



2024 ANNUAL REPORT

Empowerment | Independence | Dignity



2024-25

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Mission & Values

Mission

To promote the dignity and empowerment of the people of Wisconsin who are blind or low vision 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.

Cover image: *"Autumn in Alaska," oil painting by Janae O'Connell*

Left: *Birding by Ear at Aldo Leopold Nature Center*



Message from the Executive Director and the Board Chair



Denise



Nick

Throughout its history, the Council has strived to work with people with vision loss to improve their lives, to gain or sustain employment, to remain healthy as they age, and to live independently and with dignity. We've understood that access to more robust collective information about our population would enhance our efforts.

Since 2022 the Council has gained access to game-changing data about the people we serve through our membership in VisionServe Alliance. First came a Big Data Report outlining the demographics and health concerns of adults aged 65 and older who are blind or low vision. In 2024 a companion report was published covering the working-age population ages 18 to 64. These reports, coupled with anecdotal information, have guided our strategic efforts in providing vision services, advocacy and educational programming geared

towards promoting the dignity and empowerment of adults of all ages.

Here is some key data from the report on working-age adults:

- **3.5% of Wisconsin residents** aged 18 to 64, or just under 92,000 people, are blind or low vision.
- **48.6% of this population** are currently working compared to 74% of the general population.
- **Over 40% of working-age adults** who are blind/low vision report being unable to work compared to 5.6% of the general population.
- **72.5% of the working-aged blind/low vision population** earn less than \$35,000 annually.
- **Over 21% of this age group** have not completed high school compared to 8% of the general population.

Working-age adults who are blind or low vision face significant barriers, including limited transportation to and from work, insufficient specialized education and training opportunities, significant health concerns like diabetes and mental health issues, and employer bias about blind or low vision individuals' ability to succeed in the workplace.

The Council has several strategic initiatives to support working-age people in gaining the skills and confidence to enter or re-enter the workforce.

- **Orientation & Mobility Training:** Using a white cane is important for anyone who is blind or has low vision to develop confidence in navigating their environments, but it is absolutely vital for success in the workforce. Nearly 75% of our clients participating in O&M instruction are in the working-age population.

- **Access Technology Training:** In most employment situations, it is imperative that workers have strong computing skills. For blind or low vision workers, accessing computers, tablets and smartphones requires using access technologies like screen readers and magnification. While access technologies are liberating for the user, they require skill to use them effectively and efficiently. Approximately 60% of clients using our AT services are working-aged adults.
- **Working-Age Support Group:** Recognizing the unique needs of people under 45, the Council facilitates a monthly support group to address the needs of people seeking employment and those who are already working. Peer-to-peer support can be a critical lifeline for sharing ideas and strategies for navigating the workplace and staying emotionally fit. We continue to see the membership of this group grow.

- **Post-Secondary Academic Scholarships:** Recognizing that postsecondary education is a roadmap to career success and financial stability, the Council has a long tradition of providing scholarships to students seeking a postsecondary degree or technical training. In 2024 we awarded six \$2,000 scholarships to students or adults returning to school who are blind or low vision. Past scholarship recipients have gone on to careers in education, health services, social work, finance and law.
- **Advocacy:** The Big Data information, particularly the information on workforce participation, has been very useful for deepening our work with the Wisconsin Department of Workforce Development's Division of Vocational Rehabilitation. Leaders in the department have acknowledged after seeing the data that they didn't fully understand the

scope of the challenges. We look forward to strengthening our working relationship with DVR to increase access to their programs and training opportunities and improve results for people who are blind/low vision. We are pleased to serve as a trusted service provider with them.

At the Council, we believe in the dignity of work for people who are blind or low vision and are excited about how we can continue to play a critical role in opening doors of opportunity. We are grateful to our donors, grantors, volunteers and public policy partners for joining us on this journey.



Denise Jess
Executive Director



Nick Sinram
Chair

2024 In Review

Making Progress and Breaking Barriers

2024 was another fantastic year for the Council, as events and activities new and old propelled our mission to promote the dignity and empowerment of people in Wisconsin who are blind or low vision. "2024 was a full and dynamic year for the Council across all three of our pillars: advocacy, education and vision services," says Council Executive Director Denise Jess. "The hard work of the Council staff and board, the support of our donors and volunteers and our collaborations with many partner organizations around the state were the foundation for these successes."

We started the year with a strong advocacy win, as Governor Evers signed into law 2023 Wisconsin Act 114, known as "Steve's Law." Named in tribute to Steve Johnson, an avid outdoorsperson and former member of the Council's Board of Directors, the law allows people to use a State



Governor Tony Evers Signing Steve's Law, a small but important step toward ID equity.

ID to prove their state residency when purchasing things like fishing and hunting permits through the online Go Wild system. The Council had been working with state lawmakers for years to pass Steve's Law, and while there is still work to be done to

create true ID equity across all areas of government, Steve's Law marked a major steppingstone toward that goal.

A few months later, another important bill supported by the



Blindfolded diners at Brix Cider in Mount Horeb experiencing Dining in the Dark.

Council, Wisconsin Act 267, was signed into law. This legislation allows ABLE savings accounts—already available in most other states—to be set up in Wisconsin. ABLE accounts help people with disabilities aged 45 and under save money on health-related expenses.

In the spring, the Council hosted three successful educational events in a single month. We held our Advocacy Day event to help arm people across the state with the tools to work effectively with local leaders on the issues that matter to them. We teamed up with the Southern Wisconsin Bird Alliance (formerly Madison Audubon) and new partner the Aldo Leopold Nature Center in Monona for Birding by Ear,

which demonstrates that sound can be just as important as sight in identifying birds, and that people of all abilities can enjoy hobbies that take place in Wisconsin's wonderful natural areas. And we returned to Brix Cider in Mount Horeb for Dining in the Dark, where diners donned blindfolds to experience a three-course meal focusing on senses other than vision.



The dishes are described to Dining in the Dark participants only after they have taken their first few bites. Each of the courses served at Brix was a multi-sensory delight.

In June, we continued our decades-long tradition of awarding postsecondary scholarships to students across the state who are blind or low vision. Six students each received a \$2,000 scholarship to further their education and support that progress toward their career goals.

Over the summer, we gained a powerful new advocacy tool in the VisionServe Alliance's (VSA) Big Data Report on Working Age Adults. This second in a series of VSA Big Data reports confirmed what the Council has long known: Vision loss is more prevalent in Wisconsin than most people realize, and available vision services are not meeting the level of need. While the data is sobering, the information contained within the report is monumental in supporting our advocacy for systemic changes in our healthcare and transportation systems to promote employment success and overall well-being.

In October, several members of the Council staff travelled to Dodgeville for a new event, On Sight: Vision Loss Resources in Southwest Wisconsin. Each member of our Vision Services team and Executive



Brent Perzentka addressing participants at On Sight: Vision Loss Resources in Southwest Wisconsin

Director Denise Jess gave presentations that introduced attendees to the services available to them and to the Council's advocacy work. Staff from the Aging and Disability Resource Center (ADRC) of Southwest Wisconsin, the Wisconsin Talking Book and Braille Library, and the Wisconsin Office for the Blind and Visually Impaired were also on hand to provide information. The event helped affirm that people who are blind or low vision living in rural areas can live independently on their own terms with the right knowledge and support. We're grateful to the generous local foundation that funded this event.



Our hosts for the On Sight event, ADRC of Southwest Wisconsin, provided participants with a wealth of information about their services.

October was also Pedestrian Safety Month, which includes White Cane Safety Day on October 15. Over three dozen municipalities across the entire state issued White Cane Safety Day proclamations in 2024, along with the State of Wisconsin and Milwaukee County. Local advocates in all corners of Wisconsin continued to work tirelessly to make their communities safer by working with local leaders to improve pedestrian safety infrastructure throughout their neighborhoods and communities.



Waukesha was one of four Wisconsin communities where we ran bus ads for White Cane Safety Day and Pedestrian Safety Month.



2024 Gallery Night

In November, we opened our doors to the community for our annual Gallery Night event. In 2024, we featured the work of nine artists from across the state who are blind or low vision. The art on display delighted and inspired everyone who came.

We are grateful to the many individuals, Lions Clubs, grantors and businesses who contributed financially to the Council. Those gifts enabled us to provide services for every client regardless of their ability to pay, and their sponsorships provided resources to present events and other educational outreach programming.

Making a Difference:

Personal Stories Show the Impact of Council Services

Using O&M Skills to Get Out into the Community

Sarah Evans loves to get outside and aims to walk four miles every day through the park near her home in Madison. "If I don't get outside every day, I really start to struggle," she says. Sarah is legally blind from cataracts, and before coming to the Council she would walk through the park without a white cane. She says she could manage the park trails just fine, but getting there was difficult. "Before the Council, I struggled with most things," Sarah says. "I couldn't go grocery shopping on my own and I couldn't cook. Crossing the street was pretty scary."

Sarah first came into the Council in the summer of 2023 looking for a white cane and help on how to use it. She was quickly connected with Certified Orientation and Mobility



Sarah Evans

Specialist Brent Perzentka to learn how to move safely throughout her home and her community. Brent went with her to the park near her home to build her white cane skills and master

navigating the route back home and the surrounding area. Soon, Sarah began to feel confident that she could get wherever she needed to go safely.

Brent, who is also a Certified Vision Rehabilitation Therapist, also worked with Sarah on daily living skills like cooking and using an ATM. Between the O&M instruction and vision rehab training, Sarah made great strides toward real independence.

“Just being able to go get groceries by myself is so amazing,” Sarah says. “There is definitely a time to reach out and ask for help, but it’s really empowering to know that I can do it on my own. It makes me feel like a bigger, stronger person. It makes me realize that other things in life may not be as hard as they seem.”

That confidence has led Sarah to get more involved in her community. She started volunteering at the church down the road from her home, making sandwiches for people with food insecurity. While she sometimes leaves spreading the mayo to someone else, she says she still enjoys being able to help where she can.

Sarah also began to make art after attending an art class at the church. Before losing her vision, Sarah says she used to love to draw. While she can no longer draw the way

she used to, she can create a more tactile experience. She’s also been experimenting with clay.

More than anything, Sarah says her work with Brent has given her the confidence she needs to live her life how she wants to without fear. “We’ve been working on crossing the street for long enough that I almost feel silly for being so scared,” Sarah says. “It just isn’t scary anymore, and that’s so cool for me. I walk in the park every day, and I’ll run into people who say what I’m doing is brave. But it doesn’t feel particularly brave. Maybe that’s because I’m lucky to have a good teacher.”

Access Technology is an Essential Job Search Tool

Before coming to the Council, Mustapha Fatty says that he didn’t have much experience using a computer. Diagnosed with retinitis pigmentosa at a young age, Mustapha says his vision has deteriorated rapidly in recent years and is now very limited. In the fall of 2023, his ophthalmologist recommended that he reach out to the Council to see what services we could provide that

might help him in his daily life. He was set up with Certified Vision Rehabilitation Therapist and Orientation and Mobility Specialist Brent Perzentka to learn daily living skills along with how to safely move around his community. He also scheduled training with Access Technology (AT) Specialist Jim Denham to learn how to use a computer.



Mustapha Fatty using his O&M skills to navigate his neighborhood.

“When I first started with Jim, we had to begin by going over the keyboard and the basics of how to use the computer,” Mustapha says. “Eventually, we moved on to how to use a web browser and email.” Mustapha relies on screen reader programs to help him navigate the web and email. Over time, his skills improved to allow him to use the computer independently. Because he could not afford to purchase a computer himself, he was able to borrow one from the Council at no cost through our Laptop Loan Program. With access to the laptop, he was able to practice regularly and put what he learned working with Jim into practice.

One of Mustapha’s top goals with his access technology training was to find a job. “These training sessions have been so important to me,” Mustapha says. “In the modern age, you cannot really do anything without technology. Without this computer training, I would not be able to look for a job.” The AT instruction has built up his skills enough that he is able to submit online applications on his own. The Council also connected Mustapha with the Wisconsin Division of

Vocational Rehabilitation, which was able to connect him with potential jobs that were accessible to him. In less than two years working with the Council’s Vision Services staff, he is now interviewing for jobs in the Madison area.

Whether he’s working with Jim to beef up his technology skills or with Brent to learn how to navigate his community safely, Mustapha says he is grateful for everything the Council has been able to provide. “Because of the Council, I no longer believe disability to mean a lack of skill,” Mustapha says. “Through the vision rehabilitation sessions and the access technology training, I am able to do things for myself. I used to just sit in the house all day long. Now, I can go for walks on my own, apply for jobs, and live the life that I want to live.”

Christine Violet Advocates for Safety in Her Community

Hillsboro resident Christine Violet goes to her local public library a lot. While her vision loss keeps her from checking out many books, she can often be found working with the

library staff to use their copy machine and many of their other services. But as a white cane user, she says she struggled to use the stairs leading into the library. Christine does have some usable vision, but it’s hard to tell where the concrete begins and ends for each step. She says she could only use the stairs if she held the railing, a major challenge when her hands were already full with books, her cane, and anything else she brought with her.



Christine Violet on the newly painted library stairs.

Christine noticed that she wasn't alone, that other library patrons also struggled with the stairs. "When I spoke with the librarians to tell them the stairs weren't safe, they said they had never thought about that before," Christine says. "They worked very fast to put in a work order and get things moving." In no time at all, the Hillsboro Public Works department was out to paint the stairs so that they are now significantly more visible.

Christine's efforts to improve access to the library is a great example of the kind of self-advocacy the Council promotes. So it's no wonder that she was one of the first people to get involved in our recently launched Advocacy Discussion Group.

But advocacy is not Christine's only connection to the Council. After being diagnosed with macular degeneration three years ago, she quickly sought the Council's help in getting a free white cane. Because she can no longer drive, she got a ride from her local Aging and Disability Resource Center to our offices in downtown Madison to pick up her cane and to meet with our Vision Services team. "I've been really happy with everything the

Council has done for me," Christine says. "Certified Orientation and Mobility Specialist Brent Perzentka taught me how to use my white cane, and I did a lot of work with Certified Low Vision Therapist Amy Wurf as well. They were all really great."

Christine's favorite part of the Council, however, is our monthly online support groups. Christine joined the Trailblazers Low Vision Support Group shortly after her diagnosis and attends meetings regularly. "There are all sorts of people there with different levels of vision loss in those meetings," Christine says. "It's great to be able to talk with others about what they are doing, especially when you live in a rural area like I do."

Christine puts the Council's mission into action in her own community. In addition to the library, she's now worked with four local businesses to make their stairs more visible and accessible for people with low vision. Sometimes it means painting the concrete by hand. Other times it simply requires putting a welcome mat on one stair to create better contrast. "The first place I worked with was the library, so that had to

go through the City Council," Christine says. "Working with private businesses means taking a little different approach, but I'm glad that they're following through and doing it!"

Whether it's through advocacy advice, support groups or vision services, Christine says the Council helps her continue to live her life independently. "Everyone at the Council is so friendly, helpful and knowledgeable," she says. The Council has been wonderful."

2024

by the Numbers

Donors

1,411

gifts received from
60 Wisconsin counties
and 26 states

We welcomed

207 new
donors

Volunteers

746 hours
donated

Sharper Vision Store

2,179

customers from 60 counties

Vision Services

21 Vision
Rehabilitation Visits

308 Access Technology
Appointments

157 Low Vision
Evaluation Visits

164 Phone
Consultations

232 Orientation &
Mobility Visits

White Canes

551 canes provided to
clients in 49 counties

38 municipalities,
1 county and the
State of Wisconsin
issued White
Cane Safety Day
proclamations

Scholarships

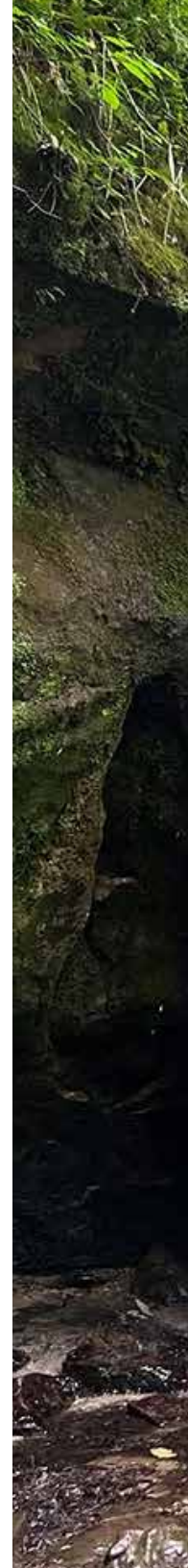
6 \$2,000
scholarships

to students across Wisconsin

Education

67 presentations and
outreach events
reaching 3,049
participants

Right: "Waterfall,"
photograph by Illana Dehoyos





Financials

Financials

2024 Revenue

Contributions	\$482,666
Bequests	\$257,759
Store Sales (net)	\$240,304
Vision Services	\$24,066
Rent	\$14,000
Investments	\$1,033,412
Miscellaneous	\$2,033

TOTAL REVENUE \$2,054,240

2024 Expenses

Low Vision Services	\$309,794
Community Education	\$202,110
Fund Development	\$137,858
Management & General	\$778,709
Cost of Goods Sold	\$214,266

TOTAL EXPENSES \$1,642,737

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