

Providing Services to Individuals with Combined Traumatic Brain Injury and Visual Impairment

Many individuals who sustain a traumatic brain injury (TBI) also experience vision problems, and some experience permanent blindness or visual impairment (B/VI). Individuals with pre-existing B/VI may also sustain a TBI. The combination of a TBI and B/VI often makes the rehabilitation process more challenging. Based on a recent research study, we have developed some recommendations for service provision for this population.

Recommendations for Service Provision

- **Screen for TBI.** Estimates indicate that more than 1.5 million people sustain a TBI every year. Given its high prevalence and its impact on rehabilitation, it is important to screen consumers for TBI. There are a number of screening tools available; one free tool is the [HELPS Brain Injury Screening Tool](#). Other tools are described on the [Center for Excellence in Disabilities website](#).
- **What to do if your consumer has a TBI, or you suspect a TBI.**
 - If a consumer has a documented TBI or your TBI screening indicates a possible TBI, it is important to obtain a neuropsychological evaluation. This evaluation can identify cognitive strengths and weaknesses and any challenges the person may experience. Provide specific questions and reasons for the evaluation to the psychologist conducting it. Ensure that the psychologist who performs the neuropsychological evaluation is familiar with B/VI and able to conduct a valid assessment, given the individual's level of vision loss. If you cannot find a neuropsychologist who has this experience, consider connecting the neuropsychologist you select with a psychologist who has conducted testing with people with B/VI.
 - Consider how the TBI may affect the consumer's goals and use the results of the neuropsychological evaluation when developing an Individualized Plan for Employment (IPE). A TBI can negatively impact a person's ability to self-evaluate, and someone with a TBI may overestimate his or her abilities. A neuropsychological evaluation can help you ensure that the goals developed for the IPE are appropriate.
 - If you do not personally have knowledge about TBI and its impact, ask for help from a colleague or another professional who does have TBI expertise. Discussing your consumer's case with a TBI professional may help you provide the most appropriate and effective services.
- **Identify service providers with dual expertise in TBI and B/VI.** Our research indicates that employment outcomes were much better for consumers served in agencies that had staff with dual expertise in TBI and B/VI. If your agency does not have a staff person with dual expertise, strive to identify a professional within your TBI vendor network that has dual expertise. Specifically ask your vendors if they have a person with this expertise. If one does, send all consumers with TBI and B/VI to that provider, if feasible.
- **Obtain training about TBI.** Our research also indicates that agencies that provide TBI training to their staff have better consumer employment outcomes. This suggests that obtaining training about TBI may help you be more effective at providing services to consumers with combined TBI

and B/VI. There are many options for online training about TBI (see list below), and many states have annual TBI conferences.

- **If you have an interest in TBI, consider gaining expertise in this area.** Given that consumers served in agencies with staff with dual expertise in TBI and B/VI tend to have better outcomes, it could be very beneficial to your agency to have an in-house expert on the topic. If you have an interest in learning more about TBI and have the opportunity for direct contact hours with individuals with TBI, consider obtaining a certification in this area.

Online Training Options

This list is not exhaustive, but it provides a starting point for online training options for VR professionals.

- [Brain Injury Association of America](#) has several training and certification options through its Academy of Certified Brain Injury Specialists.
- [National Technical Assistance Center on Blindness & Low Vision](#) offers a free, online continuing education course that covers basic information about brain injury and vision loss (see Special Topics section).
- [Commission on Rehabilitation Counselor Certification e-University](#) offers an online continuing education course about optimizing vocational outcomes for individuals with TBI through recreation and leisure.
- [Ohio Valley Center for Brain Injury Prevention and Rehabilitation](#) has several online training modules about TBI.
- [Working with People with Traumatic Brain Injury](#) is a website that provides self-study modules about TBI.
- [Michigan Traumatic Brain Injury Online Training](#) offers training courses about acquired brain injury, health complications associated with TBI, and finding and using public services.

Learn More

This fact sheet is based on research findings from the following articles:

- McDonnall, M. C., Cmar, J. L., & Lund, E. M. (2020). Comorbid traumatic brain injury and visual impairment: Vocational rehabilitation service provision and agency-level outcomes. *Journal of Visual Impairment & Blindness*, 114(1), 6-17.
- McDonnall, M. C., Cmar, J. L., & Sui, Z. (2020). Service factors and personal characteristics associated with employment and job quality for vocational rehabilitation consumers with combined traumatic brain injury and visual impairment. *Journal of Vocational Rehabilitation*, 52(3), 223-238.

Both articles are available on the [NRTC's website](#).