

WHITE CANE SAFETY DAY

OCTOBER 15

The white cane is not just a tool that can be used to achieve independence; it is also a symbol of the blind citizens in our society. To honor the many achievements of blind and visually impaired Americans and to recognize the white cane's significance in advancing independence, we annually observe October 15 as "White Cane Safety Day." In modern society, the white cane works both as a tool for the blind as well as a symbol. This has not always been the case when using the white cane as a traveling aid for the blind and visually impaired.

HISTORY:

Dating back to biblical times records show that a shepherd's staff was used as a tool for solitary travel. The blind used such tools to alert them to obstacles in their path. For centuries, the "cane" was used merely as a tool for travel and it was not until the 20th century that the cane, as we know it today, was promoted for use by the blind as a symbol to alert others to the fact that an individual was blind. This new role for the white cane had its origins in the decades between the two World Wars, beginning in Europe and then spreading to North America. James Biggs of Bristol claimed to have invented the white cane in 1921. After an accident claimed his sight, the artist had to readjust to his environment. Feeling threatened by increased motor vehicle traffic around his home, Biggs decided to paint his walking stick white to make himself more visible to motorists. Ten years later a national white stick movement for the blind began in France and the white cane established its presence in society. The campaign was reported in British newspapers leading to a similar scheme being sponsored by rotary clubs throughout the United Kingdom. In May 1931, the BBC suggested in its radio broadcasts that blind individuals might be provided with a white stick, which would become universally recognized as a symbol indicating when someone was blind or visually impaired. In North America the introduction of the white cane has been attributed to the Lion's Clubs International. In 1930, a Lion's Club member watched as a blind man attempted to make his way across a busy street using a black cane. The Lion's Clubs decided to paint the cane white to increase its visibility to oncoming motorists. In 1931, the Lion's Clubs International began a national program promoting the use of white canes for persons who are blind, their canes held diagonally in a fixed position, and the role of the white cane took on a symbolic role as an identifier. When blind veterans of World War II returned to America, the form and the use of the white cane was further altered in an attempt to help return veterans to participatory lifestyles at home. Doctor Richard Hoover developed the "long cane" or "Hoover" method of cane travel. These white canes are designed to be used as mobility, but maintained the symbolic role as an identifier of blind independence. During this period, the white cane began to make its way into government policy as a symbol for the blind. The first special White Cane Ordinance was passed in December 1930 in Peoria, Illinois. It granted promoting the white cane as a visible symbol for the blind. On February 25, 1936, an ordinance was passed for the City of Detroit, Michigan, recognizing the white cane. To promote the new ordinance, a demonstration was held at City Hall where the blind and visually impaired were presented with white canes. The following year, Donald Schuur wrote the provision of a bill and had it proposed in the State Legislature. Governor Frank Murphy signed the bill into law in March 1937. During the early 1960's, several state organizations and rehabilitation agencies serving the blind and visually impaired citizens of the United States urged Congress to proclaim October 15 of each year to be White Cane Safety Day in all fifty

states. This event marked an important moment in the long campaign of the organized blind movement to gain state as well as national recognition for the white cane. On October 6, 1964, a joint resolution of the Congress, HR 753, was signed into law authorizing the President of the United States to proclaim October 15 of each year as "White Cane Safety Day". The resolution read "Resolved by the Senate and HR. that the President is hereby authorized to issue annually a proclamation designating October 15 as White Cane Safety Day and calling upon the people of the United States to observe such a day with appropriate ceremonies and activities." Within hours of passage of the congressional resolution, President Lyndon B. Johnson went down in history as the first to proclaim October 15, as White Cane Safety Day. The Presidential proclamation emphasized the significance of the use of the white cane as both a tool and as a visible symbol. In the first White Cane Proclamation President Johnson commended blind people for their growing spirit of independence and the increased determination to be self-reliant and dignified. He said in part: "A white cane in our society has become one of the symbols of a blind person's ability to come and go on his (or her) own. Its use has promoted courtesy and opportunity for mobility of the blind on our streets and highways. With proper training, people using the white cane can enjoy greater mobility and safety by determining the location of curbs, steps, uneven pavement, and other physical obstacles in their path. The white cane has given them the freedom to travel independently to their schools and workplaces and to participate more fully in the life of their communities. It reminds us that the only barriers against people with disabilities are discriminatory attitudes and practices."