



## ADVOCACY YEAR IN REVIEW: Laying a Strong Foundation for Steady Progress

Nearly a third of Wisconsin adults do not drive. It's a fact that Council Executive Director Denise Jess shared this past spring with members of the State Legislature's Joint Committee on Finance during nine hours of budget hearings.

Submitting testimony on the state budget is one of the key actions the Council took in 2021 to advance our advocacy priorities, which focused on civil rights, education, vocational services, healthcare, transportation and accessible absentee voting. You can find more information about each focus area on our website at [wcblind.org/advocacy](https://wcblind.org/advocacy).

Here is an overview of our progress on advocacy efforts last year.

### Advocating for State Budget Priorities

The Council weighed in on a number of measures in Wisconsin's 2021-23 biennial budget to improve transportation and accessibility for nondrivers, increase training and work-related resources in the Department of Workforce Development's Division of Vocational Rehabilitation (DVR), and increase aid for special education (visit <https://wcblind.org/2021/03/advocating-for-action-in-the-state-budget/> for more information). While we were heard,



Gov. Tony Evers signed the 2021-23 biennial state budget into law in July.

the Legislature did not act on our requests, and the Council got little of what we asked for in the budget.

“We were disappointed in the outcome of the budget process,” Denise says. “We believe this budget doesn’t fully reflect the needs of the people in the state who are blind and visually impaired. But there were some important wins that set us up well for the next budget cycle.”

Denise notes that we laid a solid foundation for future budget talks by establishing an open communication line with the Governor’s Office and educating legislators about our priorities through participation in budget hearings that captured significant media attention.

**Advocating for Accessibility**

Our efforts on this front focused on improving access to voting, transportation, and vision rehabilitation services.

**Wisconsin Non-Driver Advisory Committee**

This diverse group, co-chaired by Denise, includes representatives from state agencies, lawmakers, advocacy organizations, local government and transit operators. They are charged with identifying and making recommendations to remove transportation barriers for people who don’t drive. Major accomplishments include:

- Drafting a set of transportation performance metrics that reflect non-drivers’ needs. This information will be distributed to transit operators across the state to evaluate how effectively they are serving non-drivers.
- Using Census data to determine that 30 percent of Wisconsin adults are non-drivers.
- Developing a computer mapping tool that shows where in the state non-drivers live. With this tool, planners and policy makers can discover where public transit funding and services are most needed.

As we continue to work toward our advocacy goals, please share your story in your communities to illustrate what transportation options, pedestrian safety and accessible absentee voting mean to you.

**Voting Access**

The Council advocated for an absentee ballot that is fully accessible for people who are visually impaired. With voting rights being at the center of heated public debate this past year, we had an opportunity to inform people of the election barriers people with vision loss experience.

**Website Accessibility**

We worked with the Wisconsin Department of Administration (DOA) to build more accessibility into state government websites. The result was a first-ever coordinated plan to help different state agencies—the Department of Health Services (DHS) and Department of Workforce Development (DWD)—become more accessible to people who are visually impaired.

This effort is a great start to gaining access to important information on voting, public health and more. We are now in discussions with the State Legislature about making its website—which is administered separately from those controlled by DOA—more accessible.

**Access to Services**

The number of people living with vision loss is expected to double in the next 10 years. This is troubling, since there is already a large resource gap in vision rehabilitation services. The Council is discussing this gap with DHS, advocating for the agency to examine needs and develop a comprehensive plan for addressing them.

**Advocating for Pedestrian Safety**

White Cane Safety Day in October was an opportunity to build awareness of the importance of pedestrian safety for people who are blind and visually impaired. The Council’s White Cane Safety Day campaign was supported by 22 mayoral proclamations from across the state and a statewide proclamation from Gov. Tony Evers.

We spoke in front of six of these communities, and participated in a press event in La Crosse. Council bus ads ran in Green Bay, Wausau and Madison.

**What You Can Do**

To be successful, we rely on the participation of a network of advocates across the state. As we continue to work toward our advocacy goals, please share your story in your communities to illustrate what transportation options, pedestrian safety and accessible absentee voting mean to you. If you use social media, share our posts with your online network to help spread the word and educate people about our work. Sign up for our Advocacy Update e-newsletter, which will also place you on our Action Alert list. ■

## Letter from Executive Director Denise Jess



How exciting! The Wisconsin Council of the Blind & Visually Impaired celebrates our 70th anniversary this year. Since our founding in 1952, the Council has been a primary voice for the rights of Wisconsinites living with vision loss. It is with sincere gratitude that we honor our founders and financial supporters who created the firm base on which the Council has grown and evolved.

A solid foundation is only one aspect of our history. Having the wisdom

to flex to welcome our changing world is another. As the faces and voices of those living with vision loss have grown well beyond congenital vision impairment to include the rapidly expanding population of older adults acquiring vision loss through disease, the Council has responded.

The Sharper Vision Store has grown from a pegboard of adaptive products to one of the largest stores of its kind in the country, with a vibrant web and physical presence. Our free white cane program puts the tool of independence and safety into five hundred hands annually, including those of our littlest Wisconsinites. The Council offers a robust suite of vision rehabilitation services ranging from in-home teaching to in-person and remote access technology training to low vision evaluations. We are excited to add orientation and mobility services later in the year. Our advocacy footprint grows as we work in coalition with others, influencing legislators, the Governor's Office, and state agency leaders. Those governing and leading the Council's mission also evolve to represent the diversity of Wisconsin's blind and visually impaired population.

We know that our past and present must pave the way for our future. We have important work to do to honor our mission to promote the dignity and empowerment of people living with vision loss. With only a small fraction of the visually impaired population receiving life-changing vision rehabilitation services, the Council has much work to do in

advocating for services that reach all parts of our state, including our most rural communities. As a result of health access disparities, women, people of color and those living in poverty experience vision loss in ever increasing numbers and with significant implications. The Council must stretch to understand and acknowledge these disparities, and strive to break down barriers through both our advocacy and direct service work.

Please join us in celebrating our history, promoting our current endeavors, and guiding our future. While the road to greater equity and access for Wisconsinites living with vision loss is long, it is filled with exciting opportunities. Thank you for being a part of our first 70 years. We invite you on the journey of our next 70. ■

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## Changing Lives One Visit at a Time

For the 100,000 people in Wisconsin living with visual impairment, vision rehabilitation services can be a gamechanger. Access to these services can make all the difference in being able to continue engaging in daily activities and living a rich, satisfying life. Often, experiencing the profound impact vision rehabilitation can have on a family member or one's own life is what prompts an individual to become a Council supporter.

When he started to lose his vision, Lodi resident Howie Blanchar's life changed.

"I couldn't read the newspaper anymore. My wife read it to me every morning," Howie says. "Now, with the help of a video magnifier from the Council, I can read it myself again."

Howie learned about the Wisconsin Council of the Blind & Visually Impaired from a family member. He called and set up an in-home visit from a member of our Vision Services staff with expertise in helping people adapt to life with vision loss. Brent Perzentka, a Certified Vision Rehabilitation Therapist at the Council, introduced Howie to adaptive tools designed to help people like him adjust to their changing vision.

"When I sit down with someone who is experiencing vision loss, I like to get to know the whole person and learn about the things in their life that matter the most to them," Brent explains. "If their vision loss is impacting their ability to continue enjoying the things they love and their ability to maintain their independence, then hopefully we can work together and find solutions and new ways for them to continue to do those things."

These solutions can include technology classes, in-home visits and adaptive products from our Sharper Vision Store.

"I love watching basketball, but I couldn't see a single basket during the Milwaukee Bucks playoff games," Howie says. "With my MaxTV glasses, I can enjoy watching sports and other TV shows again."



The Council's Brent Perzentka helped Howie Blanchar return to reading the newspaper on his own with the aid of a video magnifier.

"I want others to know that if you're having trouble seeing, call the Council. I'm so glad I did," says Howie.

There is no charge for the kind of vision rehabilitation services Howie received from the Council, largely thanks to the generosity of our donors.

"I asked Brent how much his visit was going to cost, and I couldn't believe it when he said there was no charge! My wife and I made a donation right then," he says.

If you would like to help ensure that people experiencing vision loss continue to have access to free vision rehabilitation services, please consider giving to the Council to support our efforts. You can donate or learn more about how to give on our website at [wcblind.org/donate/](https://wcblind.org/donate/). ■

## Arrivals and Departures on the Council Board and Staff



Terri Young, MD

Changes to both the staff and Board of Directors of the Wisconsin Council of the Blind & Visually Impaired are bringing new faces and new experiences to the organization.

The Council welcomed two new board members and a new slate of officers in January. Joining the board are Chuck Fehl of Berlin and Terri Young of Madison. The Council also said goodbye to longtime board member Dan Sippl of Eau Claire, who exits the board after 15 years of service.

"Dan has been a great friend and supporter of the Council. He has been a tireless advocate on issues that are important to the blind and visually impaired community, including employment, transportation, education and access," says outgoing board chair Chris Richmond.

The incoming board members bring valuable new connections and expertise to the Council. Chuck is president of the Berlin Lion's Club and leads a low vision support group at the Berlin Senior Center. Terri is a pediatric ophthalmologist and professor, currently serving as chair



Chuck Fehl

of the Department of Ophthalmology and Visual Sciences at the University of Wisconsin School of Medicine and Public Health.

"Both Terri and Chuck bring a diversity to our board based on their backgrounds and professions that we currently don't have," says Nominating Committee Chair Chip Kaufman. "They're already living the mission of the Council, and we're pleased that they're joining us."

Each also brings experience advocating for people who are visually impaired in their own communities and professions.

Officers elected to new two-year terms on the board are: Nick Sinram, Chair; Rebecca Arrowood, Vice Chair; Rhonda Staats, Secretary; and Renee Peterson, Treasurer.

After seven years as Chair, Chris Richmond will relinquish his gavel, while remaining on the board for one year. He has led the Council through a time of tremendous change, growth and success.

"It has been an honor to work alongside Chris," says Council Executive Director Denise Jess. "In his tenure as Chair, he has skillfully led the Council, building on our rich history while guiding us forward to respond to the needs of our ever-growing community of Wisconsinites experiencing vision loss."

**"I'm very excited to build a strong working relationship with our newly elected board Chair, Nick Sinram. Nick brings skills in law and fiscal management. As a younger professional, his perspective adds value to the Council's strategic direction."**

**—Denise Jess**

**continued on page 10**



## Arrivals and Departures continued

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Sue Cowan

Staff transitions have also taken place at the Council in recent months. Last fall, longtime accounting manager Sue Cowan retired after nine years in the role. She was a big part of the Council's growth and success, and the Council is grateful for her years of service. Sue plans a busy retirement that will allow her to continue focusing on running an ice arena with her family, beekeeping, and much more.

"Sue's integrity, steady accounting stewardship, and willingness to help out in ways that went beyond her job description will be sorely missed," Denise said. "Her no-nonsense yet compassionate style brought a unique energy to the office, and her years of service made us a better organization"



Hannah Mercier

We're pleased to welcome Hannah Mercier as Sue's successor. Hannah brings a wealth of nonprofit financial management experience to the organization, where she will handle accounting, payroll and employee benefits management. ■

## Upcoming Events



### Big Share

Join the Council on Tuesday, March 1 for the Big Share, a day of online giving hosted by Community Shares of Wisconsin. Mark your calendar for this opportunity to make a difference for people living with vision loss in Wisconsin.



### Scholarship applications

Wisconsin students who are blind or visually impaired are invited to apply for a scholarship from the Wisconsin Council of the Blind & Visually Impaired. Scholarships are available for postsecondary students attending a two-year college, technical college, four-year university or graduate program. The application period will open in February, with completed applications due in April.



### Advocacy Days

Plan to join us in April for the Council's 2022 Advocacy Days. Advocacy Days, offered as a virtual event this year, will provide opportunities to learn about the legislative process, get tips on how to communicate with policy makers, and find out how you can help advance the Council's advocacy priorities. ■



## Wisconsin Council of the Blind & Visually Impaired

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### Contact Us

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