

MEDIA RELEASE



New campaign encourages us to not turn a blind eye

EMBARGOED Monday 11th October 2010: While new research shows that most Australians (87%) would offer help to a person with impaired vision, those who sometimes need the help are concerned that not everyone knows how best to go about it.

Despite positive intentions from the community, people with impaired vision who use canes and other mobility aids have told Guide Dogs NSW/ACT that their ability to get around would be made easier if people knew a little more about how they can help².

In response to these findings, Guide Dogs NSW/ACT is launching a new public education campaign, ***Don't turn a blind eye***, in the lead up to International White Cane Day (15th October) that encourages people to learn and use good communication when offering guiding assistance.

Campaign ambassador and blind marathon swimmer James Pittar, who uses a long cane, is excited to have the opportunity to educate Australians about how best to lend a helping hand.

"From my experience, people might be willing to help out but they don't really understand what actions are helpful or distracting to us. Hopefully this campaign helps clarify this issue," said Mr Pittar.

"Although we have lost some vision, we are independent and capable but, at times we'll need guiding. If you see someone with a cane or another mobility aid who looks like they are having trouble getting around, an easy way to offer assistance is to simply ask 'do you need help?' and we can then tell you how you can help out," said Mr Pittar.

The campaign also recognises that environmental obstructions like overhanging branches, poorly maintained footpaths and cluttered alfresco dining areas also make navigation difficult for people with impaired vision.

A recent Guide Dogs survey found that 88% of people with impaired vision had encountered problems with footpath obstructions in the past year.

Dr Graeme White, Chief Executive of Guide Dogs, says a safe and accessible community benefits everyone, and importantly helps people with impaired vision to get around independently.

"It's great to see that most people want to help someone with impaired vision," said Dr White. "However, if you are unsure about how to guide or unaware of the impact of things like footpath obstructions then it is not helpful and can even place a person with impaired vision in danger.

"As well as providing free mobility services to help people with impaired vision get around more independently, our role is to educate the community about how they can help make things easier. We will be actively speaking to the public about encouraging proper guiding communication and working with local councils to keep footpaths clear of obstructions. These simple actions can make a huge difference for someone who can't see."

As part of the new campaign, Guide Dogs has launched a web-based resource kit to provide the community with the tools needed to address both environmental obstacles and good communication and guiding skills. The kit includes videos and photos and downloadable information, including articles for council newsletters that outline solutions for resolving common environmental obstacles faced by people with impaired vision.

In NSW and the ACT, there are over 200,000 people who are blind or have impaired vision, with this figure set to increase to nearly 300,000 by 2020³.

To view the ***Don't turn a blind eye*** online resource kit visit www.guidedogs.com.au or to find out more about Guide Dogs NSW/ACT and the services it provides call 02 9412 9300.

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For more information about the campaign or to arrange media opportunities, please contact Karina Candia (0402 307 056) or Lauren Sharkey (0439 404 200) at Palin Communications on 02 9412 2255.

1. Roy Morgan Research. Conducted for Guide Dogs NSW/ACT. September 2010

2. Guide Dogs NSW/ACT 2010 Client Survey

3. Access Economics, *Clear Focus: The Economic Impact of Vision Loss in Australia in 2009*, June 2010