



How Self-Advocacy Can Educate and Affect Positive Change

What is the best way to affect positive change?

There are several facets of advocacy: education, self-advocacy, litigation and lobbying. Knowing where to start can help you be most effective in your advocacy efforts. This piece will focus on self-advocacy, which is often the quickest and easiest way to make change in your everyday life. For example, you could advocate that a company create a more accessible website



so you can shop for groceries, or that their phone answering system is more inclusive by providing both verbal and touchscreen options.

Education

At the Council, we educate members of the public, state agencies, and legislative staff about our advocacy priority areas: Employment, Healthcare, Civil Rights, Education, and Transportation. Change happens when people understand what is at stake and why it is important. You can learn more about our priorities at WCBlind.org/Advocacy.

Self-Advocacy

It can often be unclear how to best start self-advocating. Begin by asking to speak with someone in a leadership role or customer service at the business to help bring awareness to your issue. Offer a possible solution that would be inclusive and not discriminate. Highlight what the business stands to gain by changing how they do things, framing the interaction as positive.

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If, for example, you have difficulty navigating an automated phone system, ask that the system be changed to include an option where the auto attendant forwards the call to someone in the business at the end of the menu. Prioritize which businesses you decide to approach about this issue; choose places that you call regularly. If they agree to change their system, realize that this may take time and ask for a timeline.

Good for You, Good for Business

Businesses that listen to their customers will have a culture which, formally or informally, includes customer advocacy. This customer-first approach considers the needs of people served by the establishment, banking on the long-term value of listening, responsiveness and, based on what is heard, providing great service.

Here's where your voice comes in. To flex your self-advocacy muscle, it is important to practice effectively conveying your needs and rights. Communicating—speaking up for more inclusive and less discriminatory practices and policies at companies you frequent—is necessary to make changes.

As you find your advocacy voice it is helpful to remember that, in many cases, employees at a company are not even aware that they are doing something that makes it difficult for you to do business with them. Letting them know provides education and improvement for them and you.

Individual Advocacy

Self-advocacy can also be individual advocacy, which refers to helping another person find a solution to a problem on an individual rather than a systemic level. Helping solve a service issue with a business will benefit others. Because if you're having an issue using a website or phone system, it's likely others are as well.

We focus on this type of education at the Council for all our legislative priority areas because we know that sustained behavior change happens when people understand why it is important.

When it comes down to it, education, self-advocacy or individual advocacy can be a very effective and powerful way to positively impact change.

There is great value as a person who is blind or visually impaired in learning how to ask for what you need. Self-advocacy is a vital and necessary skill and there are many great opportunities to build it while providing important education for others and inclusion for many more people. ■

Monthly Donors Mike and Susan Archer Share Why They Give

Mike and Susan Archer appreciate having good vision resources. They are grateful that the Council was there to help their family and recently started supporting the Council as donors to help other families throughout Wisconsin. The Archers were introduced to the Council by Mike's daughter Jill who lives in Sun Prairie. Jill has also supported the Council through workplace giving.

The Archer family has extensive experience with vision loss. Mike, his mother, sister, and daughter Jill have Stickler Syndrome, also called "Sticklers Disease." What medical professionals in rural Illinois called undiagnosed vision loss when Mike began losing vision in his right eye as a child is much better understood as a genetic condition known to cause glaucoma and retinal detachment. It can also cause hearing loss and joint problems.

Having vision loss did not affect Mike's career. Now retired, he worked for 30-plus years in market research for the commercial fertilizer industry. Susan, also retired, had a career in information technology.

"I have had glaucoma since early mid-30s, but took eye drops and my vision held long enough that I could choose paths in my career that allowed me to continue," he explains. "Vision loss did not hold me back. I didn't dwell on it. I had one good eye to capitalize on and moved forward."

The couple moved to Madison two and a half years ago to be near their daughter, whose vision has also been affected by Sticklers since she was a child. She now has a master's degree and works with the State of Wisconsin to help people with Medicaid and disability benefits.

Through the Council, the Archers were connected to resources including the state's Office for the Blind & Visually Impaired white cane training, which, Susan said, was valuable to the whole family.

Through their support, they hope to further the Council's mission and ensure others have the resources they need.

"It's important that the Council is there as a portal for people experiencing vision loss and blindness across the state who don't know where to turn," says Mike. "We are grateful that the Council is out there providing outreach to people in more rural areas. ■"



Mike and Susan Archer

Board Update

Welcome New Board Members Melanie Ramey & Renee Peterson

The Council welcomes two new board members, Renee Peterson and Melanie Ramey. Each brings valuable experience and perspective to their positions.

“I’d like to warmly welcome Renee and Melanie to the Council board. Their talents and expertise are great gifts to support our work of promoting the dignity and empowerment of those living with vision loss.,” says Denise Jess, Council CEO/Executive Director.



Melanie Ramey

Melanie Ramey

A native of Alabama, Melanie has lived in Madison for 30 years, and is a communication and speech coach (melanieramey.com). She works with people in management and leadership roles, helping them manage the fears of public speaking with tips to polish their speaking and presentation skills. She has served as a director of The HOPE of Wisconsin, a statewide organization for hospice and palliative care organizations.

A self-described joiner, Melanie serves many organizations. She is the vice president of the Wisconsin League of Women Voters, chair of the Madison Committee on Foreign Relations and active in Downtown Madison Rotary.

Melanie connected with the Council as her eyesight deteriorated due to macular degeneration. What she found were professionals who were helpful in recommending handy tools including audio books, and contacts for the paratransit system.

Melanie wants to ensure people have the information and tools to live their lives with confidence and ease as their vision worsens.

“There have got to be ways to prepare people and help reassure them to not be afraid,” she says.

Educating people about the need for transportation support in individual communities is one of the ideas she is interested in advancing. There is room to develop information about being sensitive to the needs of friends and neighbors who no longer drive because of vision impairment. Relying

on people to always ask for a ride can be difficult, she explained. Voting rights is another issue of great importance.

"I am interested in making sure people have access to voting and I have certain experience, expertise and ideas that will help," says Melanie.

She looks forward to meeting people who have experience with vision loss, building her own knowledge and skills and adding her own expertise to the Council.

"I look forward to this opportunity to work with the Council and hope to be able to bring some ideas and participate in a way that will add value," Melanie says.

Renee Peterson

Renee Peterson and her husband, Dave, split their time between residences in Horicon and Kingston with their dogs Shae and Walter. She has worked with Horicon Bank for 21 years, currently as Talent Acquisition and Development Officer.

She heard about the Council during her years of service with the Wisconsin Lions. For 17 years, she has been active with the Horicon Lions, and serves on the Wisconsin Lions Foundation Board as well as the Lions Pride Endowment Fund committee. A Horicon native, Renee is also a member of the Dodge County Society for Human Resource Management (SHRM) and Blue Zones Project of Dodge County.

She is passionate about her foundation work, which provides camp opportunities for people with blindness and visual impairment, deafness or hearing loss, and those with cognitive disabilities.

"I'm always for the underdog," Renee says. "I want to be able to make sure everyone has the same experience."

In this new role, she is eager to learn and apply her skills to educate and advocate for those served by the Council.

"I look forward to using my human resource and policy experience to add value to the Council board," she said. "My goal is to use the things that I am naturally good at to help others and work toward the organization's goals."



Renee Peterson

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Rejoining the Board: Karen Heesen and Nick Sinram

The Council is pleased that Nick Sinram and Karen Heesen are returning to the board. Nick, a budget and policy specialist with the City of Milwaukee, was introduced to the Council as a scholarship recipient in 2007. He graduated from the University of Wisconsin-La Crosse in 2012 with degrees

in Psychology, Political Science and Public Administration before attending Law School at Marquette University in Milwaukee.

He says there is great opportunity to put generous Council donations to work providing education and adaptive technology tools to people who need them. "Helping people who have no experience with adaptive

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–Karen Heesen

technology, guide dogs or white canes and now need to rely on these tools is one of the most impactful things that we do."

Karen has been an active member of the Council board at different times throughout the past three decades. She is a teacher at the Wisconsin Center for the Blind and Visually Impaired and lives in Janesville with her family.

As a board representative on the scholarship, gratitude, awards and legislative workgroups, she addresses topics including accessible voting, transportation and educating the public about the abilities of people with visual impairment.

"During this term, I hope to see more changes in areas which affect the blind and visually impaired individual the most: education, employment, and transportation, all of which are necessary components for independence, empowerment and dignity," she says.

Thank You Departing Board Member Patty Zallar

Patty Zallar has been involved with the Council's board in various capacities for about 10 years. She served on the legislative work group and looks forward to continuing to work on advocacy issues like transportation and employment.

"I'm proud of the legislative work we do to advocate," she says. "The goals and initiatives like transportation and celebrating the 30th year of the Americans with Disabilities Act and accessibility for all breaks down barriers and tries to make a culture shift."

She has worked for 29 years as a project manager with the State of Wisconsin Department of Employee Trust Funds and is president of the Madison Evening Lions Club. She was recently elected chair of Leader Dogs for the Blind.



Patty Zallar

"Patty is a proud proponent of service dogs and a staunch advocate of disability rights, especially access to public places and accommodations in the workplace," says Board Chair Chris Richmond. "A thoughtful, detail-oriented person, the board is grateful for her service." ■

Thank You to Council Donors and Volunteers

We wish to thank all volunteers and donors for their support of the Council in 2020. It's been a tumultuous year and our volunteers and donors helped us keep our doors open and transition to running virtual events and vision services.

Our volunteers made a difference by gardening on Council grounds, audio recording Courier and On Sight newsletters, repairing braille writers, and in many other ways. Financial gifts from businesses and individuals made educational programs possible, such as the 2020 Council webinars, Gallery Night and access technology classes. Low vision evaluations, in-home rehabilitation visits, and free white canes were all possible because of your gifts. Visit **WCBlind.org/Donate** to see a list of all donors who gave during 2020. Thank you all for sharing your time, talents and treasure with the Council. ■

Staff Updates

Introducing Kathleen Callen: The Council's Newest Program Associate



Kathleen Callen

The Council welcomes Kathleen Callen as Program Associate. She manages event sign-ups and logistics, keeps the Council's website up to date and helps with store customers and clients on the phone at the front desk.

"I am happy to be surrounded by a wonderful, welcoming, and passionate group of people," Kathleen says. "I am excited to learn more about the mission and goals of the Council and to become a better advocate for others."

Previous positions include being a Development Director for the University of Tennessee, a Financial Specialist for the University of Wisconsin-Madison Student Loans Office,

and most recently Assistant Director for Recruitment and Outreach for the Schools of Hope AmeriCorps Project.

Kathleen holds a master's degree in international development, social policy and social development from the University of Manchester, and bachelor's degrees in political science and integrated liberal studies from the University of Wisconsin-Madison.

In her spare time, Kathleen loves to travel and has been to 34 countries on five continents, all 50 states, and all but Nunavut and the Northwest Territories in Canada. Reading, watching films and volunteering are other hobbies.

"I am delighted for Kathleen to bring her warmth, reflective personality and skills to the Council," says Denise Jess, Council CEO/Executive Director.

Farewell to Katherine Corbett and Kris Johannsen

Please join the Council in wishing departing staff Katherine Corbett and Kris Johannsen well. Katherine was the writer for the Council for the past three years. She recently accepted a role as a communication specialist with Promote Local, one of our partners through the Disability Vote Coalition.

Store Manager Kris Johannsen is no longer with the Council. The Sharper Vision Store is open by appointment only, which allows vision services staff time to talk with you one-on-one about your home/workplace needs, hobbies you would like to return to and more. We wish both the best of luck in their future endeavors! ■

Awards & Scholarships

The Council is excited to announce its 2021 scholarship and award nominations.

We invite Wisconsin students who are blind or visually impaired to apply for a \$2,000 scholarship. Scholarships are available for post-secondary students attending a two-year college, technical college, four-year university or graduate program. Find out more by requesting an application packet by calling 608-255-1166 or 800-783-5213. The deadline for applications is Friday, April 9.

If you know an individual or organization who has made an important contribution in the lives of people who are blind and visually impaired in Wisconsin, consider nominating them for a Wisconsin Council of the Blind & Visually Impaired Excellence Award.

Awards are given in the following categories, with nominations due by Friday, April 16.

- Community Volunteer Service Award
- Community Partnerships and Collaborations Award
- Community Giving Award
- Exceptional Accommodations in Employment Award
- Public Policy Award
- Lifetime Service Award

Past recipients have been honored for starting low vision support groups in their communities and spear-heading accessibility efforts. In 2019, Judy Lehman was honored for her outstanding commitment to students who are blind or visually impaired while the Greensville Lioness Club was honored for fiscally supporting the Council over the past decade. ■

2021 Events

Mark your calendars for these virtual events. For more information and to register for these free events, visit WCBlind.org/Events or call 1-800-783-5213.



The Big Share

March 2, 2021

The Big Share is an online day of giving hosted by Community Shares of Wisconsin (CSW) for nearly 70 local nonprofits dedicated to building an equitable and just community and protecting our environment. The Council is a member of CSW. The Big Share is a fun, easy and flexible way to donate to and learn more about organizations making a difference in our community. Visit TheBigShare.org to learn more.



Webinars

Get to Work with the Division of Rehabilitation

March 16 at 10 a.m.

What is the Wisconsin Division of Rehabilitation (DVR)? Who is eligible for DVR services, what is the process for applying, how do DVR and the Council work together to assist job seekers?

Summer Cooking and Grilling

May 18 at 10 a.m.

Join Council Vision Services staff to learn more about outdoor cooking with low or no vision by using adaptive techniques, some adaptive products, safety, and tips for summer grilling.

New and Useful Products in the Sharper Vision Store

November 9 at 10 a.m.

What's new in the Sharper Vision Store? Meet our store manager and learn about some interesting store products.



Scholarships

Apply by April 9

Wisconsin students who are blind or visually impaired are invited to apply for a \$2,000 scholarship. Scholarships are available for post-secondary students attending a two-year college, technical college, four-year university or graduate program. Find the application packet on our website in February or call 800-783-5213 to request one.



Excellence Awards

Apply by April 16

Nominate an individual or organization who has made an important contribution in the lives of people who are blind and visually impaired in Wisconsin for an Excellence Award. Find the application on our website at WCBlind.org/scholarship-and-awards or call 608-237-8114 to request one.



Access Technology Classes

Monthly

The Council holds free, monthly virtual access technology classes (previously called assistive technology classes). Topics range from using GPS on your phone to JAWS to how to do online grocery shopping. Sign up for a class by emailing Jim at JDenham@WCBlind.org or calling 608-237-8104.



Virtual Monthly Low Vision Support Group

Second Monday of the month via Zoom

The Council holds a low vision support group monthly, currently via Zoom to assist you or a loved one affected by vision loss. For more information or to sign up, contact Brent Perzentka by email at BPerzentka@WCBlind.org or by phone at 608-237-8112 to get the link/call-in number.



Gallery Night

October 1

The Council's Gallery Night features the work of artists from Wisconsin who are blind or visually impaired. The submission period will open in summer 2021. Learn more at WCBlind.org/Gallery-Night.



Low Vision Fair

Begins week of July 12

Virtual, statewide event featuring vendors of adaptive products, and speakers from an Aging & Disability Resource Center, falls prevention program and more. This event will run weekly starting in July. ■



Wisconsin Council of the Blind & Visually Impaired

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FREE MATTER FOR THE BLIND
AND PHYSICALLY HANDICAPPED
POSTAL MANUAL PART 138

The Council's Vision Services staff recently helped a daughter find items to help her mother transition to an assisted living facility in Lodi. The daughter writes, "Mom has used the table lamp and clock every day. She relies on the clock to tell her the time since her eyes will not always see the correct time on her watch. Of course, the light greatly adds to her reading ability. I do appreciate the time you took to carefully explain all the tools you brought with you."

Find a selection of adjustable table and floor lamps and talking clocks in our Sharper Vision store. Safety procedures include masks, limiting customers and disinfecting products. Schedule a one-on-one store appointment or an in-home visit by calling Amy at 608-237-8107 or **AWurf@WCBlind.org**. Clients who have worked with a specific vision services team member can contact that person directly or call the front desk at 800-783-5213 to schedule with that team member. ■

Stay Connected

Stay up to date on events, legislation, news and technology related to blindness or vision loss by subscribing to one of the weekly Council emails. Council Courier is available in large print, braille and CD. To request an alternative format, email Ray at **RCubberly@WCBlind.org** or call 608-237-8109.

