
A Guide to Navigating LHON with Money in Mind

**Information & Resources for the
Texas LHON Community**

Updated February 2024

Purpose

Individuals who carry an LHON mutation can experience sudden-onset blindness at any age. When this occurs, it is a life-changing event for the individual affected, their family, and loved ones.

There are many ways in which LHON onset can have a significant financial impact on all involved. Fortunately, there are also many resources available that can help mitigate that financial impact.

The goal of this document is to help the Texas LHON community become familiar with resources that can limit negative financial impacts. It provides descriptions and contact information of agencies and programs that can create a better financial outcome for affected patients and their loved ones. Unaffected carriers can also benefit by being better prepared in case they experience LHON vision loss one day.

This document is intended as a general guide only. It was developed by LHON volunteers, and is subject to change. It does not purport to provide legal, financial, or tax guidance. You should check with each listed provider and your own advisors for your specific situation.

The organizations and services listed in this document are those that provide free or low-cost assistance. There are many other valuable fee-for-service agencies available. In some cases, those may be a better fit for you. To access them simply search blind or low-vision services in your city/region.

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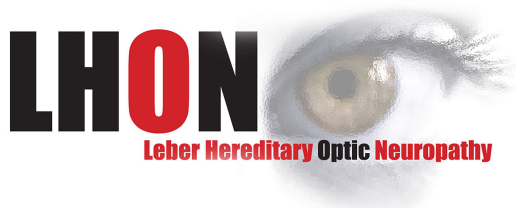


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TRAINING & TECHNICAL RESOURCES

Texas Workforce Commission

Texas Workforce Commission (TWC) is the state agency charged with overseeing and providing workforce development services to employers and job seekers of Texas. They provide workforce education, training and support services, including vocational rehabilitation assistance to people with disabilities.

Texas Workforce Solutions

Texas Workforce Solutions is comprised of the Texas Workforce Commission and a statewide network of 28 Workforce Development Boards for regional planning and service delivery, their contracted service providers and community partners, and the TWC unemployment benefits Tele-Centers. This network gives customers (people who use the TWC's services) local access to workforce solutions and statewide services at numerous Workforce Solutions offices and five Tele-Centers.

Texas Workforce Solutions-Vocational Rehabilitation Services supports people with disabilities to prepare for, obtain, maintain and advance in meaningful employment by providing a range of services based on an individual's employment goals. Their Vocational Rehabilitation (VR) counselors work closely with job seekers to determine an employment goal, and then identify and arrange for the high-quality services that lead to successful employment.

Some of the services they provide include:

- Referrals for visual and other examinations
- Assistance with medical appointments and treatment
- Therapy to address a disability
- Physical restoration services
- Medical, psychological and vocational assessments
- Assistance with college education or trade certification
- On-the-job training
- Training in workplace and employer expectations
- Vocational adjustment training

TRAINING & TECHNICAL RESOURCES

- Rehabilitation teachers and services to help you learn Braille, orientation & mobility, and home and health management skills
- Supported employment

To locate your Texas Workforce Solutions Vocational Rehabilitation Services office, visit: www.twc.texas.gov/find-locations

Criss Cole Rehabilitation Center

The Texas Workforce Commission's Criss Cole Rehabilitation Center (CCRC) is a state-of-the-art adult residential training facility located in Austin, Texas. It is the largest vocational training facility in the United States.

CCRC provides training in orientation & mobility, daily living skills, Braille, technology, career guidance, industrial arts, and adjustment to blindness. CCRC offers three distinct training paths for the customer (a person who uses the CCRC's services) to choose from: Proficiency Training, Career Focus Training, and the Deafblind Training Program.

CCRC also provides three to five day mini trainings to groups of customers in their local communities. To participate in CCRC programs and services, customers must: 1) be legally blind or meet the definition of deafblind, 2) be referred by a vocational rehabilitation counselor, 3) be independent with administering medications and self-care and 4) have a permanent residence in Texas.

For more information about Criss Cole Rehabilitation Center call 512-377-0300 or email ccrc.admissions@twc.state.tx.us

The National Federation of the Blind

The National Federation of the Blind (NFB) is the oldest and largest nationwide organization of blind Americans. Founded in 1940 and headquartered in Baltimore, the NFB consists of affiliates, chapters, and divisions in all fifty states.

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Through their network of blind members, they coordinate many programs, services, and resources, providing information and support to blind children and adults, offering training and career mentoring as well as scholarships and awards. Additionally, the NFB sponsors the Free White Cane Program (<https://nfb.org/programs-services/free-white-cane-program>) where any blind individual in the fifty states, the District of Columbia, and Puerto Rico can request a cane for their personal use. Requests can be made as often as every six months.

www.nfb.org

The Department of Veterans Affairs – Blind Rehabilitation Services

The Department of Veterans Affairs provides blind and visual impairment rehabilitation services (BRS) to eligible veterans and active-duty service members. Veterans Affairs is the first and only national healthcare system to integrate rehabilitation services completely and seamlessly into its health benefits for patients with vision loss.

<https://www.rehab.va.gov/blindrehab>

VisionAware

VisionAware is a free, easy-to-use informational service for adults with vision loss. They provide practical tips and resources for adults, their families, friends, caregivers, and related professionals. Information includes: eye diseases and disorders, ways to connect with others including social media channels like Twitter and Facebook, the VisionAware blog, “Visually Impaired, Now What?” as well as a searchable, free Directory of Services.

<https://aphconnectcenter.org/visionaware>

TRAINING & TECHNICAL RESOURCES

Hadley

Hadley offers free online learning opportunities in assistive technology, daily living, recreation, employment, Braille, and other topics. Additionally, they offer podcasts and online discussion groups covering a wide array of topics.

www.hadleyhelps.org

DISABILITY INSURANCE

Family Medical Leave Act

Both federal (FMLA) and some states' laws require covered employers to provide family and medical leave for eligible employees. These laws require employers to provide up to 12 weeks off in a 12-month period for the employee's own serious health condition, or for the employee to care for a family member with a serious health condition. This leave need not be taken consecutively.

Upon return from FMLA leave, an employee must be restored to his or her original job or to an equivalent job with equivalent pay, benefits, and other terms and conditions of employment. An employee's use of FMLA leave cannot be counted against the employee under a "no-fault" attendance policy.

Short-Term and Long-Term Disability Insurance

Both short-term and long-term disability insurance are private insurance policies that protect an employee from loss of income in the event that he or she is unable to work due to illness, injury, or accident for a long period of time. This can be devastating for a family financially.

Disability insurance ensures that an employee will still receive a percentage of their income if they cannot work for an extended period. Short- and long-term disability insurance can be provided and paid for by employers or individuals. Your employer may offer one, or both, of these options. If a company doesn't offer disability insurance or if an employee wants additional coverage, he or she has the option of purchasing an individual plan. Some employers, if they do not provide disability insurance, will develop a relationship with an insurance company to create an employee discount for their staff who choose to purchase a policy.

The disability insurance provided by an employer may be inadequate to meet your needs. In this case, you might want to consider purchasing supplemental insurance. Since it's expensive for an individual to purchase, disability insurance is often available through an employee's professional

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associations at a discounted rate.

Long-term insurance usually begins to assist the employee when short-term disability insurance benefits end (most commonly after six months). Disability policies sometimes have offset language. For example, a policy may require an employee to secure Social Security Disability Insurance. The insurance company will then reduce the amount of its payment by the amount SSDI is providing. If someone is collecting on a policy and returns to work, the insurance payout may be reduced by some percentage of the amount earned. Since there are so many complexities to the disability insurance process, consider hiring a lawyer familiar with disability insurance to get help navigating the process.

Each insurance policy has different conditions for payout, diseases, or pre-existing conditions that may be excluded, and various other conditions that make the policy more, or less, useful to an employee. Some policies, for example, will pay disability benefits if the employee is unable to work in his or her current profession; others expect that the employee will take any job that the employee is capable of doing. Long-term disability insurance payments to the employee, in some policies, have a defined period of time. Others pay an employee until he or she is 65 years old.

Keep in mind your health history, and your family's history of LHON and any other diseases, when you consider the amount of disability insurance that you need.

SOCIAL SECURITY

Social Security Disability Insurance

SSDI provides benefits to disabled persons (including those who are legally blind) who are “insured” by workers’ contributions to the Social Security trust fund. These contributions are based on your earnings (or those of your spouse or parents) as required by the Federal Insurance Contributions Act (FICA). Your dependents may also be eligible for benefits from your earnings record. Adults who have been disabled since childhood may qualify for SSDI on a parent’s record even if they never have worked.

SSDI is different from the Supplemental Security Income Program (SSI). SSDI is funded through FICA and Social Security taxes; SSI is financed through general tax revenues. Also, the qualifications for SSDI and SSI differ.

SSDI will help if you are severely disabled and can’t be employed in your field of work, have a history of work, have paid into Social Security in prior work years, and have a medical issue that meets the Social Security disability guidelines (such as legal blindness). Blindness is defined as central visual acuity of 20/200 or less in the better eye with best correction, or a limitation in the field of vision in the better eye so that the widest diameter of the visual field subtends an angle of 20 degrees or less. Under SSDI, this condition has to have lasted or be expected to last at least 12 months.

SSDI is an earned benefit, based on your work record. In order to qualify, you need to have worked for a minimum amount of time, depending on your age when you become disabled. Your benefit amount can be higher or lower depending on your income history and work duration.

Qualification for SSDI is primarily based on two things: documenting a disability, and an evaluation of your work history. The Social Security Administration (SSA) looks at your recent work history, and how long you’ve

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worked. There is also an earnings test, if you're still working. Basically, if you're still able to work, and you earn over a certain amount, you aren't considered disabled.

Benefit amounts vary dramatically based on each individual's work record. The SSA uses a weighted formula to calculate disability benefits. To get an estimate, view your Social Security statement by creating an account on www.ssa.gov.

SSDI can be applied for online at www.ssa.gov. The SSA will review your application and supporting documents and make a decision as to whether or not you qualify as disabled, and if you do, whether or not you're eligible for benefits.

You can speak with an SSDI representative by calling your local Social Security office or the national number (1-800-772-1213). Local office phone numbers can be found online with the Social Security Office Locator.

www.ssa.gov/locator

Note: If you receive SSDI benefits and work, it is important to pay close attention to the amount of income you earn in relation to the monthly maximum allowed for a blind individual to earn and to continue to receive SSDI benefits. If your monthly income exceeds the monthly allowed amount, SSDI does not automatically stop sending your monthly benefit amount. They will review your case from time to time, and if they determine that you have received benefits to which you were not entitled, they will send a letter demanding repayment. This can be for a significant amount, and can be an extremely unpleasant situation to be in.

Supplemental Security Income

Unlike Social Security Disability Insurance (SSDI), which is based on work experience, Supplemental Security Income (SSI) is a program based on

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need. Eligibility for SSI does not depend on whether or not you worked and paid into the Social Security system. In order to qualify for SSI benefits, your income and resources must be below a certain amount.

SSI is available to people who are disabled (including legally blind), or over 65. The SSI program makes cash assistance payments to aged, blind, and disabled persons (including children) who have limited income and resources. The Federal Government funds SSI from general tax revenues. Many states pay a supplemental benefit to eligible persons in addition to their Federal benefits.

SSI qualification is based on your resources. If your resources (the things you own) are worth more than \$2,000 for an individual or \$3,000 for a couple, you're considered to be ineligible. This amount includes most personal property, but excludes certain items, such as your primary home. There are also strict income requirements for SSI eligibility.

To apply for SSI, you can begin the process and complete a large part of your application by visiting their website at www.ssa.gov/apply. You can also call them toll-free at 1-800-772-1213 to set up an in-person or telephone appointment with a representative from your local Social Security office. Do not wait to apply. If you believe you're eligible for SSI, contact SSA right away. The earliest they will pay SSI is the month after the filing date of your application, or the month after you first meet all the eligibility requirements, whichever is later.

www.ssa.gov/apply

Note: As with SSDI, if you receive SSI benefits, it is important to pay close attention to the amount of income you earn and your assets in relation to the maximum allowed. If your monthly income exceeds the monthly allowed amount, or if in any month your assets exceed the maximum allowed amount, SSI does not automatically stop sending your monthly benefit

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amount. If you ever request to stop receiving SSI benefits, they will review your case. If they determine that you have received benefits to which you were not entitled, they will send a letter demanding repayment. This can be for a significant amount, and can be an extremely unpleasant situation to be in.

Employment Supports

There are many provisions designed to assist you in becoming self-sufficient through work. The Social Security Red Book discusses each of these provisions, including Blind Work Expenses (BWE), Impairment-Related Work Expenses (IRWE), Trial Work Period (TWP) and many others.

www.ssa.gov/redbook

Disability Rights Texas

Disability Rights Texas (DRTx) is Texas' state disability protection and advocacy system, helping people with disabilities. DRTx provides information, advice and support regarding Social Security and other matters.

www.disabilityrightstx.org

MEDICAL INSURANCE

Medicare

Medicare is a national health insurance program administered by the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services (CMS). If you are age 18 to 64, your eligibility for Medicare is tied to your eligibility for Social Security Disability Insurance (SSDI) benefits. You must qualify for and receive SSDI monthly income benefits to be eligible for Medicare.

Once you are approved for SSDI, you must wait 5 months for your income benefits to begin, and an additional 24 months before Medicare benefits begin.

Medicare covers only some of the healthcare expenses of those enrolled, and does not cover the cost of low vision devices. It is divided into four Parts. Medicare Part A covers hospital, skilled nursing, and hospice services, and has no cost. Part B has a cost, and covers outpatient services, outpatient hospital charges, most provider office visits, and most professionally administered prescription drugs. Your Part B cost can be deducted from your monthly SSDI and/or SSI benefit payment.

Enrollees can cover most of the remaining costs by taking additional private insurance and/or by joining a Part C Medicare health plan. Part C is an alternative to the combination of Parts A and B, called Managed Medicare or Medicare Advantage, which allows patients to choose health plans with at least the same service coverage as Parts A and B. A beneficiary must enroll in Parts A and B first before signing up for Part C. Part D covers most self-administered prescription drugs.

www.medicare.gov

Medicaid

Medicaid in Texas provides health coverage to people with low income and low asset levels who meet certain eligibility requirements. If you are blind or

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have a disability and receive Supplemental Security Income (SSI), you are eligible for Medicaid.

Many people who become affected by LHON at a young age are not eligible for Medicare benefits because they do not have the work credits to qualify for Social Security Disability Insurance (SSDI) benefits. These people are only covered by Medicaid, not Medicare, if they are eligible based on low income and low assets.

Some people are eligible for both Medicare and Medicaid. When medical benefits are covered by both Medicare and Medicaid, Medicare is the primary payer and Medicaid is the secondary payer. When services such as dental care or long-term care are covered only by Medicaid, it is the sole payer. If you have both Medicare and Medicaid, be sure the medical providers you choose accept both sources of payment for your care. Otherwise, you may face billing delays or be required to pay unexpected medical costs.

To apply for Medicaid in Texas, visit www.yourtexasbenefits.com and choose “Apply for new benefits.” Please note that it can take up to 45 days to receive your approval.

www.hhs.texas.gov

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Early Childhood

Early Childhood Special Education (ECSE) services are designed for young children (aged 3-5) with disabilities who need specially designed instruction or related services and whose disability causes the children to be unable to participate in developmentally appropriate typical preschool activities.

School districts are required by law to ensure that a developmentally appropriate ESCE program and services are available. ECSE programs and services ensure that all children with disabilities have a free and appropriate public education (FAPE) that is designed to meet their unique needs and enable them to make progress in acquiring knowledge and skills, improving social relationships, and learning to take action to meet their needs within the general education program.

School Age

If someone becomes affected by LHON while in elementary, middle, or high school, it is important to contact their school district immediately. A discussion with the school principal, or Section 504 coordinator at the school district, is often the best first step to address concerns.

Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, commonly called "Section 504," is a federal law that protects students from discrimination based on disability. This law applies to all programs and activities that receive funding from the federal government, including Texas public schools.

Under Section 504, students with disabilities are entitled to accommodations, aids, and services to access and benefit from education. Section 504 requires that public schools provide a "free appropriate public education" to every student with a disability, regardless of the nature or severity of the disability. A counselor or coordinator works with the student and their family, teacher(s), and the school to develop an Individualized Education Program (IEP) to support and accommodate the student's needs.

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For detailed information on Section 504, please see the Parent and Educator Resource Guide to Section 504 in Public Elementary and Secondary Schools:

<https://www2.ed.gov/about/offices/list/ocr/docs/504-resource-guide-201612.pdf>

Higher Education

Anyone eligible for educational services from Texas Workforce Solutions-Vocational Rehabilitation Services (TWS-VRS) will be assigned a TWS-VRS counselor to start the process of attending college in Texas. The TWS-VRS counselor assists potential students by determining their educational needs based on the academic requirements associated with employment in their chosen career field. The TWS-VRS counselor will also consider the student's record of academic achievement and independent living skills when deciding whether to grant assistance for educational training.

Students must complete a Free Application for Federal Student Aid and grants (FAFSA) every year at the college's financial aid office or online at <https://studentaid.gov/h/apply-for-aid/fafsa>. The FAFSA award or denial letter must be submitted to the TWS-VRS counselor before the beginning of the first semester and each consecutive fall. FAFSA awards or denials will be taken into consideration when determining the level of TWS-VRS assistance. Pell grants must be applied to tuition fees and other educational expenses. It is important to keep in mind that the FAFSA approval process can take up to four months.

Texas residents who are legally blind are eligible for a certificate of blindness tuition waiver. The waiver is valid for any public college in Texas and waives all tuition and fees, except refundable deposits, when presented to the college's registrar. Private and out-of-state colleges will not honor the waiver.

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TWS-VRS will issue the waiver upon the student presenting a current eye exam report that shows legal blindness. Students are responsible for submitting the waiver to the college and ensuring that the student is not charged for the items covered. Some colleges have specific requirements that students must meet for the college to honor the waiver so make sure to check in advance.

Tuition assistance is based on each student's IPE and the TWS-VRS counselor's assessment of need in accordance with policy. Once a student has an IPE, and the TWS-VRS counselor has authorized tuition payment, the student must promptly submit an itemized fee statement for the upcoming semester and apply any remaining grants or economic resources that exceed guidelines toward tuition before TWS-VRS assists with the difference.

TWS-VRS may pay for books and supplies if the student can demonstrate denial of grants and does not exceed income criteria. If TWS-VRS is paying for books and supplies, the student must submit his or her course schedule for the semester, which will be used to generate a service authorization form for the college bookstore. When the student picks up the order, the bookstore will send a receipt to TWS-VRS. This process needs to be completed each semester, and the TWS-VRS counselor will determine the allowable amount for each semester hour.

TWS-VRS may also help students get a low-vision evaluation to determine if low-vision devices will help with academic needs. Some examples of low-vision devices are magnifiers, special glasses, special sunshades and telescopes. Depending on income criteria, students may have to contribute to the cost of these aids.

Students who need assistive technology to access college training and related materials and the Internet can consult with TWS-VRS to receive an evaluation for assistive technology. Based on a review of the student's economic resources, TWS-VRS may purchase necessary assistive technology and provide training on its use.

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Student Loan Forgiveness

A Total and Permanent Discharge (TPD) relieves you from having to repay a William D. Ford Federal Direct Loan (Direct Loan) Program loan, Federal Family Education Loan (FFEL) Program loan, and/or Federal Perkins Loan (Perkins Loan) Program loan, or complete a TEACH Grant service obligation, on the basis of your total and permanent disability. Before your federal student loans or TEACH Grant service obligation can be discharged, you must provide information to the Department of Education, Federal Student Aid Department, to show that you are totally and permanently disabled. The Department will evaluate the information and determine if you qualify for a TPD discharge.

If you think you might qualify and want to apply for a TPD discharge, you must complete a TPD discharge application and gather supporting documentation on your disability. Contact the Department to apply, either by phone: 888.303.7818 or by email: DisabilityInformation@Nelnet.net

If you want to start your application online, go to: <https://www.disabilitydischarge.com/application-process>

If the Department approves your TPD discharge request, they will notify you and the holders of your loans and/or TEACH Grant service obligation of the approval. They will also instruct the loan holders to return any loan payments received after your disability date to the person who made the payments. Your “disability date” is the date they received the documentation of your SSA notice of award for SSDI or SSI benefits, or the date the physician signed your discharge application, depending on the type of documentation you provided to show that you are totally and permanently disabled.

After being notified that the Department has approved your discharge request, your loan holders will transfer your loans and/or TEACH Grant service obligation to the Department for discharge. You will then be subject

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to a 3-year post-discharge monitoring period that begins on the date the discharge is approved. There are requirements that you must meet during the post-discharge monitoring period.

Note: The Department will reinstate your obligation to repay your discharged loans or complete your discharged TEACH Grant service obligation if at any time during the 3-year monitoring period you do not meet the requirements of the post-discharge monitoring period.

Scholarships

For more information about educational resources and scholarships, visit the LHON website.

www.lhon.org/living-with-lhon

EMPLOYMENT

Employment Assistance Programs

Many employers offer an Employee Assistance Program (EAP) that will include several visits to a mental health professional at no cost. Onset of LHON vision loss can have a significant impact on the mental health of the individual affected and their loved ones. An EAP is an opportunity to try working with a mental health professional at no charge. Additional access to a therapist or counselor may be available through your health insurance, or at your local non-profit agency serving the blind and visually impaired.

Disability Rights

The Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 (“ADA”) is federal legislation designed to counteract bias and protect the rights of the disabled in the workplace. The ADA prohibits employers from discriminating against qualified individuals with disabilities. A disability is defined broadly as any mental or physical impairment that limits at least one major life function. Workers are deemed to be qualified to perform a job under the ADA, if they meet the educational and other requirements for the job and they can perform the job duties with or without reasonable accommodations.

Job Accommodation Network

The Job Accommodation Network (JAN) is a leading source of free, expert, and confidential guidance on workplace accommodations and disability employment issues.

JAN’s consultants offer one-on-one guidance on workplace accommodations, the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) and related legislation, and self-employment and entrepreneurship options for people with disabilities. Assistance is available both over the phone and online.

JAN provides individualized consultation to assist:

- Individuals with medical conditions and disabilities seeking information about job accommodation solutions, employment rights under the ADA, and self-employment and entrepreneurship opportunities.

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- Family members and rehabilitation, medical, educational, and other professionals in their effort to support successful employment outcomes for individuals with medical conditions and disabilities.
- Employers and their representatives seeking guidance on practical ways to engage in the interactive process, provide job accommodation solutions, and comply with Title I of the ADA.

www.askjan.org

TRANSPORTATION

Discounted Public Transportation

In many municipalities, a rider with a qualifying disability, such as legal blindness, can apply for a discounted regional transportation fare card for buses, subways, streetcars or ferries, depending on local rules. In most cases, you can load a cash value on the card, which will be deducted automatically upon usage. To apply for a discounted transit card, contact your local transit authority. You will usually need to fill out a form and have your doctor sign it.

Paratransit

Paratransit is a transportation service for individuals with disabilities who are unable to use public transportation services. A transit agency must provide paratransit service within 3/4 of a mile of a bus route or rail station. This service must be available on the same days and at the same hours as regular transit services. You may have to pay a higher fare for paratransit services, but this fare cannot be more than double the regular fare. You're eligible for paratransit service if you're unable to use public transit because of your disability.

Demonstrating legal blindness is usually adequate to establish eligibility. Contact your local transit agency to request access to your local paratransit service. The transit agency may ask you to support your request for paratransit services with a letter from your doctor. Once approved, you can schedule trips by following your transit agency's scheduling process. Transit agencies are required to offer next-day service, and they must agree to pick you up within an hour of the time that you requested.

Disability Parking Placard

A qualified permanently disabled person may obtain a Disabled Parking Placard which can be moved from one vehicle to another, making them a good option for someone affected by LHON who rides in various cars. With a placard, you can park in an on-street metered parking space at no charge and park in spaces designated for people with disabilities. The placard is

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valid for four years.

You can apply for a disabled parking placard from your local Texas tax collector's office (<https://www.dmv.org/tx-texas/dmv-office-finder.php>). Applications are accepted by mail or in person.

To apply, you will need the Application for Persons with Disabilities Parking Placard and/or License Plate (Form VTR-214: https://www.txdmv.gov/sites/default/files/form_files/VTR-214.pdf); medical certification on the application form, signed by your doctor or optometrist; a check, cashier's check, or money order for applicable fees found on the form, and a copy of your identification (either your Texas driver's license or ID card).

www.dmv.org/tx-texas

Ridesharing Services

The two largest ridesharing services are Uber (www.uber.com) and Lyft (www.lyft.com). Both utilize software and smartphone technology to assist visually impaired riders to get from place to place. Both services offer: cashless options to simplify the payment process, reducing the need for riders to worry about counting out cash or exchanging bills with a driver; on-demand transportation so riders no longer have to pre-arrange trips through dispatchers or paratransit options; upfront pricing so riders know the cost of their trip before requesting the ride; the ability to share the rider's ETA and location with friends or family members; and service animal policies which require drivers to comply with all applicable laws regarding the transportation of service animals.

Additionally, rideshare companies have been partnering with the National Federation of the Blind (NFB) and Lighthouse for the Blind to increase awareness of blind passengers' rights, advocate for effective public policies, and expand transportation options for passengers who are blind or have low vision. They are working to make their apps more accessible and inclusive.

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Air Travel

People with visual impairments are protected via rules that all airlines are required to follow, however, specific methods can differ from airline to airline. While airport personnel should always accommodate requests for assistance at the airport itself, making arrangements in advance can help save time, travel headaches and delays.

When making your reservation, contact the airline's disability support desk; they often have a dedicated phone number. Your reservation can be marked to let the ground staff and onboard personnel have all the information they need to facilitate any special arrangements you may require such as transportation to your gate and upon arrival at your destination, as well as assistance regarding your baggage and ground transportation. This information can also be entered into a reservation online.

Additionally, some airlines' disability support desks can waive seat assignment fees, and/or provide a lower cost fare for a companion who may be traveling with you to provide assistance. Check with your airline to see what specific services they provide.

Miracle Flights

Some people affected by LHON want to travel to a distant location to see a LHON specialist, but find the travel cost prohibitive. One option to consider is Miracle Flights, the nation's leading medical flight charity and one of the only national non-profits. They arrange more than 600 flights every month to medical facilities across the country.

www.miracleflights.org

Amtrak

Amtrak offers a 10% rail fare discount to adult passengers with a disability. Child passengers with a disability are eligible for the everyday 50% child discount plus an additional 10% off the discounted child's fare, regardless

TRANSPORTATION

of the service on which they travel. Amtrak also offers a 10% discount for persons traveling with a passenger with a disability as a companion. Those designated as a companion must be capable of providing the necessary assistance to the passenger with a disability.

Just select 'Passenger with Disability' or 'Companion' for each passenger as appropriate in Fare Finder at the beginning of your search to receive the applicable discounts.

You must provide written documentation of your disability at the ticket counter and when boarding the train. Acceptable documentation includes a transit system ID card for persons with a disability, membership card from a disability organization, letter from a physician, Medicare card, if under 65, or a Disabled/ Accessible parking placard issued by a state Department of Motor Vehicles (photocopy is acceptable).

www.amtrak.com/passengers-with-disabilities-discounts

TRAVEL & LEISURE

State Parks Discount Pass

The state of Texas provides a “Parklands Passport” for persons with permanent disabilities. With this pass, you and a companion pay 50 percent off the entry fee rounded to the next whole dollar. For example, if the entry fee is \$3, each of you will pay \$2.

<https://tpwd.texas.gov/state-parks/park-information/passes>

National Parks Access Pass

The National Parks Access Pass is a free, lifetime pass available to U.S. citizens or permanent residents, regardless of age, that have a permanent disability. It can be used at over 2,000 Federal recreation sites across the nation, including National Parks, National Wildlife Refuges, and many National Forest lands. Discounts offered by the Pass vary widely across the many different types of recreation sites. Pass owners are encouraged to check with sites they plan to visit before obtaining a Pass to verify that their Pass will be accepted. Any time a Pass is used, photo identification will be requested to verify Pass ownership. The Pass may be obtained at certain federal recreation sites, through the mail, or online. To obtain a Pass you must have identification to verify that you are a U.S. citizen or permanent resident as well as documentation that you have a permanent disability. Showing a state motor vehicle department disability sticker, license plate or placard is not acceptable documentation.

If you apply for an Access Pass at a Federal recreation site you do NOT need to fill out an application. Upon arrival, the officer will verify your documentation of disability and that you are a U.S. citizen or permanent resident by checking your ID. You will then be issued the Pass. The Pass is free if obtained in person, and there is no processing fee. Before making a trip to obtain a Pass, be sure to contact the site to ensure that they have Passes available. To obtain an Access Pass through the mail or online, you must complete an application, provide a photocopy of proof of citizenship or residency, documentation of disability, and pay the processing fee. The cost of obtaining an Access Pass through the mail or online is \$10 for

TRAVEL & LEISURE

application processing (the Pass is free).

<https://usparkpass.com>

Audiobooks and Periodicals

Braille and Audio Reading Download

Braille and Audio Reading Download (BARD) is a free online service run by The National Library Service for the Blind and Print Disabled (NLS) that allows you to download books and magazines instantly. To use BARD, you must be an NLS patron and fill out an application. Once approved, you can download the BARD mobile app for either IOS or Android at no cost.

www.loc.gov/nls

NFB-Newsline

Anyone who cannot read printed publications due to vision loss is eligible to receive NFB-NEWSLINE; a free audio news service offering access to more than 500 publications, emergency weather alerts, job listings, and more.

www.nfb.org/programs-services/nfb-newsline

Libby by OverDrive

The Libby app is a free downloadable audio book borrowing service that works with any public library using OverDrive. Over 90% of public libraries in North America have OverDrive. To utilize Libby, you need a library card from your local OverDrive-enabled library. Once downloaded, the Libby app works with Windows 10, IOS, or Android. The app can be downloaded from your preferred app store.

www.overdrive.com

Bookshare

Bookshare is an ebook library where members can access a collection of over 1,109,245 titles. It includes books for school, career, and reading pleasure, as well as titles in over 34 languages. Thanks to funding from the U.S. Department of Education, Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP),

TRAVEL & LEISURE

Bookshare is free for all qualified U.S. students and schools. Qualified individuals who are not students pay a nominal annual fee for their membership. To qualify, you will need to provide a proof of disability form signed by a qualified expert such as an ophthalmologist.

www.bookshare.org/cms/get-started/sign

Sports

There are many ways to save money while participating in sports with LHON vision. For instance, many ski areas provide a free pass to a guide for a visually impaired skier. Check with your local ski area for more information

Ski for Light is an all-volunteer, non-profit organization whose mission is to teach visually- and mobility-impaired adults the sport of classic cross-country skiing.

www.sfl.org

Facilities like the National Ability Center provide adaptive sports opportunities, often at low/no cost to the VI athlete.

www.discovernac.org

Organizations like the Challenged Athletes Foundation (CAF) provide grants to athletes with any disability including vision loss to support their athletic activities.

www.challengedathletes.org

A good source of information on sports that may be available in your area is the United States Association of Blind Athletes.

www.usaba.org

Fishing Licenses

Special Resident All-Water fishing licenses are available to any Texas

TRAVEL & LEISURE

resident who is legally blind. Endorsements are not required for this license.

<https://tpwd.texas.gov/regulations/outdoor-annual/licenses>

Theatre Discounts

Many theatres throughout the country offer discounts and often special seating for the blind. Many also offer special performances with a live Audio Describer. Check with the theatres in your area.

ASSISTIVE TECHNOLOGY

Aira

Aira delivers instant access to visual information. Aira's trained, professional agents remotely assist people who are blind or low vision with virtually any task, all without a sighted assistant nearby. Through an app on your smartphone, you can connect with a trained Aira agent. Pick the plan that makes the most sense for you, sign up in a couple of minutes, and download the Aira app to your smartphone. Access agents on-demand for almost any task, take advantage of ride-share integration to get you where you need to be, and use one of the free Aira Access offers to save you money while doing it.

Aira also offers a free option to anyone who has an Aira account (regardless if they're on a plan or not) and resides in a country where Aira provides full service (USA, Canada, UK, Australia, and New Zealand). People without a monthly subscription receive one free call every twenty-four hours and people with a plan receive one free call every four hours.

www.aira.io

Be My Eyes

Be My Eyes is a free app that connects blind and low-vision people with sighted volunteers and company representatives for visual assistance through a live video call. It works similarly to Aira. You connect via either an IOS or an Android app on your phone. During the call, you and a volunteer can communicate directly and solve a problem. The volunteer can help guide which direction to point your camera and what to focus on. A blind or a low-vision user may need help with anything from checking expiration dates, distinguishing colors, reading instructions or navigating new surroundings.

Additionally Be My Eyes has recently introduced Be My AI, a state of the art visual assistance tool that helps vividly describe images via the use of a phone app. Calls can still be escalated to a human, but this is only required in 10% of use cases.

www.bemyeyes.com

ASSISTIVE TECHNOLOGY

Seeing AI

Seeing AI is a free app developed by Microsoft that helps people with vision impairment convert visual info into audio. Optimized for use with the iPhone's VoiceOver setting, the app enables you to recognize:

- Short Text – Speaks text as soon as it appears in front of the camera
- Documents - Provides audio guidance to capture a printed page, and recognizes the text, along with its original formatting
- Products - Scans barcodes, using audio beeps to guide you, allowing you to hear the name, and package information when available
- People - Saves people's faces so you can recognize them, and get an estimate of their age, gender, and emotions
- Currency - Recognizes currency
- Color - Identifies color
- Handwriting - Reads handwritten text like in greeting cards
- Photo browsing experience - Describes photos on your phone

SeeingAI.com

Apple Pay

Once set up, Apple Pay is easy and works with your Apple devices. You can make contactless, secure purchases in stores, apps, and on the web. You can also send and receive money from friends and family. Apple Pay is safe, helping you avoid touching buttons or exchanging cash. For many people with low vision, it is often simpler and more secure than using a physical card. Apple Pay can be used at any store that accepts tap-to-pay, and at restaurants, vending machines, trains and taxis.

Computers for the Blind

CFTB is a non-profit 501(c)(3) organization located in Richardson, Texas, devoted to providing refurbished computers with assistive technology to persons who are blind or visually impaired, at very low cost. There are no income or age requirements. There is a processing fee for a desktop or laptop with JAWS or ZoomText installed. Shipping is free in the US. Certain

ASSISTIVE TECHNOLOGY

upgrades are available, and details are on this fact sheet: <https://www.computersfortheblind.org/src/documents/CFTBPriceSheet.pdf>

www.computersfortheblind.org

TAX TIPS

Several aspects of federal tax law apply specifically to individuals considered to be legally blind (vision is 20/200 or less in the best eye). Some of those deductions are described below, but check with the IRS or your local tax preparer for comprehensive information.

Deduction for the Legally Blind

Legally blind federal tax filers can claim unique deductions. This translates into a larger tax break, allowing you to subtract a bigger standard tax deduction from your adjusted gross income. Married filers also benefit from this deduction when their spouse is visually impaired. If you're blind and over age 65, your savings increase.

Medical Deductions for the Blind

The law allows you to deduct what you spend to prevent, diagnose, or treat illness, as well as any costs related to your blindness or visual impairment. As with any taxpayer, the total of both types of medical expenses must be more than 10% of your adjusted gross income before you can claim a deduction. Transportation to and from a doctor's office, prescriptions, insurance premiums and tests are examples of accepted medical deduction expenses as are disability-associated items such as Braille magazines and books (costs that exceed regular print versions), Braille printer, eyeglasses, eye exams, eye surgery, Guide dog and all related costs, and home modifications.

State Tax Exemptions

Many states offer exemptions or special rules for legally blind residents. Search "State Tax Exemptions for the Blind" to see if your state offers any exemptions that may apply to you.

Impairment-Related Work Expenses

You may require special equipment or accommodations as an employee or self-employed individual. The tax code allows you to subtract expenses for things you must have in order to work. Called impairment-related work expenses, they appear as unreimbursed employee expenses on the

TAX TIPS

Schedule A form used for itemizing.

Minimum requirements for the dollar amount do not apply to blind filers. Impairment-related work expenses you might have, provided you don't count them under medical expenses, include the following: computer attachments for Braille display and typing, electronic visual aids, high-speed Internet connection, modifications to your home, software that provides synthetic voice description, and reader services.

Tax Preparation Assistance

Blind or low vision people are eligible for tax preparation assistance from their local IRS office, or through the Volunteer Income Tax Assistance Program (VITA) sponsored by the IRS. Taxpayers can find a nearby IRS office location by calling 1-800-906-9887.

MISCELLANEOUS

Avoiding Unnecessary Medical Care

The diagnostic odyssey for LHON can be extremely expensive, including many tests to rule out other, more common causes of sudden vision loss. Many individuals have spent thousands of dollars on tests and treatments for diseases they did not have (Brain Tumor, Optic Neuritis, MS, NMO, etc.). They and their loved ones have lost time from work for these appointments, and have spent money traveling to a range of specialists trying to get the correct diagnosis. If LHON vision loss begins when an individual knows they carry a LHON mutation, they can avoid all of these costs, and go directly to a LHON specialist for care. This is one of many reasons why people in the LHON community tell their maternal relatives about LHON. While it can be difficult information to share, there can be great value. There are several videos and links in the Genealogy section of the LHON.org website that can help in identifying maternal relatives, and preparing to share the information.

www.lhon.org/living-with-lhon

Since there are no approved treatments for LHON, patients and their families can be vulnerable to unproven, experimental and expensive “treatments”. It’s important to avoid clinics that claim to offer “clinical trials” that require payment by the patient to participate. Legitimate trials will not require patient payment.

Employee Assistance Programs

Many employers offer an Employee Assistance Program that will include several visits to a mental health professional at no cost. Onset of LHON vision loss can have a significant impact on the mental health of the individual affected and their loved ones. An EAP Program is an opportunity to try working with a mental health professional at no charge. Additional access to a therapist or counselor may be available through your health insurance, or at your local non-profit agency serving the blind and visually impaired.

MISCELLANEOUS

General Financial Support

Many in the LHON community have been creative in finding financial support. Local service organizations are often willing to assist those in need, in particular Lions Clubs which have a specific mission to serve those with vision loss. College fraternities and sororities often do fundraising and are willing to provide support, especially the Delta Gamma (DG) sorority whose philanthropy is Service for Sight. [GoFundMe.com](https://www.gofundme.com) is a fundraising platform on which individuals can describe their financial hardship or need, then share the link with family and friends to crowdsource donations.

Genetic Testing

There are several ways to make LHON genetic testing cost-effective:

Obligate Carrier/On the Maternal Bloodline

It's first helpful to understand the genetic transmission of a LHON mutation. LHON is maternally inherited, and a woman who carries a LHON mutation passes that mutation to all of her children. If someone on your maternal bloodline has had genetic testing done and has a confirmed diagnosis of their LHON mutation, you can reasonably assume that you're an "obligate carrier." This means that based on genetics, you carry the same LHON mutation. You can presume you carry that LHON mutation without doing any genetic testing, which is the least expensive option. Also, there are no test results in your medical records that could impact your future insurance choices.

If you're an obligate carrier and would prefer to have your own genetic testing done to confirm your genetic status, you can save money by testing for just the specific mutation in your family. Most LHON genetic testing is a panel that tests for multiple LHON mutations at one time. However, if you have a copy of your maternal relative's LHON genetic test results, you can get testing done for that single, targeted mutation. The cost is far less than the broader panel test.

MISCELLANEOUS

First in Family

If you're the first in your extended maternal family to become affected by LHON and/or to get genetic testing done, there are ways to limit the cost, including the following:

- The Carver Lab at the University of Iowa is a non-profit lab, so the cost of a LHON panel test is currently \$140; much lower than at for-profit labs. Note that they batch their testing, so the turnaround time is slower than other labs. www.carverlab.org
- Athena Diagnostics offers the Athena Alliance Program. This is a financial assistance program for those with low income. www.athenadiagnostics.com
- GeneDx offers a Financial Assistance Program. <https://www.genedx.com/tests/billing>