



VERMONT ASSOCIATION FOR THE BLIND AND VISUALLY IMPAIRED

HELPING ACHIEVE INDEPENDENCE IN A VISUAL WORLD SINCE 1926

Dear members of the Appropriations Committee,

The Vermont Association for the Blind and Visually Impaired (VABVI) has served Vermonters since 1926. We are the only non-profit in the State to offer rehabilitation services to the blind and visually impaired. Our mission is to enable Vermonters with vision problems to achieve and maintain their independence. Towards that end, we have provided independent living skills training, orientation and mobility, adaptive equipment and materials, volunteer drivers, low vision evaluations, and produced written materials in braille, audiotape and large print format. Enclosed is our latest fact sheet, and other information that tells you more about VABVI and the services we provide.

There are an estimated 14,000 Vermonters who are currently blind or visually impaired. As the “Baby Boomer” generation ages however, this number is expected to increase to 24,000 or higher by 2030. As a result, our neighbors, parents, family and friends are among those who may be coping with a vision loss.

If you spoke to our clients, they would tell you how important our services are to them. Approximately 20% of our clients, (one in six) express concerns when they first contact us that they fear that they might have to move into a nursing home. If anything, that percentage is low as many do not want to admit to that fear. For the number of elderly adults that we currently serve, 20% is about 170 people. For those clients whom VABVI has completed providing services, about 98% of those who had expressed that concern are now confident that they could live independently in their current living situation and continue to lead fulfilling lives regardless of their vision loss.

One service we have not offered due to our limited resources is to provide technology training on iOS devices to our clients. Adults with disabilities tend to spend twice the amount of time online as adults without disabilities. They also report that smartphones, iPads, and the internet have significantly improved their quality of life and reduced their feelings of isolation. Our clients have asked for this training, as it is more affordable than computers with the associated assistive software since many accessibility features are now incorporated into the phones and tablets. Social isolation has always been an issue for the visually Impaired, and COVID made it even worse. Social distancing, stay at home orders and family and friends unable to see or visit with them to name a few.

We were able to obtain a \$100,000 grant from the State in FY21 and FY22 using some of the COVID funding from the Federal government. This was used to provide this technology training to combat the feelings of isolation that had increased due to the Coronavirus. We thank the State for doing this, and the DAIL department has been supportive of this program and the results that we have achieved. This funding will be completely used by the end of 2021. We trained 150 people in 2020 and 290 in 2021. The need for this program continues, and will do so even when COVID is behind us.

60 Kimball Avenue
So. Burlington, VT 05403
(802) 863-1358
(FAX) 863-1481

13 Overlook Drive, Ste. 1
Berlin, VT 05641
(802) 505-4006
(FAX) 505-4039

80 West Street, Ste. 202
Rutland, VT 05701
(802) 775-6452
(FAX) 775-4669

130 Austine Drive, Ste. 280
Brattleboro, VT 05301
(802) 254-8761
(FAX) 254-4802

So. Burl (800) 639-5861
Berlin (877) 350-8838
Rutland (877) 350-8839
Bratt (877) 350-8840

www.vabvi.org

We ask therefore, for the State to increase our appropriation by \$100,000 in FY23 for the permanent expansion of our services with the addition of this iOS technology training. We would continue to subsidize our other services, but we need your help to offer these additional services. While vision loss could be seen in a negative light, the stories of success and accomplishment from VABVI's clients highlight the "can-do" attitude and joy of life that is present regardless of their vision levels. From skiing to artwork, a walk in their neighborhood or cooking a meal at home, our clients demonstrate that the only limiting factor to what can be done is their imagination.

Please join us in keeping our clients independent and contributing members of our society. I appreciate your consideration in this critical area of need.

Sincerely,



Steven P. Pouliot
Executive Director



SMART Program Description

VABVI launched the SMART Device (Speech Magnification Access Reading Telecommunications) Technology Training Program for adult clients in January 2018 to train them on both standard application and adaptive software and hardware, including screen print enlargers, speech and Braille input/output devices, and tablet, smart speaker and smartphone technology. A primary goal of the program is to help our clients to combat social isolation. Studies show social isolation, particularly among adults, can have adverse effects on physical and mental health. The SMART program enables our clients to connect not only to their friends and family, but also to the world available online. A record-breaking 366 Vermonters participated in the program in 2021.

Since the launch of this program, several updates have been made to reflect both lessons learned and advances in technology. Our teachers can now instruct clients on using a wider range of smart devices and speakers including Android, Google, Apple, and Amazon. Expanding the program to include non-iOS devices was significant, as other products have had great advances in accessibility and are more affordable for many of our clients. Clients use their devices for a wide range of needs, from communicating with friends and family via video calls, to having a greater sense of security through smart speakers that can be programmed to call 911 with verbal commands in case of a fall.

The main objective of the SMART Device Technology Training program is for our adult clients to learn how to confidently operate their smart phones, iPads and tablets.

Clients train to use these technologies to:

1. Use the accessibility features of computers, smartphones and tablets.
2. Use voice operated commands of smart devices to gather and send information.
3. Access telecommunications, including the ability to gather information on the web, make phone calls, video conference, email, text message and social media.
4. Assist in organizational planning (labeling, scheduling, reminders, filing, etc.)
5. Utilize OCR technology (reading print material by taking a picture and extracting the text.)
6. Access emergency alerts communicated by local, state and federal governments.
7. Manage finances, prescriptions, emergency contacts, etc.
8. Access to Newslines, National Library of Congress services and other media outlets.
9. Assist in GPS and route planning.
10. Access medical care via "telehealth" appointments.

Our clients need direct instruction to learn how to access these devices and require periodic support to keep up with technological updates. The requested funding for this program would allow us to continue the current level of services while meeting the annual increased demand for services.

The importance of the SMART Device Technology Training program is evident now more than ever. This program has become vital not only for keeping our senior clients socially connected, but also for allowing them to access healthcare during the challenges of the pandemic.

Evaluation

Program effectiveness and impact is measured through our client's success and their satisfaction with our services. As mentioned previously, clients begin the program with an initial assessment that determines where their training will start. Subsequent assessments made each training session determines client progress and helps to set goals for subsequent training.

Clients who participate in the SMART Device Technology Training program provide positive feedback, expressing excitement and gratefulness that they can now navigate multiple features of their technology, from using a magnifying feature to simply searching the Internet. Clients who received technology training prior to COVID-19 have reported that the skills learned in this program have been invaluable throughout the pandemic, keeping them socially connected, informed, and able to continue living independently.

Success Story #1:

A woman in her late sixties had recently lost all her sight due to diabetes. She moved to Vermont to be closer to her sister (hoping her sister might be able to help her), but with COVID-19, she was very limited in her ability to spend time in person with her sister. With her recent sight loss, our teachers worked with her to be able to fully access her smartphone. Through the use of voice commands, she could dial her phone and spend time with her sister virtually. The voice commands also allowed her to set calendar appointments. She is able to both read and dictate emails and text messages to her family, friends and doctors. She's able to set alarms and reminders when cooking or needing to take medications. While learning how to use a talking label wand in combination with the Seeing Ai app on her phone, she burst into tears because she was able to organize her skin care, hair care and other cosmetic products independently. She was scared to be alone, but knows now she can be independent and stay connected with others through the skills and technology she is learning.

Success Story #2:

A client in Southern Vermont has been a life-long poet and creative writer. Throughout her life she had enjoyed being a member of writers groups, attending poetry reads and writer's coffee hours. Around the time that COVID-19 hit she was in the process of losing much of her sight. She found it very difficult to read her handwriting and was not able to attend the public reads due to lock downs. These groups migrated to the virtual platforms. Our teachers worked with her to help her begin to type her poetry and connect with video teleconferencing systems online. She was grateful to feel connected to her peers, but still struggled to read her poetry independently during the reading sessions. Then she was shown how she could use Voiceover on her iPhone to read her poetry out loud. She now joins the groups and turns on her phone's ability to read her poetry aloud and the digital voice is part of her new form of art. She is independent, connected and creative!

Success Story #3

When you haven't used assistive technology your entire life, it can be very hard to become accustomed to new technology. As part of the aging process, other senses and cognition can be affected as part of the normal aging process. This compounds the challenges when learning new technology. A senior Vermonter, who had run a diner his whole life now finds himself in retirement losing not only his vision, but hearing as well. He also acknowledges that his memory is not what it used to be. He knows that a smart phone can help him stay connected with his kids and family which have moved all over the country, but often when he asks for help to practice the phone, people lose patience with him. Thanks to the SMART training funding from the State of Vermont, our teachers have been able to dedicate the time needed for him to repeat the gestures and actions to run his phone. Being able to return and teach him for several visits has allowed him to develop the basics to make phone calls, access his voicemail and send and read text messages. Plans are underway to also record instructions for him in a "step by step" process to learn additional voice commands and gestures to set and clear calendar events, make FaceTime calls and more. These instructions will be able to be played back for him and he can rewind and repeat as much as he needs on a loud speaker. He is grateful we are tailoring our teaching strategies for his individual learning needs, to help him stay connected.