



# IMPACT REPORT 2020

Society for the Blind  
and Visually Impaired

*A Year of  
INNOVATION*



# A YEAR OF INNOVATION

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I am proud to share the Society for the Blind and Visually Impaired 2020 Impact Report with you. This year was about innovation. As we transitioned to new ways of serving clients during the pandemic, we held firm to our mission to “enhance independence, empower individuals and enrich the lives of people who are visually impaired or blind”. To keep our clients and staff safe, the way we accomplished that mission required us to pivot.

Except for a brief closure in the first part of 2020, we provided in-person treatment to individuals throughout the year. Group programming continued by using technology. For example, staff created and implemented monthly “Connect with Us” conference call workshops on topics of interest to those living with vision loss. This conference call approach also enabled us to conduct support groups by phone. We expanded our Assistive Technology Center’s physical space and augmented the inventory of assistive technology products. Staff created the “Sight Solutions Shop” of both new and gently used aids and appliances within the Drews Low Vision Clinic. Another Society space was also transformed into a “Falls Prevention” room to educate clients and their family on how to do home modifications to create a safer living environment. The volunteer program began “Friendly Calls” to assist clients. Volunteer’s compassionate and friendly voices provided calls of support to the clients sheltering at home to give them a sense of connection and needed companionship.

None of these things would have been possible without the steadfast support of our board, staff, volunteers, and generous donors. We thank you for your many kindnesses and patience as we navigated 2020 and invite you to visit the agency in 2021 to see all that we have accomplished, with your assistance, to serve the clients’ needs more effectively.

**Laura Park-Leach**

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Laura Park-Leach, President & CEO

**Tom Enger**

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Tom Enger, Board Chair



# OUR MISSION

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The Society enhances independence, empowers individuals, and enriches the lives of people who are visually impaired or blind.

## SPECIALTY SERVICES

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- Assistive Technology
- Low Vision Medical Exams
- Occupational Therapy
- Orientation and Mobility
- Social Work
- Support Groups
- Transportation



# ENHANCING COMMUNICATION



Joann Heatherly first visited St. Louis Society for the Blind and Visually Impaired several years ago with her mother. Joann's mom suffered from Macular Degeneration and not only was Joann there for her mother, so was Society.

Now...it is Joann who needs our services.

Joann has Macular Degeneration in one eye and Glaucoma in the other. She was becoming discouraged and frustrated by her declining eyesight when her eye doctor reminded her of Society for the Blind and Visually Impaired services. Joann scheduled her first visit with us for a low vision exam with one of our doctors and a visit with our occupational therapists. Although her eyesight will continue to decline, she found adaptive tools and a better prescription to help her complete the daily tasks of life.

"I had forgotten about the Society for the Blind and Visually Impaired and my mother had one of their CCTV screens, which helped her read again. And now, I'm in the same boat."



A lamp with a bright light and a lighted magnifier have helped her tremendously. "I enjoy reading, but I couldn't see the letters. This light and magnifier have made all the difference." She added, with a laugh, "With the magnifier, the letters just come alive!"

Joann said that Society had treated her mother with complete care and compassion, and now she is receiving that same kind of service. "I remember how my mother was treated and everyone was wonderful. I just can't say enough good things about Society for the Blind and Visually Impaired!"

**"With the magnifier, the letters just come alive!"**



# EMPOWERING INDIVIDUALS

Several years ago, when Rod Kerner started losing his vision to Glaucoma, he called Society for the Blind after a recommendation from his eye doctor. His first encounter was with Susan Meissel, our Orientation and Mobility Specialist. Rod wasn't quite ready to start using a white cane, but he sought help in learning to cross streets safely in Clayton where he was working.

"Susan gave me safety lessons and I never forgot her and how she helped me. About two and a half years ago, I got hit by a car and long story short, I wound up losing my right eye."

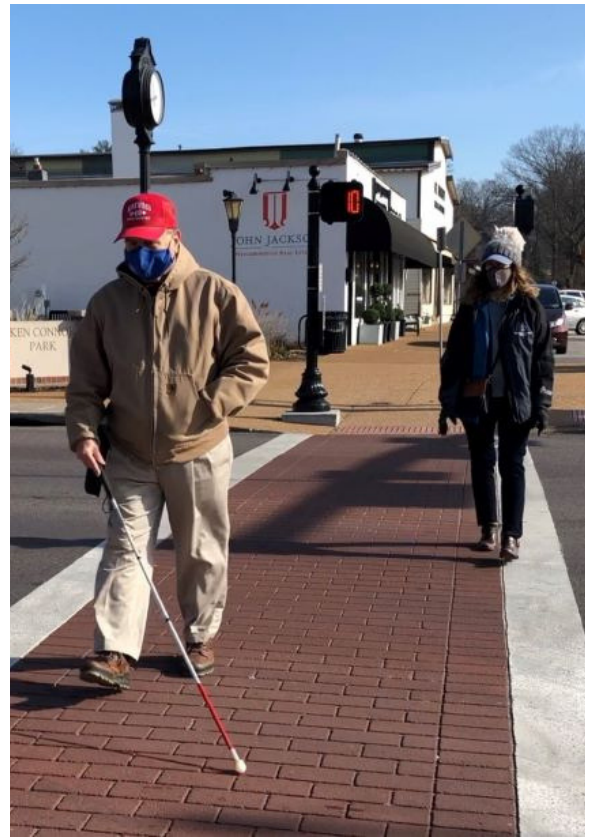
Before surgery, Rod called Susan, whom he had not spoken to in several years and told her about recent events and his fears. "She said to me, 'We'll help you get through this.' And they did!"

Rod went through extensive white cane training with Susan and found solace in the Society's Support Groups. The groups helped him because "...each person has their own challenges and it helped me understand other sighted issues." Rod realized he wasn't alone in his circumstances. "What it gave me was confidence that I could deal with this."

Ongoing training with Susan has helped Rod navigate his neighborhood and walk to downtown Kirkwood where he regularly visits restaurants and his favorite stores. At one point, Susan and Rod contacted the Kirkwood City Engineer to propose a mid-block pedestrian crossing near Rod's home. The city wasn't able to meet this request but did work with Rod to upgrade and adjust audible signaling at many downtown intersections along Kirkwood Road.

"Because of the training I received from Susan and the Society for the Blind, I'm confident."

**"What it gave me was confidence  
that I could deal with this."**





## ENRICHING THE PATH TO INDEPENDENCE

Since the age of three, Viswa Balaji has struggled with his eyesight. An infection in his body affected his right eye, resulting in complete vision loss. His left eye had partial vision until he reached his early 20s. In 1973, upon the advice of an older brother, he left India and came to America to receive vision rehabilitation. Nothing could be done to save his sight, but he accepted it and took it upon himself to remain as independent as possible.

He learned Braille, achieved independent living skills, and learned to walk with a cane. "I rarely use audio books. I read almost everything in braille. I hope it never becomes a lost art." His blindness has never frightened him or kept him from pursuing his dreams. After going through a Business Enterprise Program, he received a degree in Food and Hospitality Services, obtained his Citizenship and spent the next several years managing cafeterias and an apartment complex.

As the 90s turned into the 2000s, Balaji (who affectionately goes by his last name), found that computers had become his biggest obstacle, especially as the world became more digital. That's where Society for the Blind and Visually Impaired came in. He had all the independent living skills down, but technology was a challenge.

"Basic computer—I didn't know anything. Society taught me from the beginning." Our Assistive Technology team has worked with him for several years to hone his computer skills. Since then he has mastered JAWS, email, and Excel. "I am the treasurer for the United Workers for the Blind, and I needed to learn how to create spreadsheets and now I'm using Excel. Veronica and John both have worked with me. I've learned a lot."

At 78, Balaji is not finished learning. He comes in faithfully every two weeks to receive training with his phone and computer, and he serves on SLSBVI's Minority Advisory Board. With a lift in his voice he said, "I feel so independent. I'm a people person and I've got the opportunity to meet so many people." Pausing briefly, Balaji smiled and added, "Blindness will not stop me!"

**"I feel so independent. Blindness will not stop me!"**



# CLIENT SUCCESS

Even with the Pandemic, we made an impact in our clients' lives. Below are the percentages of clients who met or partially met their goals after they worked with the Society. Clients create their own goals and the Society measures each individual's success.

Support Groups

100%

Occupational  
Therapy

97%

Low Vision Center

95%

Fall Prevention

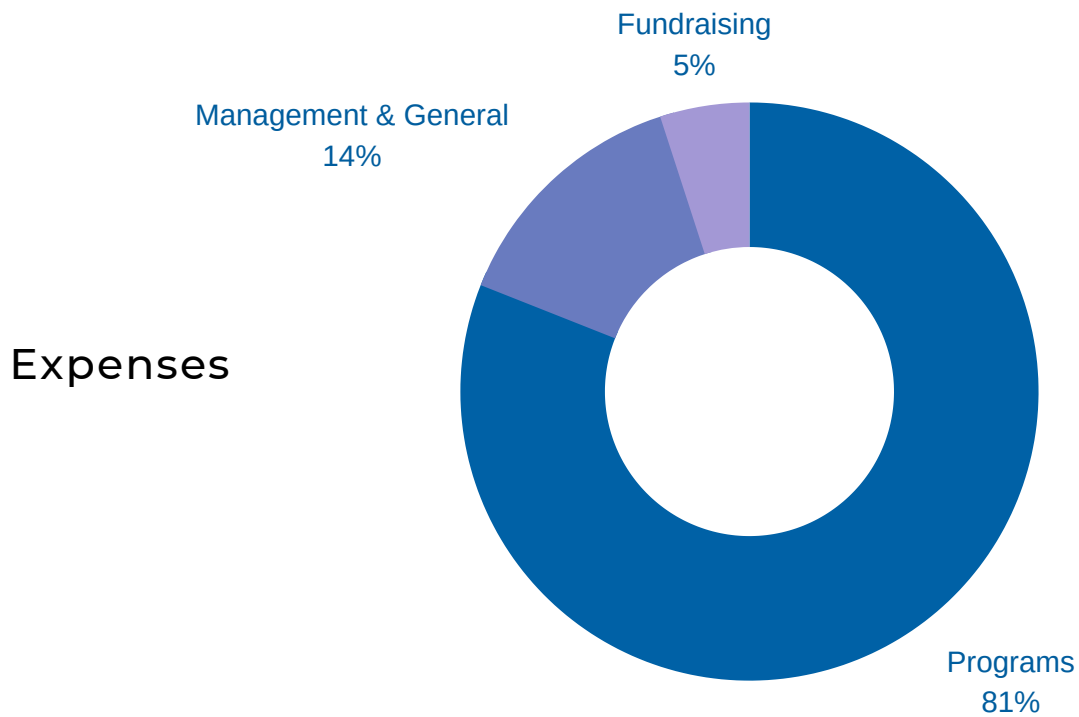
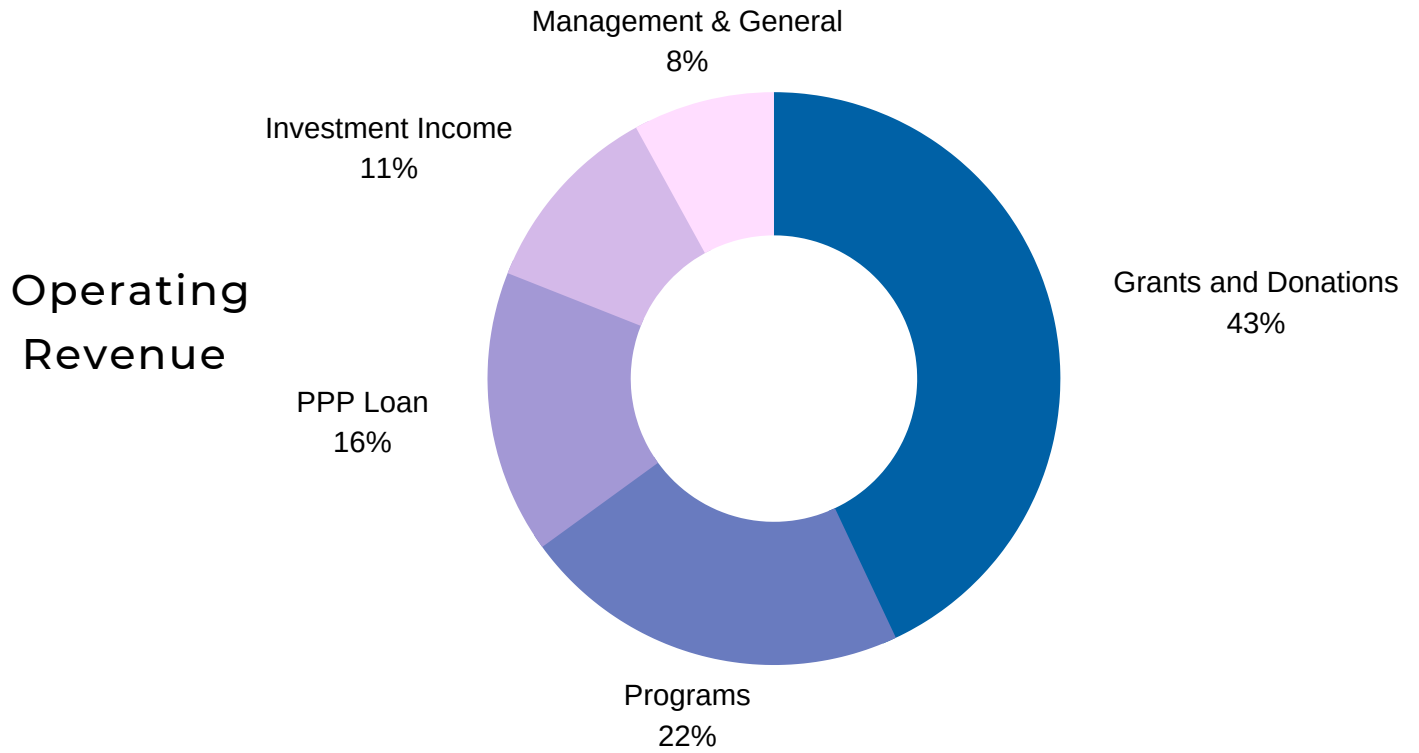
85%

Orientation and  
Mobility

76%



# SOCIETY FINANCIALS





# LEADERS WHO PURSUE EXCELLENCE



The Society for the Blind and Visually Impaired depends upon the generous support of community members who believe in our mission and our clients. We believe the leaders in our community help change the world.

Ann Shapiro is one of those leaders who embodies our values and shows it in the way she serves Society for the Blind and Visually Impaired. Since 2012, she has served on our Board in one capacity or another.

“I was introduced to the Society for the Blind and Visually Impaired by Joe Brinker. He is a good friend of my husband, Mark, and I. He knew we had a blind child, Blake, and thought I might be a good match to be on the Board of Directors.”

Ann is currently in her second round of being on the Board. She served for two terms her first round in which she was secretary, vice chairman, and chairman of the board.

“I strongly believe in the Society’s mission. Since Mark and I have a child that was born blind, we have a personal connection for what the Society can do for the blind community in and around St. Louis.” Their son Blake is now 29 years old and has been living at Beverly Farm in Godfrey, Illinois since the age of 23.

“I would like to see the Society grow to reach out to a much wider number of people of all ages. They offer such a wide variety of opportunities to help those who are visually impaired, as well as those who take care of the visually impaired. The opportunities, support, and resources are endless. I wish for them to be financially secure and to have the ability to reach all those in need of the Society’s help.” Ann would love to see Society become the “go to” place for those with visual needs.

Leaders must be willing to get involved and have the understanding and compassion to put themselves in our clients' shoes. Ann understands how big those shoes are to fill. She follows our mission with fervor and inspires others to do the same.



## Leadership 2020

### Board of Directors

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Tom Enger - Chair  
Joseph Brinker - Vice Chair  
Ryan Whittington - Treasurer  
Elizabeth Kauffman - Secretary  
Paul Tesser, MD, PhD - Asst. Treasurer  
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Viswa Belaji  
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Laura Park-Leach

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Diane Schulte  
Melody Simmons  
Veronica Steibel  
Joyce Strother  
Maria Tegtmeyer  
Brenda Wendling

# DONOR RECOGNITION

Thank you for building a world where people with vision loss are empowered and can live independently. Every single gift matters to us, and most importantly to our clients. We are honored to recognize those who have made contributions at the \$250 level and above. We do our best to ensure the donor list is accurate. To make a donation or alert us to a correction, please contact: Megan Connelly, Director of Development at 314-968-9000.

## **Helen Keller Society (\$5,000 and above)**

Blackbaud Giving Fund By Its Agent,  
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## **Insight Club (\$250- \$999.99)**

A Friend  
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Mrs. Barbara Conway  
Mr. & Mrs. Mark Dow  
Mrs. Mary Jo Ely  
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# BE A VISIONARY

For 110 years the St. Louis Society for the Blind and Visually Impaired has been providing comprehensive services to people living with vision loss. Without these services, individuals with vision loss may not receive the therapy and training they need to stay independent.

You have a chance to change the path forward. Every gift helps a person with vision loss live an enriched full life. And when you join our giving program for as little as \$10, you can become a person who is committed to creating a future for others in the St. Louis area and beyond with vision loss. In short, you become a visionary.

To become a visionary today, visit **[slsbvi.org](http://slsbvi.org)** and select "Donate."

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