

## **Pennsylvania Council of the Blind**

A peer network of people impacted by vision loss.

**PCB's SPARK: The Newsletter for Igniting Ideas**

Summer 2025

## **Harvesting Talents and Resources: What's Ahead at PCB's 2025 Virtual Conference**

Each fall, the Pennsylvania Council of the Blind brings together community members, service providers, professionals, and allies for its flagship event — the annual PCB Conference and Convention. This year's event, taking place virtually from October 16–19, 2025, is shaping up to be our most impactful yet.



With the theme *Harvesting Your Talents and Resources*, this year's conference will explore the strengths and skills of people who are blind or low vision — and the tools and networks that help them succeed. Sessions will focus on everything from accessible technology and employment resources to personal development and advocacy strategies.

As a virtual event, the conference offers flexible participation for attendees across Pennsylvania and beyond. Participants will enjoy expert panels, interactive discussions, and networking opportunities from the comfort of their homes or offices.

We invite professionals, educators, agencies, employers, and community members to attend or exhibit. Join us in supporting an inclusive future by engaging in meaningful dialogue, learning from lived experiences, and connecting with a community committed to access and empowerment.

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*For more information on PCB's Annual Conference and Convention visit our website at [pcb1.org/conference-and-convention](http://pcb1.org/conference-and-convention)*

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### **Did You Know?**

- Guide dogs are helpful, but not every blind person uses one. Many rely on white canes or other tools.

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## **Making Summer Activities More Inclusive for People Who Are Blind or Have Low Vision**

Summer is a time for connection, celebration, and enjoying the outdoors. But for many people who are blind or have low vision, joining in on the fun is not always as simple as showing up. When activities are not planned with accessibility in mind, people can be unintentionally left out.

The good news is that inclusion does not have to be complicated or expensive. With just a few thoughtful changes, your summer events can become more welcoming for everyone.



### **Consider More Than Just the Visual**

Many summer activities focus heavily on visual elements like fireworks, parades, or outdoor movies. But visual experiences can be made more inclusive with some simple adjustments.

- Describe what is happening. Having someone narrate key parts of an event, such as a fireworks display or a baseball game, helps people who are blind or have low vision follow along and stay engaged.
- Use sound in creative ways. Music, audio cues, and descriptive storytelling can help bring an event to life for someone who cannot see what is happening.

### **Provide Clear Navigation**

Finding your way around a large park or busy festival can be difficult for anyone. For someone with vision loss, it can feel especially overwhelming.

- Give precise verbal directions. Say things like “20 feet ahead on your left” instead of vague instructions like “over there.”

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- Label areas using large, high-contrast print and Braille when possible.
- Offer help but ask first. Not everyone wants or needs assistance, so it is always respectful to ask before stepping in.

### **Include Tactile Activities**

Hands-on experiences are a great way to make your event more inclusive and enjoyable.

- Create touch-friendly stations. Set up areas where people can explore textured crafts, musical instruments, or objects with different shapes and materials.
- Offer food tastings. These are naturally inclusive and even better when menus are available in audio or large print formats.

### **Train Your Team**

Even the best event plans can fall short if staff and volunteers are not sure how to assist someone with vision loss.

- Provide basic awareness training. Teach your team how to offer assistance respectfully, describe surroundings clearly, and guide someone safely if requested.
- Use respectful language. Saying “a person who is blind” instead of “the blind” shows that you are focusing on the individual, not just the condition.

### **Communicate Accessibility in Your Promotions**

If your event is accessible, make sure people know about it. Good communication helps build trust and allows people to prepare.

- Add image descriptions online. Alt text allows people using screen readers to understand visual content.

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- Clearly list accommodations. Let people know what to expect, such as audio description, available assistance, or tactile maps.
- Design your website to be screen reader friendly. Use clear headings, simple layouts, and descriptive links.

### **Invite Input from the Community**

The best way to know what people need is to ask. Reach out to organizations that support people with vision loss or invite individuals to review your plans and give suggestions.

This not only improves accessibility but also builds lasting relationships and shows your event truly values every participant.

### **Final Thoughts**

Inclusion is not about checking a box. It is about creating an environment where all people feel welcome and valued.

Whether you are planning a backyard cookout, a concert in the park, or a citywide festival, taking small steps to consider the needs of people who are blind or have low vision makes a big difference.

You do not have to make everything perfect. You just must care enough to try.

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### **Did You Know?**

- Not all blind individuals see “total darkness.” Many have some usable vision.
- Blindness doesn't mean helplessness — individuals with vision loss work, travel, and parent independently every day.

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## **Why Funding for Blind and Low Vision Programs Matters More Than Ever**

When it comes to public funding, the programs that support people who are blind or have low vision often don't get the attention they deserve. These services are not "extras" or "nice to have." They are essential tools that help people live independently, find employment, stay safe, and contribute to their communities.

Yet year after year, these programs face budget cuts or threats of elimination. The impact of those decisions is not just measured in dollars—it is felt in real lives.

### **Independence Shouldn't Be a Luxury**

For many people with vision loss, programs like blindness support services, vocational rehabilitation, and independent living training are life changing. They teach critical skills like how to use a white cane, read Braille, or navigate public transportation.

Without these services, people can lose the ability to live on their own, get to work, manage personal finances, or stay socially connected. Cutting funding means cutting off access to the tools that allow someone to live with dignity and confidence.

### **Employment and Economic Participation**

Programs that support people who are blind or have low vision also play a key role in helping individuals find and keep jobs. From assistive technology training to career counseling, these services help close the employment gap.

Investing in these programs is not just the right thing to do, it is smart economics. People with the right training and support are more likely to enter the workforce, pay taxes, and rely less on public assistance.

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When funding is cut, opportunities disappear. It becomes harder for people with vision loss to access job-ready training or receive the accommodations they need to succeed.

### **Access to Health, Safety, and Community Life**

Many state and local programs also help people with vision loss stay safe and healthy. Whether it's access to prescription labels in large print, help understanding medical paperwork, or training to safely cook and clean, these services allow people to manage their daily lives.

Other programs make sure public services and spaces—from voting booths to transit systems—are accessible. These efforts keep people connected to their communities and their rights as citizens.

Without adequate funding, these vital supports are the first to go. The result? More isolation, more accidents, and fewer options.

### **It's About Equity**

At its core, this issue is about fairness. People who are blind or have low vision deserve the same access to opportunity as everyone else. That includes access to education, work, public services, and community participation.

When governments cut funding for programs that level the playing field, they send a message: some people matter less. That is not the kind of community most of us want to live in.

### **What You Can Do**

If you care about equity, independence, and inclusion, you can help protect these programs.

- **Call or write to your state and federal legislators.** Let them know why these services matter to you or someone you care about.

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- **Support local blindness organizations.** Your time, voice, or donations can help fill gaps when funding falls short.
- **Raise awareness.** Share facts and stories in your workplace, faith group, or social media circles. Most people simply do not realize how important these programs are.

Publicly funded programs that support people who are blind or have low vision are not luxuries. They are a lifeline. Cutting them might balance a budget on paper, but the real cost is felt in lost potential, lost independence, and lost lives.

Now is the time to protect and strengthen these programs, not weaken them. Because when everyone has the tools to succeed, we all benefit.

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### **Real Impact, Real People**

When funding gets cut, it's not just programs that disappear, it's mobility lessons for someone who just lost their sight. It's assistive technology that helps a college student finish their degree. It's the job support a parent needs to return to work after vision loss.

These services change lives. Without them, people fall through the cracks.

**Let's make sure that doesn't happen.** Speak up, stay informed, and support the programs that make independence possible.

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Want to learn more about how ACB is fighting for your rights?

[www.acb.org/advocacy-governmental-affairs](http://www.acb.org/advocacy-governmental-affairs)

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### *Community Outreach*

## **Deafblind Awareness Week: The Power of Communication and Connection**

Observed annually during the last week of June, deafblind Awareness Week is a time to shine a light on a vibrant community whose experiences are often overlooked. People who are deafblind live with a combination of vision and hearing loss, yet their lives are full of communication, creativity, and connection.

The deafblind community uses diverse tools and methods to navigate the world — from tactile sign language and braille displays to support service providers (SSPs) who assist with environmental information and travel. These supports aren't about dependency; they're about access, autonomy, and equal participation.

Agencies can take meaningful steps to serve this population by providing staff training, incorporating accessible technology into programs, and consulting directly with individuals who are deafblind about their needs and preferences.

DeafBlind Awareness Week is more than a calendar observance — it's a call to action. By understanding and embracing the unique communication methods of deafblind individuals, we foster a culture of true inclusion. Everyone deserves to be seen, heard, and understood — regardless of how they communicate.

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### **Simple Ways to Make Your Office More Blind-Friendly**

- Install tactile labels and Braille signs on key office doors and equipment.
- Ensure all digital documents are screen reader accessible.

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### **Accessible Pedestrian Signals: Making Streets Safer for Everyone**

Crossing a street should be a simple task, but for someone who is blind or has



low vision, the absence of Accessible Pedestrian Signals (APS) can make it dangerous. APS uses audible tones, vibrating surfaces, and spoken messages to inform pedestrians when it is safe to cross — effectively replacing the visual cues of traditional traffic signals.

In Pennsylvania, many intersections still lack these essential devices. This not only compromises safety but also limits independence. Individuals may be forced to wait for assistance or avoid walking altogether in areas they do not know well.

Cities and towns can improve public safety by prioritizing the installation of APS at intersections with high pedestrian traffic. Funding for these improvements can be accessed through federal grants, local planning, or transportation improvement programs.

When streets are designed for everyone, mobility and safety improve across the board — including for children, older adults, and people with cognitive or mobility challenges. APS is a small investment with a big impact.

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### **More Simple Ways to Make Your Office More Blind-Friendly**

- Maintain clear, unobstructed walkways to support mobility cane users.
- Train staff in disability etiquette and basic sighted guide techniques.
- Use high-contrast color schemes for signage and forms.

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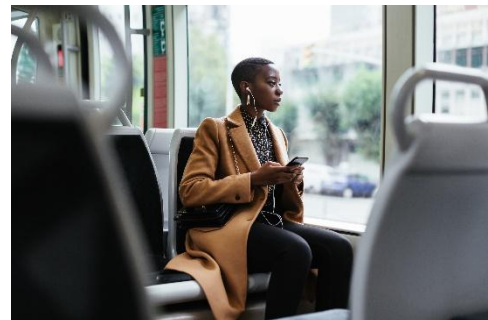
## **Transportation Access in Pennsylvania: Why It Matters Now More Than Ever**

Accessible and reliable transportation is not a luxury. It is the foundation for independence, opportunity, and participation in community life. In Pennsylvania, public transportation plays a critical role, especially for people who are blind or have low vision. For these individuals, transit is not just about convenience. It is often the only option for getting to work, accessing health care, shopping for groceries, or participating in civic life.

As transportation systems across the state face financial challenges, the impact is being felt in real and personal ways. Routes are being eliminated, wait times are increasing, and services like paratransit are becoming harder to access. These changes are especially harmful for people who already experience barriers to transportation.

### **Transportation Means Independence**

For someone who is blind or has low vision, driving is not an option. Public transportation, whether it is a bus, train, or door to door service, is often the only viable way to get from one place to another. These services make it possible to attend job interviews, take college classes, visit the doctor, or vote in elections.



Without access to transportation, basic needs and rights are out of reach. People become isolated. Health and well-being decline. Job opportunities disappear. A lack of transportation quickly becomes a lack of independence.

### **Pennsylvania Transit Is Under Pressure**

Across Pennsylvania, transit agencies are dealing with aging infrastructure, rising costs, and uncertain funding. In rural areas where options are already limited, service cuts can leave entire communities without access. In more

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populated areas, overcrowding and delays make travel difficult for anyone who requires extra time or support.

For people with vision loss, these obstacles are more than just an inconvenience. They are barriers to living a full and independent life.

### **Paratransit Is Not Optional**

Paratransit services in Pennsylvania are a lifeline for many people with disabilities. These services provide scheduled transportation for those who cannot use fixed route systems on their own. But when paratransit programs are underfunded or poorly managed, rides are delayed or canceled and schedules become unreliable.

These disruptions do more than inconvenience riders. They force people to miss medical appointments, lose work opportunities, or stay home entirely. Consistent and dependable paratransit is essential for equal access to daily life.

### **Accessibility Is a Public Right**

Transportation is a public service. Like all public services, it must be inclusive. Accessibility is not just about installing a ramp or adding an audio announcement. It is about building and maintaining systems that allow all people to travel safely and independently with confidence.

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### **In Pennsylvania...**

- 1 in 4 adults with vision loss depends entirely on public transit.
- Over 40% of Pennsylvania counties offer limited or no fixed-route service.
- Missed paratransit rides = missed medical appointments, lost wages, and isolation.

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**The Pennsylvania Council of the Blind (PCB) believes that transportation should be planned and funded with accessibility and equity at the center.**

This includes:

- **Expanding service areas for both fixed route and paratransit**
  - **Improving on time performance and service communication**
  - **Training staff to better support riders with disabilities**
  - **Ensuring bus stops and transit centers are fully accessible**
- 

## **A Better Transit System Helps Everyone**

When transportation works well for people with disabilities, it works better for everyone. Parents with young children, older adults, commuters, and students all benefit from reliable and accessible transit systems. Inclusive design creates safer, stronger communities.

Investing in public transportation is not only a disability issue. It is an economic, social, and civic issue. It benefits the entire state.

## **What You Can Do**

Transportation access in Pennsylvania affects more people than many realize. Here are a few ways you can help:

- **Reach out to lawmakers.** Let your representatives know that public transportation needs stable and increased funding.
- **Share personal stories.** Talk about how transportation helps or hinders your daily life.

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- **Support advocacy efforts.** Organizations like PCB are working every day to ensure transportation is fair and inclusive for all people.
- **Educate your community.** Remind others that accessible transportation strengthens the entire population, not just one group.

Transportation access is about more than just getting around. It is about inclusion, opportunity, and human connection. When systems fail to serve people with disabilities, they fail us all.

Pennsylvania is at a turning point. The choices we make now will determine whether our communities stay connected or become more divided.

Let us choose to invest in systems that include everyone. Let us choose to build a future where transportation truly works for all.

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## **Disability Pride Month: Celebrating All of Us, Seen and Unseen**

Every July, communities across the country recognize Disability Pride Month, a time to celebrate the strength, resilience, and diversity of people with disabilities. It is a time to share stories, raise awareness, and stand tall in our identities. But as we wave our flags and reflect on how far we have come, it is important to ask: Are we truly including all disability communities in the celebration?

Too often, when people think of disability, they picture something they can see, like a wheelchair, crutches, or a guide dog. But disability is not always visible. In fact, millions of people live with what are often called invisible disabilities. Among them are individuals with low vision, vision loss, blindness, and those who are deafblind.

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At the Pennsylvania Council of the Blind (PCB), we believe Disability Pride Month should represent the full range of disability experiences. That includes people who may not appear disabled but still face daily challenges navigating a world that often was not designed with them in mind.

### **Why Visibility Isn't the Whole Picture**

Invisible disabilities are just as real and impactful as those that are more apparent. People with low vision, for example, may struggle with bright lighting, have difficulty reading signs, or experience disorientation in new environments. These challenges do not always come with a white cane or other visible clue, which can lead to misunderstanding, judgment, or even exclusion.

Similarly, members of the deafblind community, who experience a combination of vision and hearing loss, may use a variety of communication methods such as tactile sign language, braille, or communication support services. These differences might not be obvious, but they are essential parts of our disability community that deserve full recognition and respect.

### **Inclusion Means Everyone**

True inclusivity during Disability Pride Month means looking beyond appearances. It means listening to the voices of all disabled individuals, including those who live with vision loss or other non-apparent disabilities. It means making space at the table for blind professionals, low vision students, and deafblind leaders. And it means understanding that disability pride is not the same for everyone.

When we say we are celebrating disability pride, we are celebrating difference. We are saying that every person—regardless of how their disability is experienced—deserves to be seen, heard, and valued.

### **How You Can Help**

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- Acknowledge all disabilities. When talking about disability, include terms like blindness, low vision, and deafblindness alongside mobility and cognitive conditions.
- Educate others. Share stories, podcasts, and posts from people with less visible disabilities to help broaden understanding.
- Support accessible spaces. Physical access matters, but so does digital inclusion, sensory friendly environments, and communication access.
- Amplify voices. Let people speak for themselves. Invite members of the blind and deafblind communities to lead discussions, panels, and celebrations.

### **Disability Pride Belongs to All of Us**

Disability Pride Month is about more than just awareness. It is about empowerment, unity, and joy. Let us make sure we are celebrating the entire disability community, not just the parts we can see. Because true disability pride means embracing who we are, exactly as we are.

From every corner of the disability community, whether sighted, blind, low vision, or deafblind, we all have something powerful to share. Let us honor that, this month and every month.

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### ***Peer Spotlight***

Get to Know Your PCB Leaders!

A Lighthearted Q&A for Chapter Presidents, the PCB President, and Board Members.

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### ***Debby Hill Current President of the PA Council of the Blind***

Q. How did you first get involved with PCB?

A. When I moved to Pittsburgh from Alexandria Virginia in 2021, I was recruited by friends to join the Golden Triangle Chapter of PCB in Pittsburgh, and from there started to get involved in PCB's teams such as the tech team and the vision loss team.



Q. What's one thing you love most about your local chapter or the PCB community?

A. I like having a resource of blind people where I can get information and support for blindness issues.

Q. What's a hidden talent or fun fact most people don't know about you?

A. I have a rather large collection of T-shirts, both souvenir and from various organizations, and I don't mind having more.

Q. What's your go-to coffee order or favorite comfort snack?

A. At this point, my comfort food is M&M Peanuts.

Q. What song, book, or movie always lifts your spirits?

A. The song is "I'm Into Something Good" by Herman's Hermits. At Christmas time I like to read A Highland Christmas by M. C. Beaton.

Q. If you could instantly become an expert in anything, what would it be and why?

A. It would be medicine. As a kid I always wanted to be a doctor.

Q. What's a piece of advice you'd give someone new to the vision loss or the

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blindness community?

A. Never give up! Everyone is different, but I believe that people are adaptable and there is way to live a good life with blindness or low-vision.

Q. What's one accessibility tip or tech tool you can't live without?

A. This is a tough one. I would say my iPhone with Voiceover, but that is tied with my Mantis Q40. The mantis is a braille display that I use to interact with my Windows computer and my iPhone and allows me to read braille books.

Q. Finish this sentence: "Being a part of PCB means..."

A. Being supported and being there to support others.

### ***Mervin Keck***

Q. What's your name and role in PCB?

A. President of Keystone Chapter, Virtual Chapter of PCB. Co-Chair of PCB Communications Committee, Member of PCB Peer Engagement Committee, Co-Facilitator of PCB Peer engagement Presents on ACB Community.

Q. How did you first get involved with PCB?

A. Nicki, my wife, talked me into joining Keystone and I went to the PCB Convention a few years ago. A couple of very friendly PCB members spoke to me at a first timers meeting and encouraged me to join a couple of committees. By the next PCB Convention, I was Hosting for both Keystone and PCB.



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Mastodon Account Coming Soon...

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A peer network of people impacted by vision loss.

### **PCB's SPARK: The Newsletter for Igniting Ideas**

**Summer 2025**

Q. What's one thing you love most about your local chapter or the PCB community?

A. Both Keystone and PCB both feel like a Family to me. Especially Keystone. I look forward to our monthly meetings and I love interacting with my Keystone Family. One day I'll be their Past-President. But they will always be my Keystone Family.

Q. What's a hidden talent or fun fact most people don't know about you?

A. I have no functional vision now. However, back in the nineties when I had very low vision I was a member of the Professional disc Golf Association. I always wanted to compete professionally but never had the opportunity. I did score a hole in one while playing with friends once in 1990 while in Seminary.

Q. What's your go-to coffee order or favorite comfort snack?

A. I make my own iced coffee with a Keurig, extra bold coffee and Zero sugar Italian Cream Liquid Coffee Creamer.

Q. What song, book, or movie always lifts your spirits?

A. Fiddler on the Roof. I have seen the movie and read the book which the movie was based many times.

Q. If you could instantly become an expert in anything, what would it be and why?

A. Python Programming because it would open more doors both personally and professionally. I used to code when I had some low vision and still have not mastered it without functional vision.

Q. What's a piece of advice you'd give someone new to the vision loss or the blindness community?

A. Join PCB on the local and State level. Get involved before you stagnate. I am

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speaking from experience because when I lost the rest of my vision I self-isolated for years before I was fortunate enough to get to know people on my local and state PCB level. Thanks to the resources available and the caring people in PCB I have more confidence in myself as a blind individual than I did my entire life.

Q. What's one accessibility tip or tech tool you can't live without?

A. VD Scan. I read my mail, labels, and a number of other things with this iPhone app. I use it daily.

Q. Finish this sentence: "Being a part of PCB means..."

A. I am not alone. I am part of a living, growing, thriving community.

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## **Resource Corner: Accessible Tech & Support Services You Should Know**

- **BARD Mobile App** (Library of Congress): Free access to thousands of audiobooks and braille titles.
  - [nlsbard.loc.gov/nlsbardprod/login/NLS](https://nlsbard.loc.gov/nlsbardprod/login/NLS)
- **Be My Eyes**: A free app connecting blind users with volunteers for visual assistance.
  - [www.bemyeyes.com/](https://www.bemyeyes.com/)
- **PCB In-Person and a State-Wide Virtual Chapters**: Connects individuals who are blind or have low vision to peers across the Commonwealth.
  - [www.pcb1.org](https://www.pcb1.org)

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