

# Annual Report 2023/24

**CNIB**  
**DEAFBLIND**  
**COMMUNITY**  
**SERVICES**



## Empowering Connections



# Navigating Important Changes Together

Letter from the Board Chair and President and CEO: ASL

## Letter from the Board Chair and President and CEO

What a year it has been! As we move forward, I'm honored to step into the role of CEO and lead DBCS into this exciting new chapter. With a strong foundation in place and a passionate team, we're ready to build upon our successes and explore new ways to serve and empower Canadians who are Deafblind from coast to coast to coast.

I would also like to acknowledge the incredible leadership of John Rafferty, whose 15 years of dedicated service have been instrumental in bringing us to where we are today. His contributions will continue to inspire our work as we look to the future.

As we embrace this next chapter, I want to reaffirm my commitment to a brighter and more inclusive future for the Deafblind community. One where every Canadian who is Deafblind can access the services they need, no matter where they reside.

We began to put our strategic plan into practice, hired new talent and recruited new board members. Perhaps most importantly, we saw a dramatic one-third increase in client service hours, meaning that they are more engaged in their community!

Growth happens with intention and collaboration, and we focused on both this past year. We kicked off our talent strategy and realized the rewards with a 38 per cent increase in new hires. Furthermore, we implemented a robust recruitment strategy to focus on identifying people whose values align with our community. We also strategically recruited four new board members whose skills and expertise will allow us to realize our ambitious goals.

Our partnerships increased as well. With CNIB, we launched an Indigenous Learning Strategy to provide employees with valuable information and support to engage Indigenous communities and individuals. This strategy honours and celebrates the rich cultures, histories, and contributions of Indigenous peoples, while taking into account the 94 Calls to Action by the National Truth and Reconciliation Commission.

While the year has also brought a lot of adjustments, we know that navigating change together will ultimately build resiliency. As we look forward to the next year, we plan to share further results from our comprehensive review of the Emergency Intervenor Services program. We also plan to maintain and build on our funding across the country. Thank you to everyone in our community who has helped us to make these important steps toward an even brighter future.

Thank you,



A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Penny Bennett".

**Penny Bennett**  
Board of  
Directors Chair



A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Angela Bonfanti".

**Angela Bonfanti**  
President and CEO

# Highlights

## Highlights: ASL

### Streamlining services

Offering clients a simpler way to access our services and select the ones that suit them best is a top goal for our organization. In the past year, the Access Intervenor Services (AIS) assessment tool was created as a result of the partnership between the Deafblind Network of Ontario and the Ministry of Children, Community and Social Services (MCCSS). The tool provides a single point of access for adults who are Deafblind across Ontario who want to access MCCSS-funded intervenor services.

Besides creating a more equitable application process, the tool offers clients more choice: a choice of providers from which to access services, and a clearer sense of what services might be best for them. Already 16 clients have successfully moved through the AIS process and are on their way to receiving the interventions that will help them with their daily activities.

### Literacy program growing

We're so proud of the growth in our literacy and skill development program, especially because we exceeded the number of learners we set out to serve by 37 per cent. Available to clients in Ontario, this innovative program offers literacy and basic skills instruction in one-on-one or small group settings. The year began with a focus on recruitment, with two full-time specialists hired this year.

Beyond the classroom, the team conducted outreach in communities across Ontario. In Hamilton, they joined forces with the CNIB Mobile Hub to connect with clients who might benefit from our services. In London, a new Eye Health Nutrition course was introduced, while in Ottawa, we offered a new two-hand manual class and provided additional support for learners.



## Coffee Chat Helps Clients Collaborate

What can coffee do? Besides perking us up, coffee also provides an opportunity to gather, share stories and make a big difference to our mental health. That's the thinking behind DBCS's new Coffee Chat program, inspired by direct feedback from our clients who urged us to find new ways to connect with peers in a relaxed and informal setting. Since launched in 2023, Coffee Chats have been held monthly and, as expected they are fast becoming a much-anticipated time to develop a sense of community and plan for future events!

In addition to catching up, Coffee Chats have been a place to experiment with different activities, including games, prizes, and holiday refreshments. Monthly meetings foster meaningful conversations and stronger relationships, with members deciding together on occasions to celebrate, from Christmas to Valentine's Day to summer picnics. The response has been overwhelmingly positive, with clients appreciating the consistent support and positive impacts on their mental health.



## A seat at the table

In addition to serving our community with our organization's expertise in Deafblind services, we are also eager to help others to design programs and standards that will elevate the opportunities for everyone. That's why DBCS is participating in the Accessible Standards Canada Grant Project, which aims to collaborate with the Deafblind community to create inclusive service planning and evaluation guidelines at the federal level.

Key progress includes co-designing service expectations, establishing outreach standards, identifying best practices for decision-making, and developing training materials that will help to create the best possible offering for Deafblind community members.

# Resister to Recommender: DBCS client now a champion of two-hand manual

Bruce's Story: ASL



## Bruce's Story

Bruce Turner may be retired, but he's still open to learning new things. This year, the CNIB Deafblind Community Services (DBCS) team convinced him to try out two-hand manual communication, and after some initial resistance, he's become a convert.

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“Two-hand allows me to get clear answers to my questions; it puts me on the same level as a person with vision, only in a different way. I can now communicate more effectively and receive more useful information,” says Bruce.

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Currently living in Victoria B.C., Bruce was born with retinitis pigmentosa, a genetic disease that causes the person to slowly lose their sight over time. He also lost his hearing at age three. As his sight loss progressed, it became difficult to read text and see people's faces. Frustrated by the things he felt he couldn't do, Bruce began to feel isolated.

When Bruce was connected with DBCS, he said it immediately made a difference. “DBCS has had a positive impact on my life,” says Bruce, who is now learning braille. “I can do errands and shop with my intervenor and go for walks safely.”



He adds, “So, my communication, mobility and learning have increased immensely. The service is wonderful and the intervenors are there for you and very helpful. The biggest benefit is the increase in my self esteem and knowing that I can still do things with help from an intervenor. There is also increased communication and community participation as well.”

DBCS is also where Bruce was encouraged to learn two-hand manual by Janine Tucker, who has been with DBCS for 29 years. She recalls meeting with Bruce first as an intervenor and being immediately impressed. “Bruce is amazing. He has such an optimistic view of the world and he’s just so thankful about any support he gets. He’s very patient,” says Janine. Yet she did recall his initial resistance to learning two-hand manual. She introduced him to DBCS board chair Penny Bennett (who also uses two-hand manual) to help inspire him.

Finally, Janine offered Bruce a challenge to try the two-hand manual for a week as a celebration of Deafblind Awareness Month last June, tossing in an offer of sports tickets as further incentive. That did the trick.

“At first, I was resistant to two-hand manual because I was so used to lip-reading,” recalls Bruce, who had also used hearing aids from a young age. “But now I had lost that ability and had no choice but to learn. I now understand the benefits of two-hand. Janine is a very good teacher and as soon as I opened my mind I was to learn.”

Now that he’s been using it for a while, Bruce sees new pathways opening up. “Two-hand is working really well for me. The biggest benefit has been increased communication with family members. I have a better understanding of what is being said and done.” His wife Barbara is left-handed and learned it on her left hand, and his son learned as well.

From resister to recommender, Bruce now encourages others to try out two-hand. “I would tell others that they have a lot to gain by learning two-hand. This is the smart thing to do and it will make communication easier. The benefits are priceless,” he says.



# International Conversations and Community

When an international conference rotates to Canada, it's time to celebrate our community. That's exactly what we did in July when our CNIB Deafblind Community Services (DBCS) team attended the Deafblind International 18th International World Conference in Ottawa.

The week-long event saw over 600 participants in attendance, including individuals who are Deafblind, researchers, interpreters, intervenors, support professionals, community organizations and other key stakeholders. Held at the Shaw Centre, the conference featured engaging guest speakers and in-depth breakout sessions on a wide variety of topics. Moreover, the gathering provided opportunities to further important discussions and research in the field of Deafblindness.

Both CNIB and DBCS hosted booths at the event trade show. DBCS was at the Certification Booth and CNIB at the SmartLife table, demonstrating the latest accessible products. CNIB's Research team also presented two projects during the conference. The first project focused on Employment and the second on the impact of COVID-19 on the Deafblind Community.

Community participants enjoyed the chance to gather, learn and even try out new technologies. "The top thing I've enjoyed learning about is technology and the accessibility [that goes along] with it," said DBCS client Barbara during an interview at the conference.

## International Conversations and Community: ASL

Barbara tried out a new product called HaptiBraille that allows the user to type their message in their known language of braille, which is then synthesized into speech. The user can also speak into the built-in microphone, to have the message translated back into braille in real-time.

Being part of a global conference was also a chance to come together and reflect on the substantial progress we have achieved, and collaborate on aspirations for a future community to shine even brighter. "Even though we are fairly far advanced, there are people who are even more advanced than Canada. So, you get to really appreciate where you are. It's motivation on both sides, to know your past but know that your future can be even brighter," said Penny Bennett, Chair of the DBCS Board of Directors.





“ In the 19 years I’ve supported DBCS, I would never have imagined the incredible progress we’ve made in Deafblind services. The conference was a powerful reminder of how essential our global partnerships and allies are in this journey. As we look to the future, I am more confident than ever that through continued collaboration, we can ensure that every Canadian who is Deafblind has access to the services and support they need, no matter where they live.

– Sherry Grabowski, Vice President of DBCS



# Our Impact at a Glance

Our Impact at a Glance: ASL

Total clients served:  
**200+**

Total direct service hours:  
**68,000+**  
36% increase year over year

## Regional Impact

### British Columbia

- 5,800+ direct service hours

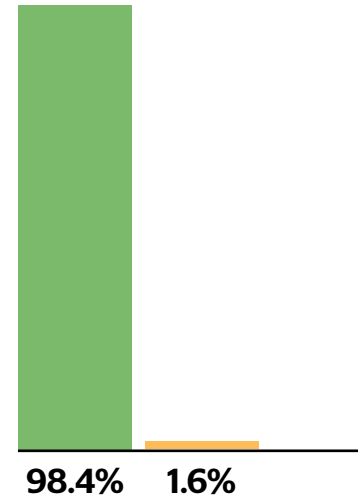
### Saskatchewan

- 3,100+ direct service hours

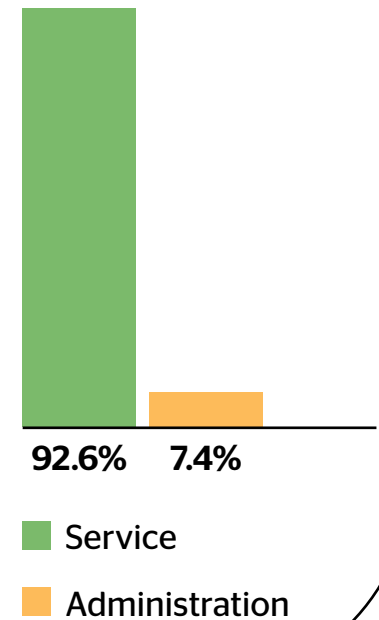
### Ontario

- 59,000+ direct service hours
- 40+ emergency service requests delivered
- 880+ literacy classes provided to more than 78 learners

## Operating revenue



## Operating expenses



CNIB Deafblind Community Services takes pride in upholding the highest standard of ethics and accountability in stewarding the funding we receive from our provincial government partners. Our financial statements for the fiscal year ending March 31, 2024, were prepared in accordance with Canadian accounting standards for not-for-profit organizations and were audited by Ernst & Young LLP. Visit [deafblindservices.ca](https://deafblindservices.ca) for more information.

# Board of Directors and Executive Leadership

Board of Directors: ASL

## Leading the Way to Service Excellence

CNIB Deafblind Community Services is made up of a diverse team of passionate and enthusiastic professionals. We are proud to be governed by a board of directors comprised of leaders in the field of Deafblind services and advocacy, including individuals who are living with a loss of both hearing and sight, as well as a talented executive leadership team.



## Board of Directors

**Penny Bennett** | Chair

**Lindee David** | Vice Chair

**Jane Ashford** | Treasurer

Ammad Anwar

Shari Bancarz

Denise Beaumont

Nora Constas

Maryann Everett

Katherine Hesson-Bolton

Kelly Kimens

Arvind Mohandoss

Christy Sebastian

Charlie Thompson (past Chair)

Sousie Weston

## Executive Leadership Team

**Angela Bonfanti** | President and CEO

**Sherry Grabowski** | Vice President

**CNIB**  
**DEAFBLIND**  
**COMMUNITY**  
**SERVICES**

CNIB Deafblind Community Services is one of Canada's leading providers of specialized support and emergency services for people who are Deafblind. Our services enable people who are Deafblind to maximize their independence and engagement with the world around them.

- Visit **[deafblindservices.ca](https://deafblindservices.ca)**
- Email **[infoweb@deafblindservices.ca](mailto:infoweb@deafblindservices.ca)**
- Call **1-855-862-6001**

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Back Cover: ASL

## Stronger Together



Together, we support and stand by Canadians who are blind, partially sighted, or Deafblind.