recognized on a federal level in 1945 when the Surgeon General's office dispatched Warren Bledsoe, an orientor, from Valley Forge Army General Hospital to Dibble Army General Hospital to instruct on the use of the white cane to wounded American Veterans. This act led to the opening of the Veterans Administration (VA) Hines Rehabilitation Center for Blinded Veterans and the creation of rehabilitation

services specifically for individuals who are blind and visually impaired. Today, rehabilitation services, including O&M, are provided through federal and state funding for individuals across the lifespan by a variety of certified rehabilitation specialists (Wiener, Welsh, & Blasch, 2010).

This tradition of support continues on a federal level through the U.S. Department of Education (DOE) and U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) via the provision of federal grants to state rehabilitation service programs for individuals who are blind and visually impaired (OOD, 2020). The Rehabilitation Services Administration (RSA), Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP) and Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services (OSERS) work under the DOE umbrella to ensure federal funding for vocational rehabilitation services, including O&M, for individuals with visual impairments and blindness with the understanding of its importance in both supporting the health and wellbeing of the individual and the economy as a whole. This support is further addressed by the HHS, who acts as the “U.S. Government’s principal agency for protecting the health of all Americans and providing essential human services, especially for those who are least able to help themselves” (HHS, 2020).

For school-aged students, federal legislation also speaks to the provision of services for students with visual impairments through related service providers, including O&M instructors: Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) (2004) § 1401 (3)(A) In general the term “child with a disability” means a child (i) with... visual impairments (including blindness) (ii) who, by reason thereof, needs special education and related services. (26)(A) In general the term “related services” means transportation, such developmental, corrective, and other supportive services (including...orientation and mobility services) as may be required to assist a child with a disability to benefit from special education. (29) The term “special education” means specially designed instruction, at no cost to the parents, to meet the unique needs of a child with a disability, including (A) Instruction conducted in the classroom, in the home, in hospitals, and institutions, and in other settings. (Individuals With Disabilities Education Act, 20 U.S.C. § 1401 (2004))

On a state level, the Ohio Guidelines for Working with Students Who Are Blind or Visually Impaired (2017) recognizes that “orientation and mobility is essential, sequential instruction for individuals with visual impairments in using their remaining senses...for safe movement from one place to another.” These skills must be taught in-person by certified orientation and mobility specialists (COMS) for the safety of the student throughout the training process.

Essential Rehabilitative Services in Times of Crisis

According to the Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency’s (CISA) Advisory Memorandum on Ensuring Essential Critical Infrastructure Workers Ability to Work During the COVID-19 Response, human service providers providing services to at-risk populations, including individuals with disabilities, are considered essential workers (Krebs, 2020, pp. 8-9). Although O&M specialists who work with individuals who are blind and visually impaired are not specifically named in the CISA language, the memorandum notes “The following list of identified essential critical infrastructure workers is intended to be overly inclusive reflecting the diversity of industries across the United States. Workers who provide human services, [include] but are not limited to industries listed within the document” (Krebs, 2020, pp. 7-8).

At the state level, Ohio’s order defines essential workers as healthcare and public health operations, human services operations, essential governmental functions, and essential infrastructure (Acton, DeWine, & Husted, 2020). Based on the rehabilitative services provided through orientation and mobility services, O&M specialists are to be considered human service operations. Within human services operations, individuals may leave their home to:

Work for or obtain services at any Human Services Operations, including any provider funded by Ohio Department of Aging, Department of Developmental Disabilities...Opportunities for Ohioans with Disabilities,[and] Department of Veterans Services...that is providing services to the public and including state operated, institutional, or community-based settings providing human services to the public. Human Services Operations includes, but is not limited to...vocational services, rehabilitation services...and other necessities of life for economically disadvantaged individuals, individuals with physical,

intellectual, and/or developmental disabilities, or otherwise needy individuals. Human Services Operations shall be construed broadly to avoid any impacts to the delivery of human services, broadly defined. (Acton, DeWine, & Husted, 2020, pp. 3-4).

Position of AERO

Despite this legislative groundwork on the importance of rehabilitation services for individuals who are blind and visually impaired and the fact that O&M services are to be considered as human service operations, many agencies and school districts throughout Ohio have restricted O&M specialists from providing direct instruction to individuals due to COVID-19.

This interruption of service has sparked research within the field of blind rehabilitation, resulting in the Access and Engagement Research Report (October 2020) published by the American Foundation of the Blind (Rosenblum, et al., 2020). This research found that rehabilitation services, for students' birth-21, have been significantly impacted by the COVID-19 response across the United States and Canada, with students failing to meet IEP and IFSP goals due to limited/cancelled services and objectives that are too difficult to approach virtually. Furthermore, there is a collective concern among families and providers for student independence, with major setbacks in student learning and lost progress noted because of service changes due to the application of COVID-19 orders. This research indicates that "it may not be possible to provide remote instruction that is relevant and helpful for the student while also meeting the [legal] requirements of IDEA and the student's IEP" (Rosenblum, et al., 2020, p. 101).

Travel for educational purposes for any related service is allowed under Ohio Orders (Acton, DeWine, & Husted, 2020). Educational institutions, including public and private pre-k-12 schools and universities, are allowed to provide distance learning and in-person essential functions while maintaining six-foot distancing guidelines, "to the greatest extent possible" (Acton, DeWine, & Husted, 2020). However, in Ohio, each school district and private agency has been allowed to interpret and apply guidelines independently; thus, creating an exclusion of in-person O&M instruction even though this is an essential service for many.

Declaration of O&M Services as Essential in the State of Ohio

Due to the rehabilitative needs and the safety of travelers who are blind and visually impaired, it is the position of AERO that O&M services in the State of Ohio are recognized as essential services. With this recognition, it is the position of AERO that educational institutions, as well as private and public agencies, review their individual exclusionary guidelines on COVID-19 to allow O&M specialists who work with individuals with visual impairments and blindness to provide essential in-person services in times of crisis.

Respectfully Submitted,

AER Ohio O&M Ad Hoc Committee

Vicki Lorenz, CLVT, AERO President

Stephanie Welch-Grenier, VRT/COMS/TVI, Public Policy & Advocacy Chair

Jessica Chandler, TVI/COMS, AERO Past President, O&M Co-Chair

Staci Wills, TVI/COMS, AERO President-Elect

Danene Fast, PhD, TVI/COMS

Dr. Jennifer Perry, CVRT/COMS, O&M Co-Chair

Nolan Markle, COMS

Mary Swartwout, COMS

Shelley McCoy, TVI/COMS, Education Chair

Scott Riseng, COMS

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Apply AERO Scholarships and Member Grants!!!

❖ Personnel Preparation Scholarship - \$500

Ohio residents attending college and majoring in a field related to visual impairments are welcome to apply!

❖ David H. Newmeyer Member Grant - \$250

AERO members are welcome to apply!

No application deadline!!!

*To become an AER member: <https://aerbvi.org/membership/>

*Download application form from **AERO Policies**:

<http://www.aerbviohio.org/policy-board>

*For questions, email **Ying-Ting Chiu**: chiuyingting@gmail.com

BRaille PENPAL PROGRAM

AERO is launching the Braille Pen Pal Network. The program's goal is to allow students across Ohio to practice their braille skills, while making

new friends across the state. Please consider getting your students signed up! Click below for more information and permission forms.

[PERMISSION FORMS](#)

Your AERO Board

Please reach out to any board member with ideas, questions or concerns.

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