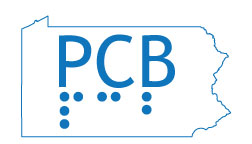
**The**

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**Advocate**

**Spring Edition 2021**

**PCB- A Peer Network for All Impacted by Vision Loss**

PENNSYLVANIA COUNCIL OF THE BLIND

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MISSION

To promote independence and opportunities for all people with vision impairments.

VISION

To continue to be recognized as the leading advocacy organization for people with vision impairments in Pennsylvania. The aim of all our efforts is to encourage and assist people in achieving their potential as valued members of society. PCB assistance, advocacy, and encouragement will be carried out in such areas as, but not limited to, all aspects of accessibility, transportation, education, employment, entertainment, recreation, and quality of life.

The PCB Advocate is available in large print, braille, audio cartridge and email. Send changes of address or format preference to the PCB office. Contents are available to the public via pcb1.org and the PCB Information Line at 773-572-6314.

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# SOMEONE NEW LOOKING OUT FOR YOU

By Chris Hunsinger

It’s a new year and we have a new secretary at PCB. I’d like to tell you a little about Autumn Imhoff, who works virtually from her home in Volant, Pennsylvania.

She only works for PCB twenty hours a week, but you won’t be waiting for days to get a response from her if you have to leave a message. Our phone number is still (717)920/9999 or toll free (877)617/7407.

Because Autumn lives in Volant, we had to change our mailing address. You can mail correspondence to our office:

Pennsylvania Council of the Blind

PO Box 68

Volant, PA 16156.

We chose Autumn to be our new secretary because she has so many very valuable skills. She has already worked on constructing webpages for other employers, and she has worked with many of the tools we have been using to keep PCB running. She will be keeping our office humming and organized. We know that she will be helping us make our Conference Registration page on the PCB website for this year easy to complete. She will be helping with the updating of the PCB website as well.

She has stepped up and become familiar with both the PCB and ACB systems for record keeping, and she has been recording the information to keep our records current as the dues come in.

She is available to assist PCB teams and chapters whenever the services of a skilled administrative assistant are required.

Autumn seems to have worked for us for a long time because she rarely needs to ask questions about jobs that she is working on. She just picks up a task and works on it. I keep forgetting that she only started work for PCB on Jan. 4 of this year. However, she won’t be doing the braille documents which we usually do in the office. We have passed that task onto Sandy Marsiglia. That puts the conversion to a braille format and the braille printing all in one place.

Autumn has two dogs and three cats, as well as a family. She is a quilter, and this may explain how she can keep all of the various activities we ask her to take care of organized. I hope that you all get to know Autumn over the next several months and enjoy her quiet thoughtful way of taking care of business.

# What’s New For You From ACB?

By Chris Hunsinger

We had three action packed days of meetings at the National midyear meetings of ACB, but I don’t want to just summarize the meetings because there were more than 30 hours of presentations during those three days. Suzanne Erb, Pam Shaw, Melissa Carney, Joe Sickora, and Bette Passanante-Rodriguez helped me with both the meetings and the virtual Congressional visits afterward. None of us could go to all of the presentations, but I, along with the rest of the Hill Warriors, broke the events into parts that each of us made notes on. You can listen to podcasts of most of the presentations eventually as ACB Podcasts. You will be able to get those podcasts in the same way you listen to other PCB podcasts.

ACB identified three legislative imperatives for this year, and we were all asked to request support from our congress members on these imperatives. We had no bill numbers, but that means that when the bills are actually introduced, we will be able to re-contact the legislators to ask for support of the particular bill. The imperatives are:

1. Secure Independence for Seniors and Medicare Beneficiaries, otherwise referred to as the low vision Medicare demonstration bill. We have been asking Congress to pass this bill for several years.

2. The Disability Access to Transportation Act (DATA). This bill would actually be a part of the Fixing America’s Surface Transportation or (FAST) Act. We hope that this bill will make paratransit more flexible, create a national complaint system at the Department of Transportation, and give pedestrians more consideration in many aspects of transportation and infrastructure design.

3. The Exercise and Fitness for All Act. This bill hopes to set a base line both for accessibility and instruction at fitness facilities so that the quarter of the population with disabilities can more easily stay healthy and avoid some of the perils of inactivity.

We will be asking for your help with your legislator once we actually have a bill number for all of these bills, so stay tuned to the   
pcb-l@groups.io list.

We had several other items to mention in our virtual legislative visits, but you usually only get about a half hour of someone’s time, so you can’t necessarily get to everything. We really tried, but if you talk too fast they stop listening.

We still wanted our legislators to be aware of the safeguards that we want built into any legislation regarding autonomous vehicles.

We still wanted Congress to pass legislation that will resemble the Cogswell-Macy Act from the past but might actually be a part of a bigger law for educating disabled children. IDEA has to be re-certified sometime soon so we need to keep Congress aware of the special considerations for children with sensory disabilities.

American Printing House for the Blind wanted us to ask Congress for more money for providing their services for students.

Prevent Blindness wanted us to ask for money for the CDC to keep better blindness statistics and do more glaucoma testing.

NFB wanted us to request support for a refundable tax credit after purchasing Assistive Technology.

A National Disability Coalition wanted us to ask for support for Stop The Wait which would remove the five-month waiting period for Social Security Disability and the twenty-four month wait after entitlement to disability for Medicare benefits.

The meetings were not all about legislation. There were informative discussions about service animals and airlines, Audio Description, elimination of the digital divide with subsidies for emergency broadband benefits, accessible voting, advocating for blind and visually impaired students, working with other organizations to advocate for the older blind, working with other disability groups to improve employment outcomes for disabled individuals, improving the usability of medical equipment for people with vision loss, and new ways to connect with people using all kinds of social media and other communications platforms.

We also talked about organizational activities like growing membership in affiliates and chapters, encouraging diversity in leadership through mentorship, finding new ways to raise money for our affiliates and chapters, using the ACB database as a tool for better management of affiliate membership, and collaborating with ACB in joint fundraising activities like the virtual Walk and the Monthly Monetary support (MMS) program.

We learned more about the upcoming ACB Convention which will be held from July 16 to July 23. It will be virtual again this year, but there will be some changes. We will actually be voting for elected positions in ACB. We will be using a flexible electronic voting system with both internet and phone voting, and the votes will be carried out throughout the week of general sessions. It is expected that ACB will run some kind of mock election so we can all see how it works. We will not be voting on resolutions, but the Board of Directors has a plan in place for discussion of and approval of resolutions after the Convention.

The exhibit hall may well have some way for us to interact with exhibiters if we want to do more than just listen to recorded presentations. There will be tours, special interest affiliate events, taskforce and committee events, as well as the much-anticipated ACB auction.

Now, in a few minutes, you have learned what I found out over three days. In some future year you may want to join those participating in the midyear meetings, and you might actually be able to enjoy some personal interaction with members from all over the country. I’m certainly ready for that.

# Strengthening Community through Unity: A Conference Start

By Sue Lichtenfels, PCB Conference Coordinator

It’s difficult to right an information-packed article about the 2021 PCB Conference and Convention when it is so early in our planning process. While we do have our dates, the “location,” and the theme, many of the details are still in the works. So, to make sure I give you your money’s worth, I’ve included a conference-related word challenge for your enjoyment within the article.

The centerpiece of this year’s conference is community. For PCB, community is the culmination of all we strive to accomplish through our offerings and advocacy. Providing people who are blind or visually impaired with a sense of belonging that gives them hope and validation is the ultimate purpose of our collective efforts. Appropriately, this year’s conference theme is “Strengthening Community through Unity.”

The 2021 PCB Conference and Convention will be held Thursday, September 16 through Sunday, September 19. Once again, we will be utilizing the Zoom platform to host our virtual event. If you recall, Zoom can be accessed by landline phones, smartphones, tablets, computers, and even Amazon Echo devices. Toll-free calling will be available for anyone who needs it. For peers who don’t wish to interactively participate, but want to still listen in, the weekend line-up will be broadcast on ACB Radio’s many listening outlets.

The Conference Program and Planning Team (CPPT) wants to develop conference activities, presentations, and exhibits that will be informative and interactive. The team is seeking proposals from individuals, chapters, teams, and community organizations to provide attendees with seminars and workshop sessions relevant to our theme. Details for potential presenters are posted at pcb1.org/conference/call-for-presentations/. Proposals are due April 1, 2021. And if you are not keen on being a presenter, we welcome your ideas for subjects or speakers you would like us to actively pursue in our presentation planning. Email us at [presentations@pcb1.org](mailto:presentations@pcb1.org).

Exhibitor and sponsor opportunities will be coming soon. We are seeking a special sponsor to underwrite a conference podcast so we can provide you fun and informative monthly updates like the Blast that Thomas Reid produced. Please get in touch with a member of our team if you work for or have a contact with a company who might generously underwrite our conference podcast or another aspect of our conference. Like last year, many of our exhibits will be prerecorded and played during presentation downtime. However, we are researching ways to offer some live exhibit time where attendees could drop by a virtual booth to speak directly with company representatives.

If you have been to a PCB conference, you know the weekend is an organization-wide effort to provide learning, fellowship, support, and inspiration to all who are impacted by vision loss. Our chapters, teams, and peer volunteers play an important role in the conference’s success. Each year, chapters both small and large, provide vital support by financially sponsoring events, subsidizing and encouraging peer registration, providing generous door prizes, and donating interesting items to the annual auction. PCB teams design presentations and workshops organize auxiliary activities like the auction, and manage logistical aspects such as awards, scholarships, and mentors. And then there are dozens of individual peer volunteers who take care of our audio and technical needs, line up presenters and exhibitors, promote the conference, organize registration materials, and on and on. There are so many within our organization who go the extra mile to ensure conference success. To all of you, thank you! We welcome your on-going support in 2021.

This year we have an impressive team of organizers on the CPPT. Our conference ambassadors are: Tom Burgunder, Gigi Beatty, Melissa Carney, Suzanne Erb, Mary Ann Grignon, Chris Hunsinger, Bob Lichtenfels, Sue Lichtenfels (Coordinator), Rose Martin, Kelsey Nicolay, Irene Rehman, Pam Shaw, Tony Swartz, and Jackie Wissinger. Once again, Doug Hunsinger will be our audio guru. We all welcome your questions and suggestions. And we will release more conference details as they become available through the PCB-L, the PCB Information Line, the PCB1.org/conference page, and our social media accounts. If at any time you would like to reach me, Sue Lichtenfels, PCB Conference Coordinator, please call 412-480-9696 or email [sueperlative73@gmail.com](mailto:sueperlative73@gmail.com).

Now, for your money’s worth, the word challenge. Since our marquis word is community, I wrote my ideal description of the PCB community by using anagrams from the word community. For example, the word tommy is an anagram from the letters in community. I made a specific effort to use words that were at least four letters long. How many of my anagrams can you find in the below paragraph?

We come together as one unit, our shared experiences as people with vision loss a tonic in our on-going adjustment process. When tensions mount or we sink into despair, we need only reach out to our community for comfort. In comity and unity, we strive to do for and unto others as we expect of them were the circumstances reversed. Together, we commit to improving life for all who are impacted by vision loss. Our mission: a metaphorical mutiny against naysayers of ontic independence; they who question our ability to launder a tunic or safely fill a tummy. We count everyone’s voice and wish to omit no one. Whether you hail from a large city, a tiny town, or a rural county, we invite you into our circle. You need not be an American icon or Tony award-winner. Just step right up and take one coin or more from our treasure chest of support. And when you are ready, mint your token of appreciation by paying it forward for the next person with vision loss.

Does this sound like a community to which you want to belong? Me too. Striving together, all of us can make this ideal community into an on-going reality within PCB. Join us for the 2021 PCB Conference and Convention where we will learn about “Strengthening Community through Unity.” Anagram count: 21.

# Tribute to an Educator & Advocate: Anthony "Tony" Evancic

By Michael Zaken

There are several of us within PCB who had Tony Evancic as a teacher at the Western Pennsylvania School for Blind Children (WPSBC). He was a demanding teacher who expected students to perform beyond their perceived abilities. He taught us to believe in ourselves, which prepared us to be successful in life. Our peers from the eastern part of the state may also remember Tony’s teaching style from the two years he taught for Overbrook. His style of teaching certainly left an impression on his students.

Tony began his WPSBC career as a fifth-grade teacher and later moved on to teaching high school grades. He taught all types of math and several languages. His memory was phenomenal, such that he would do math in his head, or switch from one language to another in an instant. This came in handy when he worked as an educational consulted in Chile for six weeks. There is no doubt many of us would not have made it through college or had a successful career if we had not had Tony as a teacher. He became the Secondary Supervisor at WPSBC before retirement. He also served on the school’s board for 8 years.

Tony believed in community service. He was active in his neighborhood association and his local Lions Club. He especially enjoyed service to blindness organizations. At Radio Information Service, Pittsburgh’s former radio reading service, Tony served as Treasurer, assisted with braille transcription, and read on-air for the Data Stream program. Many years ago, Tony collaborated on the development of early computer speech and actively participated in the Visually Impaired Pittsburgh Area Computer Enthusiasts group (VIPACE). Tony was a certified braille proofreader for the Library of Congress and advised on creating braille texts for the Public-School Systems.

As many of us were fortunate to witness first-hand, Tony’s passion for many decades was the Council. He served as the Treasurer of both the Golden Triangle chapter and our Pennsylvania affiliate. Tony was also a stickler for following the rules, so naturally he volunteered as chairman of the bylaws committee for both organizations. Over the years, Tony attended many PCB conventions. He was a wise and humble leader on the PCB board. He was usually the last person to speak because he patiently listened to every side of a discussion and then usually put forth a perspective that neither side had considered.

Tony enjoyed music. He studied piano at Duquesne University and was an accomplished pianist. He enjoyed attending symphonies at Heinz Hall and sang with the Brailletones, a mostly blind group in Pittsburgh.

Tony liked problem solving and engaging in a good debate. While he never wanted to be the center of attention, he desired to help others find the right solutions to their problems. Many people were extremely impressed with his vast amount of knowledge.

Tony was a devoted family man who enjoyed time with his siblings, daughter Joan, and two wives. Tony spent most of his life living independently and traveling with his wife Rosemary and later in life with his wife Philagonas. They enjoyed dining out and traveled on many cruises. When each of Tony’s wives experienced health declines, Tony devotedly took care of them so they would not need to go into a nursing home. Unfortunately, Tony did spend the last bit of his time in a nursing home after a fall and subsequent medical decline. He died on February 15, 2021 at Sunrise of Upper St. Clair in the South Hills of Pittsburgh. Tony will be greatly missed, and his legacy will never fade, because he remains a part of us.

# Fund Development, We’re All in it Together!

By Mary Ann Grignon

Has it been a while since you’ve visited the Fund Development emporium? Well, grab a virtual shopping cart and let’s explore together!

Here, in aisle one we have opportunities to win money for yourself and for your chapter with our calendar raffle. Simply grab some tickets for yourself for $20 each or a bunch to grow your chapter’s coffers. There is a chance to win every night between May 1 and October 31. The winning numbers are drawn each night from the PA state lottery, evening Pick-Three. On most nights, the least you can win if your number is drawn is $30. But hang on-- if your number is drawn on either the 1st or 15th of any contest month, you’ll win $75. If you win on one of six holidays: Mother’s Day, Memorial Day, Father’s Day, Independence Day, Labor Day, or Halloween-- well then you will win $125. Just call the PCB Virtual office at 717-920-9999 or toll-free at 877-617-7407 and ask our fabulous new secretary, Autumn, to send you tickets. There are also virtual tickets available. You can find out more by using the tools shared on the PCB-l and PCB-Leadership. If you need these documents emailed to you personally, please contact the author at 570-807-1276 or send her a request at maryanna0407@gmail.com. Good luck!

Now, we will move on to aisle two where you can browse items from Loving Touch Connection. When you purchase something lovely, decorated with tactile paint, and embossed in both braille and print, you automatically donate 10% of the cost of your item choice to PCB! If you want to purchase a great gift for someone with vision loss, get in touch with the owner, Kathy Keck for some great ideas. Her email is [lovingtouchconnection@gmail.com](mailto:lovingtouchconnection@gmail.com) **or call her directly at** *610-657-9869*

In aisle three, we have the opportunity to donate to PCB and ACB through the Monthly Monetary Support (MMS) program. Please see below for our article outlining this fun way to give and win.

In aisle four-- let’s get cooking! Pick up a No Measure Cookbook in digital format for just a ridiculously low price of just $5. Again, if you’re interested, just call Autumn in our virtual office at 717-920-9999 or toll-free at 877-617-7407.

Now let’s hear it for aisle five, where there’s virtually something for everyone! This is the Amazon Smile isle. A portion of everything you buy from Amazon, when you specifically check out using the Amazon Smile page goes into PCB’s coffers-- so shop a lot! To set up an Amazon Smile account, just go to smile.amazon.com and log in with your Amazon username and password and follow the simple steps to choose the Pennsylvania Council of the Blind as your charity. Once you’ve registered with Smile, it becomes even easier because you can now use your phone’s app to shop through Smile.

While aisle six is empty right now, it will start to fill up with items to be purchased at our virtual auction. Once again, the theme for our auction will be “Great things come in small packages.” The team hopes you’ll send in your offerings to fill this aisle sooner than later so folks can start to browse long before our auction which will be held on September 19, at the close of our virtual auction. This year, because our conference is being held earlier than usual, we will need to have your donations no later than August 20 so we can prepare for the event and so we can put the item lists in alternative formats and have them delivered to all of you in a timely fashion. Last year, the Virtual auction raised nearly $3,800, one of our best years ever. We hope this year we can top this number. The fund development team thanks all of you in advance for your donations.

The Fund Development team continues to look for ideas from you, PCB peers for new ways to raise funds so we can grow our offerings. Our challenge continues to be that people are not gathering in person; therefore, we are seeking virtual fundraising ideas. Every new idea presented will be given serious consideration, so share your thoughts!

Like anything else in PCB, fund development only makes sense if we all collaborate to find ways to grow our funds with the most participation possible. In order to accomplish this, we need your input, talents, ideas and ultimately, *you*!

Contact Mary Ann Grignon (570) 807-1276 or [maryanna0407@gmail.com](mailto:maryanna0407@gmail.com) with your ideas, input and talent.

# MMS: Giving and Winning Made Easy

By PCB Fund Development Team

Once again, the PCB Fund Development Team is hosting a Monthly Monetary Support (MMS) contest. The contest runs from February 20, 2021, through January 14, 2022. The MMS 50/50 option is quick, easy, and provides a steady source of funds for the American Council of the Blind (ACB) and the Pennsylvania Council of the Blind (PCB). When you sign up or increase your existing monthly donation, your monthly donations are automatically withdrawn from the account you designate.

If you signed up for the MMS program or increased your monthly donation during the 2021 ACB Leadership Conference (Feb 21-23, 2021), you will also be eligible to win the prizes described later in this article.

Your next chance to win is by entering or increasing your monthly donation by the end of the 2021 ACB National Conference (July 16-23, 2021). You will be eligible to win one of two grand prizes that are drawn at the end of conference. The first is a $500 dollar gift card. The second is a Sonos One (2nd generation) Smart Speaker. This drawing will take place on or around September 1. If you are a PCB peer, you will also be eligible to win prizes described below.

Your last chance to win is by entering the contest or increasing your monthly donation after the ACB Conference. You will be eligible to win a prize specific to PCB peers. The first prize is $100.00 and the second prize is $50.

To enter the contest, you need only contribute a minimum of $10 per month, or if you are already a contributor, you need only increase your donation by $5. Your initial entry of $10 will place your name in the hat one time, but your name will be entered once for every additional $5 that you contribute. Whatever you give will be split 50/50 between ACB and PCB.

If you wish to enter the contest, increase your monthly donation, or have questions, contact George Holliday:

E-mail: [george.holliday@comcast.net](mailto:george.holliday@comcast.net)

Home: 215-796-9813

Cell: 484-343-2722

# Confidence in the Kitchen: What Is on Your Plate?

By Melissa Carney, PCB Director of Outreach & Engagement

Confidence is a complicated term. Traditionally, it is described as a feeling or belief of firm trust in and reliance on someone or something. However, there is a lot of wiggle room in this definition. How quickly does confidence grow? How easily can we gain or lose faith in ourselves? Is there a point at which confidence is truly palpable? Does failure make up just as much of the equation as determination?

The answer to all these questions is that there is no answer. Confidence displays itself differently in each individual. Our personal interpretations of confidence are shaped by our experiences and backgrounds, as well as our trials and errors. However, because we express confidence in a multitude of ways, it is imperative to learn from one another and adopt new ideas and perspectives of how we motivate ourselves to find trust in our abilities.

I could tell you how I gained confidence speaking to large crowds on stage, navigating through cities with my guide dog, and standing up for my accommodations and rights as a blind person, all of which made me anxious at first. Instead, I am going to describe a journey that occurred a bit closer to home, something that I am sure most of us can relate to despite diverse backgrounds.

In elementary school, my Teacher of the Visually Impaired (TVI) enticed me with lessons to make my favorite foods, unsurprisingly, for a fifth grader, cookies and pasta. As you may well know, the attention span of a 9-year-old is atrocious. I was excited about the results of these cooking lessons, but I lost interest in the process. I was also extremely nervous around the heat of the stove and oven. My mom did her best to educate me about cooking tips and tricks, even when I sat in the kitchen with her and did not have a hand in the meal itself. However, as I entered middle school and high school, my priorities fell into line with my sighted peers. I did not know a single peer my age who cooked, and so I chose to follow their example by placing kitchen education on the bottom of the to-do list, and putting social activities, acceptance, and sports near the top. I did not understand then that it was important to be ahead of the curve, because one day, I would not only need to learn how to cook, but how to cook in an accessible way.

As college drew closer, I picked up several recipes from my mom. Though I was able to cook them independently, I cringed at the idea of not having supervision, not having someone to fall back on if something went wrong. That was my first indicator that I was truly bothered by my lack of confidence and experience in the kitchen. The knowledge that I might not be able to support my family and friends in return shocked me into action. I promised myself that, even if I might be eating at the dining hall for 4 years at college, I would make more of an effort to pay attention in the kitchen while home for breaks. This was when my journey in the kitchen truly began.

I realized very quickly that I would not become a proficient cook overnight. After so many years of avoidance, I had to work hard to enhance both my confidence and skills overtime. I lost count of the number of incidents in which I spilled flour all over the counter, struggled to peel a potato, or forgot the names of important spices. My family continued to encourage me when they noticed my determination. My mom took that faith a step further by thinking up ways that her cooking methods could be adapted. She taught me how to observe the texture of meat, feeling with a wooden spoon as it went from spongy to solid as it cooked. She taught me how to effectively pour spices and liquids according to their consistencies to avoid spills. Above all, I learned that, once you show initiative, and find that those who care about you have faith in your abilities and potential, confidence is in reach. Half the battle is realizing that you must adjust to succeed. From there, you must make mistakes, figure out how to clean up your messes, both literally and metaphorically, and use each error as a steppingstone to greater comprehension of the task at hand.

I was truly tested once I moved into my first apartment in August, but it turned out that this was exactly the final push I needed. I had the skills by then to prepare meals on my own, but it was a matter of proving to myself that I could succeed, despite being hundreds of miles away from my mentors. I was no longer a student in the kitchen, but an active participant, with her own space to organize and experiment. Over time, I began to understand my own cooking preferences, to tamper with the ingredients of a recipe to slightly alter the flavor, or to design shortcuts to assist with time management after a busy workday. I explored new cuisines, spices such as dill and curry, and finally tried my hand at baking cookies from scratch. True confidence has also helped me to admit to myself when I might need help; there is no shame in relying on your support network for advice when needed.

I do not believe that confidence is something that ceases to grow with time, nor do I believe that it will always show itself as boldly from day to day. What I do believe is that confidence is essential to how we perceive ourselves and our capabilities, and how we choose to advocate for those capabilities both internally and to those around us. If there is a desire to obtain a skill, we should not shy away from that knowledge simply because we do not know when it will become a possibility. We should seek out resources, mentors, and fellow advocates who can point us along the right path. If we have an inner drive to further our independence, we should act on it, no matter how small or monumental the objective may seem. Every ounce of motivation, perseverance, or curiosity is an opportunity to further our confidence and raise our own expectations of what we can accomplish. For those like me who want to be able to feel comfortable, and truly at home, in their kitchen, do not be afraid to phone a friend, blind or sighted, and tell them about your goals. Build a community of supporters, or enter one that already exists, such as your peers in the Pennsylvania Council of the Blind. Be honest with your reservations and concerns, as that is the easiest way to grow and move beyond them. You are in the driver’s seat of your own life.

# Low Vision Over the Life-Span: Discovery, Diagnosis, and Rehabilitation

By Jule Ann Lieberman MS CLVT/CATIS

What is low vision? In my graduate coursework at Salus University in low vision therapy we were all asked to define the term low vision. Many went immediately to search references on the Internet, others in textbooks, and the definitions provided were a varied collection of descriptions of vision loss. Those who have lived with “low vision” for many years or have worked in the eye care field have seen terms such as “vision impaired,” “visually impaired,” “partially sighted,” and “legally blind.”

Let me first tell you what low vision is not. Low vision is not seeing objects lower in a view, low vision is not necessarily a partial view, and low vision may not be a low level of recognition. Yet all these experiences can be described by persons as their vision loss.

The term legal blindness was first used in the creation of the social security act to identify individuals whose vision loss created difficulty in one or more activities of daily living. A clinical visual acuity standard was set at 20/200 (top line of an eye chart which contains the largest size letter or number) or a restricted field of 20 degrees (the view you may be able to see if you looked through a bathroom tissue roll). If a person had either or both these visual measurements, they were then deemed eligible for social security benefits as well as supportive educational and rehabilitation services. This definition is still used to determine eligibility of many services.

What we have learned over many years, however, is that clinical vision is not the only factor in vision function. Professionals working with persons with vision loss are taught to discover how to make the most of the remaining vision in functional terms.

Variations between individuals with the same clinical measurements have given rise to the concept of functional vision. This determines the best potential outcomes for the person with low vision when considerations of alternative non-visual techniques and tools are recommended.

Now that we have a basic framework in low vision, how does a person discover a vision loss has taken place? Let us start at the earliest this can be observed. Infants are tested by pediatricians, beginning in the nursery and throughout infancy. Visual tracking of objects, eye contact and other responses to visual stimulation can be observed. These observations are then compared to a range of expected responses for that age. If the exam indicates inconsistencies, the infant is referred to an ophthalmologist for a dilated eye exam and other studies. Parents are then advised on potential treatments or therapies that can maximize visual development for this infant.

Sometimes, vision loss is not discovered until the child enters school. Here, the school may provide routine vision screening as part of the school experience. Teachers may also observe such behaviors as holding objects closer to the eye than typical, physical coordination difficulties or clumsiness, or failure to meet and keep eye contact with the teacher or friends. The child would then be referred to eye-care professionals for corrective lenses or to rule out conditions that warrant further evaluation.

In cases where the vision loss cannot be corrected by glasses, the child may be referred for additional services that could include a comprehensive low vision exam and services included in an individual education plan. IDEA (Individual Disability Education Act) provides for students with vision loss services such as instruction by a teacher of the vision impaired, an orientation and mobility specialist, and an assistive technology instructional specialist. A learning media assessment is performed to determine accommodations such as alternative materials such as large print, braille, and audio. Students are also assessed to determine the best technology that can provide the best access to the educational material and experiences. Each school district or system makes the determination of the individual education plan and this can vary from student to student and from one school system to another.

Who are these professionals in vision?

There are several types of eye-care professionals and therapist that may work with you or your child. Ophthalmologists are medical doctors with additional training in the medical diagnosis and treatment of disorders of the eye. This may also include treatments such as surgery and medications. Optometrists have not completed medical school; however, they have completed training as doctors in the study of the eye, visual perception, optics, and medications. Both can perform dilation to exam the structures of the eye and diagnose disorders and prescribe corrective lenses or medications. Opticians are trained in measurement and fitting of corrective lenses. This may include a vision screening without a dilated eye exam. Low vision diplomats are typically Optometrists who have extensive training or experience in the application of optical solutions for those whose vision cannot be corrected with traditional glasses or contact lenses. Low Vision Diplomats are frequently associated with low vision rehabilitation centers within a university or a private vision care center.

Students receiving services in their individual education plan (IEP) may likely work with a teacher of the vision impaired who is a certified special education teacher with specialized training in the education of students with vision loss and blindness. They work as part of an inter-disciplinary team, which may include the classroom teacher and school counselor. When it is determined that safe mobility is of concern, an orientation and mobility specialist joins this team. The orientation and mobility instructor can train the student in safe travel with remaining vision, the recognition of environmental clues, and, when needed, safe use of a white mobility cane. The IEP team may also include an assistive technology instructional specialist, who will evaluate the need and train in the use of technology designed or accessible for use by a student with low vision. This could include both mainstream technology such as computers or mobile devices with accessibility features enabled or with assistive software added. Large monitors, video magnification systems and braille devices may be included in the student’s plan.

Once the student reaches high school, plans are initiated with the state’s office for vocational rehabilitation and in Pennsylvania this is then referred along to the Bureau of Blindness and Visual Services (BBVS). Transition plans are begun, and further assessments can determine additional support for employment or post-secondary life.

What happens if your vision loss occurs later in life? The largest number of persons defined as having low vision are those who acquire vision loss as adults. Frequently, this comes as the result of medical conditions such as diabetes, conditions that develop because of a vascular condition such as heart attacks or strokes, or age-related or genetic conditions that cause retinal degenerative changes, as well as injuries that result from accidents.

Many adults may experience a slow loss of vision; whether they need larger print or bifocal lenses or magnification to read or fail to recognize faces of friends and loved ones at a distance. Adults may not recognize that their field of vision has narrowed or become distorted until they find themselves having difficulty moving through spaces without encountering an obstacle or recognizing changes in elevation such as steps or curbs.

At first, the adult may contact their primary care doctor to rule out medical conditions that may have contributed to this vision loss such as undiagnosed diabetes, MS, and heart or vascular medical conditions. The physician may then refer them to either an Ophthalmologist or Optometrist for a dilated eye exam. In some cases, the dilated eye exam can detect other medical conditions. A comprehensive low vision exam may be advised where several acuity and field measurements are taken. A refracted correction of near sighted or far-sighted vision is explored and there is a determination as to whether there is value in glasses for a functional outcome. Technology for magnification may also be explored or they might be referred to a technology provider for evaluation. Where field measurements and mobility difficulties are observed, a referral will be made for training with an orientation and mobility specialist. Coverage for these services can vary with multiple factors; private or public medical plans may or may not pay for the exam and currently optical devices or technology are not covered by insurers. BBVS has limited provision to cover the cost of low vision exams and devices unless they are considered as part of the written individual rehabilitation plan for post-secondary training or employment. BBVS will also consult with the employer as to what can be provided under the ADA regulations, BBVS provides devices as the resource of last resort in employment after it is determined that employers are exempt for provision under reasonable accommodations.

Adults not seeking post-secondary education or employment can seek support for devices purchased through alternative financing from sources such as PATF (Pennsylvania Assistive Technology Foundation) or vendor payment plans. Used equipment in working condition can be found through contacting private agencies that support persons with low vision or blindness, TechOWL network throughout the state in regional assistive technology centers, and from listings in various publications and on-line sites such as Craig’s List and others. Applications for financial grants to reduce the cost or cover the entire cost of assistive technology and devices can be found online at such resources as Association of Blind Citizens and Virginia DelSordo fund from TechOWL. Reduced pricing of computers with assistive technology can be found at Computers for the Blind.

Contact TechOWL at 800-204-7428 for additional information on these options.

How do I learn how to use these devices? For students in K-12 education, training is provided as part of their IEP. As adults in vocational rehabilitation, BBVS contracts with technology training providers and low vision centers for support. If neither of these options apply to you, consider contacting your peers at PCB, the nearest low vision support group, or contact sources such as the Hadley Institute for the Blind and Vision Impaired by visiting [www.hadley.edu](http://www.hadley.edu) or by calling (847) 446-8111 for training options.

Contact the PCB Office to locate the eye-care professional and rehabilitation agency nearest you. If you believe or have been told “there is nothing more I can do,” consider being your own health care advocate and ask how and where you can get the help you need to make the most of your remaining vision or learn new techniques without using vision. I hope this article has given you a sense of the journey from discovery to diagnosis to rehabilitation. The PCB Vision Loss Resource Team and PCB peers are here to help!

# A Way to Be of Service to Our Peers

By PCB Technology Team

As an experienced Jaws user, have you ever found yourself on the phone frustrated in your attempt to assist an inexperienced Jaws user? The more instructions you give, the deeper trouble you seem to cause. "Try pressing this key combination." "Oh, that didn't work?" "How about pressing..."and it goes on and on. Just imagine how frustrating it is for the person you're trying to assist. Don't you just wish you could be at their computer yourself? Well, you can be, at least virtually. With the last several releases of Jaws, "Jaws tandem" is now available to all Jaws users regardless of whether you have a Jaws professional or home addition.

## How It Works

For purposes of our discussion, we will refer to the person offering assistance as the controller and the person receiving the assistance as the target. If the target is willing, the controller is granted permission to access and control the target's computer via a "Jaws Tandem session".

To start a JAWS Tandem Center session, the controller would follow these steps:

1. Press INSERT+J to open the JAWS application window.

2. Press ALT+U to open the Utilities menu.

3. Select JAWS Tandem from this menu, and then select Tandem Center from the next submenu.

4. Select Get Access to a computer, which then opens the Get Access to a Computer dialog box.

5. Press SPACEBAR to activate the Get Access button. The Meeting ID Created dialog box opens. An alphanumeric ID appears in the Meeting ID read-only edit field. It is not case sensitive.

6. The target user presses INSERT+ALT+T, opening the "Allow Access to My Computer" dialog box. The target's focus is placed directly in the Meeting ID edit field. The controller then gives the user the meeting ID to type in. Once the meeting ID is entered, the target user presses TAB, and then SPACEBAR to activate the Allow Access button.

7. After the target user enters the meeting ID, wait for the connection process to complete on the target system. After successful connection with the target, the controller has access to the target system’s desktop.

Note that once an ID is generated, it is valid for 60 minutes until a connection is made. If a connection hasn't been established within this period, the controller must obtain a new ID from the Tandem Center.

## Conducting a Jaws Tandem Session

Once the controller and target have established a connection, the controller can run the target's system using JAWS and braille as though the controller would be sitting in front of the target's computer. The controller Uses the same JAWS keystrokes and functionality to control the target system. JAWS keystrokes work no matter which type of keyboard layout is used: Laptop or Desktop.

## Disconnecting a Session

Either the controller or target may close the tandem session at any time, breaking the connection by Pressing INSERT+ALT+T.

## The Golden Rules of Offering Assistance

If you are offering assistance to another Jaws user by employing Jaws Tandem, and the offer of assistance is accepted, above all remember you have been granted a position of trust and responsibility. Before beginning a Jaws Tandem session, ask the target to close all applications on their computer which might reveal confidential or personal information. These applications may range from email, to social media, to banking. Secondly, before beginning the session explain in general how you might be of assistance and what you are planning to do. Once in the session, explain each step you are taking and any settings that you are changing. In your zeal to offer assistance, resist making changes which will significantly alter the computing environment with which the target is familiar. If you have been allowed access to someone's computer, it's as though they have invited you into their home, so be a respectful guest and not the proverbial bull in the china shop.

If, as the target, you have accepted someone's offer of assistance and allowed someone access to your computer, if you feel uncomfortable at any time with whatever is occurring, remember that you can terminate the session immediately by pressing INSERT+ALT+T.

Jaws Tandem offers those of us who are more experienced with Jaws and computer software an opportunity to respectfully offer assistance to our less experienced peers. The above quick summary of the Jaws Tandem tool when properly used may save both time and frustration. For further details and an extensive JAWS Tandem FAQs, look under "JAWS Help Topics" in Help in the Jaws menu system.

# Voyage To Leadership: Conquering Uncharted Waters

By PCB Peer Engagement Team

Ahoy! Mark the date! Saturday, April 10, 2021! Your Peer Engagement Team invites you to join them for a fast fun two-hour virtual workshop: Voyage To Leadership: Conquering Uncharted Waters. From 9:30 a.m. to 11:30 a.m., you will be entertained, informed, engaged, and empowered!

The Team, along with your Director of Outreach and Engagement, Melissa Carney, have put together an action-packed agenda. We will explore what it means to be a leader, how leaders are nurtured and upheld, and how a crew only gets to its intended destination only if everyone onboard contributes to the overall goal.

Keep a crow’s-nest eye out for future announcements and make a date to come aboard for the voyage into leadership! And read the next article for some insights into this whole leadership, crew, and voyage thing.

Also, if you have ideas for Peer Engagement Team monthly discussion calls, please let Mary Ann Grignon know at: maryanna0407@gmail.com.

Who me? Yes, you!

By Peer Engagement Team

Are you an officer, a director, a committee chairperson, or a member of a committee? Have you ever considered being a member of a committee, a committee chairperson, a director, or an officer? Who, me?

Your Peer Engagement Team knows it can be daunting and confusing when thinking about taking that next step. But it’s really not that scary and it’s really not that confusing, especially when you keep in mind that you will be a member of a committee, will receive mentoring, and will not be asked to take on anything alone.

Below, we have broken down each role into its basic parts. We hope that this checklist will help to demystify each role, make clear each role’s key jobs, and encourage you to step forward and get involved.

We start with members of a committee because they are the backbone and engine of any organization. We recommend that each committee has at least three members – both to take advantage of multiple perspectives and to avoid the “lone wolf” member who tries to run projects without input or accountability. Committee members are the thinkers, the planners, and the workers. PCB has hundreds of peers, each with vast experience and special skill-sets, just waiting to be asked to do a job. Have you ever sat at a meeting and had a good idea, voiced an opinion, or shared an insight? Then you are ready to be a member of a committee. Your organization has several committees, each with a specific mission and all needing fresh voices and visions to keep the group alive and growing.

A committee chairperson, often a member of the committee who has worked on projects for a few years, has been mentored by the chairperson, and has shown leadership qualities, is often appointed by the president. The chairperson recruits members for the committee, sets the agenda for committee meetings (based on directives from the membership and the president), presides at all committee meetings, manages projects undertaken by the committee, And often presents committee reports at meetings. The chairperson may also be tasked with developing future leaders from among committee members. Finally, it’s also a good idea that each committee develops a useful record on how the committee conducts its business and how projects are run as part of the organization’s institutional knowledge

A director sits on the organization’s board along with the officers and, sometimes, the immediate past president. Typically, the board sets organizational policy, considers major projects before they go before the general membership, recruits and approves candidates for positions that come open (usually, not president), and performs duties set forth in the bylaws. A director attends board meetings, provides insight and advice, votes on all board issues, and may be tasked to head a special project or chair a committee. Many times, serving as a director for a term is a good way for a member to progress from a committee member or chair to running for and being elected to an officer position.

The membership Secretary, who often serves as the chair of the membership committee, has several important jobs: develop programs to get new members, develop programs to retain existing members, keep the official membership roster, and, generally, keep track of the mood and engagement of members and reach out to members who haven’t attended an organization event in a while.

Some organizations have a recording secretary (who takes and distributes minutes) and a correspondence secretary (who is responsible for all correspondence outside the organization), but many PCB teams, chapters, and affiliates have one secretary (who does both). Hence, the Secretary takes minutes of all meetings and distributes them to the membership, keeps all official records, and is responsible for all official correspondence from and to entities outside of the organization.

The treasurer, who usually serves as co-signatory on organization checks, is the chief financial officer. As such, the treasurer is responsible for: keeping accurate records of all funds, accounts, and project finances, collecting membership dues and remitting shares to ACB/PCB, making Treasurer’s Reports at all meetings, paying all outstanding invoices, and filing necessary filings with the bank, the state, the IRS, etc., Finally, the treasurer often serves as the chair of Fundraising committee.

The 2nd vice president has one big job: filling in for the president when the president and the 1st VP can’t preside. As with the 1st VP, many bylaws set forth other duties of the 2nd VP. Often, the 2nd VP is groomed to advance to the position of 1st VP.

The 1st vice president has one big job: filling in for the president when the president can’t preside. In addition, many bylaws set forth other duties of the 1st VP. Often, the 1st VP is groomed to advance to the position of president.

The president is chairman of the board. As such, the president: often, serves as co-signatory on organization checks, sets the agenda for all meetings, and presides at all meetings. The president also appoints committee chairs and makes sure committees are doing what they should be doing when they should be doing it. The president is an ex officio member of all committees except Nominating – ex officio means that the president can attend and advise but cannot vote. Finally, the president represents the organization to the outside world as public face and mouth-piece. The president becomes the immediate past president once the new president takes office.

The immediate past president has three basic duties: acts as repository of institutional knowledge, advises officers and the membership from a position of experience, and models good leadership and effective mentoring. The immediate past president vacates this office and the member who was serving as president becomes the new immediate past president.

The parliamentarian, who often serves as a member or the chair of Constitution & Bylaws Committee, rules on questions of order and procedure at all meetings and, more than not, handles all aspects of constitution and/or bylaws, including amendments.

So, that wasn’t really that bad, was it? We think the best way that any team, chapter, or affiliate can get peers involved, engaged, and empowered is to get them interested in something they are passionate about, mentor them as members of a committee, offer training, and provide everyone with the tools and resources they need to succeed. In sum, everyone has something to offer and an organization only thrives when everyone gets a chance to shine. Yes, you!

# Peers Are Volunteers

By William H. Grignon

PCB is a community of volunteers. Other than Melissa and Autumn, none of us are paid for our services. We all have lives, relationships, responsibilities, commitments, and passions that have nothing to do with PCB but which make up the vast majority of who we are.

While we devote uncounted hours to serving the cause and projects of PCB, we are not full-time drudges to be overloaded with work and to be shamed when we don’t choose to take on extra duties. PCB is only as strong as its volunteer corps and the corps is only as willing as the nominal leaders cherish, respect, and honor them. Simply put, there is no place in PCB for snark.

Each of us can only do what each of us can do. We may want to do more, but can’t, or we would do more, but won’t, because a negative experience has left a bad taste. There will always be more work to be done than volunteers to do it. The trick is to pick the best projects and make them as fun and as meaningful as possible for everyone. this means supporting, nurturing, empowering, and thanking our volunteers.

Remember, any of us can simply say we’ve had enough and we’re leaving. Studies have shown that it is infinitely more difficult to bring back someone who has left than it is to make sure they don’t want to leave. Recognizing that we are all volunteers can go a long way to keeping and growing peers.

Officers, team leaders, veteran PCB peers, and peers who have the time and resources to devote an above-average amount of work for PCB must recognize that not everyone has the time, resources, training, or interest to devote seemingly endless hours to meetings, email strings, and project implementation. In fact, study after study has shown that the typical human organization consists of an inner core of invested stakeholders who do most of the work, surrounded by an outer ring of workers who do some work but typically don’t want to take on leadership responsibilities, farther surrounded by another ring of people who claim “membership” and may participate in social events but who typically don’t volunteer for work assignments. This is why you tend to see the same names over and over, year after year, in team after team and project after project.

Mentoring, skills training, empowerment modules, and enticements might shift a few participants from one ring to another, with a few joining the inner core, but this kind of quantum shift requires total commitment, much effort, and continuous reinforcement. In short, there tends to be a big gap between inner core “buy-in” and peer “my-in” and this gap tends to widen as the core loses sight of the volunteer-in-the-peer, loses its gravitational effect, and outer- and inner-ring participants fall away, usually never to return.

In sum, there is only so much any of us can do and that has to be good enough!

# PCB-L and PCB-Chat: Make Your Voice Heard

By PCB Communications Team

PCB offers all peers two statewide listservs, PCB-L and PCB-Chat. Peers should use PCB-L as an announcement forum, and PCB-Chat as our discussion forum.

PCB-L is a resource list for sharing fact-based information and announcements relevant to blindness or vision loss such as: assistive product info, legislative and regulatory efforts, meeting/training/webinar announcements, survey/research postings, Council news and updates, employment opportunities, business or service provider resources, and the like. If you wish to reply to a post, it should be done off-list.

PCB-Chat is a listserv where individuals interested in sharing opinion pieces, having an idea exchange, and carrying on conversations relevant to blindness issues or adjusting to vision loss can be part of the conversation. Replies on the chat forum will go to the list so that all may participate in the discussion.

To subscribe to any lists that you are not currently on, send a message to the list name followed by [+subscribe@groups.io](mailto:+subscribe@groups.io). For example, [pcb-l+subscribe@groups.io](mailto:pcb-l+subscribe@groups.io) or [pcb-chat+subscribe@groups.io](mailto:pcb-chat+subscribe@groups.io). Should you feel you are encountering technical difficulties with PCB’s listservs, please don’t hesitate to email our tech team for help: [techassist@pcb1.org](mailto:techassist@pcb1.org).

# Writing Your Best for PCB

By PCB Communications Team

We on the Communications Team encourage everyone associated with PCB, including board members, officers, teams, chapters, special interest affiliates, and individual peers to present the most competent and effective image of persons with vision loss as possible when communicating with government entities, other organizations, and the general public. We offer here some tips to guide your interactions whether they are face-to-face meetings, telephone conversations, or written communications. It can be so very easy, especially with emails, to slip into quick and casual sloppiness.

All hard-copy written communications should be on official letterhead from PCB or your chapter. In the case of letters and emails, your name, mission, and contact information should be conspicuously displayed.

We should all adhere to official PCB policies and positions when writing as representatives of our chapter or as PCB peers. Hence, before we state what we think constitutes official PCB policies and positions, we should check and make sure we are accurately representing PCB’s latest policies and positions. Consult the PCB website or communicate with someone from the leadership or staff who should have the latest information.

If you are writing as an individual, not as a representative of any entity of PCB, then you should feel free to speak your mind, state your opinions, and make your points— so long as you make it clear you are writing as you and not as someone representing any entity of PCB. In this case, you would not use organization letterhead.

We encourage teams, chapters, and special interest affiliates to form an Editorial Committee. Before any member sends anything out which represents the team, chapter, or special interest affiliate, that member should send it to the editorial committee for review. This is not a small group trying to control every aspect. It is an attempt to ensure consistency and professionalism in what is produced and how we are perceived in the community.

None of us should use our vision loss as an excuse for sloppy documents/emails and we should not excuse one another. Instead, we should hold ourselves and each other to the highest standard of professionalism, share in the production of materials, be responsible for our work-product, and be accountable for the final product, both individually and collectively.

Let’s make every effort to create written communications as professional and error free as possible: i.e., at a minimum, the following should be done before sending:

• Be as clear, concise, and compelling as possible. Think about what you want to say before you say it and re-read everything you write before you send it. Make sure your writing is organized, makes sense, is complete, and has no mistakes.

• If it is an important document intended to serve a formal function, you might do well to ask someone else to proofread it. Another “pair of eyes” can be very helpful in spotting errors and suggesting the most effective ways to say what you want to say.

• Use spell-check, but do not rely on it to find all mistakes. You must proofread your documents to find and correct all errors.

• Check for the correct spelling of names and places that are not included in your spell-check dictionary.

• Check for grammatical mistakes, including the use of homophones. Homophones are words that sound alike but mean different things. Some spellcheckers will not pick up when they have been used incorrectly, e.g., “hear” and “here.” Also check for missing words, odd sentence structures, and any “read-bumps” that distract the reader from an easy read and clear understanding of your message. In most document and email programs, you can choose a grammar check that will run when you run a spell-check.

• Use proper punctuation, especially in text messages. Lack of punctuation can generate a stream-of-consciousness effect in which meaning is lost amid a jumble of words.

• Check for different fonts and type sizes (this usually occurs when you cut/copy/paste bits of text from several sources) – the easiest way to ensure consistency of both is to select your entire document/email, cut it to the clipboard, and paste it as unformatted text (this will get rid of all weird paragraphing, font/size differences, and special typological items like bolding, underlining, and italicizing).

• Assign one font (Arie\al Black is a good one) and one font size (12 is good enough for most sighted audiences, 18 should be used when corresponding with persons with some vision loss) to the entire document/email.

• Check your facts, especially make sure dates, times, places, and names are all correct. If you aren’t sure, ask someone who knows.

• Check your language. Remove any potentially offensive language.

• Humor is a very subjective and easily misunderstood, so use it sparingly or make it clear that you are making a joke.

• Avoid acronyms, emoticons, and emojis in official correspondence. They are fine for personal writings but insert an unprofessional air of casualness in any official text.

• Use formal opening and closing salutations. “Dear” followed by the person’s name and ending with a colon, is sufficient. Use the person’s last name preceded by Mr., Mrs., or Ms. (each ending in a period), if you have never met this person or have a formal relationship; and use the person’s first name if you are on more familiar terms. With respect to closing salutations, “Sincerely,” followed by a comma, or “Respectfully,” followed by a comma, are sufficient.

# When Dogs Fly

By PAGDUS

**The following article was inspired by a February 10 discussion call sponsored by the Pennsylvania Guide Dog Users and Supporters (PAGDUS). PAGDUS hosts discussion calls on the second Wednesday evening of every even-numbered month, presenting thought-provoking topics and useful information about all aspects of working and living with your guide dog. This most recent discussion call featured a presentation made by Melissa Allman, Senior Specialist in Advocacy and Government Relations, at The Seeing Eye, Inc., 973-539-4425,** [**info@SeeingEye.org**](mailto:info@SeeingEye.org)**, and** [**www.seeingeye.org/**](http://www.seeingeye.org/)**. It should be noted that your guide dog school should be a good source for the latest information on air travel and your service animal.**

On December 10, 2020, the US Department of Transportation (DOT) published in the Federal Register a final rule to amend the Department’s Air Carrier Access Act regulation on the transport of service animals by air. In that final rule, the Department allows airlines to require passengers traveling with service animals to provide carriers with two forms of documentation developed by the Department – a U.S. Department of Transportation Service Animal Air Transportation Form ([www.transportation.gov/sites/dot.gov/files/2020-12/Service%20Animal%20Health%20Behavior  
%20Training%20Form.pdf](http://www.transportation.gov/sites/dot.gov/files/2020-12/Service%20Animal%20Health%20Behavior%20Training%20Form.pdf)) and a U.S. Department of Transportation Service Animal Relief Attestation Form ([www.transportation.gov/sites/dot.gov/files/2020-12/Service%20Animal%20Relief%  
20Form.pdf](http://www.transportation.gov/sites/dot.gov/files/2020-12/Service%20Animal%20Relief%20Form.pdf)).

On the Service Animal Behavior Form, you must input your name, phone number, and email address, your guide dog’s name, description of dog, date of last vaccination, date of vaccination expiration, attestation to no disease-carrying vermin, your vet’s name and phone number, attestation that dog is a service animal, and name and phone number of guide dog school. In addition, there is an attestation that your properly-trained dog will not bark, act aggressively, or relieve itself on the plane. You also agree that if your dog does not act like a properly-trained service animal, the airline can treat it as a pet, charge a pet fee, and require you to transport it in a pet carrier. Finally, you must attest that your dog has not been aggressive to people and other animals, you agree that that your dog will remain leashed, in harness, and otherwise tethered in the airport, and on the plane, and that you can be charged for damage caused by your dog. You must sign the document and, by signing, you acknowledge that you may be subject to federal law.

On the Relief Attestation Form, required for flight segments of eight hours or more, you must input your name, phone number, and email address, your dog’s name, and flight info (date, length, departure airport, and arrival airport). You will also have to check one or both boxes: either your dog will not have to relieve himself during the flight or, if your dog does relieve himself during the flight, he can do so without “creating a health/sanitation issue.” You then have to describe how the dog won’t relieve himself or can relieve himself without creating a health/sanitation issue. You then agree that you will pay for damage caused by your dog. Finally, you sign under penalty of federal law.

Along with these required forms, the DOT has made several rule changes. One change narrows the definition of “service animal” to be a dog (not a horse) that must be trained to perform a specific task. And, after much debate, the DOT ruled that airlines cannot discriminate based on breed, e.g., pit bulls are allowed as service animals. Emotional support dogs are now treated as pets and must be carried or kenneled at all times.

Hence, airlines can ask the 2 ADA questions: is it a service animal and is it trained to perform a specific task? It is recommended that you respond in a matter-of-fact way by saying, “I am blind and this is my guide dog.”

You can submit these forms electronically up to forty-eight hours in advance of flight or at the gate. However, if the flight reservation was made less than forty-eight hours before the flight, they cannot require the advanced form, but they can require that you present the form at the gate. Airlines are required to have these forms available at the airport (for all domestic flights and at foreign airports serving flights to and from the US).

Federal law requires airlines to provide these official DOT forms in an accessible and fillable online format. Most airlines are in the process of developing their websites to meet these requirements. Allegiant, Southwest, and Alaskan airlines DOT forms are pretty accessible to screen readers but may not be as accessible for people with other disabilities.

Airline personnel are supposed to help you fill out the forms, unless it causes unreasonable delays. Even if you don't fill out the online forms in advance, airlines are supposed to accept the forms at the gate, unless it causes unreasonable delays. It should be noted that airlines may not use their own forms, they must use the official DOT forms.

Alaskan and American allow you to save service animal info. You get a service animal ID, so you don't have to fill in the same info over and over. The American ID is good for a year, while the Alaskan ID is good for the life of the current vaccine.

Furthermore, airlines are not allowed to force you to check in at the airport: you can check in online. You are allowed to have two service animals per passenger. The service animal must fit in the foot-space or on your lap. Airlines cannot force you to sit in a bulkhead seat, but you are not allowed to sit in the emergency row of seats. Airlines are supposed to accommodate large service animals by trying to put them next to an empty seat, but they reserve the right to require the dog to travel in cargo if no adequate space is available in the cabin. Dogs must be harnessed, leashed, or tethered at all times, which means that a handler can No longer have their service animal managed by only voice commands. It is recommended that you request early boarding for you and your dog. Finally, the airline can deny you boarding of the plane if your dog is barking, lunging, or relieving itself at the gate.

If you think you have been discriminated against, ask for a Complaints Resolution Officer (CRO). Airlines are required to make one available to you, at no cost, in person at the airport or by telephone during the times they are operating. Failure to provide you with a CRO constitutes a violation of your rights. The DOT recommends that you try to resolve the issue with the airline’s customer service staff. If you are not satisfied with the response you get from airline personnel, you can file a complaint on the airline’s website. Finally, if you get no satisfactory response from the airline, you can file a complaint directly with DOT ([www.transportation.gov/airconsumer/file-consumer-complaint](http://www.transportation.gov/airconsumer/file-consumer-complaint)). Remember that inaccessible online forms may also constitute a violation of your rights subject to complaint.

If you need more info, visit the DOT website ([www.transportation.gov/individuals/aviation-consumer-protection/service-animals](http://www.transportation.gov/individuals/aviation-consumer-protection/service-animals)) or you can contact Seeing Eye’s Senior Advocacy Specialist Melissa Allman at [advocacy@seeingeye.org](mailto:advocacy@seeingeye.org). Finally, The DOT has a very informative webinar, for which you have to register, at Ada-audio.org and searching through recent webinars in their archives.

You will minimize hassles by knowing your rights and responsibilities, preparing ahead of time, and having your paperwork in hand.

# Motions: Building-Blocks of Your Meeting

By PCB Parliamentary Team

Unless your chapter or special interest affiliate has cited a different procedural authority in its governing documents, your meetings should be governed by the latest version of Robert’s Rules of Order. Robert’s Rules of Order is a manual that sets forth the rules of parliamentary procedure. These rules help people to run orderly and productive meetings; however, arguments about the rules can make meetings overly complicated, with various factions making claims and counter-claims and no one having a complete understanding of the rules. Therefore, it is important for your chapter or special interest affiliate to have a parliamentarian.

Your parliamentarian can be your secretary or someone who volunteers for the post. They can also be appointed. There are many “cheat sheets” on the internet that explain Robert’s Rules of Order using simple examples. The parliamentarian is an umpire, not a dictator. A parliamentarian’s ruling can be ignored, but if that happens, you then open up any decision to be questioned or challenged.

The most basic rule in Robert’s Rules of Order is how a matter is presented, discussed, and voted on. This is the building block of everything that goes on at your meeting. Without this basic process, your meeting can break down into chaos, confusion, and rancor. The bedrock rule is that nothing can be discussed or debated without a motion being made and seconded. Here is the basic process which should be recorded in your minutes:

Step 1: When there is no business before the body, a member gets the attention of the chair (usually the president).

Step 2: The chair recognizes the member.

Step 3: The member rises to take the floor and makes a motion. They use the phrase, “I move that…”

Step 4: The chair determines if the motion is in a proper form. If it is not phrased properly or is unclear, the chair asks for clarification or rewording. Once the motion is phrased properly, the chair asks for a second of the motion.

Step 5: If there is a second (another member says, “I second the motion”), the chair acknowledges it and discussion may proceed. If there is no second, the chair acknowledges the lack of a second, the motion dies, and there may not be any discussion on the topic unless and until there is another motion.

Step 6: The chair then presides over discussion of the motion that has been duly made and seconded. The chair strives to give everyone a chance to speak, but also works to keep discussion civil, focused, and moving forward. The person taking the minutes should focus on the main points being raised rather than on the personalities involved or any irrelevant asides.

Step 7: During discussion, the chair may entertain various motions from the body. These will be discussed in a future article.

Step 8: When the discussion has run its course, i.e., no other member wishes to speak, or when the chair determines that the discussion has gone on long enough, the chair may call the question and ask for a vote.

Step 9: The chair asks, “All in favor of the motion to [repeat the wording of the motion], say ‘aye.’” The ayes are duly noted. The chair then asks, “All opposed to the motion to [repeat the wording of the motion], say ‘nay.’” The nay votes are duly noted. Finally, the chair asks, “All abstaining to vote on the motion to [repeat the wording of the motion], say ‘aye.’” The abstentions are duly noted. Note: abstentions are not counted when determining whether a majority has voted to approve or defeat the motion.

Step 10: The chair announces the result of the vote, i.e., the aye votes have a sufficient majority and the motion is approved and the chapter or special interest affiliate is bound by that vote, or the nays have a sufficient majority and the motion is defeated. For example: there are 20 members in good standing: 8 vote aye, 7 vote nay, and 5 abstain. The motion passes. However, a tie vote means the motion is defeated, i.e., 8 ayes, 8 nays, and 4 abstentions result in a defeat of the motion. The vote is duly noted in the minutes.

It should be noted that Robert’s Rules of Order and some organizations allow the chair (e.g., the president) to delay a vote until the general votes are counted. In such a case, the president could break a tie to either approve or defeat a motion or defeat a motion by casting a nay vote to create a tie that defeats the motion. Presidents are strongly urged to use this procedure very sparingly, especially since it will only come up in close votes where the body is almost equally divided. In the end, the president will be better off abstaining and let the matter be decided by the body.

The process discussed above might seem overly convoluted, but once your chapter or special interest affiliate gets into the habit of following this basic procedure, your meetings will be quicker, friendlier, and more productive.

# Voting Reflections

By Joseph Sickora

I have always attempted to utilize accessible voting alternatives ever since they became available. When I voted in my first election, I was a resident of Park Towers in Philadelphia. I relied on a fellow resident to assist me. She was a Democratic Party member who didn’t like me splitting my ticket, so she voted me straight instead of continuing to read me the ballot choices.

Back then, talk radio in Philadelphia and TV news did not hesitate to have politicians as guests, so splitting my ticket was as natural as eating a mixed bowl of cereal while listening to Joel A. Spivak.

Having accessible voting equipment didn’t end my problems. While voting in the 2008 primary, a contest where I went to the internet for information to supplement what I watched on TV, the ballot for the delegates read strangely. My pole workers were my neighbors who calmed me down after I started crying.

Whenever I got transported to poles while living in Bristol, I knew my drivers would give me their pitch. I frequented business establishments and participated in religious activities, but it seemed peculiar that people didn’t feel comfortable talking politics until that last-minute plea.

I share these experiences so you can feel that I can relate to your situation.

Yet, perhaps the most vexing advocacy challenge I have faced is the reluctance of blind residents of my current Bucks County, and the other counties where I have lived who chose not to try the technology.

So, as fallout to the last election still simmers, I wanted to urge our peers to answer some questions which have occurred to me.

The assumption behind regulations for our voting equipment is that it could be designed to help both technically-inclined and non-technical people.

If you are in the non-technical category, did you appreciate not having to use a keyboard to type in results? Did you feel more comfortable just using the keys to move through the ballot to select your candidate? What would it take for you to give the equipment a try?

If you are someone who has experience typing, are you turned off by not having a machine that would allow you to manually type in results, or simply use the spacebar or enter key to select or deselect candidates?

My fear is that peers who fall into the non-technical category may feel that they are more comfortable with someone assisting them, and perhaps if you feel that way, you find my urging you to trying the equipment to be an intrusion, and I should mind my own business.

Perhaps the people who have keyboarding skills feel that a machine that doesn’t allow full use of your skills just isn’t worth your time. Perhaps the idea of using a mail-in ballot provided the incentive of voting without the hassle of working with pole workers who weren’t comfortable with you and the machines. This was the most socially-distanced alternative for those fearing exposure to COVID-19, but only fifty people chose to use the specially-designed mail-in ballot.

What occurs to me is the proposition that designing a machine for both groups is impossible. Would participation by our community be higher if we suspended this premise? This suspension assumes that the less technically-inclined voter is so used to having assistance and may not be interested in a different alternative.

Increased participation will happen by reflection within our community. The easiest thing is to blame this state of affairs on election officials, but if we can get a better handle on the thinking and preferences of blind people inside and outside of advocacy circles, we will be better off in the long run. Our advocates can give a nuanced explanation as to where to go from here in terms of machine design and voting place protocols.

I enjoy reading about the developments relative to the adaptive technology we use. It is inspiring to read about the talented people whose efforts have led to more progress.

I believe that people from both sides of my conundrum must be heard. When someone on my level speaks of their experiences, I am inclined to appreciate the fits and starts of progress I’ve made. So, if you have had a good experience with voting and your background comes from a person who doesn’t use a keyboard, your positive experience will influence others to try, rather than someone who is more at home in a technical setting.

Our accessibility needs are now caught up in a much broader electoral discussion. Who can and cannot vote, how votes are cast and counted, and who gets to review that count and decide elections have been placed into serious question. If we do not speak now, we might lose what progress we have made. What will the new rules be? What technology will evolve, and how accessible will this new technology be? To what degree must we rely on drop-boxes and on the post office? How will overall electoral reform affect our specific accessible needs? Does our community face marginalization as various forces compete to shape and control the electoral process? The only way we can make sure we have a place at the electoral table is to speak up and speak up loudly. Vision loss should be no bar to full participation in our society, including the political realm, and self-suppression, where we are too afraid or just don’t bother, can only lead to us having a harder time exercising our constitutional right to vote.

# PCB Peer Gets Her First Book Deal

By Rebecca Holland

My name is Rebecca L. Holland and I am a relatively new peer in PCB. I was born with bilateral congenital cataracts and developed glaucoma when I was four years old. My life has been full of challenges, but I have also experienced many blessings. I love to write, and my undergraduate degree is in English Education.

Four years ago, I started taking my writing more seriously. I am a pastor in the United Methodist Tradition (I earned my M.Div. from Wesley Seminary in D.C.) and I was tired of the ableism I constantly encountered in the church and society.

I started a blog entitled Rev. Rebecca Writes (BeckieWrites.com) where I shared book reviews, poetry, and devotional writing. I was surprised and pleased by the positive response my writing received, and before long, my little blog had gained some traction and a regular readership. I self-published a chapbook of poetry, Through My Good Eye: A Memoir in Verse and a collection of essays, The United Methodist Church and Disability.

Finally, after years of hard work, multiple rejections, and countless revisions, my third book, Hope for the Broken: Using Writing to Find God’s Grace was accepted for publication by Touch Point Faith, an imprint of Touch Point Press. I am beyond excited to be working with my very first publisher. I hope that you will consider checking out my book in the future.

If you are a fellow writer who is visually impaired, I would like to encourage you to keep writing. The world needs to hear our voices. Our stories can help change the world.

The following is the synopsis of Hope for the Broken: Using Writing to Find God’s Grace as provided by the publisher. Hope for the Broken is available from Touch Point Press on February 23, 2021. You can find out more about me and my writing at BeckieWrites.com

Publisher’s Synopsis:

Rebecca was no stranger to adversity. Marked as different from an early age by her visual disability and half-Filipino heritage, she tried her best to bury herself in the pages of a book. For years, she was able to find solace in stories, until an ill-fated battle with her own personal Goliath left her with a shattered heart and broken dreams.

Rebecca found herself at the darkest point in her life. All she knew was that she needed to finish school and find work so that she could continue to afford the expensive medicines that maintained what remained of her precious eyesight.

During the darkest point in her life, a miraculous encounter with God gave her a new hope and a new purpose. Rebecca accepted the call to ministry in the United Methodist Church, and since then, her life has never been the same.

By writing just fifteen minutes a day, you can find God’s comfort and spiritual healing for your own life!

Redeemed by the gift of God’s grace, Rebecca found her own “happy ending.” In this book, Rebecca helps the reader to use the art of writing to find that same sense of purpose. It includes:

-Instructions to help you create your own Writer’s Notebook

-Weekly Bible verses and prayers

-Daily writing prompts

-Exercises to help the reader connect to God

-Excerpts from Rebecca's own spiritual journals and poems

God bound up the pieces of Rebecca’s heart and created something beautiful. Healing doesn’t always look like we expect. Journey with her as you find your own place in the biblical story and hope for your own life.

# The Forecast Calls For Thunder

By William H. Grignon

Here is the latest chapter in my quest to get my first guide dog. I now have a date to meet my dog. It is March 13, 2021. That is when I come face-to-face with Thunder: a seventy-pound yellow Lab from Freedom Guide Dogs.

I am told that Thunder “has a lot of energy” and “can get rather goofy.” Well, duh, he’s a Lab. At least I have lived with a goofy high-energy Lab for years, Percy, and I’ve seen how my wife, Mary Ann, has handled him and how he has responded by being a superb guide.

I still have some reservations, but trepidation appears to be giving way to anticipation. One thing about cane travel I think I will miss is knowing what the ground around me feels like and being able to locate things in my immediate vicinity with my cane. This tactile exploration helps me to create a mental picture of what is around me and I wonder if I will miss this when I have a dog.

Mary Ann says that the freedom and confidence I will enjoy with Thunder will outweigh the loss of tactile data, but I might just keep a telescoping cane around to point the tip of my tap in the blank abyss.

# What’s Happening at ASB?

By Ethel Siegel

What is happening at ASB (Associated Services for the Blind and Visually Impaired) since the building is closed due to the pandemic? Here are a few answers. No one really knows when ASB will open, but an estimate is June 30 for staff and July 6 for clients. You can learn all about ASB by visiting Asb.org , calling 267-551-0561, or emailing [asbinfo@asb.org](mailto:asbinfo@asb.org) .

ASB is holding many of its meetings via Zoom, but only clients may participate. Members of the ASB staff host the calls. Here are a few examples.

There is a comedy club, as well as various book clubs. The pharmacy students from Jefferson host a diabetes support group, and another group discusses wellness issues. There is also a group that discusses keeping up with the times and current events, as well as tips on making our lives better. There is a discussion on blindness issues and learning the iPhone, as well as a story-telling group.

These meetings provide a social outlet for clients, but it is not the same as meeting in person. Moreover, there is a disadvantage to these virtual meetings, some people stay unmuted and have background noise.

I look forward to the day we can get together again.

Zigazint! (Yiddish for stay well)

# Low Vision “Wearable” Solutions

By Jule Ann Lieberman, MS CLVT/CATIS and the Vision Loss Resource Team

During the 2020 PCB Conference held virtually this past October, I spoke on how magnification works and how optical and technology options are used for reading with low vision. In this article I wish to primarily discuss magnification devices for distance tasks along with near reading tasks.

In 1982 I visited the William Feinbloom Low Vision Center located in Philadelphia. As part of my comprehensive low vision exam, I was introduced to Bioptic Glasses. Wikipedia describes Bioptics as follows: “Vision-enhancing lenses that magnify between two and six times and are used to improve distance vision for those with severely impaired eyesight.” Think of a pair of glasses with one or two telescopes mounted strategically in the lens portion of prescription spectacles. A Low Vision Specialist would evaluate the potential use for the patient including the optimal placement of the telescopes in what is termed the carrier lens. All prescription glasses include a measurement of the pupillary distance, the point where your eyes position to use both eyes at the same time.

Placement of the telescopes relies on this measurement for best results. The magnification level will dictate the length of the telescope, with higher magnification needs requiring longer telescopes. To understand this concept, think of the size of the telescopes to magnify the night sky; the larger the telescope, the closer the stars will appear. With telescopes for low vision, larger telescopes bring objects closer to you to make the object appear larger and more visible. My first experience with Bioptics included a trip outside the low vision center where I was able to spot and read successfully a street sign from the middle of a city-long block. My acuity with standard corrective lenses at the time was 20/350 and the Bioptics increased my acuity to approximately 20/35 for distance acuity. To explain this acuity measurement, 20/200 is the top line of the eye chart and 20/20 the bottom smallest line on the eye chart representing typical vision. I was also prescribed a “reading cap” that was placed on the end of one telescope, which provided magnification in a small field for reading. Over the years, Bioptics improved with lighter and shorter telescopes with increased magnification and smaller telescopes placed on the interior portion of the lenses for more cosmetic appearance. In recent years, an auto focus feature which uses a re-chargeable battery lasting eight hours of continuous use was added. The auto-focus Bioptics will adjust quickly for multiple activities, reading street signs, watching television, and reading. Bioptics are a great option for a person who has been diagnosed with macular degeneration, Stargardt’s Dystrophy and Albinism who has best correction of 20/300 or better, using typical corrective glasses. In 1982 Pennsylvania had no laws allowing use of Bioptics for driving. Currently, my Bioptics are no longer effective for me; however, I remember the thrill of seeing the street signs and watching baseball games both on TV and in person.

In as many as 28 states, Bioptics can be used while operating a motor vehicle. In November 2020, the Pennsylvania Legislature passed, and Governor Wolf signed into law Act 131, which addressed several items regarding driving. One section of this act included allowing persons using Bioptics to apply for driver permits and licenses in the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania. According to the PennDOT (Pennsylvania Department of Transportation) website: “PennDOT is currently developing the program's training and licensure process and will implement the program on the effective date of this section of the legislation, which is September 27, 2021.” For updates to this development, visit [www.penndot.gov/news](http://www.pendot.gov/news) or contact the Department of Motor Vehicles Driver and Vehicle Services Customer **Call** Center staff at 717-412-5300.

Bioptic driving requires a prescription by a low vision specialist and training by a driving instructor who understands the proper use. Additional requirements may include a restricted license limiting hours of driving and limits on what roads can be traveled. A driver using Bioptics will spend 95% of the time looking through the carrier lens where the standard prescription correction is located and will tilt head and look into the telescopes to spot road signs and objects ahead. This requires training and practice for ultimate safety.

A friend of PCB who lives in Virginia has been driving with Bioptics for two years to date. She was introduced to this idea after hearing from another in Virginia who was successfully driving using Bioptics for a few years. She did not want to “lose the freedom of driving” and discussed with her eye doctor this potential. After receiving some training from the eye doctor's office for using Bioptics to watch television, walk outside, ride a bicycle, ride in a car while wearing Bioptics for at least three months, and after successful testing, she was advised to pursue this option for driving. This led to contacting the Department of Motor Vehicles where she scheduled a driving test with a DMV instructor along for the ride. She currently has only driven in Virginia and has not indicated any restrictions to where and when she may drive. Her eye doctor states if she feels comfortable, she is permitted to drive at night.

New trends in wearable low vision technology are devices that simulate the functions of a video magnification system. Based on virtual reality glasses, devices such as those from IrisVision, eSight, NewEyes, and a few others have options for both distance and reading magnification built into a goggle type of wearable. These devices must be used while still and cannot be used while walking or operating a motor vehicle. As with many video magnification systems, contrast, color options, and zoom magnification are standard features. Optical Character Recognition is also possible with speech reading of documents, and text can be displayed in larger size while reading aloud takes place. Many of these wearable video magnification systems also connect to the Internet through Wi-Fi network access where newspaper subscriptions can be accessed. The best candidates for these devices are persons who have acuity of 20/400 or better when wearing corrective lenses, benefit from high contrast and color display options, and have interest in connecting to the Internet for reading. The devices have auto focus and can easily change from near reading to viewing at a distance. Activities such as watching television, movies, and sporting events can be viewed using the zoom magnification feature. During an Assistive Technology Day at TechOWL in November 2019, several visitors tried out these devices. The most common comments were that each of the devices we had to try would need some training to use most effectively and were somewhat heavy to wear for extended periods. TechOWL has in the equipment lending library both IrisVision and NewEyes to borrow for short term evaluation. Visit the TechOWL website [www.techowlpa.org](http://www.techowlpa.org) to sign up as a library user or call 800-204-7428 for additional assistance in borrowing all low vision device options available in the equipment inventory.

Check with your nearest low vision specialist to determine if either a Bioptic or wearable video magnification device is right for you. Contact the PCB Office to locate low vision and rehabilitation centers nearest to you.

# Complimentary Access to Immediate Real Assistance

By Sue Lichtenfels

Every time I read about the Aira service, I think to myself, “That’s such an unusual name. Surely the letters in Aira must be an acronym for the company’s full name.” According to the “About” section of the Aira.io website, the Ai portion stands for artificial intelligence, while the ra stands for remote assistance. In this case you would expect all of the letters to be capitalized, but only the first letter is. The name explanation is a bit off the mark, since the most amazing feature of this service is a direct link to a living human assistant.

For this article, let us create an acronym that accurately describes what Aira is: Access to Immediate Real Assistance. At the press of a button, we can immediately connect to a real, living being to assist us. Furthermore, there are many opportunities to do so without spending a dime. Let us explore how:

To use the Aira service, you need a smartphone, either iPhone or Android. The app is free to download from the App Store and the Google Play Store. When you open the app for the first time, you will need to provide your phone number to register for a free account. You will not be charged for this account. Aira will then text you a verification code for you to enter to confirm that you did request to register. You can literally be ready to get access to immediate real assistance in less than two minutes.

Aira’s business model is to sell visual interpretation services that enable blind and visually impaired individuals to accomplish tasks more easily. Aira provides highly trained and vetted agents who are available 24/7 to answer video calls from people who are blind or visually impaired.

Agents, known as visual interpreters, use the pone’s camera and online research to assist users. Agents can guide, inform, describe, and help users in many different ways. The service makes money by charging for the minutes spent connected to an agent.

Aira sells monthly minute packages to users. Users are referred to as “Explorers.”

Some helpful information for us to know is that companies and organizations sometimes pay for minutes because it is good business practice that improves their public image. These companies or organizations are referred to as “Access Partners.” When these third parties pick up the tab, those of us who cannot afford a monthly Aira plan can get complimentary access to immediate real assistance.

Once you have registered for a free account, you are considered a Guest. On the home screen, click on the “Apply Free Offer” button to find all the offers you can access for free. Offers are separated into three categories: Promotions, Products, and Locations. Most promotion and product offers come with stipulations about how many complimentary minutes you can be connected with an agent and what types of tasks you can get help doing.

When it comes to location offers, there do not seem to be time limits, just physical location boundaries. For example, if you use Aira inside a Target that is attached to a mall, do not expect complimentary service to shop other stores. The list of Aira Access locations shown will depend on your GPS coordinates. If you are curious or want to do some trip planning, you can search other cities using the search field on the Aira Access Locations screen. What follows is information about complimentary offers available at the time of this writing.

First, let me address the one “Free Access” offer that is not officially listed within any of the promotional categories. Aira itself offers one free call, up to five minutes of complimentary visual interpretation of any task. You may call only once within a 24-hour period. If you have a quick task such as checking your makeup application, reading the screen on a mis-behaving appliance, getting feedback on a busy street crossing, finding help to locate a dropped item, or the something similar, Aira welcomes your call. Simply double tap the “Call Aira for Free” button on the home screen to connect to an agent.

When I browsed the “Promotions, Limited-time and On-going Promotions” category in late February, five offers were displayed:

1. Job seekers can access Aira for up to 30 minutes per call when seeking visual feedback during any aspect of the job-seeking process.
2. Intuit offers complimentary service for small business owners and those who are self-employed. It sponsors up to 30 minutes of Aira assistance with almost any kind of business-related tasks.
3. Aira offers up to 15 minutes free for demonstration purposes so users can show employers, others with vision loss, or anyone else interested in Aira how the service works.
4. Access to online viewing of virtual exhibits at SheddAquarium.org. A
5. The last offer in this category ran through February for Black History Month. Free Aira assistance was made available to anyone seeking access to explore either physically or virtually hundreds of sites within the Association of African American Museums (AAAM). The network directory is at aaam.org.

At the time of this writing, even more offers were available in the products category. Vispero, retailer of JAWS, Zoomtext, and Magic, provides Aira Access up to 30 minutes for technology-related issues. Target.com provides complimentary Aira service to shop its website without a posted minute limit. VHL Central offers up to 60 minutes for visual assistance with their online language learning courses. QuickBooks provides up to 30 minutes per call to provide assistance with any task related to using the QuickBooks program. Nationwide Insurance and Nationwide Pet Insurance Offer Free access to anyone using their websites, digital documents, and mobile apps. Aira assistance is free to users with tasks related to using Brightspace software. D2L Brightspace is a learning platform.

Complimentary Aira Access for shopping, navigation, and entertainment is available in many locations throughout Pennsylvania and the country. When you arrive at these Aira Access sites, find the offer for that specific location, and activate it to connect with an Aira Agent who can assist throughout your visit. National chains include Walgreens, Target, Bank of America, AT&T, Wegman’s, and Fresh Thyme Market.

Aira Access sites include these tourist locations in Pennsylvania: John Heinz History Center, Erie Maritime Museum, Landis Valley Farm and Village, Old Economy Village, Pennsylvania Military Museum, Railroad Museum of PA, and the State Museum of Pennsylvania.

Aira Agents can also help you navigate the Capitol complex in Harrisburg for free. You can visit for a tour, meet with a legislator, or attend an event. Complimentary Aira access is also available at the Philadelphia International Airport and more than 40 other airports across the country. Often, Aira provides free access at in-person conferences for the blind including ACB and PCB.

If you find that having access to immediate real assistance is a service you want whenever and wherever you are, there may still be time to take advantage of a very special offer. The University of California, Irvine and Toyota North American Motors (TNAM) are partnering to sponsor persons with vision disabilities a free, 500-minute, monthly AIRA subscription from October 2020, through August 2021. The project has allocated funds to provide 600 AIRA subscriptions to interested individuals with visual disabilities. As of the writing of this article, there were still subscriptions remaining. The short form to request one of these subscriptions is at tinyurl.com/freeairasub.

If you cannot access the free subscription, you can read about plans, minutes, and costs on Aira.io or call Aira for more information at 800-835-1934. Admittedly, the service is expensive. Perhaps a local Lions Club would be willing to help with funds toward a monthly plan. Maybe your local church or scout troop would help raise funds through a special event. The Veterans Administration may also offer benefits that include Aira. Online services like GoFundMe which utilize social media asks are also popular ways to raise money for specific needs. As advocates, we can all be working to expand the free Aira Access network for all peers by educating companies we do business with about the marketing rewards they can reap by sponsoring complimentary service at their locations.

In summary, peers lucky enough to have smartphones have complimentary access to immediate real assistance at their fingertips. Within the Aira app, three categories of offers are available across the sectors of learning, shopping, banking, traveling, touring, working, job-seeking, technology troubleshooting, and more. In addition, guests can make one free call every 24 hours for help with any quick, under five-minute task. Even as a guest using a free offer, peers connect to the same top-notch, highly trained agents as paying peers do. Download the app and start utilizing complementary access to immediate assistance today!

# Underwriting Contributions

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(Meets Third Wednesday 7:30 p.m.)

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