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Maximizing O&M Services in Rural and Remote Areas through Distance Consultation

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Abstracts of the 2018 Southeastern Orientation and Mobility Association (SOMA) Conference

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The Southeastern Orientation and Mobility Association (SOMA) started more than 50 years ago with informal gatherings of O&Ms, and has grown to annual/biannual conferences hosting hundreds of O&Ms. Until 2016, when SOMA was incorporated and a board was established, SOMA conferences were organized entirely by individuals who volunteered at the final session of the previous conference.

SOMA's unique traditions include: an emphasis on hands-on workshops (SOMA conferences were the first to feature feet-in-the-street sessions); introducing new ideas (this year's SOMA unveiled the establishment of the O&M Specialist Association); having a general session 'Exhibitors' Highlight' to preview the vendor tables; offering each session twice so that participants have a greater selection; and welcoming and mentoring newbies doing their first presentation.

The most recent SOMA conference, held December 8–11, in Tampa, Florida, USA, had 40 presentations done by 48 presenters – the following abstracts summarize some of these presentations.

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The region served by Portland State University's Orientation and Mobility (O&M) and Visually Impaired Learner (VIL) hybrid preparation program is geographically vast. The states of OR, WA, ID, MT, AK, and HI comprise 28% of the US's geography, covering more than 1,061,000 square miles. Because of regional personnel shortages, faculty must prepare candidates to serve geographically dispersed children and adults with visual impairment or deaf-blindness using technologies that support distance-based consultation.

As a part of a federally funded grant from the US Department of Education, faculty in the O&M program developed an online learning module for candidates to use as a part of their practicum experiences. Through a systematic review of the literature and consultation with professionals in the field of blindness and deafblindness, PSU faculty synthesized findings on distance consultation practices and have begun to further validate and refine module content through field-testing. At SOMA workshop, participants gained knowledge of approaches that may be used to maximize services to those in remote communities. During the conference, faculty sought to increase the content validity of the ideas presented in the module by engaging interested stakeholders in evaluating the quality, relevance, and usefulness of the distance consultation approaches. While at SOMA, O&M, and TVI specialists engaged in conversation about equity, their own distance consultation practices, as well as any ethical concerns regarding telepractice. As the module is field-tested and refined with PSU students and clinical partners, a validated framework for maximizing services to those in remote communities will be shared with the field.

How Can You Impact Change?

JoAnne Chalom
In Focus Mobility

The conference presentation addressed several intertwined topics: accessibility, advocacy, and working with stakeholders to achieve lasting change.

A deep dive explored how Orientation and Mobility Instructors, Guide Dog Mobility Instructors, Researchers, Administrators, and Professors could use their expertise while developing a rapport with transportation engineers, traffic engineers, local, city, county, or state planners.

Multiple options to move forward accessibility challenges were presented. One was joining the Environmental Access Committee of the Association for the