



2022

# Annual Report

70th Anniversary

**Empowerment—  
Independence—Dignity**



•⠠ 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.



**Flashback:** A staff member assisting a client using a video magnifier.

# Message from the Executive Director and the Board Chair



In 2022 the Wisconsin Council of the Blind & Visually Impaired celebrated its 70th anniversary. Founded in 1952 by Wisconsinites living with blindness, the Council has a proud legacy of promoting the dignity and empowerment of people with vision loss, initially through legislative advocacy. Seventy years later, our public policy efforts remain a key pillar in fulfilling our mission. During the year, we strengthened our relationships with legislators and state agency leaders and fostered collaborations with other disability and aging advocates. Through efforts like the Wisconsin Disability Vote Coalition and the Wisconsin Non-Driver Advisory Committee, we strive to ensure our community is heard by policy makers and to improve access to key services and activities like transportation and voting. The Council is pleased to serve as a leader in these critical advocacy endeavors.

Early in our history, the Council began our free White Cane Program and opened the Sharper Vision Store,

adding vision services as our second pillar function. The ability to navigate our environments safely and confidently is key to living independent and successful lives for those with vision loss, and the white cane is a critical tool for safe travel. In 2022, the Council gave out over 400 white canes. Some recipients, including children, were getting their first cane, while others were receiving a replacement for an old, worn-out one. Additionally, we added Orientation and Mobility (O&M) training to our menu of services. O&M is a vital skillset for navigating busy environments.

Our store has grown from a small room with merchandise on pegboards to a busy brick and mortar shop in our current Madison building along with a growing online presence. The purchasing experience is complemented with excellent customer care, providing consultation and training to enhance success in using these adaptive tools.

Education is the Council's third pillar of service. In 2022, we continued our long tradition of education opportunities geared toward people with vision loss and their families to build understanding and confidence. We also work to educate Wisconsinites without vision loss to demystify and support. Some of our audiences included staff from



the Wisconsin Corrections system, building their awareness of the prison population who are blind or visually impaired; tabling at events like Madison's Gospel Run to connect with communities where the incidence of vision loss is quite high; and our much-enjoyed Dining in the Dark experiences.

The work of advocating for our community by working for greater inclusion, increased awareness and more high-quality vision services is made possible by a dedicated Board of Directors, passionate and highly skilled staff, and strong relationships with our volunteers, partners and donors. More than 50 of those donors have been giving to the Council for at least half of the organization's lifetime! We are grateful that you've joined us for part of our 70-year journey to enhance the lives of those of us living with vision loss and are excited for you to continue on this journey with us.



**Denise Jess**  
Executive Director



**Nick Sinram**  
Chair

## 2023 Board of Directors

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“The need is more than we can possibly provide for, but we continue to build our capacity to fill more of the gaps.”

– **Amy Wurf**, Education and Vision Services Director

**Image:** Education & Vision Services Director Amy Wurf demonstrating a lighted digital magnifier to a client.



# Vision Services

## Expanding Menu Helps Address Growing Gap in Vision Services

2022 was a banner year for the Council's Vision Services team and the clients they serve. We began offering new services, added a second low vision support group, and opened an on-site vision rehabilitation classroom at our Madison offices.

"We were just so excited to offer the new services and welcome the new clients," says Education and Vision Services Director Amy Wurf. "We offer the whole gamut now. I know the need is more than we can possibly provide for, but I also know we can now fill in more of those gaps."

The gaps Amy refers to are the focus of an eye-opening 2022 report, "Wisconsin's Older Population and Vision Loss," compiled by The Ohio State University for the VisionServe Alliance. Among the facts in the report: An estimated 4.2% of older people in Wisconsin report severe vision impairment

or blindness. The report underscores the importance of ensuring that people across the state have access to the full range of vision services.

One new service option at the Council is Orientation and Mobility (O&M) training. O&M provides skills for getting around independently. That could be anything from white cane skills to get to a baseball game across town to moving smoothly from the basement to the second story in one's own home. Amy says offering O&M is particularly significant, as the need far outpaces the number of qualified, certified instructors.

To help address that need, Brent Perzentka, who was already serving the Council as a Certified Vision Rehabilitation Therapist, added O&M certification to his list of credentials in 2022. After completing his academic coursework in O&M, Brent finished his training during the summer with over 600 hours of work in an internship at the Blind Rehabilitation Center at Edward Hines, Jr. VA Hospital in Chicago. Brent speaks passionately about the importance of O&M skills in maintaining independence. "Without these skills, they'd be relying on other people all the time and compromising their own personal safety," he says.

Braille instruction, taught by Certified Vision Rehabilitation Therapist Rachel Pavone, is another new addition to the Council's Vision Services menu. Rachel was in elementary school when she started learning braille. She emphasizes that even very basic braille skills can

improve one's quality of life, assisting with such daily activities as reading elevator buttons, room signs and labels on kitchen items. Amy says, "Rachel has great ideas for practical uses of braille."

Much of Rachel's braille instruction takes place in the Council's new on-site Vision Rehabilitation Classroom, created with the help of a generous gift from an anonymous donor. Rachel also uses the classroom to work with clients to build adaptive skills for accomplishing daily living tasks. "Having the option to work with clients here at the Council has made a huge difference both for us and for the people we're serving," Rachel says.

The idea for the Council's new College and Working Age Low Vision Support Group came from members of the Council's original group, which is now called Trailblazers. "We listened to younger members of the support group from around the state who said they'd be more comfortable in a smaller group more tailored to their needs, people in college or early in their career tracks," Amy says. The new group also meets outside of business hours to better accommodate members' work or school schedules. Both support groups are a valuable opportunity to be heard by people experiencing similar challenges and share ideas and tips for everyday living.

As the need for vision services continues to grow, the Council is pleased to continue expanding its



capacity to provide the services Wisconsinites living with vision loss can benefit from.

You can learn more about the full range of Vision Services offered by the Council at [WCBlind.org/Vision-Services](http://WCBlind.org/Vision-Services).



**Flashback:** Staff with an early model video magnifier.



# Advocacy

## Personal Stories + Data = Effective Advocacy

For years, one of the biggest obstacles we faced in our advocacy work was a lack of reliable data about vision loss in Wisconsin. That obstacle was removed in 2022 with the publication of a new report by the VisionServe Alliance, written by researchers at The Ohio State University College of Optometry. “Wisconsin’s Older Population and Vision Loss: A Briefing” is the first study ever to examine health and quality of life at the state level among older Wisconsinites with vision loss. The report also provides county-level estimates of blindness and low vision among older Wisconsinites.

This research was an extremely valuable tool in our 2022 advocacy work. It also helped strengthen collaboration among partner organizations that share our advocacy goals, such as Vision Forward.

“Personal stories give policymakers concrete examples of our concerns, while data gives them the big picture,” says Council Executive Director Denise Jess. “Analytics like the number of people impacted, which groups are disproportionately affected, how the group is doing



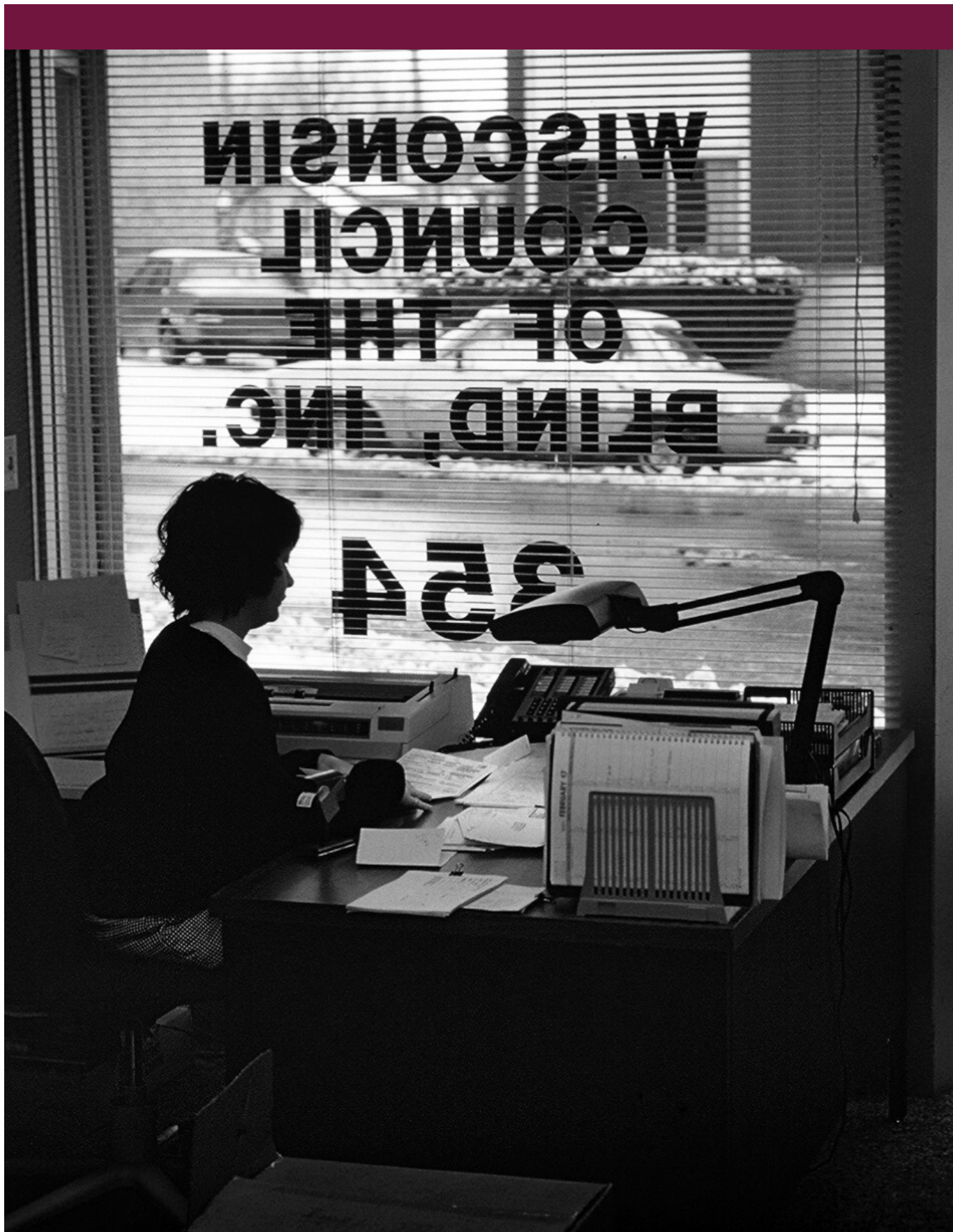


"Personal stories give policymakers concrete examples of our concerns, while data gives them the big picture."

– **Denise Jess**, Executive Director

**Image:** Executive Director Denise Jess speaking at a press event in Madison about voting rights.





**Flashback:** The Council's old offices at 354 W. Main St. in Madison.



compared to their peers, and what the costs to society are when issues are not addressed are powerful points of advocacy.” These data tools were particularly useful as we prepared to communicate our 2023-25 biennial state budget priorities to the Governor and legislators.

The report confirmed what we’d long been observing. A few of the baseline facts:

- An estimated 4.2% of older people in Wisconsin report severe vision impairment or blindness.
- Women, who comprise 59% of the older population, are more likely than men to experience vision impairment.
- African Americans report much higher prevalence of vision impairment than their white peers.
- Vision impairment among people 65 and older varies widely across Wisconsin counties, from 3% to 13%.

The report goes on to focus on the impact of these facts. It notes that economic well-being is a key social determinant of health, and that lower socio-economic status has been shown to represent a substantial barrier to access to care for those with vision loss.

- Older people with vision impairment have lower levels of education and are poorer than older people without vision loss. Forty percent of older

people with vision impairment have not graduated from high school, and 30% have annual incomes below \$20,000.

- Older people with vision impairment report higher prevalence of chronic conditions, particularly stroke, arthritis, diabetes, kidney disease and depression. Not surprisingly, 55% of older people with vision impairment in Wisconsin report fair or poor health, compared to 20% of older people without vision impairment.
- 37% of older people with vision impairment report 14 or more days of poor physical health in the past 30 days, compared to 13% of those without vision impairment.
- 13% of people with vision impairment report 14 or more days of poor mental health in the past 30 days, compared to 6% of those without vision loss.

These statistics will continue to provide a foundation to advocate for, among other things, greater access to vision services, better accessible transportation options, and more affordable health care coverage. “This data in tandem with a personal story makes for a powerful advocacy combination,” Denise says. “Putting those pieces together is the most effective way to get the attention of policymakers.”



“

“We need to open the path for people to better understand our experience and our lives. Education leads to less unintentional pain directed toward our folks.”

– **Denise Jess**, Executive Director

**Image:** Blindfolded diners enjoying their entrée at a Dining in the Dark event.



# Education

## Delivering Our Message to More Key Groups

The Council's education work took on both traditional and new forms during the past year. Executive Director Denise Jess says, "Education is the doorway to Vision Services," and that has never been more apparent than in 2022. As in years past, the Council's Vision Services team continued to support clients in understanding and adapting to their vision loss—knowing what to expect, learning new skills and strategies, and understanding that they're not alone in their journey.

But it was also a year of evolution. That shift included engaging in more outreach to key groups of sighted people than in the past. "When I first came to the Council, direct outreach with constituents with vision loss was the primary way that education was done," says Denise. "We now have this whole other population of people who don't have vision loss who are interacting with us. They may be acting on beliefs about vision loss that are not accurate."



Denise points to a recent national survey that showed a large section of Americans would prefer a cancer diagnosis to having a disability. “I’ve had vision loss my whole life and people have treated me like I’m not smart or like I’m a child,” she says. “And then I see surveys like that one and it brings home why we need to open the path for people to better understand our experience and our lives. Education leads to less unintentional pain directed toward our folks.”

To that end, we worked in 2022 to open the hearts and minds of people who do not have vision loss. And to find common ground to build this approach. The Council is strategic about this, and one strategy is to develop new partnerships and strengthen existing ones.

The “Make Way for Pedestrians” webinar was a good example. Co-sponsored by the Council, 1000 Friends of Wisconsin, and the Sierra Club Wisconsin chapter, the event educated attendees on how to evaluate their local pedestrian networks and effectively advocate for better sidewalks, crosswalks, curb cuts and more. The idea was that we are all pedestrians, so walkable communities benefit both people with vision loss and those without it. When White Cane Safety Day rolled around in October, the Council took the opportunity to expand our message from a narrow White Cane Law focus to a broader pedestrian safety agenda.

Voting rights was another key education topic. Two webinars, “Empowering the Disability Vote” and an “Interactive

Session on Voting Rights,” were presented by the Council in collaboration with the League of Women Voters of Milwaukee County, the League of Women Voters of Wisconsin and the Disability Vote Coalition.

“There is so much commonality out there,” Denise says about these partnerships. “Why not join together to better elevate our message?”

The Council continued its ongoing annual educational programming in 2022 as well. The springtime Birding by Ear event, presented in partnership with Madison Audubon Society, takes participants—both sighted and with vision loss—into nature to learn to identify birds by sound rather than sight. The Council staffed tables and distributed educational materials at events like the Disability Pride Festival in Madison and the Madison Gospel Walk/Run and Health Fair. People around the state picked up valuable tips on accessing information through classes taught by Access Technology Specialist Jim Denham. Jim’s November access technology class, for example, walked students through the latest iPhone and iPad operating systems.

2022 marked the return of Dining in the Dark, a culinary experience in which blindfolded diners experience a meal focusing on senses other than sight. There were two Dining in the Dark events in June 2022—at Beastro & Barley in Reedsburg and at Four Winds Farm in Fitchburg. Both events sold out well in advance.



Gallery Night in November was a wonderful celebration of art created by individuals with vision loss. We were honored to showcase the work of eight artists from across Wisconsin working in a range of media, including acrylic and watercolor paint, pen and ink drawing, digital illustration and woodworking. The event was another opportunity, Denise noted, "to help people see that we're just people too, and like the rest of the population, some of us are artists."

These open-to-the-public events widen the Council's educational scope and create opportunities to normalize vision loss. "We like to do things that disrupt the expected," Denise says. "With events like Gallery Night and Dining in the Dark, you never know who will come in the door."



**Flashback:** Council members staffing an event exhibit table.

# Donors

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

## **Friends of the Council gave \$500 or more in 2022**

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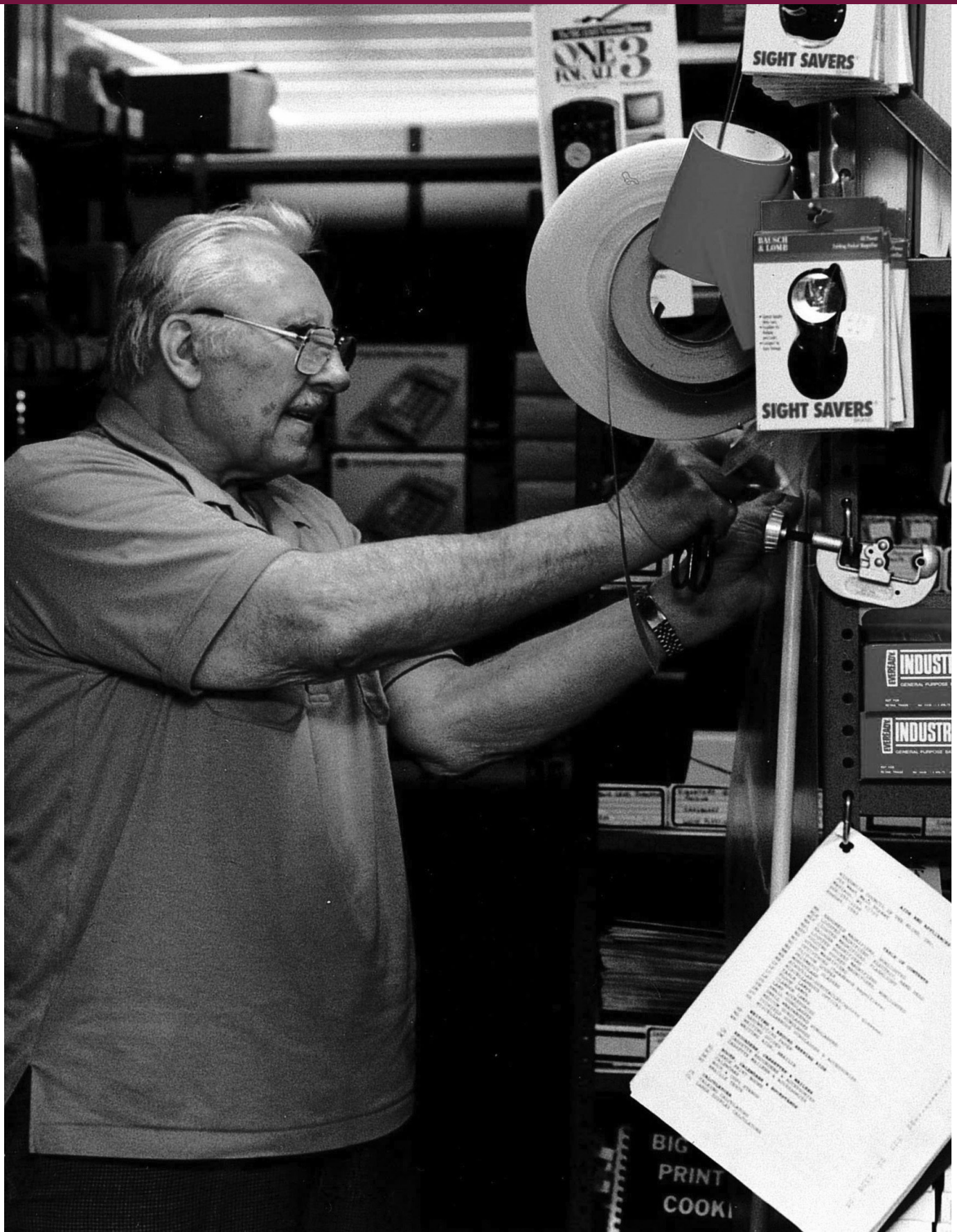
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William &  
Michele Holcomb





**Flashback:** The storeroom in an earlier version of the Sharper Vision Store.



Wenthe-Davidson  
Engineering Co.

**We gratefully  
acknowledge  
bequests from:**

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Norman K. Bailey  
Florence Preiss  
Norman & Irene Volke  
Vreeland Family Trust

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Members made  
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Donald Whitman  
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**1,376** gifts  
from 27 states and 57  
Wisconsin counties



**186**  
new donors



**40**  
monthly donors

# 2022

## by the Numbers

### Advocacy

Advocated on health care, transportation, employment, education, civil rights and accessible voting with:

- State Legislature
- 3 cabinet-level state agencies
- Wisconsin Elections Commission
- Governor's Office
- Local governments

### Scholarships

**8** \$2,000 scholarships

Awarded to students across Wisconsin

### Volunteers

**841** hours donated

### Education

**87** presentations reaching 3,998 participants

Topics included: Transportation

- Access Technology
- Adapting to Changing Vision

### Vision Services

**129** Vision Rehabilitation Visits

**255** Access Technology Appointments

**123** Low Vision Evaluation Visits

**139** Phone Consultations

**20** Orientation & Mobility Visits (Oct.–Dec.)

### Sharper Vision Store

**1,517** customers from 65 counties

### White Canes

**438** canes provided to clients in 48 counties

**32** communities and the State of Wisconsin issued White Cane Safety Day proclamations

# Staff 2022-23

## Financials

### 2022 Revenue

Contributions .....	\$400,276
Bequests .....	\$150,392
Store Sales (net) .....	\$203,359
Vision Services Revenue .....	\$14,400
Rent .....	\$14,600
Investments .....	(\$1,353,456)
Miscellaneous.....	\$4,552

**TOTAL REVENUE ..... (\$565,877)**

### 2022 Expenses

Low Vision Services .....	\$670,339
Community Education .....	\$357,307
Fund Development.....	\$156,274
Management & General .....	\$249,844

**TOTAL EXPENSES ..... \$1,433,764**

**Note on financials:** Like many organizations, we experienced substantial investment losses in 2022, resulting in negative revenue and an operating deficit for the year. Recognizing that market fluctuations are inevitable, the Council maintains ample reserves to insulate us from this uncertainty to the degree possible. Consequently, there was no significant impact on our ability to conduct operations as planned in 2022.



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





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