

A Walk on the Wild Side

Marcia Cummings

Alliance for Equality of Blind Canadians

Contact Information:

Marcia Cummings

130 Neptune Drive, Apt. 803

North York, Ontario

M6A 1X5

marcia.cummings@rci.rogers.com

Abstract

Walking in the city can be very relaxing, until you have to start dealing with the barriers and obstacles prevalent on our sidewalks—merchandise, bicycle racks, garbage cans, etc. They may not seem like barriers to you, but to someone who is blind they can turn a relaxing walk into a nightmare. How do we reclaim our sidewalks?

Marcia Cummings has lived and walked in Toronto all her life. She is totally blind and uses a white cane as her mobility aid of choice. She also uses the Trekker GPS solution to gain more information about her environment—street names, points of interest, etc. She has encountered all of the above obstacles many times and looks forward to the day when everyone considers pedestrians before they add more clutter to the sidewalks.

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Introduction

Many people take the sidewalks for granted—a means of getting from point A to point B safely—but are they? People who are blind, deaf-blind or partially sighted would probably describe sidewalks more accurately as ever-changing obstacle courses, fraught with barriers of all kinds—permanent ones, temporary ones and those which affect more than one sensory channel. The challenge, therefore, is to use all the tools at hand—both educational and technological—to conquer the barriers so that the frustration and danger are minimized and one can travel around the city freely.

The Alliance for Equality of Blind Canadians / L'Alliance pour l'Égalité des Personnes Aveugles du Canada (AEBC) is a consumer organization, the majority of whose members are blind, deaf-blind and partially sighted. It was founded in Kelowna, BC, in 1992, and continues to strive towards full equality for all Canadians, through advocacy work, public awareness and peer support. AEBC awards scholarships each year to deserving post-secondary students who are blind, deaf-blind or partially sighted, and publishes a national magazine, the Canadian Blind Monitor, full of articles by and about the everyday lives of citizens who just happen to be blind, deaf-blind or partially sighted.

Tools of the Trade

In order to be able to understand the barriers faced by people who are blind, deaf-blind or partially sighted, it is important to understand the various tools they have to aid with navigating the pedestrian realm. There are two well-known mobility aids at their disposal—white canes and guide dogs. White canes, when wielded by well-trained pedestrians, will find most obstacles—and therefore will usually prevent the pedestrian from making bodily contact with said obstacles. However, canes are limited to detection of obstacles which touch the ground. They do not protect their owners from suspended objects, such as tree branches and low-hanging signs, and can easily miss detecting parked vehicles. Guide dogs are highly trained to guide their owners around obstacles and, when working well, will often avoid overhanging objects as well. However, there can be a long waiting list for guide dog training, and of course, having a dog does not fit everyone's lifestyle.

Recent technological advances have also introduced GPS solutions which add to the information one can learn about the environment—Trekker (web site: <http://www.humanware.com/en-canada/products/orientation>), and StreetTalk (web site: http://www.freedomscientific.com/fs_products/StreetTalk_info.asp), to name but two. They give audible access to street names, direction of travel, and points of interest. There are also Electronic Travel Aids such as the UltraCane (web site: <http://www.soundforesight.co.uk/new/>) and the MiniGuide (web site: http://www.gdp-research.com.au/minig_1.htm), devices which give their user, once trained, more information about the objects around them. However, no device or dog is a match for the clutter on today's city sidewalks!

Permanent Barriers

The permanent barriers can pose some of the biggest problems, but they can also be the easiest to conquer, since, once installed, they do not change in location or make-up. They include, but are not limited to: Pillars, trees, overhangs, patio enclosures, planters, mailboxes, newspaper boxes, statuary, garbage cans, bicycle racks, telephone poles, and merchant stalls such as those on Spadina north of Dundas in Toronto's Chinatown. Once a blind person learns where these barriers are, he/she can begin to make the necessary adjustments in walking patterns to avoid running into them. These are the types of barriers whose original placement urban planners should be able to control, so that they are as close to one side of the walking surface as possible.

Temporary Barriers

The next collection of barriers cause a different set of problems, because they materialize and dematerialize without warning—here today, gone tomorrow. They include, but are not limited to: garbage bags, unprotected construction sites, sandwich boards, and trucks/cars parked on sidewalks. These barriers can change, making it difficult to plan ahead; however, more consistent enforcement of by-laws and safety regulations would help reduce their impact.

Environmental Barriers

The third category of barriers encountered by people who are blind, deaf-blind or partially sighted are more complicated than a simple physical blockage of the sidewalk. They impact the environment as well, being both physical and auditory in nature. They include, but are not limited to: sidewalk singers/money-seekers, street corner noise, cyclists on sidewalks, snow, snow ploughs, and poor terrain caused by sidewalks and streets in need of repair. Due to their nature, these barriers are harder for the pedestrian to conquer and harder for the city officials to alleviate.

Regulations Required

There are two additional major issues which could be ameliorated through the establishment of urban standards: the current absence of large print and tactile signage throughout the city and the inadequate numbers of Accessible Pedestrian Signals (APS) already installed or being newly installed. Accessible Pedestrian Signals vibrate and emit various tones and other audible information to alert pedestrians when it is safe to cross a street.

At this time, retail and street signs are in print, high above the sidewalk. If you have ever craned your neck to look for a street number in this city you will understand how difficult it must be for someone who is partially sighted to locate that information. If you are successful in reading street signs, the blind pedestrian never finds you—he/she inevitably finds someone whose first reaction is to advise the person asking that he/she is from out of town. This only adds to the frustration already being experienced, as you can imagine. Tactile and large print formats should be mandatory for all street signs and retail operations.

The small number of current Accessible Pedestrian Signals means that there are many intersections where people who are blind, deaf-blind or partially sighted take their lives into their hands on a daily basis, as they do not know when the traffic signal's walk cycle actually HAS started. This safety concern should be channelled into a policy requiring all newly-constructed traffic signals be installed as fully-functional Accessible Pedestrian Signals.

Conclusion

It is becoming more important for people to walk around the city—both for environmental and personal health reasons. However, the barriers facing pedestrians who are blind, deaf-blind and partially sighted need to be removed. City planners need to pay more attention to placement of trees, poles, and other sidewalk additions. They need to seek input from pedestrians as to how and where to best position necessary fixtures so they do not impede travel. Policies need to be established to regulate the clutter. New installations of traffic signals must include the accessible pedestrian signal functionality—funding must be found to ensure that all intersections can be made accessible and safe for all Torontonians. Until then, while the obstacle courses still exist, people who are blind, deaf-blind and or partially sighted will have to continue taking their walks on the wild side.