GROUP PROJECT

THE TRINIDAD AND TOBAGO ASSOCIATION FOR THE BLIND AND VISUALLY IMPAIRED

INTRODUCTION

The word blindness has many shades of meaning. According to the Association for The Blind and Visually Impaired, the legal definition for blindness is “when a person sees 10% of the 100% vision after a corrective surgery”.

In North America and most of Europe, legal blindness is defined as visual acuity (vision) of 20/200 (6/60) or less in the better eye with best correction possible. This means that a legally blind individual would have to stand 20 feet from an object to see it with the same degree of clarity as a normally sighted person could from 200 feet. In many areas, people with average acuity who nonetheless have a visual field of less than 20 degrees (the norm being 180 degrees) are also classified as being legally blind. It would be wrong to speak about blindness and not mention the term Visual Impairment, which can be defined as, “when a person’s visual acuity is 20/70 or less in the better eye with best correction, or a visual field of 140 degrees or less in the better eye.

Blindness falls under the broad category of disabilities known as “Sensory Handicaps”, under the heading Visual Impairments. Within this group, there are four subsets:

- Visual Handicap – which is little to no vision
• Blindness – an absence of sight, although shadows can be seen
• Low vision – cannot read fine print
• Visual Limitation – there is little sight, but the individual can manipulate the environment to their advantage.

The blind and visually impaired attain academic qualification by using their own form of language known as Braille. It was named after its inventor, Louis Braille, a Frenchman, who became blind through an accident at age 3. However, at age 15, after learning sonography, a form of communicating used in the army, Braille simplified the code and began teaching it.

CAUSES OF BLINDNESS

DISEASES

Most visual impairment is caused by disease and malnutrition. According to WHO estimates in 2002, the most common causes of blindness around the world are:

• cataracts (47.8%), - when there is an disturbance in the fluids and nutrients in the lens. Also caused by exposure to ultra- violet light from the sun, smoking and heavy drinking.
• glaucoma (12.3%), - when the level of pressure needed to maintain the fluid that keeps the eyes’ shape is restricted, causing the pressure in the eye to rise and damage to the optic nerve.
• age-related macular degeneration (AMD) (8.7%), - when the lighting cells in the macula malfunction and over time cease to work.
• trachoma (3.6%), - caused by the bacteria Chlamydia trachomatis and it is spread by direct contact with eye, nose, and throat secretions from affected individuals, or contact with objects, such as towels and/or washcloths, that have had similar contact with said secretions.
• corneal opacity (5.1%), - A cloudy spot in the cornea, which is normally transparent. Causes include corneal scar tissue and infection. Symptoms include halos around lights, photophobia, vision loss and a white or cloudy spot on the eye.-www.allaboutvision.com/resources/glossary.htm

• diabetic retinopathy (4.8%), - retinopathy (damage to the retina) caused by complications of diabetes mellitus, which could eventually lead to blindness. It is an ocular manifestation of systemic disease which affects up to 80% of all diabetics who have had diabetes for 15 years or more

ENVIRONMENTAL

• Trauma – when a traumatic incident occurs, such as the loss of a child it has been known to cause individuals to go blind.

• Motor accidents- shattered glass from the accident can enter the eye and cause serious damage

• Industrial accidents – individuals have been known to have lost their sight in industrial accidents. Also welders with improper eyewear have a tendency to have deteriorating eyesight.

• Domestic Violence - According to the Journal of the American Medical Assn., 35% of all women who arrive at doctors' offices or hospital seeking emergency treatment are victims of domestic violence. Battering causes emotional disability and physical disability, including blindness, deafness, and paralysis -- even death. In Trinidad, there have been reports of women having their eyes gouged out, or having corrosive chemicals thrown at their faces, causing permanent damage to the eyes.

• Premature birth – According to Developmental Psychologist John Santrock, the fetus develops eyelashes and eyebrows during 17-20 weeks and opens its eyes at 24 - 28 weeks. If a child is born in its 28th week, chances are that it can be born blind. Also, if a pregnant mother consumes large amounts of alcohol or uses illegal drugs, it can damage the visual development for the child.
SOME PROBLEMS THAT INDIVIDUALS WITH A VISUAL IMPAIRMENT FACE:

- Historically, blind and visually impaired people have either been treated as if their lack of sight were an outward manifestation of some internal lack of reason, or as if they possessed extrasensory abilities. *The Cricket on the Hearth* by Charles Dickens showed a horrid scene of how easily people who are blind can be manipulated and deceived.

- There is a problem to travel independently or even with an aide, as commuters see a blind person as an “added burden to their travelling experience”, as they may take a while to enter a car or bus.

- Individuals who possess visual limitation tend to have a problem when applying for assistance, as the nature of their ailment allows them to manipulate their environment. Individuals may see these individuals moving about on their own and may feel that they are con – artists.

- In some subject areas, having a person with a disability in the field would seem as a burdensome task. For example, “how can I have a disabled student in my class without lowering my standards,” is a common perception among lecturers.

SOME STATISTICS ON BLINDNESS IN TRINIDAD AND TOBAGO

- According to the 2000 Population Census, there are 18,583 individuals living in Trinidad and Tobago with one form of visual impairment. This can be further broken down into 7,998 males and 10,585 females.
• In Trinidad and Tobago, there is only one school for the blind, which is located in Santa Cruz.

• In the Association for the blind and Visually Impaired in south Trinidad, there are 300 people registered with the institution.

HISTORICAL OVERVIEW

The Blind Welfare Association was established by James A. Alves on 18th May, 1914 in Trinidad and Tobago. Mr. Alves was born in British Guiana (as it was formerly known) and he was the pioneer for organized Work for the Blind in this country. Mr. Alves set up the Institute for the Blind after a meeting with the Governor General Sir George Lee Hunte, the Roman Catholic archbishop and the Anglican Bishop. This institute then became known as the Trinidad and Tobago Blind Welfare Association by an Act of Parliament on the 13th June 1947. The name was again changed to Trinidad and Tobago Association for the Blind and Visually Impaired in 1993.

The School for the Blind opened its doors in 1943 with Mr. Alves as the first teacher, and catered to children from Trinidad and Tobago as well as from other Caribbean countries. In the 1930’s Mr. Alves trained one of his ex-pupils as a teacher to assist him with his work. At this time the population of students had started to increase at the school. The work was then divided and Mr. Alves taught the male students, while Miss Christobell Swanson (his understudy) taught the female students.

Locations

The Trinidad and Tobago Association for the Blind and Visually Impaired has expanded with locations in the two major cities of Port-of-Spain and San Fernando. The School for the Blind is located in Santa Cruz, Trinidad.

The Trinidad and Tobago Association for the Blind and Visually Impaired, San Fernando was opened in 1949, two years after the Act of Parliament was passed. It was formerly located at 8- 12 St. Andrew Street, San Fernando, and it has been temporarily
relocated to Rodriguez Building Kings’ Wharf, San Fernando for the past month. The Association will soon be permanently located at Corner Coffee and Lower Hillside Street, San Fernando.

**Courses Offered**

Initially, the syllabus was made up of Crafts, reading and writing Braille and recreational activities for the blind. Currently, the syllabus has expanded to include training in computer and typing. The repertoire of skills consists of Hygiene/ Personal Grooming, Mobility etc.

The staff at the Trinidad and Tobago Association for the Blind and Visually Impaired, San Fernando are currently attempting to diversify the programs offered there, by embarking upon Upholstery and Cane Work courses in the near future.

**Funding**

The Association presently receives a monthly subvention from the Office of the Prime Minister: Social Services Division which assists in paying the workers their wages and the overall functioning of the organization. Additionally, monies collected from the sale of items made by the workers, also goes to the operating of the Association

The Trinidad and Tobago Association for the Blind and Visually Impaired which has been in existence for the past 90 years is the only recognized Government agency which caters for blind and visually impaired persons.
ORGANISATIONAL STRUCTURE OF THE AGENCY

- EXECUTIVE OFFICER
  - WORKSHOP MANAGER
    - ACCOUNTANT
    - BLIND WELFARE OFFICERS
      - BLIND WELFARE OFFICER 1
      - BLIND WELFARE OFFICER 2
  - BLIND WELFARE
    - CLERICAL STAFF
POLICY

The Blind Welfare Association of Trinidad and Tobago is a Non Governmental Organization that is funded by the Government, receiving a subvention by the Government on a monthly basis.

The client’s of the agency must be eighteen years old and over.

Workers of the association are paid via the subvention they receive from the government, they receive minimum wage.

The Caribbean Council for the Blind hosts workshops that administrators must attend to ensure that they are abreast of new techniques and information.

Persons employed by the Blind Welfare Association are not allowed to be a part of the council, in an effort to maintain objectivity.

The income earned from the sale of the craft items is utilized by the Blind Welfare Association.

Membership is based on the definition for legal blindness and that is any person with 10% or less in the better eye after correction.

The services are for clients of different backgrounds but the main target population is persons who are not financially stable and have problems accessing alternative help to this department.

The agency also networks with the Social Welfare Department and inform their clients about the various grants they may be entitled to.
The council is elected by an annual general meeting made up of members. Blind and Visually impaired persons on the council cannot be employees of the organization.

The agency gives rehabilitative training to those that seek it. The aim of this training is to nurture independence and make life more comfortable for the Blind and Visually Impaired.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The theoretical framework used at the Trinidad and Tobago Blind Welfare Association can be classified as Systems Theory.

Systems ideas on social work originate in the general systems theory of von Bertalanffy (1971). This is a biological theory which proposes that all organisms are systems, composed of sub-systems, and are in turn part of super-systems. It deals with “Wholes” rather than parts of human and social behaviour. Systems theories offer a context for showing how public and private interact and are involved in, or themselves be agents for change. They also highlight the complexities of social and inter-personal situation, placing emphasis on patterns of behaviour and social relations, and how they connect with each other.

The principle of this approach is that people depend on systems in their immediate social environment for a satisfactory life. These systems are:

1. Informal or natural systems, such as friends, family, co-workers, etc
2. Formal systems, such as community groups or trade unions
3. Societal systems, such as hospitals, schools, etc.

This theory shifts attention from either the person or the environment alone. Instead, the locus of attention is placed on the system interaction within the person-in-situation. Neither the person, nor the environment is necessarily seen as causing problems, but the
interaction between them may be difficult. The aim is to help people perform life tasks, alleviate distress and achieve aims and value positions that are important to clients.

At the Trinidad and Tobago Blind Welfare Association, the welfare officers work with the families of the blind or visually impaired. They provide a counseling service with the aim of alleviating stress related to the nature of the disability, thus dealing with the natural system. They also work with the blind and visually impaired persons. They provide counseling, as well as workshops, teaching their clients how to be more self-sufficient.

The workshop at the institute can in many ways be considered a formal system. It provides regular employment, the workers are unionized and programs are also run to teach the clients technical-vocational skills such as computing and typing. These skills can aid entry into mainstream society and increase employment opportunities.

The institution also works in conjunction with the Eye Clinic at San Fernando General Hospital, thereby providing a link between the medical and social aspect of the disability. Referrals are commonplace between these two agencies since it had become apparent that the nature of the disability is multi-faceted and must be approached from more than one angle.

The Trinidad and Tobago Blind Welfare Association also runs the School for the Blind. This institution aims to educate the students enough to enter the mainstream school system, or teach them technical and vocational skills, which can ensure employment. The aim of the institution is not too marginalize their client population from society, but to help them to be integrated into society and teach them the ways in which they can adapt their environment to do so.
SERVICES PROVIDED

The Blind Welfare Association of Trinidad and Tobago – San Fernando branch offers a range of services to the visually impaired or blind population of our country as well as to the general public. To access these services persons must be registered with this association, all services and registration being free of charge. The services offered by this branch include:

♦ Rehabilitation
Not only for persons who are visually impaired, the San Fernando Blind Welfare Association, also provide rehabilitation services to family members or caregivers of persons who has this disability. This serves to equip them with the necessary skills to work with the blind person and to treat with their own needs (psychological / physical).

♦ Communication Skills
This service includes the teaching of Braille, Typing, Computer skills and Writing. Braille is also offered to persons who are not visually impaired, but are interested in learning this form of communication. All of the above courses are either certified or in the process of becoming certified.

♦ Home Management
Guidance with daily living skills is provided to persons who are blind.

♦ Mobility and Orientation
Persons are taught necessary skills such as independent traveling and use of the White cane.

♦ Personal Management
Members of this association are further tutored in grooming and clothing skills – highlighting the capabilities of self care.
♦ **Social Skills**

Another tremendous skill that is offered by this agency is the imparting of much needed social skills such as; eating techniques, sitting at the table etc.

♦ **Socialization Programme**

This service includes group counseling, table games and outdoor activities.

♦ **Library services**

Catering to great knowledge base and entertainment for persons who are visually impaired members are exposed to library services where they can access books on loan – Braille and large print – and cassettes.

♦ Counseling and work with families in homes are also offered. Also persons from the general public can ‘walk in’ and receive information on the agency or the disability focused on.

♦ **Craft**

The San Fernando department of the blind welfare association also serves as a workshop, where visually impaired persons are taught craft – which is a certified course offered by the agency. This skill also characterizes the livelihood of about 25 persons who are visually impaired. Two handicraft instructors oversee the smooth operations of daily activities.

Employees work a regular workday from 8am to 4pm, weaving straw into various attractive items, which are offered for sale to the public. Orders for unique items are also accepted. Currently workers receive minimum wage and are also affiliated with two unions. Monies made by the items on sale go to the further development of the organization.
CRITIQUE & RECOMMENDATIONS

Having interacted with the contact personnel and read the literature we were provided with, it was quite apparent that there are certain aspects of the policies or operations that may be revisited in order to suit the interest of the organization and the population being served.

It was found that the agency offers a range of services, both to the general public and to the specialized population being served. This has been sited as very plausible. It was quite apparent that the agency makes a concerted effort to include the general public and sensitize the nation as much as possible on being visually impaired or blind. However, it was seen both by us and the officer we spoke with that this is an area that can certainly gain from further intervention and support of other agencies in the country. Therefore the need to further sensitize and educate the public on this disability in an effort to further equip our nation with skills and the needed attitudes to treat with persons who may be living with a visual impairment or blindness can definitely be of great benefit to all.

Throughout discussions it was understood that the major form of training of staff members was the Caribbean conference training that is offered to persons who work with the visually impaired or blind population. It was also noted that the qualifications to begin working at this agency, does not really entail special training to deal with this population. Hence a major area in which the agency can benefit is by ensuring that all persons who work at the agency have the necessary skills to deal with this disability. Hence the need for more formal or professional training for persons working at this agency was sited.

Another area looked at, was the council. We were informed that the council is dormant and that all decisions are taken by the president of the council. This therefore initiates the question of, why have a council? Hence it was seen that in an effort to eliminate bias and
to have a vibrant council, the present position should be evaluated and possibly changed. Considering that some of the members on the council are visually impaired, this is noted as a plus for the decision making process as their input will be most valid and in keeping with the motto, ‘Nothing about us, without us’.

A major area cited that can be strengthened is the fact that there is only one school for the blind, located in Santa Cruz. This can be very difficult for the size of the population and also in terms of accessibility. Therefore the need for the necessary authorities to look into the possible construction of a school in the southern part of the country and possibly Tobago can be of great benefit.

There is no external validation of this agency, and therefore the only manner in which its successes are measured is via success stories by members of the agency or persons who were members of the agency. Even though, this is great, external evaluation, recommendations and input can prove invaluable to the ongoing success of this agency.

The major activity carried out in this facility is the making of craft items for trade. It was fast noted that visually impaired persons employed at the agency are not eligible for public assistance / disability grant. Therefore their minimum wage income generally covers their living expenses. In a country where cost of living is constantly increasing this might prove a strain for persons who also have additional needs. Taking this into consideration it was seen that the monies made from the craft items sold goes to the agency. A recommendation is that a certain percentage be given to employees and the major percentage goes to the agency. The additional income may therefore be of great benefit to employees.

In general it can be said that the policies and services of the agency provides greatly for the public and for the target or client group. The staff, being inclusive of persons who are visually impaired is a plus, ensuring that their input is always available. It seems that this agency has surveyed and understood the needs of its population and is constantly working on improving the services that they provide. In light of this updating of policies,
adding to the services provided and in general having a futuristic approach to the running of the agency is definitely commendable.

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