

A blindfolded journey becomes an eye-opener

November 20, 2016



Mr Luke Cheong, 49, one of the exercise participants, trying to locate the path to the lift using a cane, together with Mr Bernard Goh, 45. Guide dog mobility instructor Zara Linehan, 35, is giving them periodic reminders to help them along. With them is Mr Dennis Sim, 52, and his guide dog Melba. PHOTO: TIFFANY GOH FOR THE SUNDAY TIMES

Exercise reveals issues faced by blind people in daily commute

One suggested a sound system on all buses, which would regularly announce the location of bus stops.

Another said that raised markings - known as tactiles - on the ground should be better designed to guide those who cannot see.

These were some of the suggestions from participants who took buses and trains around Punggol yesterday, blindfolded, in an attempt to understand the challenges of navigating the landscape when blind. A total of 66 people took part.

Among them was Second Minister for Transport Ng Chee Meng, who took a bus from Punggol East to the Punggol LRT station. The one-hour exercise, he said, would be useful in helping those from the Land Transport Authority (LTA), for instance, better design the city infrastructure. Mr Ng is also Minister for Education (Schools) and an MP for Pasir Ris-Punggol GRC.

Indeed, among the participants yesterday were officers from the LTA, Building and Construction Authority, and Ministry of Social and Family Development. Also present were representatives from public transport operator SMRT and grassroots leaders from Punggol North.

The event was organised by the Guide Dogs Association of the Blind and non-profit Social Innovation Park. Called 'I'M Possible?', its aim was to help people gain a better understanding of the difficulties faced by the visually impaired in their daily commute. This includes knowing when to alight from buses and figuring out train directions.

The participants set off in groups of four. Each group had two members blindfolded, a facilitator and a visually impaired ambassador.

Among those who took part was Mr Joseph Lim, who said that the experience was "eye-opening". The 46-year-old civil servant who was blindfolded through half of his journey from Punggol East to Punggol MRT and back, said that crossing the road without help was impossible.

"Even with the tactiles, it's still not easy," said Mr Lim. "When you come to a junction, you're not sure which way to go."

Undergraduate Charmaine Tan who is visually impaired said that she hopes people will be more forthcoming in offering help to people like herself. "Sometimes, it's really hard to find someone who can tell me when to alight the bus," said the 22-year-old, who studies at the National University of Singapore.

The idea for this event was mooted by two visually impaired Singaporeans, Ms Melissa Yeo and Dr Yeo Sze Ling. The event was named as such to denote the message "Include me, possible?"

Ms Yeo, 43, who lost her sight eight years ago, said that building an inclusive society is more than having the visually impaired around, but is about including them in different aspects such as planning and design so that they can lead independent lives.

Source: The Straits Times © Singapore Press Holdings Limited. Permission required for reproduction.