

# Vision Loss Alliance of New Jersey

## 2024 Annual Report



the story

of us

Image of an open book on a desk in a library with book shelves in background and "the story of us" in braille.

# our mission



**Vision Loss Alliance**  
of New Jersey

We empower people with vision loss or blindness by providing support, education, and training in assistive technology and independent living skills.

# our vision

Every individual who is blind or low vision has the opportunity to pursue his or her highest aspirations.



*Image of a VLANJ program participant and orientation and mobility Instructor practicing O & M skills.*



*Image of a VLANJ instructor and program participant in cooking class.*



*Image of a VLANJ program participant in a technology class.*



William Schuldt  
President & CEO

Dear Friend,

2024 marked a year of significant progress, with growing enrollment, new and expanding programs, and the groundwork laid for our move to a new home in 2025. These were all positive achievements, but none came without challenges. It took our entire VLANJ community — staff and instructors, participants, volunteers, donors, and our board of trustees — pulling together.

The recognition that we are the pillars who hold VLANJ up and drive it forward inspired the theme of this year’s annual report, “the story of us”. For over 80 years, VLANJ has been shaped by the efforts of countless individuals. Together, we form the foundation that allows us to grow, adapt, and better serve adults living with vision loss throughout New Jersey.

## Expanding Access

In 2024, we completed the first full year of VLANJ@Home, our pioneering in-home low vision occupational therapy program. Bringing skilled therapists directly into participants’ homes has proven invaluable, offering personalized support that

addresses daily challenges. This program has quickly become an important way to help adults maintain independence.

We also strengthened our commitment to mental health. All staff completed Mental Health First Aid training, learning to identify, understand and respond to signs of mental health challenges. Research shows that people experiencing vision loss are at significantly higher risk for depression and anxiety. The psychological impact can be profound, affecting identity, daily functioning, and overall well-being.

We introduced Mental Health Days, inviting participants to enjoy meditation and yoga sessions and hear from knowledgeable speakers. They were a big success. Of course, giving people the skills and support to adapt to vision loss — as all our programs do — also helps alleviate the emotional toll that can come with it.

Enrollment in our center-based programs reached 105 participants in 2024. Our virtual offerings remained popular, with 159 people participating. Through community presentations and outreach, we connected with nearly 949 people, extending our reach beyond those enrolled in programs.

Our community orientation and mobility sessions helped participants gain confidence navigating neighborhoods, downtowns and businesses. And our technology training — especially in using the accessibility functions of iPhones and iPads — continues to be a draw for many.

## Sharing Stories, Honoring Community

As you’ll read, we have a strong core of devoted instructors and volunteers. Their care and creativity create a welcoming space where people feel seen, supported, and encouraged to grow.

You’ll also meet participants who shared their personal stories — powerful reminders of how our programs make a real impact in people’s lives. Whether gaining confidence in the kitchen, learning to navigate streets, or connecting through technology, these stories illustrate what it means to adapt and thrive.

And we took time to reflect on how far we’ve come. Another piece in this report looks back at VLANJ’s more than 80-year history, including insight from a current participant first introduced to the nonprofit in 1974.

None of our achievements would be possible without the shared commitment of everyone involved. Together, we’re not just providing services — we’re building a community of empowerment, resilience and hope.

Thank you for being part of “the story of us”.

Warm Regards,

William Schuldt

VLANJ President and CEO  
wschuldt@vlanj.org  
(973) 627-0055

# our history

## A Legacy of Empowerment

*A look at how VLANJ has grown into the organization it is today.*

Peggy Kane's introduction to Vision Loss Alliance of New Jersey came in 1974, when she attended a summer camp for women who were blind or had vision loss. The Diamond Spring Lodge in Denville was a welcome retreat, a place to swim, knit, play Bingo and make friends. "It was a big thing for me to be there, getting to do something other than my regular routine," said Kane, who grew up in Hudson County.

Kane has been an integral part of VLANJ, both as a participant and instructor over the years. "It's nice to see people grow, and it's good for me too to keep learning new things," she said. "Throughout the years, VLANJ has ensured participants remain the main focus."

For more than 80 years, Vision Loss Alliance of New Jersey has empowered people with vision loss to adapt, surmount barriers, and thrive. It began as a social club for adults with vision loss in Newark in 1943. Under the name NJ Foundation for the Blind, it opened the summer camp in 1955. By the 1990s, it was providing life-skills training and wellness programs September through June.

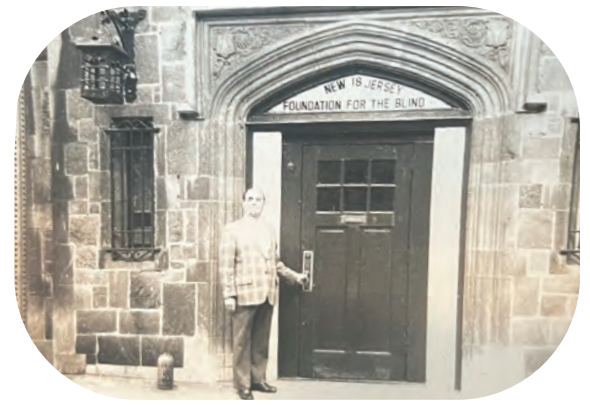
Linda Groszew, who retired as VLANJ's senior program manager in 2023, recalled an amazing final summer of camp in 2005. Leadership decided to create a highly structured, year-round, skills-focused program. Staff trained for four months to prepare for its April 2006 launch.

"We teach our participants to adapt and our programs had to adapt as well," said Groszew, who works two days a week as an instructor. The advent of the iPhone — and later the iPad — caused a seismic shift, opening up adaptive opportunities that were previously unimaginable for people with vision loss. VLANJ quickly responded by developing a program teaching participants to harness the power of these technologies.

In 2016, the board of trustees renamed the organization Vision Loss Alliance of New Jersey, to reflect more accurately what it is: an alliance of individuals, organizations and communities dedicated to helping adults who lose their sight learn to adapt and regain confidence and independence.

To foster greater self-sufficiency, VLANJ expanded technology training, added occupational therapy, and launched orientation and mobility (O&M) outings that build skills and confidence for navigating communities. "Adding low vision occupational therapy and expanding our orientation and mobility services demonstrate our commitment to empower adults with vision loss to live safely and independently," said VLANJ Senior Vice President of Programs Elsa Zavoda. "We meet the needs of our participants where they are, all with the goal of helping them thrive."

When the pandemic hit in March 2020, VLANJ effectively pivoted to



*An image a man outside of the first VLANJ building.*

online programming, which is now a staple of its offerings. To further reduce barriers to program access, VLANJ began offering stipends to cover travel costs for people without access to transportation.

In September 2023, VLANJ launched VLANJ@Home. It's a first-of-its kind in New Jersey, bringing occupational therapists specializing in low-vision services into people's homes.

**William Schuldt, President and CEO:** Every day I am inspired by our program participants who strive and work towards improving their independence.

**Elsa Zavoda, Senior Vice President of Programs:** I am inspired every day by the courage, passion, enthusiasm, and spirit of our participants and their desire to be independent and consistently offer support and motivation to lift others.

**Jennifer Singer, Vice President of Development and Communications:** A non-profit has the power to transform a person's life, and each day I am inspired by the transformation I see with our program participants. I am thankful to our generous donors who help our mission become reality.

**Victoria Lowrie, Director of Programs:** There is nothing more rewarding than seeing people grow and gain confidence through what we offer, it is why we do what we do.

**Anthony Filingeri, Technology Coordinator:** The determination and willingness to engage with technology in a different way, despite their loss of vision, is something that inspires me at VLANJ.

**Laura Downey, Bookkeeper/Office Manager:** It truly and deeply inspires me to see each person that has low vision or lost their vision to walk in our organization with such joy with a great positive attitude along with learning to improve their daily lives.

**Trisha Ebel, Outreach Specialist:** My job as the outreach specialist with Vision Loss alliance comes very easy to me. I truly can say that I work from my heart and soul. Thanks to Vision Loss alliance I was able to turn my life around and live again after my own vision loss. I learned to be confident, independent, and gained back all my dignity. In return, I am now helping others clear their pathways to independence and dignity!

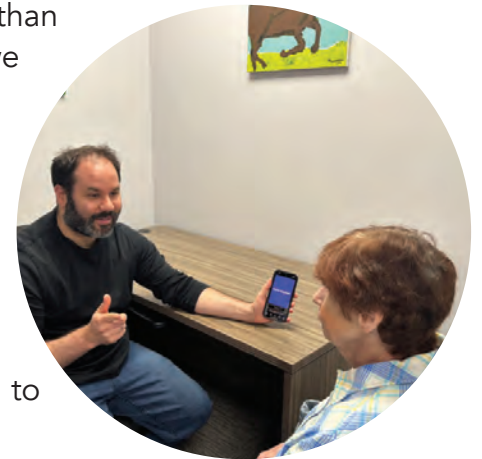
**Elizabeth Edwards, Program Coordinator:** At VLANJ, I find purpose by helping others find theirs and showing that life is not about waiting for the storm to pass but learning to dance in the rain.

**Jennifer Santosuosso, Development Assistant:** I joined VLANJ to have meaning in the work I do. Hearing the students laugh and enjoy our programs puts life into perspective every day.

**Cindy Voskian, Program Aide:** Working with the students, they inspire me in everything they do.



*Image of William Schuldt.*



*Image of Anthony Filingeri.*



*Image of VLANJ staff from left to right:  
Cindy Voskian, Trisha Ebel, Jennifer Santosuosso,  
Jennifer Singer, Laura Downey, Elizabeth Edwards,  
Elsa Zavoda and Victoria Lowrie.*

# board of trustees

## What inspires me to volunteer at VLANJ...

**Carl Augusto, Board Chair:** I had learned about the work of Vision Loss Alliance of New Jersey and had been impressed with its work. As a blind person myself, I know firsthand what a difference an organization like VLANJ can make in the lives of people with vision loss and wanted to be involved.



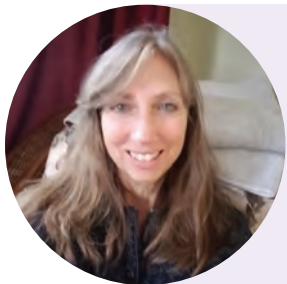
**Ming Wu, Vice Chair:** The way VLANJ teaches skills and builds communities can take someone with vision loss from a place of isolation to belonging, from reliance to independence, and from an outlook of despair to one of hope. These transformations allow for tangible improvements to daily life which are meaningful, can bring joy and are a step towards building a fulfilling and happy life after vision loss. The complete impact VLANJ has on the lives of those they serve is immeasurable, and that is what inspires me to volunteer.



**Kelly Bleach, Vice Chair and Treasurer:** Having worked in this field for a long time, I recognize the importance of offering high-quality services for people with vision loss. Whether it's learning to cross the street safely, reading the newspaper with a smartphone app, or attending a support group, VLANJ programs can make the difference between feeling fear and isolation versus confidence and belonging.

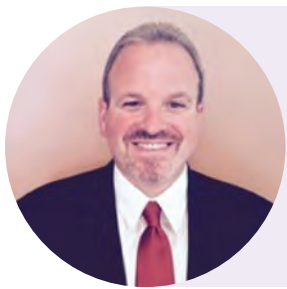


**Carol Burgio, Secretary:** The wide diversity of programs offered to instill confidence and empower those living with vision loss. Through these programs, participants can learn everything from cooking strategies to iPhone accessibility features to proper techniques for navigation outside the home, all while interacting with peers in a friendly, supportive environment. I'm proud to be associated with an organization so dedicated to serving the visually impaired community.



**Frank Cafasso:** I volunteer for VLANJ because of Carl Augusto and the amazing work he has done in the last 30 years. I'm astounded that a man with little vision can get so much done and VLANJ has countless people similar to his situation. God does work in funny ways and it's amazing to see in front of you how people adapt and succeed. I've learned quite a bit just by observing Carl and I feel blessed to have known him in my lifetime!





**Anthony DiPonio:** I am inspired by the program participants at VLANJ. The commitment of the staff and board of trustees allow us to achieve our mission in helping people with vision loss. Volunteering at VLANJ is a wonderful experience.

**Lukas Franck:** I have known about VLANJ for many years. I joined the board at the invitation of Carl Augusto several years ago because I saw an organization with a revitalized mission that was focused on bringing information, education support and community to visually impaired people in my area. Under the leadership of dedicated staff like Bill Schuldt and Elsa Zavoda, I am thrilled to be seeing the mission become a reality. I am proud to be able to help move towards the goals of our mission.



**Tajma Kotoric:** I believe in the power of community, dignity, and accessibility for all. My passion lies in supporting individuals with vision loss to live independently and thrive with confidence. It's an honor to help further the mission of an organization that provides such essential education, empowerment, and advocacy.

**Christopher Reichert:** As a member of the Saddle River Valley Lions Club as well as having a family member with vision loss, I understand and have seen how devastating vision loss can be from loss of independence and social isolation. VLANJ has such a positive and powerful impact for people to not only help regain that independence and increase their social network but assist and to thrive and achieve more than ever thought possible. I am honored and humbled to serve on this board.



**Phil So:** I volunteer for VLANJ because in this age of accelerating change and digital transformation, everyone should have the tools to lead, contribute, and thrive. Through programs like tech training, community education and @Home independent living instruction, we're building an expanding network across New Jersey and beyond, where people who are blind or have low vision don't just keep up with the world, but can play a bigger role shaping it, leading within it, and belonging to it; where participants don't just acquire skills, but can forge connections, confidence, and a community that lasts. That's what VLANJ is about.

**Tzu-Lin Toner:** Always the people! Behind VLANJ's strong mission, the energy, enthusiasm and commitment of the staff bring to life a community to serve persons with vision loss. It is an honor to support their work and their impact on the VLANJ community.



## Center-Based Programs

**Yiuwing Yu** wishes he had discovered VLANJ's center-based programs sooner. In 2024, he enrolled in Independent Living Skills, a six-week course to practice strategies for daily living.

"I made some new friends and learned how to cook something without burning myself — always a good thing!" Yiuwing said with a laugh.

Yiuwing then signed up for the Mobile Technology program, also known as "Tech Tuesdays," and Holistic Wellness. Holistic Wellness promotes well-being through offerings like yoga and fitness classes, art and pottery, horticulture, West African drumming, self-advocacy, and peer support groups.

"It's been good for my mental health, good for my fitness," Yiuwing said. On Tech Tuesdays, he's focused on learning to use his iPhone's VoiceOver screen reader. While it's challenging, the instructor and other students are patient and helpful.

Yiuwing has limited vision — he describes his sight as similar to sun glare, with everything appearing clouded. His vision loss began during the pandemic. "Sitting at home, I lost my confidence," he recalled.

He's happy to have found VLANJ, where he can connect with peers and gain new skills. "I highly recommend it to anybody going through, or beginning to go through, vision issues," he said. "The earlier they start, the better. That would truly benefit you."



*Image of Yiuwing Yu*

## Community Programs: Orientation and Mobility

After **Melissa Camacho** lost her vision, she rarely left familiar spaces, only venturing out for doctor appointments with someone by her side. She didn't know how to orient herself in new environments.

"I wondered, 'Who is going to have the time and patience to help you learn how to cross the street in the way you need to?' She recalled.

The answer, it turned out, was VLANJ's orientation and mobility (O&M) specialists. They teach individuals with vision loss how to safely navigate sidewalks, crosswalks, and businesses during community outings. Melissa took part in several O&M outings, including one to downtown Denville and another to the Morris Plains train station.

"On these excursions, you collaborate with the people who are there with you. You get attention, care, and support," said Melissa, who lost her sight in 2020 following a failed cornea transplant.

"I can ask the really hard questions — and by hard, I mean the embarrassing ones," she said. Melissa knows she'll get thoughtful feedback on techniques she's considering.

She worried that people would make assumptions because she uses a white cane. "I've learned that it's OK if people don't know what to say, because I've learned how to communicate what I need in terms of help."



*Image of Melissa Camacho*

## VLANJ@Home

**Pat Bilancia's** adult sons constantly worried about her living alone after she lost much of her vision to a severe bacterial infection. Vision Loss Alliance of New Jersey's in-home low vision occupational therapy program, VLANJ@Home, helped ease their concerns.

An occupational therapist from VLANJ@Home visited Pat's home multiple times and showed her how to improve lighting throughout the house — even inside closets — to make the most of her remaining sight. "In some places it was too bright, and sometimes there wasn't enough light," she explained.

Using electronic devices had become a challenge, but the therapist installed helpful apps on her iPad and cell phone, and walked her through how to use them. "All her recommendations were great," said Pat, a retired probation officer who was grateful for the expert guidance. "Having them come to the house — they see what you're dealing with, and they help make your life easier."

Launched in September 2023, VLANJ@Home is the first program of its kind in New Jersey. By the end of 2024, three dozen people had received in-home low vision occupational therapy, which helps them safely perform daily tasks. Most insurance plans, including Medicare, cover the service.

Pat said the best tools and techniques she's learned for coping with vision loss have come from VLANJ. "If you want to be independent," she said, "VLANJ is teaching independence."

## Virtual Programs

The pandemic lockdown was especially isolating for many with vision loss. When VLANJ had to close its doors, staff quickly adapted by creating virtual programs to keep participants connected and supported.

For **Matthew Graves**, these virtual offerings were a vital way to stay in touch with people he'd grown close to over the years. "I got to see some of my friends and the staff, and that made me happy," he recalled.

Even after in-person programs resumed, virtual options remained a key part of VLANJ's offerings. Many participants now enjoy a mix of both in-person and online programs.

Matthew's favorite virtual program is Tech Talks, where he learns about useful apps and upcoming iPhone updates. Thanks to Tech Talks, he now uses Ray-Ban Meta Smart Glasses, which use artificial intelligence to interpret his surroundings.

"When I go for walks, it describes the environment I'm in," Matthew explained. He's also discovered fun apps like Blindfold Wildcard, an accessible game inspired by the card game Uno.

VLANJ's virtual programs cover a wide range of interests. Participants can join monthly meditation and yoga classes. VLANJ Voices, offered quarterly, focuses on mental health. LIFT is a program for people new to vision loss and their families, while ARISE is an engaging speaker series. STRIVE is a monthly peer support group.



*Image of Pat Bilancia*



*Image of Matthew Graves*

# instructors & volunteers

## What inspires me at VLANJ...

**Jordan Thomas, art instructor:** "Definitely what inspires me is the people. I could study art all I want but truly what makes it art is the human experience...It widens my perspective on art and other aspects of life."



**Christina Brino, cooking instructor:** "I love to cook and I want to share that with people who are visually impaired. A lot of times when they lose their vision, they feel that they can't even cook anymore. I want to show them that they can, and that there are ways to make it safe and enjoyable for them."



*Image above of program participants and VLANJ volunteers in a pottery class.*

**Grace Amodeo, technology instructor:** "I'm very passionate about technology and how it can better our lives as blind people. I can say that it's definitely opened so many doors for me. It is very inspiring and rewarding for me to teach others to use the same technologies that hopefully will open doors for them."



*Image above of The Chester Lionesses volunteering at a VLANJ event.*



**Patrice Nicolard, volunteer:** "Volunteering here is so much fun. I get inspired by all the participants, and it makes me feel like a better person."



**Noemi Lopez, volunteer:** "I volunteer at Vision Loss Alliance because it's more than just helping. It's about being part of something meaningful and changing lives."



**Edward Hess, volunteer:** "VLANJ is a great cause. I had time and it sounded like fun, so I decided to do it!"

# WE THANK OUR VOLUNTEERS!

# financial statement

## The Following is a Brief Summary of VLANJ's 2024 Audited Financial Statement

Revenue	2024	2023
Program Revenue	\$54,641	\$ 61,664
Legacies & Bequests	\$197,142	\$ 93,255
Contributions	\$337,288	\$ 274,594
Special Events - Net	-	\$ 12,739
Other Income	-	-
**Net Investment Income - Unrealized loss/gain	\$425,276	\$ 828,414
<b>Total Revenue</b>	<b>\$1,014,347</b>	<b>\$ 1,270,666</b>
<b>Expenses</b>		
Program Expense	\$891,385	\$ 891,074
Development & PR Expenses	\$127,393	\$ 108,197
General and Administrative Expenses	\$221,036	\$ 131,458
Total Expenses	\$1,239,814	\$ 1,130,729
Net Loss/Gain	\$225,467	\$ 139,937
Net Assets Beginning of Year	\$6,700,710	\$ 6,560,773
*Net Assets End of Year	\$6,475,243	\$ 6,700,710

\*The Organizations' Net Assets enable us to fund annual deficits

## Our Impact in 2024

Vision Loss Alliance of New Jersey offered a total of 2,370 instructional hours.

VLANJ served 105 in person program participants in our center-based programs, 159 participants in our virtual programs and we reached 949 people via our outreach and education efforts in the community.

The VLANJ @Home Program, which provides in-home occupational therapy, provided 140 home visits.

Professional trainings were provided to Robert Wood Johnson Medical School, Easter Seals & St. Katharine's Nursing facility, in sensitivity awareness and education in assisting individuals with vision loss.

The New Jersey Commission for the Blind and Visually Impaired (NJCBVI) and VLANJ launched The Fellowship Program. This program is designed to bridge generations and foster meaningful connections by building community and collaboration. It leverages the unique skills, talents, and interests of both younger and older participants to create mutual growth and shared experiences.

With the increasing demand for mental health services, VLANJ introduced mental health initiatives in our programs and hosted two mental health and wellness days. Each event welcomed many participants, several new to VLANJ. Designed to be both restorative and educational, the events featured a variety of activities and group discussions led by licensed mental health professionals.

# thank you!

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An annual gift is your investment, a sustaining gift made every year. As an annual giver, you help to sustain us, every day, every year. The Vision Loss Alliance of New Jersey Annual Giving Circles recognizes our most loyal and generous annual supporters. They lead with generosity, and we are deeply grateful for their support.

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By including Vision Loss Alliance of New Jersey in your estate plan, your generous gift creates a lasting legacy and often helps generate tax benefits to you and your family. Whether through a bequest, charitable gift annuity, insurance plan, annuity or another financial instrument.

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A gift of your retirement assets, such as a gift from your IRA, 401K, 403b, pension or other tax deferred plan, is an excellent way to make a gift.

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Contributions made in recognition of important life events; a gift in memory of a family member or dear friend, or in honor of a birthday, wedding, anniversary, or other milestone.

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Many companies have programs through which they will “match” the charitable contributions made by their employees. Often these matches are dollar for dollar, or more. Through corporate gift matching, your employer or your spouse/partner’s employer can multiply your gift to Vision Loss Alliance of New Jersey, making it go further.

## DONATE YOUR TIME – VOLUNTEER

Vision Loss Alliance of New Jersey offers many opportunities for individuals to get involved by donating their time. Volunteers are needed in many areas.

## ATTEND OR SUPPORT ONE OF OUR ANNUAL EVENTS

Please visit our website for updates.

[VLANJ.org](http://VLANJ.org)

**ALL ONLINE DONATIONS MAY BE MADE BY VISITING:  
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## Vision Loss Alliance

of New Jersey

201 Littleton Road, Suite 150  
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### Save The Date: Thursday, October 9, 2025

We're celebrating two milestones — our annual Day of Giving and a fall Open House at our new location in Morris Plains! Come see our new space, meet our team, and be part of the impact.

*Transforming Lives one individual at a time.*