

First Quarterly Report 2021
S.M.A.R.T. Services
Vermont Association for the Blind and Visually Impaired

Number of clients served in 1 st Quarter	208
Average number of goals per client	4.87
Number of goals achieved per client	4.16
Number of clients participating in virtual Peer Assisted Learning and Support Groups (PALS)	50 (3 added during 1 st quarter)

Summary:

In the past quarter we have seen a major increase in the demand and need among our clients to address skills related to telecommunications and other assistive technology to reduce social isolation among those with vision loss. We have more than doubled the number of clients who received services this quarter when compared to the same time frame last year. A year ago, Vermonters were just coming out of the lockdown restrictions imposed by COVID-19. Today, clients are more open to receiving services in their homes, with proper masking precautions in effect. Likewise, as we helped hundreds of clients last year with these skills, they have told their friends, and we are receiving requests to come and serve clients specifically to help them learn how to reduce their social isolation through gaining access to telecommunications and other assistive technology. This population, beginning to age into vision loss, is the baby boomer population. They used computers and other technologies in their careers prior to experiencing vision loss. This generation will be more open to learning new skills and staying in touch with their friends, children and grandchildren. Over the next decade we will see a sharp increase in the demand for vision services, including instruction in “smart devices.”

We continue to provide online support groups through zoom to Vermonters in hopes of reducing their isolation and promoting peer support. These Peer Assisted Learning and Support Groups (PALS) focus on topics related to vision loss and help walk clients through the adjustment process related to visual impairment, much like the five stages of grief when you’ve lost a loved one. Vision loss, is a disability of access. This is access to information, one’s environment, transportation and more. Many of our clients may be the only visually impaired person in their neighborhood, which is further emotionally isolating. During COVID-19, we had to pivot these groups from in person to online through zoom. We continue to offer this service online and teach clients how to access these groups. To date, 50 clients actively participate in these groups.

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.

Success Story #4:

Many seniors find the idea of learning a new form of technology daunting. One such client refused to learn anything new related to telecommunications. Over the past year as she found herself becoming less and less connected with her community, she realized she needed to try and learn. This fall, she worked with our instructor to video conference with zoom. It was a

long, frustrating process, but ultimately, she was able to reconnect with her women's group online! She expressed her extreme joy to our teacher. But that's not all, our instructor also shared a podcast with her about a woman who was a painter, which had lost all her sight. This client also had been a painter before she lost her sight. After hearing the podcast, and having succeeded with Zoom, she had the courage to pick up her brushes again, and now shares her art with her women's group.