2023

Annual Report

Empowerment | Independence | Dignity





Mission & Values

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.



2024 Board of Directors







2024 Board of Directors

Executive Director Denise Jess, Madison

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Garden Images: On the cover and throughout this report are photos of the plants in the Council's Sensory Garden. To learn their names and much more, visit **WCBlind.org/Garden**.

Message from the Executive Director and the Board Chair



2023 was a busy and robust year for the Council. Our vision services professionals provided client-centered instruction online, in people's homes, in the community and at our offices, fostering independence, enhancing quality of life and promoting the dignity of people with vision loss. Our education events encouraged engagement and brought new people to the Council. And our advocacy work helped move bills through the State Legislature. Read on in this Annual Report to learn more.

2023 also brought us the Big Data Report through VisionServe Alliance (VSA), a national consortium of vision loss-serving organizations around the country. Using data from the US Census Bureau, VSA partnered with The Ohio State University to do a state-by-state analysis of older adults with blindness and low vision. This report was followed in early 2024 by a similar one focusing on the working-age population.We've long recognized the challenges presented by the lack of data about vision loss, knowing that better population information would strengthen our efforts to secure funding, shift public policy and plan for the future as the incidence rate of vision loss continues to rise, with an estimated increase of 118% by 2050.

The results indicated what we'd long been observing. The report starts with some 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, both on individuals and the public at large:

- 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.

Economic well-being is a key social determinant of health. Here are some of the social and public impact findings in the report:

- 10% of older people with vision impairment report annual incomes between \$10,000 and less than \$15,000, compared to 4% of people without vision impairment.
- 17% of older people with vision impairment report an annual income of \$15,000 to less than \$20,000, compared to 6% of people without vision impairment.

Lower socio-economic status has also been shown to represent a substantial barrier to access to care for those with vision loss.

To summarize, the Big Data Report supports what we've long known anecdotally: that older adults who are blind or have low vision are at greater risk for living in poverty, have poorer health outcomes than their sighted peers, are disproportionately people of color and are at increased risk for social isolation and loneliness. While these findings may be hard to process, they give us the critical tools that we need to facilitate the societal changes necessary for our older adults with vision loss to live safely, comfortably and with dignity. We look forward to leveraging this vital information to strengthen and broaden our relationships across disciplines as we begin developing our next three-year strategic plan.

Denise Jess Executive Director

Nil

Nick Sinram Chair

Vision Services

A Surge in Demand for O&M

In October of 2022, Certified Vision Rehabilitation Therapist Brent Perzentka completed hundreds of hours of training to receive his certification in Orientation and Mobility (O&M) instruction. While he began 2023 splitting his time equally between vision rehabilitation and O&M, the need for O&M services grew by leaps and bounds over the course of the year. By the end of 2023, Brent was spending nearly all of his time providing O&M services to clients across southern Wisconsin.

"People really started to come out of the woodwork," Brent says.

O&M training provides the skills to get around independently and safely. That could include anything from white cane skills to getting to a concert across town to navigating one's own home smoothly.

"Unfortunately, vision loss can lead to isolation and loss of independence for a lot of people," Brent says. "With orientation and mobility, you can learn how to navigate your community and take down so many of those barriers to employment and social activities."

As a vision rehabilitation therapist, Brent says most of his clients were older adults. But with O&M, he works with clients across the age spectrum, including working and college age adults, older retirees, and even children in the Sauk Prairie School District.

People in need of O&M services come to Brent through a variety of avenues. Some people are referred to him through the Wisconsin Department of Workforce Development's Division of Vocational Rehabilitation (DVR) to better equip them to find or keep a job. Others will simply walk in after hearing about the Council.



Certified O&M Specialist Brent Perzentka showing a client how to fold a white cane.

"Once people from the State knew that we had O&M services available, the word got out and now I'm getting referrals every week," Brent says.

One thing Brent didn't expect when he started providing O&M was the proportion of people from underserved communities who would come to him for help. "I've served a lot of immigrants, people who don't speak any English, and even some unhoused people here in Madison," Brent says. "It's especially important to help those people in underserved communities, because they may not be able to access services elsewhere." Sometimes, Brent will go into a client's home for O&M training only to find that there are more pressing issues to address first. If they've only recently begun to lose their vision, maybe they can't use their phone anymore, or are struggling to prepare their own food because they can't tell what's in the cabinet.

Because Brent is also certified as a Vision Rehabilitation Therapist, he can help address those needs before moving on to O&M.

Brent says the sheer demand for O&M has taken him by surprise.

Brent says the sheer demand for O&M has taken him by surprise. "I think a lot of the people I serve have always been there," Brent says. "They just didn't know these services were available."

Unfortunately, one of the reasons Brent has been so busy is a severe shortage of Certified O&M Specialists in Wisconsin.

"Some communities, like in western Wisconsin, don't have any O&M specialists," Brent says. "That means I can drive up to 90 minutes for an appointment, because I'm the only O&M specialist in the area." Brent says one of the reasons there is a shortage of O&M professionals, and vision services professionals in general, is that many students entering college don't know the vision services field exists. When Council staff goes out to give presentations to students and other members of the public, they encourage young people to consider a career in vision services.

"Brent's busy schedule in Dane County and the surrounding area is giving us an idea of what's lacking in other parts of the state," says Amy Wurf, Education and Vision Services Director at the Council. "We want to look into how we can get the word out that people can get certified, and how we can uplift those who are O&M certified so that they can begin to help people across Wisconsin."

On both the personal and professional levels, Brent has greatly enjoyed the addition of O&M to his portfolio. He particularly likes getting out and exploring the community with his clients. O&M also gets him thinking about things he didn't have to consider before, like traffic engineering. Along the way, he is providing valuable instruction that's helping clients become more confident and independent as they navigate their homes, neighborhoods and other environments.



Brent demonstrating white cane technique to an O&M client.

Low Vision Support Groups Bring Clarity to People Across the State

As people were forced into isolation at the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, the Council launched its first online low vision support group to help people with vision loss across the state stay connected.

Since then, the program has grown significantly. A second group focusing on younger adults was added in 2022, and both groups continue to thrive today. The groups not only provide important information to people with vision loss but also create a social space to meet with others going through similar experiences.

The original gathering, now known as the Trailblazers Low Vision Support Group, was launched by the Council's Vision Services team in 2020. "When COVID hit, we asked ourselves, 'How can we reach our people?'" says Certified Vision Rehabilitation Therapist Brent Perzentka. "I think we had about ten people join that first meeting, and since then we've had about a dozen people every month."

Brent says each meeting has a mix of loyal regulars, newcomers and everything in between. While the mix of people joining the group has remained stable over time, with the Trailblazers group consisting mostly of older adults, one thing that has changed significantly is participants' ability to access new materials.

When the group began, Brent was usually the only one to bring in information on the topic being discussed. Now, when he brings up a new topic, the participants will often find relevant information independently and even bring their own ideas into the conversation.

As a result, the meetings have grown in length from one hour to an hourand-a-half, sometimes even stretching to two hours. "While the meetings start with an hourlong education talk, the last half hour is for people to start a dialog and share their own experiences," Brent says.

Each meeting has a dedicated topic, which can be anything from gardening to access technology to local resources. They've even held a movie night, where the group watched "Going Blind," a documentary about a man's vision loss journey.

While the Trailblazers support group was a fast success, some participants

expressed their desire to have a group that was more focused towards younger adults. That's why the team added a College and Working Age Low Vision Support Group in the fall of 2022.

"The Trailblazers group was really popular, and one of my clients actually came to me and said, 'I feel like a lot of the topics are for people who are older," says Access Technology Specialist Jim Denham, who facilitates the group. "So, we decided to try and start a group covering issues for people who were a little bit younger."

The College and Working Age Low Vision Support Group focuses more on how to thrive in the classroom and in the workplace. They'll discuss topics like how to dress for an interview or how to use adaptive technology to give a presentation to a room of fully-sighted coworkers or classmates.

While the meetings will usually begin with Jim or Council Board member Maggie Groshan explaining a topic, the conversations always evolve from there. Recently, for example, the conversation even shifted toward beer companies that print braille on their labels.

"It's about being connected and realizing that they aren't the only ones going through these struggles," Maggie says.

The College and Working Age group has been meeting for less than two years, but they are already finding new ways to evolve to meet everyone's needs. One new idea was to create an email listserv, enabling members to discuss and send resources between meetings.

After starting small, the group has grown to around a dozen attendees each month. Maggie says real friendships have begun to form within the group.

"There is really a core bond beginning to form in the group, to the point where we are working on meeting up in person, and we all enjoy getting to know each other," Maggie says.

"When you're going to college, you might be the only person in your class with vision loss," Jim says. "I would have loved a group like this in college, because it helps people figure out how to navigate a dining hall or find a job. Having people you can share with and learn from is really important."

You can find information about the next meeting of both of the Council's virtual low vision support groups at **WCBlind.org/Events**. There are also many in-person low vision support groups around the state. You can find contact information for those groups at **WCBlind.org/Vision-Services/ Support-Groups**.



Advocacy

A Year of Bold Advocacy Yielded Wins and a Solid Foundation for Future Progress

Advocacy has been a cornerstone of the Council's mission since its founding over 70 years ago, and 2023 was no different. The Council worked diligently over the entire year to advocate for bills that would positively impact the lives of people with vision loss and other disabilities across the state, and against bills that could have caused harm. Through our work with legislators, state agencies, and other policymakers, the Council and its allies scored a few wins and laid a strong foundation for future progress.

One of the Council's biggest wins of the legislative session was passage of 2023 Wisconsin Act 114, also known as "Steve's Law" in tribute to Steve Johnson, an avid outdoorsperson and former member of the Council's Board of Directors.

Under the former law, the Department of Natural Resources' (DNR) online Go Wild system required a driver's license to prove Wisconsin residency. Those without a license were unable to register an account online to purchase things like fishing and hunting permits through the system, because the DNR could not legally access State ID data as it could driver's license data. Steve's Law allows for the electronic transmission of State ID records, enabling people to use that document to access the Go Wild System as a Wisconsin resident. Steve's Law was signed into law by Governor Evers in March of 2024.

While the bill is a step in the right direction, there is still more work to be done.

"I see the bill as a good victory, but it only fixes one tiny part of the problem," says Council Executive Director Denise Jess. "It lays the foundation for us to say that there is precedent here, now let's rewrite the law so that there is no prohibition on digital ID transmission anywhere in the statutes."

Denise says she is reaching out to the authors of Steve's Law to have them introduce a blanket bill allowing State IDs to be used as proof of residency in all situations.

Another important bill signed into law was Senate Bill 668 / Assembly Bill 617, now Wisconsin Act 267, which allows ABLE savings accounts—already available in most other states—to be set up in Wisconsin. ABLE accounts help people with disabilities ages 45 and under save money on healthrelated expenses.

This change will particularly help low-income people. Thirty percent of older adults with vision impairment in Wisconsin have annual incomes below \$20,000. While the ABLE accounts are only available to those ages 45 and under, they will help people save money when spending on care providers, new equipment, and other things to help with their care or quality of life. Governor Tony Evers signed the bill into law in April of 2024.

Other bills passed into law that will help people with disabilities are Senate Bill 398, now Wisconsin Act 142, which provides a tax credit to blind workers for transportation costs to and from work; and Senate Bill 728, now Wisconsin Act 189, which exempts service animals from the dog license tax.

Some victories last session include bills that didn't become law. One such bill was Assembly Bill 572, which would have required staff at residential care facilities to notify residents' families when Special Voting Deputies conducted in-person absentee voting in the facility. This change would have violated voters' privacy, so the Council was pleased when Governor Evers vetoed it.

It lays the foundation for us to say that there is precedent here, now let's rewrite the law so that there is no prohibition on digital ID transmission anywhere in the statutes.

"Every eligible Wisconsinite should be able to cast their ballot without fear of interference or intimidation, including aging and older adults," Governor Evers said in his veto statement. "I cannot support legislation that could enable voter intimidation and interference while depriving eligible aging and older Wisconsinites casting their ballot of the dignity, privacy, and independence afforded to every other eligible Wisconsin voter." While good progress was made in 2023, some helpful bills were left on the table. One of them was Assembly Bill 904, which would make all State of Wisconsin websites fully accessible. While some state websites, such as those of the Wisconsin Elections Commission and the Department of Transportation, have made major strides towards accessibility, others, including the State Legislature's, are still inaccessible.

The bill's authors worked closely with the Council to develop the language of the bill, which had a public hearing but was not voted out of committee.

Every Wisconsin resident deserves full access to state government information, and websites that are not designed for access technology, like screen readers and captioning, or are designed with inadequate color contrast, create barriers for people with vision loss. Denise is reaching out to the bill's authors to bring that bill back next year.

"The Department of Administration (DOA) is very supportive of it," Denise says. "We've worked with the DOA since 2020 on website accessibility. They have a high interest in it, and they've dedicated a lot of resources to it. This administration really favors it, but I wanted it in state law in case we have a change in administration. That's why bringing it back next session and getting it into state statute is so important."

The Council entered 2024 ready to meet again with policymakers to lay out our priorities as work begins on the 2025-27 biennial budget.



Governor Tony Evers signing 2023 Wisconsin Act 114, also known as Steve's Law.

Education

Students with Vision Loss Head to Class with Council Scholarships

The Council knows the importance of pursuing a higher education in today's professional world, especially for students who are blind or visually impaired. That's why we've awarded thousands of dollars to hundreds of students over the years to help break down barriers in postsecondary education and employment.

In 2023, the Council awarded \$2,000 scholarships to ten students with vision loss across Wisconsin. That money not only helps them pay for standard costs like tuition, books and housing, but also helps with additional expenses most other students do not incur. Many of them must buy adaptive devices and access technology. Since they don't drive, students with vision loss face transportation barriers that require them to use more expensive alternatives. Many recipients have told us the scholarship enabled them to spend fewer hours working in a part-time job and devote more time to their studies.

"We were so honored to be able to present these scholarships to ten students," said Executive Director Denise Jess. "Our scholarship recipients are diverse, living all over the state, ranging from those fresh out of high school to students enrolled in graduate programs. They each demonstrate incredible excitement about their field of study."

Jack Lichosik, who began his studies in the Culinary Arts and Hospitality Management program at Fox Valley

2023 Council Scholarship Recipients

Saree Behm, Janesville, UW-Whitewater

Grace Caine, Lowell, UW-Whitewater

Lewa Diarra, Madison, University of Minnesota

Zulikha Gondal

Jayquan Jaeger, Madison, UW-Madison

Jack Lichosik, Appleton, Fox Valley Technical College

Kaylee Mueller, Campbellsport, UW-Green Bay

Luke Robel, Colgate, Waukesha County Technical College

George Tuttle, Drummond, Carroll University

Joseph Tuttle, Drummond, Purdue University

The Council is grateful for the opportunity to help these scholars pursue their academic and career goals! Technical College last year, is an example. "I'm excited to meet the chefs and get hands-on knowledge of different styles of different restaurants," Jack says.

One of Jack's big goals is to not have to take out student loans to go to school. "It's why I work so much, so I can pay as I go," Jack says. "The scholarship will basically pay for my first semester. All the money I save will go into future semesters."

Kaylee Mueller, another 2023 Council Scholarship recipient, began her junior year at UW-Green Bay last fall. She believes education is the key to future inclusion. "From disability rights to the history of the movement, there are lots of issues to bring to people who just don't know," Kaylee says.

Kaylee started her semester by launching a new student organization, Ability Allies. The group provides resources and educational opportunities to students with and without disabilities. A Psychology major with minors in Sociology & Anthropology and Women's Gender and Sexuality Studies, Kaylee has a packed schedule. She uses her own experiences– especially those related to independent mobility on campus–to inform her work in and out of the classroom.

Kaylee says the Council scholarship helps her in a variety of ways. "It's really helped pay for housing costs," she says. "I'm living in a private apartment that has accessibility, but one of the downsides of that accessibility is that it costs more."

Around the Council

Sensory Garden Adds a Welcome Touch to the Council Grounds

One of the bright spots for the Council in 2023 had nothing to do with vision services or advocacy. It was an improvement to our physical space: the installation of a Sensory Garden on the grounds of our Madison offices, with plots on both the Livingston and Williamson Street sides of the building. Fragrant basil and columbine and waxy flowers of the Korean Spice Viburnum, along with many other plants, delighted Council visitors and passersby throughout the summer and early fall.

What exactly is a Sensory Garden?

"The garden is intended to appeal to senses that we usually don't think about when we think of gardening," said Ruth Flescher of the Rock Prairie Master Gardener Association, whose members designed and installed the garden. "When planning the garden, we had to stop and think how every plant in here can be experienced in ways other than sight. What is there to hear, or to feel?"

After a planning process that began in the spring, volunteer gardeners began work in the early summer, taking soil samples to figure out which plants would be best suited for the garden. The gardeners then pulled up weeds and planted over two dozen plant species, surrounding our building with plants that are not only beautiful to look at, but encourage people to stop and touch or smell the many plants.

"This was a group project from the get-go," Ruth says. "Everybody had something to contribute. The Council was so delightful to work with, and so

The garden not only encourages people to use other senses to enjoy the world around them, but shows that people with vision loss can still enjoy gardening. appreciative and patient with the challenges we came across."

One of those challenges was the discovery of a nesting duck that had laid its eggs in a garden bed next to a crabapple tree on Livingston Street. Not wanting to mess with the mama duck, the gardeners had to put their planting plans on hold until the eggs hatched and the baby ducklings made their way to Lake Monona. By the fall, the new Sensory Garden was complete.

The idea for the garden sprang from a desire to make our building more welcoming by creating gardens that are both visually appealing and that draw visitors in with their lovely aromas and textures.

"Someone's first visit here can be daunting, not knowing what to expect," says Fund Development Director Lori Werbeckes. "The Sensory Garden is a welcoming sight for people who visit the Council."

The garden not only encourages people to use other senses to enjoy the world around them, but shows that people with vision loss can still enjoy gardening.

The Sensory Garden is not just for people coming to the Council for services, but for the whole community. As the garden blooms in the spring and summer, the entire neighborhood is encouraged to experience it for themselves. "There are so many assumptions about people who are blind," says Executive Director Denise Jess. "If the outside of our building, the part of our organization that's facing the community, is open and welcoming, it can help break down those biases and fears."

The Sensory Garden was made possible thanks to grant funding from the Marquette Neighborhood Association and the Willy Street Co-op's Community Reinvestment Fund. That funding covered the cost of plants, flowerpots, soil and mulch. Another addition, put in place in 2024, is signs placed in the garden containing a QR code that leads visitors to pages on the Council's website describing the different plants that can be found around our building. Those signs were funded through a grant provided by AARP Wisconsin.

The Council is grateful to all the funders who helped make the Sensory Garden a reality, as well as to the Rock Prairie Master Gardener Association, particularly the gardening team of Ruth Flescher, Mary Kay Thompson, Sue Wood, and Deb Grams.

You can learn more about our Sensory Garden on our website at https://WCBlind/Garden.



Denise making her acceptance speech at the 2023 Community Changemaker Awards event.

Executive Director Denise Jess Recognized with Civil Rights Award

In September, Community Shares of Wisconsin (CSW) honored Council Executive Director Denise Jess for her years of work promoting the rights and dignity of people living with vision loss. The Linda Sundberg Civil Rights Defender Award is given each year to an individual whose passion for civil rights has improved the lives of others.

In her acceptance remarks at the awards banquet, Denise focused on

the inequitable impact vision loss has on different segments of the population, and the reasons behind those disparities. For example, African Americans are three times as likely to experience vision loss as people who are White, and women are more likely than men to lose their vision.

It's clear that some groups face greater barriers to healthcare access and information than others. They may also be less likely to know about the vision rehabilitation services that can improve their lives, or may be hesitant to reach out. That's why it's critical for the Council to be thoughtful and strategic in our outreach efforts to build connections and trust among diverse communities.

"It's so easy for people with disabilities to be invisible in our society," Denise says. "It's not my blindness that makes my world small; it's the attitudes and barriers around me that make my world small. Being remembered, being included, having my voice honored ... that's what expands the worlds of people with disabilities."

In an environment where advocating for the elimination of systemic barriers requires persistence, patience and an unwavering commitment to equity, Denise has consistently demonstrated the ability to connect with people across Wisconsin to influence decisions that affect the lives of state residents living with vision loss.

The Council staff and Board of Directors were thrilled to see Denise recognized for her tireless efforts on behalf of Wisconsinites who are blind and visually impaired, and couldn't agree more with CSW's selection.



2023 by the Numbers

Donors

1,389 gifts received

from donors living in 56 Wisconsin counties and 21 states.



Vision Services

166 Vision Rehabilitation Visits

280 Access Technology Appointments

146 Low Vision Evaluation Visits

155 Phone Consultations

166 Orientation & Mobility Visits (Oct.-Dec.)

Education

63 presentations reaching 2,700 participants

Topics included: Transportation, Web and Social Media Accessibility, Accessible Voting, and Vision Changes Related to Aging

Scholarships

10 \$2,000 scholarships

Awarded to students across Wisconsin

Volunteers

735 hours donated

White Canes

515 canes provided to clients in 46 counties

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

Sharper Vision Store

1,681 customers from 64 counties

Financials

2023 Revenue

Contributions	\$429,276
Bequests	\$5,512
Store Sales (net)	\$196,566
Vision Services	\$14,180
Rent	\$14,400
Investments	\$1,022,018
Miscellaneous	\$24,076

TOTAL REVENUE \$1,706,028

2023 Expenses

Low Vision Services \$697,049
Community Education \$372,837
Fund Development \$146,349
Management & General \$319,000

TOTAL EXPENSES \$1,535,235



Donors

Thank you to our generous donors. Find a complete list on our website at **WCBlind.org/donate/donors**.

Friends of the **Council gave \$500** or more throughout the year: Carol Adams Ryan Ames Anonymous Linda Anderson Mike and Susan Archer Priscilla and Anthony Beadell Berlin Lions Club Carl and Judy Brakebush Mike and Bonnie Callen David Cooley Joanne Delforge Delta Gamma Fraternity Mary Gill Nona Graves & Dennis Ameden Greenville Lioness Lion Club Lee Hansen Loretta Himmelsbach Anonymous Kay Hutchison Denise Jess and Jani Koester Chip and Christy Kaufman

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White Cane Circle Members make monthly gifts:

Martha Abrams Nurudeen Amusa Mike and Susan Archer Steven and Susan Baudo Claire Box

Henrietta De La Garza Claire Dick James Evans James and Karen Fletcher Susan Gentry Sean Gifford Brent Goodman Rosemary Goodrich Nona Graves and Dennis Ameden Maria and Jan Heide Denise Jess Scott and Brenda Johnson Rajnish, Arvinder and Avanish Kapur Candice Koehn Constance Malak Carmela Moftah Eva Parenica Francis Power Chris Richmond James Roberts Patricia Schroeder Patty Slaby Margaret Sommers Rhonda Staats Karen Steffen Nat Tarnoff Victor Thonn James Tormey **Eunice Wagner**

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These individuals have been supporting the Council for 10 or more consecutive years:

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



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