

## REHABILITATION OF THE BLIND IN NIGERIA - A NEW MOVE TO IMPROVE SERVICES



Blind individuals, whether by birth or after being sighted for varied periods of their lives, constitute about 1% of the Nigerian population. These individuals can meaningfully contribute to the growth and development of the society, provided they are guided properly. This is still not widely obtainable in the Nigerian society due to lack of awareness of the potentials embedded in them. From birth to adulthood, a blind individual needs to be handled and prepared for independence in a conscious way. Although this is not cheap, it is a whole lot cheaper than what is lost in cases where help is not rendered. However, the traditional way of thinking within the society they find themselves, ensure for the most part, their lack of productivity.

These financial implications lead to rejection by their families and neglect, which may involve cessation of feeding which often leads to widely documented high mortality rates in them. It is therefore imperative to offer comprehensive rehabilitation services that can assist these groups of individuals to assert / reassert control and independence by designing a program tailored to meet their individual needs. Rehabilitation and mobility instructors should be made available to provide hands-on practical training to enable such individuals to successfully face daily challenges including managing household chores, traveling in the community and managing personal finances. This is aside of enabling them to access social media networks and internet banking which everyone wants to be able to do. To carry out this sort of rehabilitation, personnel need to be trained to recognize blinding eye condition(s) and develop a burning passion to locate, counsel, retrieve and (re)habilitate such individuals, coupled with possibly feeding, clothing and equipping them at the end of the training period, regardless of the costs involved or number of individuals being helped. Steps must also be taken to sensitize the community on the advantages of educating such people along with their sighted contemporaries. Often, they drop out of school and lose several years or even remain illiterate simply because there is no one willing to help. Awareness is required to sensitize even ophthalmic personnel. Not everyone knows what to do and where to send a blind individual after no more help can be rendered. Some attempts have been made to help, with the establishment of up to 100 blind schools and rehabilitation centres with varying levels of competence across Nigeria, but these are mostly ill-equipped and poorly funded. A blind individual contributes a huge burden to the developing country's society and as a result these centres are mostly neglected and impoverished, due to gross delay in release of government subventions and subsidies. Most times, especially if those enrolled are not able to pay the fees to be admitted and maintained, they must live on charity to survive or resort to street begging with the aid of a sighted member of their family, thus ensuring the truncated destiny of someone else in addition.

One such successful centre that can be spotlighted, exists in Port Harcourt, Rivers state, in the south of Nigeria. The **Lens Eye Foundation for the Severely Visually Impaired and the Blind** (aka TLEC Rehab), which is a subsidiary of The Lens Eye Clinic (TLEC), Port Harcourt, Nigeria, is the first in Nigeria to be run by an ophthalmologist with support from a full complement of eye care workers. Here, each patient is subjected to a detailed examination & it is determined whether or not he or she can have his / her vision improved with low vision devices (LVDs). This is done to avoid admitting children whose vision could have been improved with LVDs into blind schools; as has been documented by numerous publications in the public domain. Even additional ocular complaints (if any) are diagnosed and treated here. With a team of passionate teachers skilled in the subject, we at TLEF Rehab, believe in inclusive education. We teach the blind how to survive in a world heavily dependent on using sight as independently as possible rather than surrounding them in their educational years with other blind people only. Arming them with this unique skill set, we then place them in schools whose teachers are already sensitized to their peculiar condition(s) and know how to help them alongside their sighted peers. Services are offered to both children and adults and this gives them the ability to (re)connect with family, friends and the world around. They are made to acquire Braille education, independent living skills, orientation and mobility training and are provided affordable assistive

technology, taught manual typewriting, computer training and offered other support services. Additional essential services like sponsored community enlightenment programs aimed at re-orientation, support sessions with family members and loved ones by warm dedicated staff, etc. helps them understand the challenges faced and opportunities available for their ward(s).

In tandem with all of the above, communities need to be sensitized vigorously. A lot of radio and television advocacy must be done to ensure our perceptions about disabilities as Nigerians are worked on. Community based focus personnel should be trained and sent to look for, recognize and pick up blind people in rural areas, most of whom are found in pitiable conditions. Since, all this costs money to initiate and maintain, private corporations could be enlisted to champion these causes by assisting designated rehabilitation centres through short and long-term programs and could partner with them by providing aid in various forms along with assistive devices.

Most Nigerians and indeed people in general in developing countries, at present, do not seem to see any future or advantage in helping disabled people. This is probably due to the lack of foresight coupled with apathy shown in the past by both government and individuals including eye care givers. However, through persistent advocacy by The Lens Eye Clinic, Port Harcourt, Nigeria and few others, perceptions are slowly but surely changing. We look forward to greater strides in this very important area and hope to see our blind persons well equipped to contribute significantly to the society.