



**World Blind Union  
Union Mondiale Des Aveugles  
Unión Mundial de Ciegos**

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**How Shared Spaces Affect the Safe Transit of Blind and Partially Sighted Persons**

**Press Release for White Cane Safety Day, October 15, 2016**

**Toronto, Canada:** The White Cane is the global symbol of independence and mobility for blind and partially sighted persons and today, October 15<sup>th</sup> we celebrate its importance for White Cane Safety Day. The ability to move freely on one's own has been an integral cause of the blindness movement since its inception, and it continues to be one of the most important global causes for blind and partially sighted people today. Challenges to the mobility of blind people are ever-changing because the communities that blind and partially sighted persons live in are constantly being updated. Everyone's safe transit must always be considered as environments are being updated.

An example of an emerging challenge is the issue of safe transit through shared spaces. A shared space is defined as "a street or place designed to improve pedestrian movement and comfort by reducing the dominance of motor vehicles and enabling all users to share the space rather than follow the clearly defined rules implied by more conventional designs" (Local Transport Note 1/11 October 2011, Department for Transport, London.) However, this increased complexity can make mobility more difficult for persons who are blind or partially sighted.

"Traveling safely in shared spaces depends a great deal on eye contact between vehicle drivers, cyclists and pedestrians, a kind of informal indication of who will be in the shared space next" said Martine Abel-Williamson, WBU Treasurer and member of the WBU Access to the Environment Working Group. "As a blind person, I cannot adhere to that spontaneous, informal kind of communication," she added.

The issues of shared spaces are presenting problems for blind and partially sighted people everywhere, in places all over the world. "My

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home city of Toronto has developed a beautiful new shared space along Toronto's waterfront but unfortunately, it presents safety issues for me," says Penny Hartin, CEO of the World Blind Union. "Traveling independently across the multiple transportation routes can be very frightening without adequate tactile and audio cues and it should not be assumed by city planners that everyone can travel through these spaces by simply making eye contact with each other" she added.

Luckily, as Ms. Abel-Williamson explained, the white cane can help improve this situation as "people and drivers look out for me, as the white cane makes it clear in a positive and internationally acknowledged way to others around me that I'm blind but still confidently traveling."

However, we cannot solely rely on people to respect and acknowledge white canes or even guide dogs. The mobility needs of all persons with disabilities, including blind and partially sighted persons, must be taken into account from the very first stages of design and creation of shared spaces. The WBU has developed a position statement on shared spaces, authored by Ms. Abel-Williamson and it outlines best practices for city planners and other stakeholders when planning, designing and implementing shared spaces. Overall, the statement emphasises the need for consultation with blindness organisations throughout all stages of the process and if this consultation is missing, we then encourage blindness organisations to advocate against the installation of a shared space.

You can learn more about shared spaces and good design and implementation principles by reading our Position Statement, which is available on our website at the following link:

<http://www.worldblindunion.org/English/resources/Pages/Policy-Papers.aspx>



**The World Blind Union (WBU)** is the global organization that represents the estimated 285 million people worldwide who are blind or partially sighted. Members consist of organizations of blind people advocating on their own behalf and organizations that serve the blind, in over 190 countries, as well as international organizations working in the field of vision impairment. Visit our website at [www.wbu.ngo](http://www.wbu.ngo)

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