

February is Low Vision Awareness Month

Approximately 13,000 Vermonters are living with low vision – a term used to describe an individual's sight that cannot be fully corrected even with glasses, medication, or surgery. The most common causes of low vision are age-related macular degeneration (AMD), glaucoma, cataracts, and diabetic retinopathy. People can also be born with conditions or experience injuries that cause low vision.

People with low vision have difficulty with everyday tasks like reading the mail and newspaper, shopping, cooking, seeing the TV, and writing. For many it's also difficult to distinguish faces and read street and store signs in the community. This loss of functional vision can be difficult and many people experience emotionally challenging stages of adjustment.

It is very important to know that it is possible to continue to do most of the activities a person has always enjoyed and wants to keep doing. There are specialized professionals and technologies that make this possible. For example, if they love to read, there are many resources to assist; some people can use specialized optical magnification and others prefer electronic magnification or screen enlargement software for the computer. Many people also enjoy listening to recordings of the most popular books for free through the Vermont Special Services Library. Vermont also has a service called NFB-Newsline that allows Vermonters who have print related disabilities to dial a phone number and listen to local and national newspapers using a regular telephone or app on a smart phone.

There are professionals in Vermont who can help to maximize the use of the individual's remaining vision. This begins with a visit to a low vision ophthalmologist or optometrist. These specially trained eye doctors will explore special magnification devices that will help accomplish the types of tasks the person is trying to achieve at home, in the community, or at work. There are also specially trained Vision Rehabilitation Specialists who can provide instruction about how to use magnification, lighting, and other adaptive devices to accomplish daily tasks.

The Division for the Blind and Visually Impaired (DBVI) at the State of Vermont Department of Disabilities, Aging and Independent Living (DAIL) has staff with specialized knowledge about the needs of people with low vision. They can help to access the resources in our state for low vision and provide guidance for determining appropriate services.

DBVI staff are very proud of the many individuals who have accomplished their employment and independent living goals while working with us. There is a special section on our website www.dbvi.vermont.gov/success-stories, which highlights some of their success stories. One recent inspirational addition is the journey of Neil Taylor from Brattleboro. As a young teacher and athlete, he lost all his sight and became totally blind due to a brain tumor. In his recent memoir, *The Life We Got: Losing Sight and Gaining Vision*, he describes rebuilding his life worth living and worth celebrating. In this remarkable book, you learn about the perspectives from Neil and his mother, Alison, as he works hard to accomplish his goals. Congratulations to Neil on his success!

It is easy to access low vision resources. DBVI can be reached at 888-405-5005, and a complete list of regional offices is on our website at www.dbvi.vermont.gov

Fred Jones, Worcester, VT
802-241-0326; Fred.Jones@vermont.gov

Fred Jones is the Director of the Division for the Blind and Visually Impaired at the State of Vermont Department of Disabilities, Aging and Independent Living, supporting a mission to make Vermont the best state in which to grow old or live with a disability – with dignity, respect and independence.