



2013

**A LIFETIME OF
INDEPENDENCE**



**vision
australia**

blindness and low vision services

WHAT WE DO

Vision Australia is a not-for-profit organisation providing blindness and low vision services to Australians of all ages. We have almost one and a half centuries of experience through the eight heritage organisations* which together now form Vision Australia.

We offer a wide range of services including low vision clinics, orientation and mobility services, Seeing Eye Dogs, children's services, library and alternate format information and advocacy services. Most services are available from 27 sites and 29 clinics while our library and Seeing Eye Dogs services are available across Australia.

Vision Australia offices at Geelong, Victoria, and Newcastle, NSW are also demonstration sites for the **National Disability Insurance Scheme** which will be national by 2018.

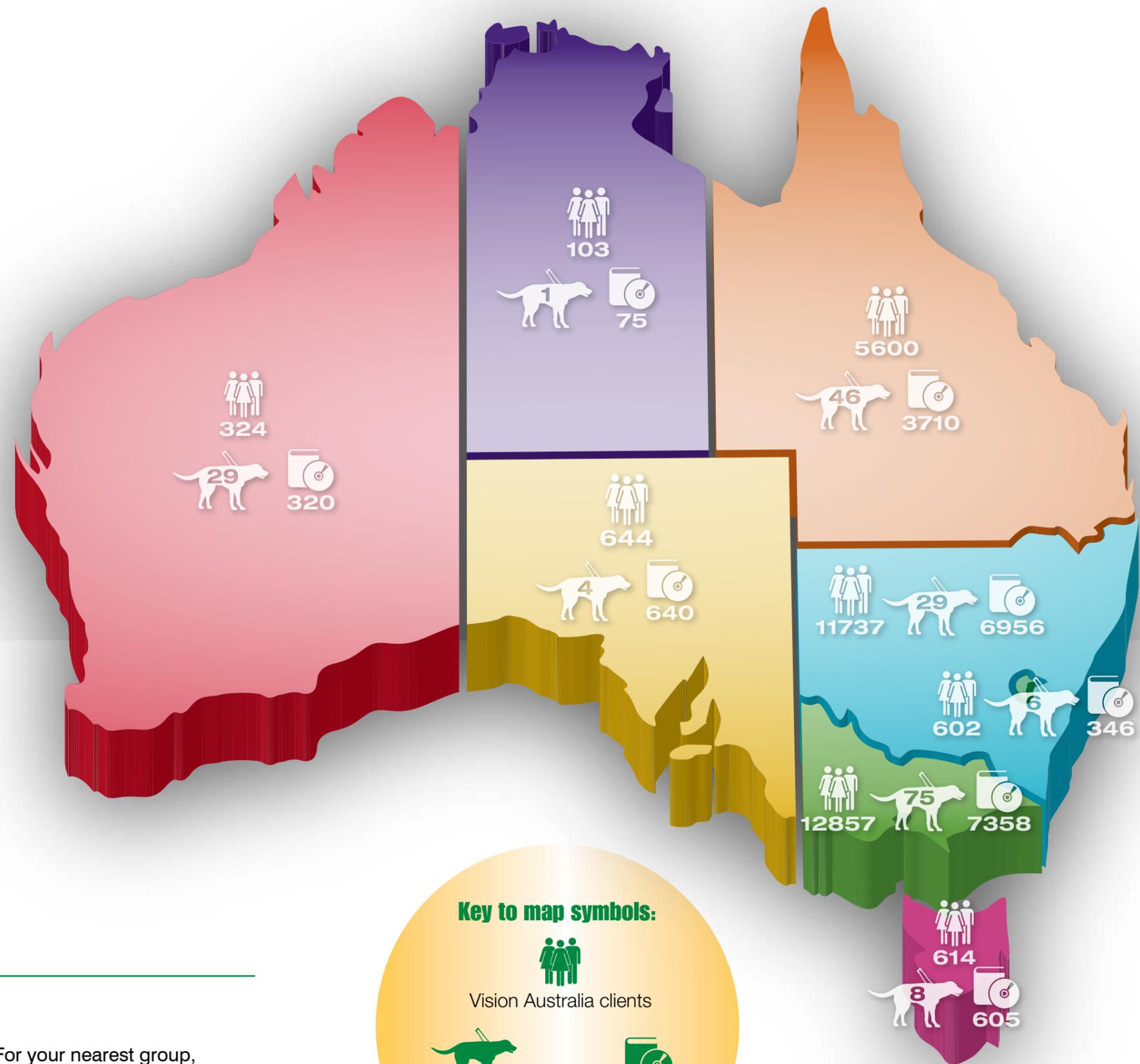
At these sites we are testing new service development initiatives with clients eligible for National Disability Insurance Scheme support so we can build an evidence base to share with all other Vision Australia sites as the scheme expands.



There are **66 Local Client Groups** in Queensland, New South Wales, ACT and Victoria which connect people who are blind or have low vision. Groups enjoy a variety of activities and family and friends are welcome

to join in. For your nearest group, visit www.visionaustralia.org/about-us/client-consultation-and-engagement/local-client-groups or phone **(02) 9334 3293**.

For further information, go to www.visionaustralia.org



Key to map symbols:



Vision Australia clients



Working Seeing Eye Dogs



Vision Australia Library Service

* Heritage organisations now forming Vision Australia: Royal Blind Society, Royal Victorian Institute for the Blind, Vision Australia Foundation, National Information Library Services, Royal Blind Foundation Queensland, Hear a Book, Seeing Eye Dogs Australia and 5RPH.

2013

OUR VISION

Vision Australia is a partnership between people who are blind, sighted or have low vision. We are united by our passion that people who are blind or have low vision will have access to and fully participate in every part of life they choose.

OUR MISSION

Vision Australia will achieve this through creating a community partnership of knowledge, skills and expertise to enrich the participation in life of people who are blind or have low vision and their families. We will ensure that the community recognises their capabilities and contributions.

Cover image: Neva, aged four, in rehearsals with singer Delta Goodrem for Vision Australia's Carols by Candlelight, our premier fundraising event for Children's Services.

Photo: Tim Carrafa, Daily Telegraph

WELCOME

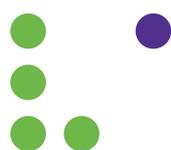
I'm very proud that Vision Australia offers a lifetime of independence to people who are blind or have low vision. Our services start with providing assistance to the families still coming to terms with the knowledge that their baby has vision problems and continue through preparing children for school and young adults for further education to employment and finally retirement. We believe every Australian should have access to and be able to fully participate in every part of life they choose. This booklet showcases some of the many ways we ensure people who are blind or have low vision can achieve independence.



Ron Hooton
Chief Executive Officer

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EARLY CHILDHOOD

When blindness or low vision is present from birth, early assistance is vital to ensure the child has the best chance of reaching their full potential. While sighted children are motivated to explore their world through visual cues and copying others, children who are blind or have low vision need more encouragement and stimulation to develop skills and mobility. Vision Australia specialists, including orthoptists, therapists, educators, adaptive technology consultants and counsellors work with the child's family to support their priorities for the child. The family's goals for their child are documented and an individual service plan is created.



We work with families to address their individual needs, recognising they are the experts on their children and the main providers of learning for their children. Our aim is to empower them and support them to be confident to facilitate their child's learning and to advocate for their child and themselves.



Liselle Sidhu, Speech Pathologist, Coorparoo, QLD.



Albinism is usually discovered at birth because the child will often have white-blond hair and very fair skin as well as pale coloured eyes with significant vision impairment due to the lack of melanin in affected

individuals. All children with albinism are prone to sunburn and need protection from glare as well. Glasses, contact lenses and other aids can assist children with their vision.

Vision Australia's Carols by Candlelight raised \$1.2 million for children's services in 2012.

10

The Felix Library is ten years old. Felix kits prepare preschool children who are blind for the concept of braille and literacy. Each Felix kit contains a storybook annotated with braille, an audio CD or DAISY recording of the story, some tactile aids relating to the story to help the child imagine the story and a little handbook with tactile graphics so the child can tell the story to themselves or others.

Mieah, aged two and a half, was born blind but wasn't referred to Vision Australia until she was 10 months old. Since then her occupational therapist has taught her to crawl and then walk and to start using a cane, to feed herself and now to begin dressing herself. She is learning basic preschool and socialisation skills so she can mix confidently with sighted children.

SCHOOL YEARS

Vision Australia specialists take a 'life-stages' approach with each child and their family so that the child continues to develop the skills required for starting school and gaining an education. As each child progresses through school we offer technology training and peer support programs. In later high school staff help prepare students for tertiary study and the workplace. We empower parents and support them to be confident to facilitate their child's learning and to advocate for their child and themselves.



Inherited **retinal dystrophies** are chronic and disabling disorders of visual function. Retinitis pigmentosa is the most common retinal dystrophy and the condition can vary greatly. Some people retain limited vision throughout their lives while others lose their sight completely. It often occurs during adolescence and there is no treatment or therapy for the condition.



Vision Australia offers school holiday programs

at major centres in a range of activities from cooking to computer skills. All groups at Vision Australia are designed to meet the specific needs of the participants. These programs are a great way for children to practice emerging skills in a fun and social setting and to connect children with their peers and allow families to meet and share their experiences.



Natalie Kaine, Occupational Therapist, Enfield, NSW.

Video conferencing will become increasingly important in service delivery for all age groups in the future as it removes travel time and costs and enables more support for families and clients.

231

Vision Australia estimates that 231 days of solid driving have been saved so far by the new VidKids™ program, which provides improved services to children with vision and/or hearing impairment in outer regional and remote Australia. Families and children connect with allied health professionals using video-conferencing for on-going support of each child and their family's specific needs.

Sean, who was born without eyes, is an active little boy. An occupational therapist helps Sean learn everyday skills like dressing and feeding himself. We also work with Sean's school to make sure he can take part in activities with the other children and get around safely with his white cane. "Without this support, we'd be lost," say Sean's parents.

STUDY AND WORK

People who are blind or have low vision are almost four times more likely to be unemployed than the general population. Vision Australia advocates strongly for equality of opportunity for everyone. Our Employment Services sites and partners assist clients to work in a range of industries and roles, from professional and administration through to trades and services. We help match the right people to the right organisations, and provide both parties with the support and advice needed. We can identify roles within a workplace that may suit a person who is blind or has low vision.



Vision Australia employment specialists and partners can conduct an **assessment** of any business or organisation to determine what specialist technology or equipment could be implemented to enable positions to be carried out by people who are blind or have low vision. We also assist people whose jobs are 'in jeopardy' due to eyesight loss to either continue working with specialist technology or to retrain for a new position.



Vision Australia Further Education Bursaries provide

adaptive technology to help ensure that students who are blind or have low vision can fully participate and succeed in their chosen studies. We advise on course selection, study skills, student advocacy and funding opportunities. We awarded 24 bursaries in 2012/13, which brings the total awarded since 1996 to 265 bursaries.



Max Bini, Tertiary Education Consultant, Macauley, VIC.

ANZ, Maxxia, Transport Accident Commission, Gforce Employment Solutions, Syn, ReCoila Hose and Reels and Trilby Misso are work partners with Vision Australia and employ people who are blind or have low vision.

134

Vision Australia Employment Services achieved 134 job placements this year in a large variety of industries and roles including office, manual work, hospitality and management, health and community services, education, retail and IT. We have recently partnered with CRS Australia, which has offices across the country, to greatly broaden our employment services.

“I used to be a pastry chef but as my eyesight got progressively worse I had to end my career. With the assistance of Vision Australia I learned how to use a computer with special software that speaks and to touch type so I could provide for my family again.”

Rolf Geerlings Coordinator of Volunteers, and Seeing Eye Dog Echo, Enfield, NSW.

MANAGING RESPONSIBILITIES

While vision loss can occur at any stage of life, loss in adulthood can be particularly challenging as people fear a loss of independence in work, family and other responsibilities. With the right services people who are blind or have low vision can retain or regain employment or continue to study and remain independent through orientation and mobility training, assistive technology and some adaptations at home.



As there is a higher incidence of blindness and low vision in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, Vision Australia has created a **Reconciliation Action Plan** to encourage more clients from these communities to access our services. We have appointed three trainees, based at Newcastle, Wollongong and Albury, to link with local communities and increase referrals while also assisting in the removal of any unintended barriers to Aboriginal or Torres Strait Island people accessing services at all sites.



It's understandable that discovering you are losing

your vision can make you depressed. When people phone us to access our services we have a simple two-question screening which assists us to identify adults at risk of depression. This is not a diagnosis but helps us to introduce emotional support services such as Quality Living and Peer Support and a referral back to a GP for an Emotional Health Assessment and Plan.



Michael Kienhuis, Service Development, Robina, Qld.

The Integrated Depression Management Project run by Vision Australia in partnership with Centre for Eye Research Australia (CERA), Melbourne University and beyondblue won the 2013 CERA Excellence in Research award.

27

Vision Australia's Equipment Solutions shops are available at 27 sites and online and offer a wide range of products and technology to assist people who are blind or have low vision to remain independent. There are solutions for everything from not overflowing a cup to reading mail, accessing computers and even telling what colour a clothing item is, and helpful staff who can advise on each product.

Rhiannon was 29 when she went blind. "It was very scary but I didn't just want to live in my house and never go out," she said. "Going blind makes you feel lonely. I was so relieved when I realised how much Vision Australia's orientation and mobility services could do for me. They have made the biggest difference to my life!"



147

Vision Australia has a proud history of 147 years of consecutive service and experience through the eight heritage organisations (see inside cover) which now form Vision Australia. With more than 33,000 clients we continue to work to ensure our services are sustainable so that all Australians who are blind or have low vision can plan their own fulfilling independent futures.

Jordan (this page and over), now 16, was just 11 when he was admitted to hospital for emergency surgery following a massive stroke. Brain surgery saved his life but the tumour which caused the problems also damaged his sight. He has since learned to walk and talk again and his new Seeing Eye Dog, Ekka is not only vital for his independence but has also become a great companion.



RECREATION SERVICES

Participating in a sport or recreational activity is essential to having a well-balanced lifestyle. Vision Australia can provide advice on maintaining favourite individual pastimes and adapting them to different levels of vision impairment and can assist with identifying new recreational ideas. Recreation offers opportunities to:

- stay healthy.
- participate in enjoyable, accessible activities.
- socialise with people who are experiencing vision loss.
- get out and about in the community through outings and excursions.
- learn new skills and increase confidence.

Vision Australia's **radio network** incorporates nine community radio stations across Victoria, southern NSW and Adelaide; offering a range of programs including readings from newspapers, magazines and books, interviews and specialist programs on new technology, gardening, finance, travel and the arts.



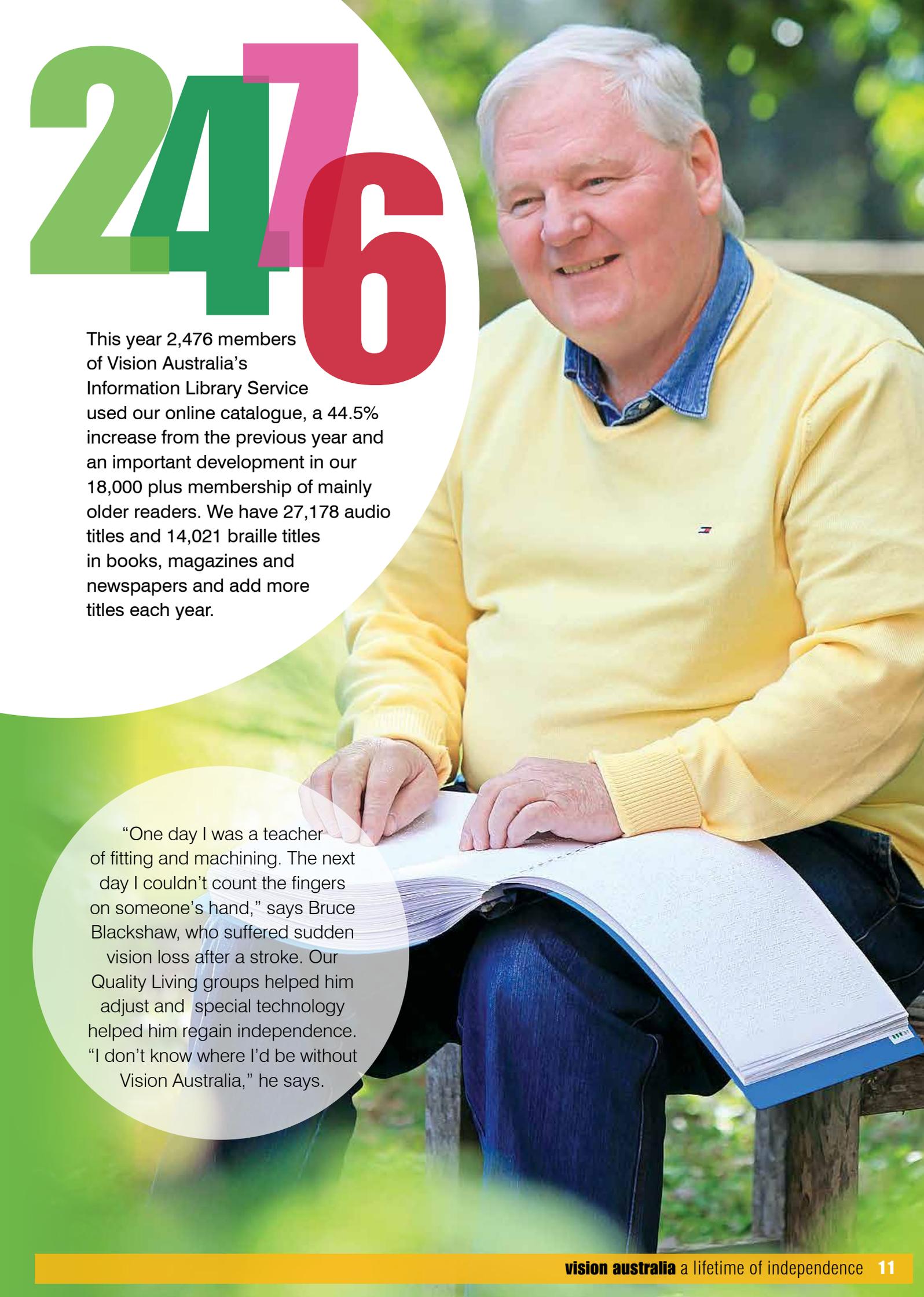
The World
Intellectual
Property

Organisation treaty, signed in June on cross-border sharing of accessible books between organisations and directly from organisations to individuals who are blind or have other print disabilities, will make a huge difference to the amount of accessible material available across the world and prevent the need for duplicate production in each country. Currently, even in developed countries like Australia less than five percent of information is accessible and in the developing world, less than one percent.



Maryanne Diamond,
Immediate Past President World
Blind Union, and member of
Vision Australia leadership team
Kooyong, VIC.

Only 5% of information available to a sighted person is accessible to someone who is blind.



2476

This year 2,476 members of Vision Australia's Information Library Service used our online catalogue, a 44.5% increase from the previous year and an important development in our 18,000 plus membership of mainly older readers. We have 27,178 audio titles and 14,021 braille titles in books, magazines and newspapers and add more titles each year.

"One day I was a teacher of fitting and machining. The next day I couldn't count the fingers on someone's hand," says Bruce Blackshaw, who suffered sudden vision loss after a stroke. Our Quality Living groups helped him adjust and special technology helped him regain independence. "I don't know where I'd be without Vision Australia," he says.

ORIENTATION AND MOBILITY

Blindness and low vision can often cause people to lose confidence and impact their ability to get around safely. Our orientation and mobility specialists assess both the individuals' needs and the environments they wish to travel in to ensure any potential risks are identified and reduced.



Diabetic retinopathy occurs when the tiny blood vessels inside the retina at the back of the eye are damaged as a result of diabetes. This can seriously affect vision and in some cases, cause blindness. Typically, blurred or distorted vision makes it difficult to read standard print, watch television or see people's faces and there is an increased sensitivity to glare and difficulty seeing at night. Laser and other surgical procedures can slow the progression of the disease and decrease the risk of vision loss.



We work 'across all ages' since our role with

young children can start from the time they begin to move. We engage the whole family and other key people in the process, particularly at important developmental and transition stages such as starting pre-school, again to primary school, and other new environments. With older clients who are having to adjust to loss of vision later in life, our role is a lot about assisting them to maintain independence and reduce risks. This can mean changing long term habits and accepting they may need a cane or another mobility aid. These folk may have been fine walking a certain way to the shops for decades but there are times when we need to identify a better and safer way.



Katherine Swalwell, Orientation and Mobility Specialist, Newcastle, NSW.

Orientation and mobility skills provide the independence and wellbeing needed for employment, social inclusion, accessing other programs and services and participation in everyday life.

1167

Last year Vision Australia provided 1167 mobility canes free of charge.

An orientation and mobility specialist assesses the needs of each person and the environments where they will be using the cane, then trains them in the safe use of the cane. Cane types include an identification (white) cane, a support cane and a long cane, which helps detect all obstacles and hazards within the path of travel.

James and Riley have been best friends since kindy and both enjoy getting out and about using mobility canes. James is learning to read braille but Riley was born with a rare condition which meant his eyes didn't develop and he has low sensitivity in his fingers so he can't learn braille. Vision Australia audio books allow him to listen to stories and enjoy literature.



SEEING EYE DOGS

Our Seeing Eye pups are born to carefully selected, genetically screened breeding dogs. Once pups are eight weeks old they are placed with volunteer puppy carers, who receive expert training and support from our professional training staff, and are taught to help the pup become confident, well behaved and socialised. Seeing Eye Dogs Australia covers all costs and food and a puppy field officer monitors each pup's progress through the year.

When pups are 12 to 14 months old they begin six months of intensive advanced training at our kennels. When they have passed all the training standards they are matched with a client and, on graduating, can provide up to a decade of independent mobility before retirement.



When you meet a Seeing Eye Dog in harness, don't touch, distract or feed the dog without the handler's permission. Speak directly to the person, not the dog, when offering assistance. Walk about one metre ahead if the handler is



Next year we open our new, state-of-the-art breeding and kennels facilities at Kensington, Victoria. Our Seeing Eye Dogs in training will enjoy the best health, welfare and enrichment facilities and that will enable us to train more dogs to provide independence for people who are blind.



Stewart Blair, Production Early Training, Kensington, VIC.

instructing their dog to 'follow' you and continue talking to the person. **Seeing Eye Dogs** in-training are legally allowed to travel in taxis and public transport and to enter restaurants, cafes and other areas.

Currently there is a 13 month waiting list to get a Seeing Eye Dog. 35 Seeing Eye Dogs graduated this year, giving a current total of 198 working dogs.

18

It takes 18 months and costs \$30,000 to train a Seeing Eye Dog. Each dog is carefully matched with a suitable recipient, taking into account the dog's natural walking speed and the client's lifestyle. They both then receive another two to three weeks residential training at Vision Australia's special facilities and a further one to two weeks in the client's home area. Phone support is always available.

Seeing Eye Dog Ambassador Emma Notarfrancesco is pictured with a puppy which will grow up to know how to walk with enough space for their handler to avoid obstacles, to stop and wait at kerbs, to not be distracted by loud noises or other dogs and to physically block their handler when necessary for their safety.

Photo: Tim Carrafa,
Herald Sun.

RETIREMENT YEARS

Many older Australians have vision loss due to age-related conditions such as cataracts, age-related macular degeneration and glaucoma. Vision loss can be a challenge after a lifetime of independence, however Vision Australia can provide a range of services including orientation and mobility, low vision clinic and library services. Our specialists work with the client and their family to ensure that the client can retain connections to the community and continue to be safely independent.



Age-related **macular degeneration** (AMD) is the leading cause of severe vision impairment in people over 40 years in Australia. There are two types of AMD, dry or wet. Dry AMD is the most common and results in a gradual loss of central vision and no treatments are currently available. Wet AMD treatments are aimed at preventing further vision loss.



The Low Vision Service is a program of

integrated services provided by specialist staff to assist adults and school aged children with low vision to use their remaining vision more effectively. We focus on the individual needs of the client and their family or carer. Information and education about equipment such as magnifiers and liquid sensors for pouring and a range of strategies such as using contrast and lighting is given to assist people to continue with reading, writing, daily activities and recreation.



Lisa Silva, Occupational Therapist,
Wollongong, NSW

Vision Australia has an average client satisfaction rate of 88%.

70

More than 70% of Vision Australia clients are 65 years or older, which means they are not eligible for National Disability Insurance Scheme funding, yet many don't experience vision loss until after 65. Older clients may also have other health-related issues and are more likely to be at risk for falls and other accidents so it is critical that they receive support and assistance as soon as vision loss is identified.

"I now have a watch that tells me the time, a special telephone that's easy to use, buttons on the stove dials so I know what temperature it's on and a wonderful machine that magnifies my mail so I can read it. I even have audio books," says Betty, whose eyesight deteriorated rapidly after the death of her husband. Thanks to Vision Australia, she remains independent at home.

HOW YOU CAN HELP

The range of our services would not be possible without generous Australians who make donations, leave bequests or give their time and skills as volunteers. More than 4000 volunteers work in a range of capacities from assisting with recreational activities to puppy care, library assistance, radio work, audio transcription, braille production, transport, administration and computer classes as well as with fundraising events. We need your help to continue to provide a wide range of important services and we thank the many thousands of people who help that to happen.



After you have provided for loved ones, you may consider including Vision Australia as a beneficiary in your will. Over the years these contributions, large and small, contribute significantly to our work. By leaving a **lasting legacy**, your gift enables us to assist people who are blind or have low vision to lead independent and fulfilling lives. It is one way of making a positive difference beyond your lifetime.



We retired to a hobby farm and we're both over 80 now. If we didn't have our eyesight we couldn't drive and look after the cows and feed the dogs. We're not affluent but we decided to sponsor a Seeing Eye Dog to help those not as fortunate as us. Cooper has graduated and we're now sponsoring our second dog.



David and Ruth, sponsors of Jackson.

You can help people who are blind or have low vision by visiting www.visionaustralia.org to make a donation or bequest or apply to volunteer; or phone 1300 84 74 66 for more information.

205

Last year Vision Australia received 205 bequests as a result of our services being named in someone's will. While the decision to remember Vision Australia may have been taken recently or long ago, that decision to help others into the future allows us to continue our services. We thank every one of these wonderful donors and their families for the generosity of spirit their legacy demonstrates.

When our new, custom designed Seeing Eye Dog facility opens in Kensington next March we expect to have up to 150 new Seeing Eye puppies born each year to ensure we can meet the increasing demand for Seeing Eye Dogs. Each of these little pups will need sponsors to share the \$30,000 it costs to breed and train a dog guide.



THE FUTURE

Vision Australia's greatest responsibility to those who are blind or have low vision is to ensure that our services are focussed on the future. We are doing this by:

- working on a new strategic plan which will enable us to operate more competitively as funding becomes increasingly person-centred.
- testing new service development initiatives for the National Disability Insurance Scheme at our two current demonstration sites and in further sites as the scheme rolls out.
- advocating for equality of opportunity for Australians who are blind or have low vision to access services, education, employment, recreation and all community activities they choose.
- partnering with other research specialists to increase the knowledge of eye conditions and to improve all aspects of service provision.
- working with new technologies such as video-conferencing to broaden service availability and frequency across all age

groups and throughout Australia.

- researching and developing assistive technologies to help our clients remain independent.



Our clients have been an important part of the strategic planning consultation process this year. We believe clients are in the best position to offer feedback on services they are currently using and ideas on services they may potentially need.



Kirsten McCombie, Client Consultation and Engagement Advisor, Enfield, NSW.

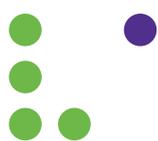
You can stay in touch with Vision Australia and our services, specialist knowledge and future plans by visiting www.visionaustralia.org

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