



Vision Loss Alliance of New Jersey



The image above is a purple butterfly silhouette. Each wing encompasses an image of a participant demonstrating skills learned in a few of VLANJ's programs; *cooking* practicing cutting skills, *technology* using voiceover on the iPhone, *orientation* and *mobility* learning to use a cane on stairs, and *pottery* using tactile skills.

Transforming Lives, One Individual at a Time

2022 Annual Report

Transforming Lives, One Individual at a Time

Empower Independence · Build Confidence · Encourage Awareness
Listen Intently · Create Community

Our Mission is to empower people with vision loss or blindness by providing support, education, and training in assistive technology and independent living skills.

Our Vision is for every individual who is blind or has low vision to have the opportunity to pursue his or her highest aspirations.

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and for further information about VLANJ,
please scan the QR code.





Vision Loss Alliance

of New Jersey

2022 Annual Report



Bill Schuldts

President and CEO

Dear Friend,

The past two years have been, perhaps, some of the most turbulent times in recent history. Thinking globally, as well as at the community level, the chaos of a global pandemic social, racial, and ethnic disparities, and a tenuous economic climate challenged providers to meet an urgent need to deliver services. Building on the strong foundation of almost 80 years of responding to the evolving needs of adults with vision loss and blindness, Vision Loss Alliance of NJ (VLANJ) has, and continues, to respond swiftly and effectively by transforming what, how, and where we deliver services for adults with vision loss.

As we changed service delivery methods, we were inspired by the incredible adaptability of the human spirit that our clients and staff demonstrated. From the broadest perspective to the individual, we learned the power of transformation – resulting in a dynamic, creative, and innovative approach to fulfilling our mission. VLANJ is now delivering a robust set of services using both in-person and virtual program

models. In the process of reworking service delivery, we have discovered and addressed critical issues that have led the way to dramatic improvements for our organization. These transformations were supported by major grant funding from the Lydia Collins deForest Charitable Trust, the Achelis and Bodman Foundation, PwC Charitable Foundation, Inc., The Provident Bank Foundation, the Morristown Medical Center Community Health Committee, The Blanche & Irving Laurie Foundation, The George A. Ohl, Jr. Trust, Novartis US Foundation, the Fund for the New Jersey Blind, Inc., and most importantly, our loyal and generous donors.

Throughout this 2022 Annual Report, you will learn how we discovered and addressed program participant needs for improving skills in using technology, navigating and moving in their homes and community, and accessing services. We also learned that VLANJ needed to expand our efforts to reach diverse populations and address cultural, economic, and social differences. We enhanced VLANJ services by strengthening relationships with other community service providers. VLANJ listened to our constituents, funders, individual donors, community partners, and most importantly VLANJ current and future program participants. This gave us a starting point for building programs and anticipating future challenges that may impact individuals with vision loss.

I am eager to give you a glimpse into the future directions for VLANJ. We are expanding outreach to bring greater awareness of vision loss, health and medical conditions that effect vision and services available to all adults with vision loss, supporting greater numbers of people with vision loss in leading their best lives. Outreach to underserved populations is a

primary objective. The challenges of transportation, the lingering effects of the pandemic, and the circumstances unique to those with vision loss: isolation, loss of independence, and self-sufficiency, drive our efforts to create VLANJ@Home. As the name implies, this new program will deliver low vision occupational therapy in the participants' homes, providing the basics and building confidence to venture out, or back into, the world. We have learned the importance of advocacy, both helping program participants find their voices and teaching the community ways to interact with people with vision loss. Advocacy creates a "user friendly" environment that is safe, welcoming, supportive, and values all people with vision loss. Perhaps most importantly, we have learned that we must be accountable and effective stewards of shrinking resources in order to fulfill our promises.

As we begin our year-long celebration of VLANJ's 80th Anniversary, we are inspired by the successes of the past and the possibilities of the future. The societal focus on individuals with vision loss is one of empowering them to be independent, self-sufficient partners in creating programs and services that serve their goals. On behalf of our Board of Directors, our staff, and individuals with vision loss, it is my pleasure to invite you to share in these successes and continue to build a promising future for Vision Loss Alliance of NJ.

Kind Regards,

Bill Schuldts

VLANJ President and CEO
wschuldts@vlanj.org
(973) 627-0055

The Following is a brief Summary of VLANJ's Audited Financial Statement from 2022

Financial Statement	2022	2021
Revenue		
Program Revenue	\$22,553	\$5,937
Legacies & Bequests	\$5,622	\$1,381,005
Contributions	\$324,972	\$208,806
Special Events - Net	\$22,016	\$9,983
Other Income	\$81,235	\$170,046
**Net Investment Income, Unrealized loss/gain	\$(1,449,882)	\$922,357
Total Revenue	\$(1,074,719)	\$2,528,088
Expenses		
Program Expense	\$633,964	\$558,509
Development & PR Expenses	\$205,704	\$181,221
General and Administrative Expenses	\$151,775	\$133,710
Total Expenses	\$991,343	\$873,353
Net Loss/Gain	\$(2,066,062)	\$1,654,735
Net Assets End of Year	\$6,560,773	\$8,545,600

*The Organizations Net Assets enable us to fund annual deficits

**Included in net investment income is an unrealized loss of \$1,422,788 for 2022

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Our Impact in 2022

VLANJ offered a total of 1,672 instructional hours across 33 virtual programs and 17 in person programs.

VLANJ serves 57 in person program participants in our weekly center based programs, 149 participants in our virtual programs and 30 people in Low Vision Occupational Therapy. In addition, we reached 130 people via our outreach efforts in the community.

Our program participants have reported that VLANJ programs have contributed to their physical independence and/or mental well-being, and 96% would recommend these programs to others.

VLANJ provided 68 hours of Orientation and Mobility(O&M) training to 114 participants through on site, virtual and community excursions. Many of our participants have received

1:1 training through in person O&M training.

With the support of our Board of Trustees and additional grant funding, VLANJ was able to transport 9 participants for a total of 153 rides to our programs. These participants would have otherwise been unable to attend our programs.

Sandi's Story

Sandi has lived her life with a degree of vision loss. Her premature birth required significant oxygen to save her life. A necessary measure, oversaturation of oxygen at birth can impact the retina and one's ability to see, a condition called "retinopathy of prematurity." The exact nature and degree of Sandi's vision loss was not immediately evident. At two years old, a common intervention for a "lazy eye", patching the "good" eye to strengthen the weaker eye, revealed that Sandi had no vision in her right eye and limited in her left eye. Throughout childhood, there were minor adaptations: but nothing, Sandi recalls, that dramatically changed her life. As all teenagers, at 17 she was eager to drive. But she had mixed feelings of eager anticipation and fears – fears, for example, of not being able to determine distance between cars and a myriad of potential hazards that undermined her confidence. It was scary. "Will I be safe?" – her biggest concern. Sandi did pass the vision test, and very gradually, with much practice, developed the confidence needed to drive on her own. Driving was freedom, and she loved it!

Sandi married and had four children, 2 girls, 2 boys. She loved her role as wife and mother and was so grateful for her life! All the time, however, knowing the retinopathy could progress, vision loss and blindness loomed on the horizon. The worry became a reality on an early summer day, Sandi reflects, "The curtain began to draw closed, from the far left of her field of vision to the right." Clinically, her retina had detached and she lost sight in her left eye – "her good eye", she could no longer see. Not only did her world stage go blank, but everything she knew about life, being a mother and wife, experimenting with career options and adventures...it all just stopped. The retinal detachment led to a series of complicated surgeries followed by repeated retinal detachments. The side-effects of the interventions, including cataracts, further impacting her limited vision. She had central vision, able to see what was directly in

front of her, however she could not use her peripheral vision – not seeing from corners of her eyes. At best, images were a blur. She could not clearly see her beautiful children, ranging in age from 10 months to 7 years old. She did, as she must, persevere through the challenges of caring for young children and maintaining her home, with the extra, sometimes overwhelming stress of very limited vision. While her third and last reattachment was relatively successful, it left her with significant vision loss.

This could be a story of Sandi's many surgeries, the details of this life-altering condition, and the depression, insecurity, and fears that came with it. But it is not that story Sandi wants to tell. Her loving husband, family support, and a network of friends helped and continue to help with managing day to day life. But again, that is not Sandi's story. "I know who I am," Sandi reveals, "I need to understand who I am with vision loss." Sandi appreciates the initial help that she received from the local Commission for the Blind, how to be safe and use a cane. However, being safe and "existing" was not enough. Pivotal points in her story were attending a seminar at Vision Loss Alliance of NJ, and later meeting another VLANJ participant, Lisette, at a support group. Getting to the VLANJ center was a challenge, however the recent availability of transportation assistance has helped. Beginning with the basics: movement, cooking, and daily living skills, Sandi progressed to learning assistive technology for computers and mobile devices and rediscovering her high-school love of drumming in the VLANJ wellness program. When asked, "what is the most significant help that VLANJ has provided?" Sandi answers, "It is the people. Meeting others with vision loss, I understand who I can be and I have learned that I am not alone. There are others walking this path with me, and we help each other by telling our stories and sharing our joys and fears. I am building who I am as a person with vision loss, achieving more successes



The Image above is of Sandi drumming in the VLANJ drum circle.

and meeting new challenges – and by "seeing" a life where I can be the me I always knew."

Whether volunteering at the food pantry, concession counter, or chaperoning a scouting overnight camping trip, Sandi is excited ... and confident that she will be successful. She cautions that one of her biggest challenges is not the task, but the attitude of others. "People assume that I cannot do things because I cannot see. They don't want to trust me with giving them correct change or keeping their children safe. But I prove, over and over, that I can do these things." Sandi's oldest daughter, who was only 7 when Sandi lost her vision, was asked in high school to write an essay about a person she admired. That person was her mother, who despite all the challenges, managed to raise her children well.

Vision loss brings with it assumptions and expectations that say, "you will not be able to live a normal life." At VLANJ Sandi has learned to "see" it differently. She is inspired by stories of those with vision loss who travel, climb mountains, and live life. She is finding ways to guide her children as they make their marks on the world. And most importantly, "in a strange way, losing my vision and meeting others with vision loss has given me hope." Hope is my way of seeing the world and with the support I am receiving, I can overcome obstacles in that world. Looking at the world with hope, is the person I am, and vision loss does not take that away."

New Initiatives: Transforming Service... One Program at a Time

The societal shift from caring for individuals with vision loss to building their independence and self-sufficiency drove VLANJ's efforts to intensify our skills-based training and the functional application of those skills. During COVID and in the aftermath, our program participants' objectives have not changed; however, changes in needs, challenges, and the environment for people with vision loss and their families prompted VLANJ to find alternate delivery methods, increase the intensity of instruction, and expand wellness.

With a growing awareness of social, ethnic, and racial disparities, we learned that the VLANJ population did not reflect community diversity. In response, VLANJ developed outreach to underserved groups, and added translation and staffing changes to reach the fastest growing underserved group, the Spanish-speaking community. In response to the ongoing challenge of transportation, VLANJ provided transportation assistance to our participants with the highest needs. Supporting the organization-wide transformation, we mounted an aggressive initiative to secure foundation funding for building diversity, increasing access to programs, and expanding technology skills.

Our Programs

INDEPENDENT LIVING SKILLS

The post-COVID need for in-depth skills training prompted VLANJ to change our one-day awareness program to a series of classes: Back-to-Basics, cooking, orientation and mobility training, assistive technology, and yoga. This program helps participants develop and refine specific skills, while filling the need for social connections, peer support, and a sense of community. Partial funding for the Independent Living Skills Program was provided by grants from the Achelis and Bodman Foundation, Lydia Collins deForest Charitable Trust, and The George A. Ohl, Jr. Trust. *Image Description:* The image to the right is a program participant in a cooking class.



HOLISTIC WELLNESS

Our Holistic Wellness program enhances emotional and physical health through exploring fitness, drumming, horticulture, healthy eating, and art. This program is designed to strengthen our participants mind and body, and to build a sense of community and connection with others. *Image Description:* The image to the right is three program participants using their olfactory and tactile senses while working with plants.



ORIENTATION AND MOBILITY PROGRAM (O&M)

Our O&M program has transformed into a robust, vital, and highly desired VLANJ program. Instruction begins at the center, orienting participants in O&M basics and moving to more sophisticated functional skills. The second O&M instructional phase puts skills into practice through off-site community excursions, transforming a skill-based learning program to functional application; improving independence, self-confidence, and living life. Excursions provide opportunities for participants to practice self-advocacy. This cross-over benefit raises community awareness; helping the public understand how to guide and interact with a person with vision loss, and learning occurs for both the public and program participants. Partial funding for the Orientation & Mobility Program was provided by grants from The Provident Bank Foundation, the William G. and Helen C. Hoffman Foundation, the Achelis and Bodman Foundation, and Lydia Collins deForest Charitable Trust. *Image Description:* The Image to the right is a program participant and an O&M instructor working on skills in a grocery store.



Simply stated, orientation refers to the ability to know where one is and where one wants to go; mobility refers to the ability to move safely, efficiently, and effectively from place to place.

TECHNOLOGY

Technology at VLANJ has transformed services and support for persons with vision loss, changing, improving, and introducing new tools for independence and self-sufficiency. Participants can access mainstream computers and devices through assistive technology. VLANJ Mobile Tech Classes and the Technology Learning Lab help participants use accessibility software engineered for people with vision loss. Using this technology, clients develop competencies from very basic computer usage and screen navigation to searching the Internet. Partial funding for the Technology Program was provided by grants from The Blanche & Irving Laurie Foundation, PwC Charitable Foundation, Inc., and the Fund for the New Jersey Blind, Inc. *Image Description:* The image to the right is a program participant and instructor using a screen reader.



Technology, part of VLANJ curriculum for 30 years, is integrated into our teaching and learning, from skills for independent living to virtual programs. The 2020 pivot to virtual service delivery helped identify challenges in technology and the lessons learned have informed our current approach to instruction.

VIRTUAL PROGRAMS

VLANJ's most dramatic transformation has been virtual training, an immediate response to COVID and the only viable solution to continuing services. Using Zoom or telephone links, virtual programs included motivational, skill building, and peer-based support offerings. The virtual ARISE program received the 2022 Morris County Chamber of Commerce Not-for-Profit Excellence Award for Innovative Programs. Virtual programming continues with diverse speakers who bring knowledge, resources, useful tips, and strategies to participants around health, wellness, and vision loss. Speakers on technology and accessibility helps participants learn to access services, resources, stay connected, and manage their daily lives using specialized hardware and software, apps, and SMART mobile and home technologies. A secondary benefit, virtual programs allowed VLANJ to serve more diverse and geographically distant populations, reaching 300 individuals from NJ, 38 states, and 5 countries. Partial funding for the Virtual Program was provided by grants from the Morristown Medical Center Community Health Committee and Novartis US Foundation. *Image Description:* The image to the right is the VLANJ logo.



Virtual learning has many forms and descriptions; at VLANJ, virtual learning uses electronic technologies for learning and teaching, reaches individuals in different locations, allows instructors to work with a larger number of participants, and has afforded VLANJ program participants the opportunity to engage with instructors who would not be accessible to them in our traditional in-person center-based setting.

The Diamond Spring Society

Named for where Vision Loss Alliance of New Jersey began. The Diamond Spring Lodge is where Vision Loss Alliance of New Jersey developed its purpose to provide services. The Diamond Spring Society honors those who have designated Vision Loss Alliance of New Jersey as a beneficiary to their estate plan or declared their intent.

"I have experienced the incredible transformation at VLANJ and how they are continuing to expand programs to meet the needs of people with vision loss. For 45 years, my entire career has been dedicated to serving people who are blind or have low vision. As a person who is blind, I know firsthand what makes programs exemplary. It is inspiring to see how VLANJ has impacted the lives of so many people over the past

80 years. This is why I chose to become a member of The Diamond Spring Society, to help build a financial future for years to come. Join me and become a member of The VLANJ Diamond Spring Society. Together, we can ensure the success of future generations."

Carl Augusto
VLANJ Board Chair and
Diamond Spring Society Member

BECOME A MEMBER OF OUR LEGACY SOCIETY

After providing for your family and loved ones, you may want to remember VLANJ in your estate plans. If you are interested in leaving a legacy to VLANJ, please contact Jennifer Singer, Vice President of Development, at jsinger@vlanj.org (973) 627-0055, ext: 2. We'd love to hear from you if you have already included VLANJ in your plans. Thank you!

An example of specific bequest language:

**"I give, devise, and bequeath the sum of \$_____ to
Vision Loss Alliance of New Jersey."**

Thank you to our founding members of the VLANJ

Diamond Spring Society

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WINE TASTING WITH DR. HOBY WEDLER
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