

**2021**

# ANNUAL REPORT



Wisconsin Council of the  
Blind & Visually Impaired





## MISSION

To promote the dignity and empowerment of the people of Wisconsin who live with vision loss through advocacy, education, and vision services.

## VALUES

### **Inclusivity**

We actively seek and welcome diverse people, experiences and perspectives.

### **Uncompromising Respect**

We uphold the dignity and worth of all individuals and groups in how we treat each other, even in times of disagreement or conflict.

### **Integrity**

We say what we do and do what we say, both within and outside of the organization, by applying the highest standards of ethics, honesty and trustworthiness.

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**On the cover:** *Forever in Bloom* is a metal sculpture of red, blue and orange flowers created by Mark Weber of Medford, WI, one of the artists featured at the Council's 2021 Gallery Night.



## 2022 BOARD OF DIRECTORS

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### **Executive Director**

Denise Jess, Madison

### **Chair**

Nick Sinram, Milwaukee

### **Vice Chair**

Rebecca Arrowood, Greenville

### **Secretary**

Rhonda Staats, La Crosse

### **Treasurer**

Renee Peterson, Horicon

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Sharon Knauf, Madison

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Chris Richmond, Janesville

Patty Slaby, Arcadia

Terri Young, Madison



# A Message from the Executive Director and the Board Chair



**2021 was a year of transitions. Some of the changes represented the reversal, at least partial, of the previous year’s transitions, as Council staff returned to the office and walk-in shopping returned to the Sharper Vision Store. While many events remained virtual, we resumed in-person vision services and generally trended back toward some semblance of “normal.”**

One of the most significant transitions of 2021 was in Board leadership, and we want to take this opportunity to thank outgoing Chair Chris Richmond for his seven years in that post. Chris presided over the Council Board during a period of tremendous growth, and he shepherded the organization through several significant changes that have left us well positioned for a strong, effective future.

During his tenure as Chair, Chris oversaw the transition to a new board governance model, and he encouraged recruitment of board members with diverse skills from both the community of blind and visually impaired individuals and the broader population of allies who share our values and priorities. Chris also guided the Board through bylaw



changes that implemented term limits, and he championed an approach to fund development grounded in relationship building rather than events.

One of the most important roles of a board chair is to lead the hiring of new executive directors, and Chris expertly guided the search process that landed Denise in that position. I (Denise) am grateful to Chris not only for performing that role so effectively, but more importantly, for being an excellent working partner for the past several years.

And finally, we would like to thank Chris for his outstanding efforts as a mentor to new Board members and officers. I (Nick) am truly grateful to Chris for making my transition into the role of Chair as smooth as I could have possibly hoped.

Chris remains on the Board as a member through December of 2022, and we are grateful for his continuing contributions to the Council and its mission.

**Denise Jess**  
Executive Director

**Nick Sinram**  
Chair

## ADVOCACY

### Creating Unity and Power Through Collaboration

**“Alone we can do so little; together we can do so much.”** — Helen Keller

That famous quote gets used often in a variety of contexts, but the simple idea it conveys is foundational for the Council. Our organization was built by Wisconsinites living with vision loss who understood that their combined voices could bring about changes that would improve their lives.

**While our advocacy work focuses primarily on Wisconsin issues, we also partner with national networks and organizations that share our goals and values.** These collaborations leverage our



strengths and facilitate knowledge sharing that can be applied to advocacy at both the state and federal levels.

**Two national groups the Council actively collaborated with in 2021 were the Aging & Vision Loss National Coalition and the National Aging and Disability Transportation Center.** Denise serves on several subcommittees to offer a Wisconsin perspective, which helps inform and inspire others across the country.

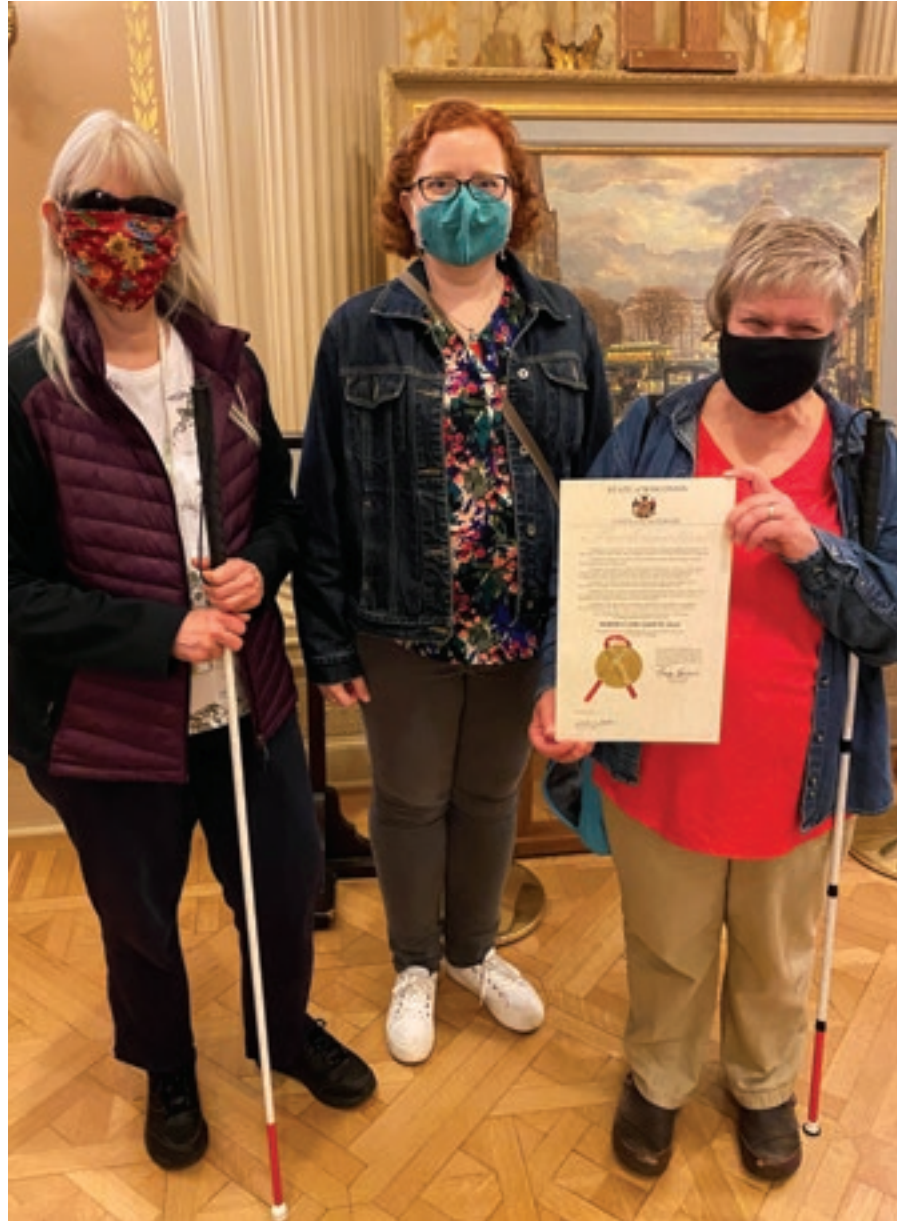
The Aging & Vision Loss National Coalition, formed in 2019 by the VisionServe Alliance, is composed of 15 national, state, local, private and public agencies that promote equal access and quality of life for older Americans with vision loss.

“The Coalition was formed to increase continuity in vision services, advocacy and messaging,” says Council Executive Director Denise Jess, who serves on the Coalition’s

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**Image:** Bus ads, like this one in La Crosse, were part of our White Cane Safety Day campaign.





**Image:** Judith Rasmussen, Kathleen Callen and Denise Jess at the State Capitol holding Governor Evers’ White Cane Safety Day proclamation.

Public Policy & Funding Committee. “This work is important because it gathers leaders in our field to hunker down and do some significant work.”

**The Coalition is targeting several key priorities, including:**

- Increased funding and availability of state vision rehabilitation services
- A state-by-state national campaign to collect solid data on the numbers of people with vision loss and their health and economic outcomes
- An awareness campaign, titled “If you can’t see something, say something.”

**In 2021, the Council also began working with the National Aging and Disability Transportation Center (NADTC).**

The Center’s mission is to create better transportation options for people with disabilities, older adults and caregivers. One of the Center’s functions is to gather information from transportation and pedestrian safety leaders in each state and serve as a

clearinghouse for sharing that knowledge.

NADTC invited Denise to present the work of the Wisconsin Non-Driver Advisory Committee (WiNDAC) in a webinar that was viewed by hundreds of transportation providers and human service groups. She was joined by a leader from Arizona who works with local agencies to improve rural transportation in that state.

“Wisconsin has become a leader in cross-sector collaboration. There are not a lot of other models like it,” Denise says. “WiNDAC gives us a platform to be in the conversations on the national level.”

**Voting equity is another issue on which the Council engaged in state/federal collaboration. In 2021 the Wisconsin Disability Vote Coalition, of which the Council is a core member, held a legislative briefing webinar on the federal Voting Rights Act,** featuring both national and state voting rights experts as panelists. The briefing informed Wisconsin legislators about existing laws related to accessible voting and educated them about the realities on the ground for voters with disabilities.

“Creating unity through collaboration is the best way to effect real change,” Denise says. “Separately, our voices are tiny. When we combine our resources, energies and talents, our impact grows exponentially.”

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— **Denise Jess,**  
Executive Director

## EDUCATION

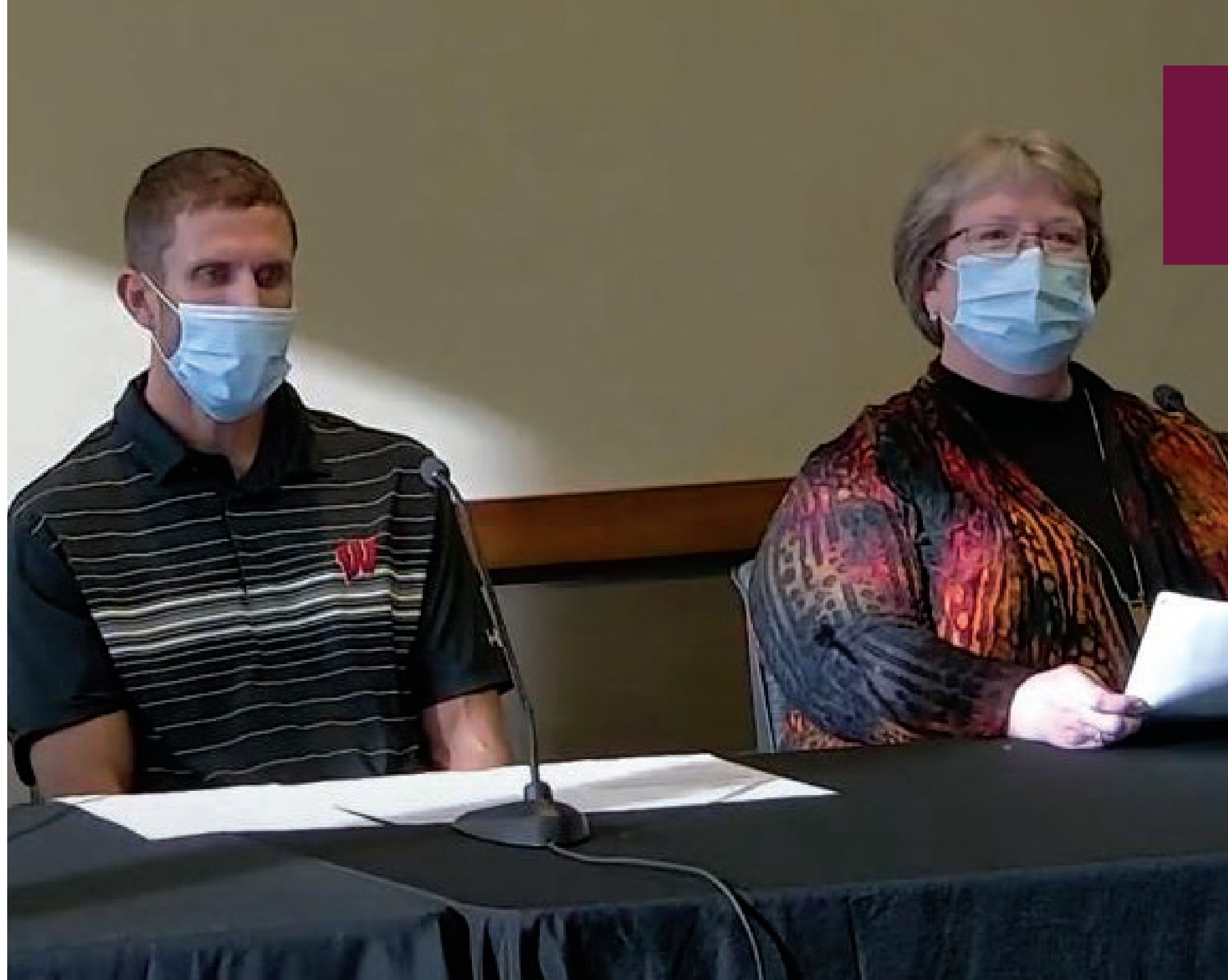
### The Unexpected Benefits of Going Hybrid

Throughout its history, **education has been a key Council function, with activities ranging from access technology training to presentations on pedestrian safety.**

Until recently, this education has taken place face to face in person.

In 2020, all our education activities either moved online or, in the case of three major annual events—Advocacy Days, Low Vision Fair and the Age-Related Macular Degeneration Symposium—were cancelled entirely.

One unintended but beneficial consequence is that the Council got better at delivering online programming. For example, the Vision Services team launched a virtual Low Vision Support Group during that period. The group has been a resounding success, providing a forum for a geographically diverse population of clients. “People call in from all over the state,” says Education & Vision Services Director Amy Wurf.



**While it became possible to return some events we had taken online back to an in-person format, we recognized that virtual events offered some advantages.**

During 2021 we took the opportunity to build on what we had learned the previous year. While it became possible to return some events we had taken online back to an in-person format, we recognized that virtual events offered some advantages. As we planned our 2021 events, we asked the question: Should we expect participants who live far from Madison to drive a significant distance for an on-site meeting, or will a virtual version of the meeting offer a comparable learning experience?

**Like many organizations, we learned that offering both options—**

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**Image:** The Council’s Jean Kalscheur (not shown), Brent Perzentka and Amy Wurf presented at the Age-Related Macular Degeneration Symposium.



**the so-called “hybrid” model—sometimes made sense**, but not always. “The beauty of switching to online was that we were able to reach many more people,” says Denise. “In 2021 we tried to capture the benefits of both online and in-person education services.” **The newly created Low Vision Support Group, which was developed as a virtual gathering from the start, remained online-only.**

In 2021, **the Council logged 82 education and outreach events overall**, many of them applying the new hybrid model which offered participants the choice of attending either online or in person. The events mainly covered the same topic areas as were offered pre-pandemic, including **voting access, advocacy, birding, falls prevention, mental health, access technology, braille devices, pedestrian safety, and how to best work with people who are blind or visually impaired.**

The Low Vision Fair, which had previously been held in varying parts of the state, was revived in 2021 as an online-only series, one session per week over seven weeks. Each session featured a new topic, with advice on relevant

resources, services and access technology. Ninety-six people from all over the state attended the series, and many more have viewed the recorded sessions online. All seven sessions are available via our website at <https://wcblind.org/events/low-vision-fair/>.

The Age-Related Macular Degeneration Symposium, presented in partnership with the University of Wisconsin Department of Ophthalmology and Visual Sciences, also returned as a virtual event in 2021, with Denise and several members of the Vision Services team serving as presenters.

The other major event that was revived in an online-only format in 2021 was Advocacy Days. “It allowed people who typically couldn’t get to Madison to participate,” Denise says. “We increased access for many people, which was a very positive change.”

The experiences of 2021 “will forever influence us,” Denise added, as **we continue to look for ways to expand access** to the educational programming the Council offers.



## VISION SERVICES

### A Tale of Two Half-Years at the Sharper Vision Store

The Sharper Vision Store has long been a portal welcoming people to the Wisconsin Council of the Blind & Visually Impaired. A store visit is often a person’s first contact with the Council, where they learn about the full scope of services we offer and, in some cases, develop a lasting client relationship. That role became more important than ever during the COVID-19 pandemic. Because of the adjustments to store operations we made out of necessity, 2021 became a tale of two distinctly different half-years.

Like all retail entities, the Sharper Vision Store was completely disrupted by the emergence of COVID. Because the store

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**Image:** Customer Care Specialist Greg Schmidt helps a customer in the Sharper Vision Store.



**The appointment-based model was not just a necessary option for the circumstances. It provided customers a relaxed environment in which to learn, explore and understand what might be best for their needs.**

was considered “essential” by the government, it was permitted to remain open. But how open was “open”? How were we to balance our customers’ need for the kinds of specialty items not available anywhere else with the safety needs of staff and the community?

The solution we came up with in 2020 was to replace walk-in shopping with appointment-based visits to the store. A doorbell was installed at the front door to accommodate customers who were unaware that shopping was restricted. Online and telephone sales continued as usual.

That policy remained in place for the first half of 2021. **In June, with the hire of new Store Customer Care Specialist Greg Schmidt, the door was finally unlocked, and self-serve shopping resumed.**

But clearly, something wonderful had transpired along the way. The appointment-based model was not just a necessary option for the circumstances; it offered unexpected and powerful benefits. It provided customers a relaxed environment in which to learn, explore and understand what might be best for their needs. Staff attended to clients individually, following appropriate safety protocols, to show customers the range of products they might find helpful. Sometimes the personal attention helped alert customers to items they weren’t aware they needed.

“If someone comes in for a magnifier because they want to continue reading, they probably have other needs as well,” Executive Director Denise Jess says. “You need to learn skills in a variety of contexts. What I think was so powerful about appointment-based visits was that it gave people time to meet with a vision services specialist in a slower-paced environment.”

Education & Vision Services Director Amy Wurf was one of the Council staff who met individually with customers in the store. “I’m pleased that we were able to provide that service and people seemed to respond well,” Amy says. “They were very grateful, partly because the store felt safe.”

Many people who scheduled a visit had never been in the store before, and some were surprised at what they found. “They’d say, ‘I didn’t know that you also had things for the kitchen, or pens that can help me see as I write a grocery list,’” Amy says.

**Because response to by-appointment shopping was so positive and brought such obvious benefits, it remained an**

**option available to customers even after the store reopened for walk-in shopping in June of 2021.**

“I’ll still recommend to some people that they make an appointment to visit the store, because some people have very specific needs and may not know what they need when they walk in,” Amy says. “That’s been a valuable lesson—there are customers who really appreciate having that extra time for a conversation.”





# DONORS

**Thank you to our generous donors.**  
Find a complete list on our website at [WCBlind.org/donate/donors](http://WCBlind.org/donate/donors).

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White Cane Day Celebration

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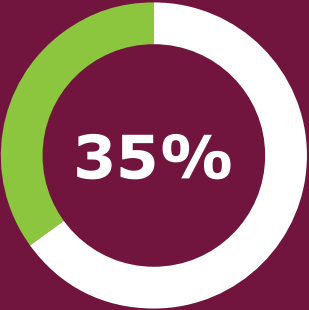
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**White Cane Circle Members made monthly gifts:**

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**894 Donors Made 1,430 Gifts**



**35% Of Gifts Were Under \$100**

**254 New Donors**



**20% Of Donors Gave More Than Once**



# 2021 BY THE NUMBERS

## Advocacy

324.5

Hours Advocating for  
Equitable Policies &  
Practices Related to:

- Transportation
- Health Care
- Employment
- Education
- Civil Rights
- Accessible Voting

## Volunteers

767

Hours  
Donated

## Scholarships

\$2,000

Awards received  
by 10 students  
across Wisconsin

## Education

82

Presentations Reaching  
2,057 Participants

### Topics Included:

- Coping with Vision Loss
- Pedestrian Safety
- Website Accessibility

## Vision Services

382

In-Home Vision  
Rehabilitation Visits

257

Access Technology  
Appointments

159

Low Vision  
Rehabilitation Visits

160

Phone  
Consultations

## Sharper Vision Store

1,654

Customers from  
51 Counties

## White Canes

438

Canes Provided to  
Clients in 42 Counties

23

Communities and the  
State of Wisconsin Issued  
White Cane Safety Day  
Proclamations



# FINANCIALS

## 2021 Revenue

Contributions .....	\$379,751
Bequests .....	\$424,173
Store Sales (net) .....	\$ 66,536
Vision Services Revenue ....	\$ 13,319
Rent .....	\$14,400
Investments .....	\$1,022,931
Miscellaneous.....	\$21,503
<b>TOTAL REVENUE .....</b>	<b>\$1,942,613</b>

## 2021 Expenses

Low Vision Services .....	\$497,830
Community Education .....	\$295,913
Fund Development.....	\$142,316
Management & General .....	\$207,339
<b>TOTAL EXPENSES.....</b>	<b>\$1,143,398</b>



**Staff:** (left to right) Mitch Brey, Heather Buggs, Kathleen Callen, Jim Denham, Bob Jacobson, Denise Jess, Brent Perzentka, Judith Rasmussen, debbie rasmussen, Greg Schmidt, Dan Torres, Lori Werbeckes, Amy Wurf





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