

Looking sharp

New program poised to help county residents with low vision

By Laura Marlow
For the Leader

Jefferson County residents with vision challenges have a new resource for help.

The St. Louis Society for the Blind and Visually Impaired has hired Michelle Harrell as a certified occupational therapy assistant for Jefferson County.

Funded through a \$30,000 grant from the Jefferson Foundation in 2021, the pilot program will assist residents with low vision through a combination of telehealth and in-home care.

Harrell will work with local vision professionals to identify potential clients and then work with them in their homes to develop skills and techniques to maximize their vision and maintain their independence.

“This could be the difference between people with low vision continuing to live and thrive at home or having to go to a care situation,” Harrell said. “The goal is to have them be able to do as much for themselves as possible and not depend on someone else for everyday tasks.”

Making things easier

Harrell, 40, of Arnold earned a degree in business management and worked in customer service/sales for about 10 years before becoming a certified occupational therapy assistant. She will make in-home visits to clients who are not able to access services at the Society headquarters in Brentwood.

“The person’s eye care professional will have made suggestions on what they think might help the client,” she said. “Then an occupational therapist will do an evaluation to see where the client is, what they know about their condition, what their abilities are. I’ll go off that. I’ll take a variety of aids with me to see what they like and what they think will help them.” Some of the aids available are as simple as magnifiers, with or without a light attached; talking calculators; check-writing guides; timers and remotes with raised dots; or tactile dice and playing cards.

“I go in and do a home evaluation,” Harrell said. “I go room to room, and try to ask, like, can you work your stove easily and safely? Most appliances are white, black or gray, and there’s not a lot of contrast in the controls. You can use adaptive techniques like raised bumps or dots, make sure the lighting is good.

“I also look at fall prevention and whether a room is set up for ease of use. If there are stairs, are they well-lighted? And with what kind of lights? We recommend warmer light bulbs for some applications, cooler for others.”



Michelle Harrell

“There are adaptive techniques for all sorts of things, like pouring hot liquids. I try to help the person put those techniques into their daily routine.” One of the most troubling things about low vision is that there’s no one-size-fits-all solution for all clients.

“Every person’s vision is different,” Harrell said. “What works for one might not be right for another.”

The Society hopes more county residents will take advantage of the programs it offers.

“Anybody will qualify who is diagnosed legally blind,” Harrell said. “We are trying to reach out to some of the optometry offices in the area so they know we’re here and we can get some referrals going. Eventually we may make contacts through hospitals or skilled care facilities.”

Financial aid is available for many clients, and many insurance plans will cover the cost of Harrell’s visit.

“Depending on the insurance, it would cost about the same as an office

visit,” she said.

The Society also has specialists who offer orientation and mobility training at the Brentwood location, with transportation available to Jefferson County residents on a limited basis.

“I know they recently hired a driver for this area,” Harrell said. “People should call in for availability.”

Harrell said she hopes her program can expand.

“It’s still in the beginning stages. I hope people will take advantage of this,” she said. “Helping people to be aware of what’s available in the way of adaptive techniques and strategies will make them more successful in the activities they do, and that benefits everyone.”

What is low vision?

“Low vision” refers to people who have trouble performing everyday activities. It is often caused by conditions such as macular degeneration, diabetic retinopathy and glaucoma, which cannot easily be remedied with glasses, contact lenses, medication or surgery.

“We see a few more rare conditions, like retinitis pigmentosa, but mostly it’s age-related conditions,” Harrell said.

There are four types of low vision:

- Central vision loss, or not being

able to see things in the center of the visual field, often caused by macular degeneration;

- Peripheral vision loss, or not being able to see things out of the corners of the eyes, caused by glaucoma, diabetic retinopathy or even stroke;

- Night blindness, or the inability to see in low light, caused by damage or malformation to the eye’s rod cells from conditions such as retinitis pigmentosa;

- Blurry or hazy vision, sometimes caused by cataracts.

Sufferers may have trouble reading, they frequently cannot pass a driving test and they struggle with seeing TV and computer screens and recognizing faces.

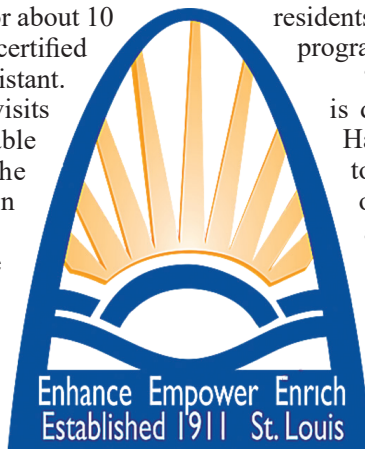
“‘Low vision’ is a pretty broad term,”

Harrell said. “Some people can barely see shadows; they can tell if someone comes in the room but that’s all. Others can see much better. But just about anyone is able to do things with compensatory strategies.”

Harrell said zeroing in on the best approach can be problematic.

“Vision varies from person to person, and it takes time and patience to find out what works best for them.”

For further information on St. Louis Society for the Blind and Visually Impaired call 314-968-9000 or visit their website at slsbvi.org.



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