

## Orientation and Mobility as a Related Service

Orientation and mobility was included the first time as a related service, with the passage of IDEA 1997. Originally developed by the Veteran's Administration to assist war blinded veterans, the profession of Orientation and Mobility (O&M) has expanded to include training from early childhood through adulthood. This service is provided by individuals who are formally educated to assist persons who are blind/visually impaired attain their O&M goals.

### Federal Definition

Orientation and mobility services means, "services provided to blind or visually impaired students by qualified personnel to enable those students to attain systematic orientation to and safe movement within their environments in school, home, and community; and includes teaching students the following as appropriate:

- Spatial and environmental concepts and use of information received by the senses (such as sound, temperature and vibrations) to establish, maintain, or regain orientation and line of travel (for example, using sound at a traffic light to cross the street);
- To use the long cane, as appropriate, to supplement visual travel skills or as a tool for safely negotiating the environment for students with no available travel vision;
- To understand and use remaining vision and distance low vision aids, as appropriate; and
- Other concepts, techniques, and tools as determined appropriate." [34 CFR 300.24(b)(6)]

Orientation and mobility services should not be confused with the federal definition of travel training, which falls under special education services and not related services. Under this definition ,travel training means "providing instruction, as appropriate, to children with significant cognitive disabilities, and other children with disabilities who require this instruction, to enable them to (i) develop an awareness of the environment in which they live; and (ii) learn the skills necessary to move effectively and safely from place to place within that environment." [34 CFR 3000.26 (b) (4)].

Travel training is not the instructional responsibility of an Orientation and Mobility Specialist.

### Colorado Statute Information

The State of Colorado issues a license for School Orientation and Mobility Specialists. The requirements for the issuance of a Provisional License in school orientation and mobility includes: (a) the completion of at least a bachelor's degree from an accredited institution of higher education and the completion of an approved orientation and mobility preparation program and (b) passing scores on the Academy for Certification of Vision Rehabilitation and Education Professionals (ACVREP) exam for Certified Orientation and Mobility Specialists.

**Importance  
of Orientation  
and Mobility  
for students  
who are  
blind/ visually  
impaired**

The importance of a quality orientation and mobility program for students with visual impairments has been well documented in the literature. Lowenfeld (1964) linked a student's academic performance with mobility skills. Wilson (1967, p. 287) noted further that "It is important to recognize that mobility represents the avenue through which a person who is born blind or becomes blind at a later age...reaches out into his social, educational, vocational, and economic environment...Independent functioning on the part of the blind person gains the person community acceptance."

O & M as a related service should be based on a developmental continuum of skills and experiences that are age appropriate. These skills should be consistent with what is known about the developmental tasks of students who are sighted. Hazekamp and Huebner (1989) stated that: "The ability to understand, interact with, and move within one's physical and spatial environment is a fundamental developmental skill. This ability is one of the milestones indicative of maturation for sighted students and should be so viewed for visually impaired students as well" (p. 23).

Hazekamp and Huebner noted further, "The development of orientation and mobility skills is essential if the visually impaired student is to travel independently in various community settings. The needs of visually impaired students in this area are unique because vision loss required them to learn and travel about their environment in a way different from that of sighted students" (1989, p. 17).

It is because of these specific needs that orientation and mobility is provided to students with visual impairments who would benefit from the following:

- Understanding physical environment and space.
- Orienting to different school and community environments.
- Traveling in school and in the community.
- Finding opportunities for unrestricted, independent movement and play.

**Orientation &  
Mobility Services  
are provided by...**

Certified Orientation & Mobility Specialists (COMS) and Certified Orientation and Mobility Assistant (COMA) provide orientation and mobility related services. A COMS is an individual with specialized training in orientation and mobility who has completed an approved undergraduate or graduate university training program in this area. Certification in Orientation and Mobility by the Academy for Certification of Vision Rehabilitation and Education Professionals (ACVREP) is required to teach orientation and mobility to children with visual impairments in Colorado school districts. A COMA will provide follow-up instruction in basic skills under the direction of the COMS.

The COMS has the primary role of providing orientation and mobility instruction to individuals who have a visual impairment. However, others also have a role in helping the student to learn and use these skills. Parents play a direct and influential role in helping their children acquire basic orientation and mobility skills in the early years. The COMS will work directly with parents on how to best teach and reinforce early travel skills. With school aged children, the O&M instructor becomes the primary teacher. The parents monitor some techniques while providing encouragement and support.

Jacobson (1993) discussed the role of the O&M instructor in terms of overseeing a student's O&M program. Other personnel may be involved in the implementation of certain O&M skills under the direction of the COMS. He noted "in the school, the classroom teacher, vision consultant, teacher's aide, and even a student's peers all reinforce the skills the student has acquired" (p. 5). If the program has a COMA, this individual will provide follow-up instruction in basic skills under the direction of the COMS.

Hazekamp and Huebner (1989) defined the roles of the O&M Specialist. The following is a revised list of activities that may be a related service:

- Providing instruction in the development of skills and knowledge that enable the student to travel independently to the highest degree possible, based on assessed needs and the student's Individualized Education Plan (IEP).
- Teaching the student to travel with proficiency, safety, and confidence in familiar and unfamiliar environments.
- Providing consultation and support services to parents, regular and special education teachers, other school personnel, and sighted peers.
- Conferring regularly with parents, classroom teachers, physical education teachers, and/or other special education personnel to assist in home and classroom environmental modifications, adaptations, and considerations and to ensure reinforcement of appropriate orientation and mobility skills that will encourage the visually impaired student to travel independently in these settings.
- Working with the teacher certified in the area of visual impairment to conduct the functional vision assessment as it relates to independent travel. \*
- Preparing and using equipment and materials such as tactile maps, models, distance low vision devices, and long canes, for the development of orientation and mobility skills.
- Transporting the students to various community locations, as necessary, to provide meaningful instruction in realistic environments.
- Providing orientation and mobility instruction, where appropriate, in a number of specific areas" (p. 26).

\* The large majority of COMS in Colorado are dual certified as teachers of students with visual impairments and as O&M specialists. In this situation, the completed Functional Vision Assessment addresses both the educational and travel needs of the student.

## Entrance Criteria

A student must be verified as blind or visually impaired by the Colorado Rules (for the) Administration of the Exceptional Children's Education Act (ECEA) to be considered for orientation and mobility instruction as a related service. [2220- R-1.00 2.02(2)].

Children, who demonstrate needs in orientation and/or mobility, as identified by the IEP team, should be referred for evaluation by a COMS. Any resulting recommendations for direct instruction or consultation in O&M should be considered by the IEP team. Key times when further O&M assessment may be indicated include whenever visual function or travel needs change or at transition periods (i.e. kindergarten, middle school, and high school).

## Methods Used for Assessment

The student should be assessed for O&M instructional needs in conjunction with other appropriate educational assessments. School assessments should be augmented with clinical documentation of vision and hearing performance, as well as other medical considerations. Comprehensive assessment tools are designed to be used by university trained COMS to identify a student's current functioning level in all areas of orientation and mobility in order to determine student needs for programming.

An assessment may include:

- Status of sensory skills (medical and functional)
- Proficiency of use of travel tools
- Current age-appropriate independence
- Complexity or introduction of new environment
- Caregiver input

Assessments can be divided into five general areas based on environments:

- Home/Living Environment
- Campus Environment
- Residential/Neighborhood Environment
- Commercial Environment
- Public Transportation

These items should be sequentially structured based upon a student's need for instruction in age appropriate travel skills by a certified orientation & mobility instructor with input from the parents, other staff, and other interested individuals.

## Service Delivery Models

Different Colorado administrative units will have varying systems of caseload allocation as far as what type of service frequency constitutes a specific level of service. The following model of service can be used as a general guideline for different levels of O&M service.

**Monitoring/Consultation** - The student is seen by a COMS 1 to 5 times per school year. An annual evaluation may be conducted by the Certified Orientation & Mobility Specialist. Contact may be with the student or other pertinent individuals.

**Supportive** – The student is seen directly by the COMS 1 to 2 times a month or during regularly scheduled times throughout the school year for 20 to 60 minutes each session. On some occasions, the service may be longer based on the particular design of an O&M lesson. For example, a bus travel lesson may involve a half day of service. In addition, the COMS may provide direct support to pertinent individuals.

**Intensive:** This direct service model is designed for a student who is significantly visually impaired and who may or may not use a cane for travel purpose, but requires intensive training in certain O&M skill areas. This individual may carry a cane for identification purposes/limited use or for a traveler with emerging orientation and mobility skills. A non-visual traveler who is maintaining and applying orientation and mobility skills in various settings would also be included. The student in this model requires direct service from the COMS 1 to 2 times a week for 30 to 90 minutes each session. The COMS provides regular communication to pertinent individuals regarding the student's needs.

**Comprehensive** - The student is seen by the COMS three or more times a week for 20 to 90 minutes each session. This model is designed primarily for a non-visual traveler who requires an inclusive program in all areas of instruction related to becoming a safe and independent traveler.

Actual service delivery is determined by the IEP team based on assessed needs of the student and may not always fit precisely within this one model.

### Exit Criteria

Exit criteria for students may include:

- Completion of the O&M curriculum, Individualized Education Program (IEP) goals and objectives
- Reassessment of skills and demonstration of competence in assessed areas
- Changes in visual condition (improvement of visual condition)

### Workload Considerations

Caseload formulation should consider the following factors: travel time for the instructor; time necessary for consulting with the classroom teacher, other staff and parents; time to develop adapted teaching materials and appropriate sites for instruction; time for completion of documentation; ages of students, the severity of their needs and the instruction necessary to meet those needs.

Hazekamp and Huebner (1989) suggested a caseload range of 8-12 students for O&M specialists. Actual caseloads may fall above or below these ranges, given time requirements needed to achieve the goals and objectives on the student's IEP. If caseloads are excessive, ability to provide services for children may be impeded.

## Equipment or Space Needs

The COMS teaches skills specific to each student's needs in a variety of settings. Free access should be given within the school building and any buildings of an individual district. More advanced training will be accomplished through travel in community environments.

Specific equipment may be necessary to address the needs of students with impairment. Equipment needs are based on assessment and may include such items as long canes, adaptive mobility devices, global positioning system equipment, maps, computer programs, optical aids, and other types of sensory aids.

## Documentation of Service

Types of written documentation may include:

- IEP progress reporting
- Summary statements of regularly scheduled lessons
- Initial assessment/reevaluation
- Transition reports

One tool that the COMS may find helpful is the *Orientation & Mobility Severity Rating Scale (O&MSRS)*. This tool has been developed to assist COMS in making recommendations for services to individuals who are blind and visually impaired. It is suggested that an *O&MSRS* should be completed before every IEP and up-dated at the end of each school year. This scale can be downloaded here:

## Supervision and Evaluation of Services and Providers

The supervision and evaluation of COMS should be consistent with the supervision and evaluation of other teaching staff members in Colorado administrative units.

The COMA is supervised by a COMS.

## References

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## Suggested Readings

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