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Sat-nav for blind 'not a gimmick'

By Malcolm Moore in Rome
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Blind residents of Turin have been equipped with GPS trackers so that they can be directed around the northern Italian city by satellite.

When wearing the device, a blind user can be tracked by call-centre workers on a map of the city. If he needs help, he can press a special button on a mobile phone to ring in and be guided towards his destination.

Another button can alert staff in case of an attack, or another emergency.

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The trial scheme, named Easy Walk, started last week.

It will be extended to 30 users in January and is expected to last three to four months before being rolled out to all of Piedmont's 3,000 blind people.

It will be free to users, but its cost to the regional government has not been revealed. The service runs 24 hours a day and can work across Italy and even France.

Federico Borgna, one of those involved in the trial, said his device had not so far given him any of the directional headaches that satellite navigation is notorious for.

"At first, the level of precision was dramatically off, but they have worked hard to correct it. The best thing about the service is the call-centre, because the person gives me instructions and then watches me as I go," he said.

Mercedes Bresso, who came up with the idea and who is also the head of the regional government, said the initiative was not "a gimmick," but "the start of a wider project to use new technologies to help people."

A blind person might not feel well and forget where the nearest pharmacy is. This service will solve that, and give them more autonomy."

The head of the Blind Association of Piedmont, Angelo Dalbano, said having a GPS tracker would give blind people the confidence to travel to new places.

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