



Iowa Department for the Blind

How Independent Living Services from the Iowa Department for the Blind Change Lives

Dan's Story

While Independent Living services are life altering on some level to those receiving them, there are times when they are most definitely life-saving. So often, older adults losing vision have very strong feelings of loss and fear and sometimes those feelings are very intense. The below story describes one of these situations as narrated by the IL teacher:

He was my last client of the day when we first met. I had scheduled a two-hour meeting to gather and share information and form an Independent Living plan; however, it went longer than that. He let me introduce myself and told a little about himself but was not very willing to list things he wanted to learn more about or even that he struggled with anything like setting the microwave or oven. At one point, I asked him why I was there. "Dan" was polite and listened and worked somewhat with me as we discussed the blindness and the need to learn non-visual skills and about tools that might help with that. He listed some things he was willing to learn more about but then he sat straight up in his chair and said, "Liz, I'm gonna be straight with you."

He shared how he had fought vision loss his whole life having lost the vision in one eye as a young child and lived with about 20/70 in the other eye for years. He had quit high school before graduating, worked hard, met the love of his life, made good with his career and drove and owned his own business; however, he did all this while working harder than fully sighted people and also keeping his vision loss secret from anyone but his wife. He would go back to a job sight after the other men had left and work harder to get the information he needed to make bids due to his vision loss. This also helped him prove to himself that he could see. He lived like this for years, along with his wife. They had no children and he had been widowed a little more than a year when this visit took place. He said he could have faced this blindness if he still had his lifelong love by his side but now that she was gone, he didn't want to live blind and if he lost all his vision, he didn't want to live. He said, "I've got a gun in this house and I know how to use it. I've also got two vehicles out there in the garage."

I was shocked but I warmly thanked "Dan" for opening up his inner thoughts to me. I provided feedback to let him know he had been heard and to verify the information and feelings. He said that was right and repeated that he would NOT live in total blindness. I asked "Dan" if I could be straight and honest right back with him, to which he agreed. I said slowly and boldly, "I would not even be here if you had not had agreed to meet with me. You invited the

Department for the Blind here or we would have never met. You know I can't do anything about the vision loss. That is your eye doctor's job. Something inside of you must want to learn how to live with this vision loss. That's why you called. He would agree to give me a chance, we would make a plan to begin to learn how to live with vision loss. He agreed he would give IDB a chance.

"Dan" lives in a nearby community so initially, I was able to get there more often to begin to build a relationship and expand his skills. He agreed to a couple cane lessons early on, learned to use writing guides, and eventually agreed to try audiobooks and we got an Alexa going. He didn't have a smart phone but there was a computer that his wife had used and unbeknownst to him, he was still paying for internet.

I have now known and worked with "Dan" for almost a year and just recently worked together with him to review his original objectives and see if there were any more needs. I had thought he would be ready to close his case. He enjoyed reviewing: attended two Community Based Trainings, one of which he hosted in his home with other blind people and his niece all wearing sleep shades. He was happy to meet other blind people and made a couple of connections with mentors. He attended a support group. He uses library services and the Alexa device for connections to history, music, the stock market and the world. We marked his new microwave and stove so he could easily use them. We decided it would be helpful to extend his case to work on some travel in his neighborhood, and community and also to visit the nearest support group, using the cane.

When COVID hit, my first call went to "Dan". He had been weighing heavy on my mind. "Dan" had always taken pride in his stock market holdings and checked them regularly by calling his investment company, listening to the news and checking with Alexa. He welcomed the call and shared with me about the state of the world, and how this was affecting his life. It was encouraging for me to hear him pulling from his strengths and his own history as he confidently shared what he was doing to understand and to cope each day. His own life's journey had prepared him for such a time as this. He has lived through downturns before, all kinds of them, including the stock market and business. "Liz, I'm doing fine."

Connie's Story

The word "grateful" seems so inadequate to express Connie's feelings about the impact the Iowa Department for the Blind (IDB) has made on her life.

Connie moved from Florida to a small Iowa college town less than a decade ago. Life was not easy for her in Florida. Connie was diagnosed with myopic degeneration and her vision progressively worsened to the point where she could no longer do her job. She battled with sobriety and depression. When her niece in Iowa offered her the opportunity to rent a small, two-bedroom home blocks from her own house, Connie made a move that would change her life in more ways than her zip code.

Connie settled into her new home. She cutely decorated her cottage-style house, started a garden, adopted a homeless cat, and enjoyed spoiling her one-year-old great-niece. It was nice having the support of family nearby. But eventually, the reality that loomed in Florida followed her to Iowa. Connie was blind.

Connie found herself becoming more and more dependent on her niece and her niece's husband. Day by day, Connie stopped doing for herself. She couldn't run her errands or go shopping alone. She couldn't cook her meals. She couldn't read a book or a newspaper. She couldn't even read her watch to tell the time of day! The more she couldn't do for herself, the more hopeless she felt. At just 50-something-years-old, this was no way to live.

Then came hope. Connie's niece got on the internet and researched "services for the blind" and came up with the Iowa Department for the Blind. A referral was made to the Independent Living Program and an Independent Living Rehabilitation Teacher (ILRT) with the agency was sent out to interview Connie.

Connie shared with the teacher all that she struggled with, and the teacher informed Connie on how she could overcome each and every one of those struggles. Connie opened an Independent Living case that day and together they developed a training plan that would allow Connie the opportunity to regain her independence.

First, Connie learned that she can read again! She signed up for library service through IDB and began receiving talking books through the mail. She absolutely loves her library service and spends hours being educated and entertained. Then she learned that she can read "The Des Moines Register" by becoming an Iowa Radio Reading Information Service (IRIS) listener. Every morning she tunes in to keep informed on what's happening locally as well as nationally.

Connie learned how to be an independent traveler by using a long, white cane for mobility. She learned how to use the cane in indoor settings as well as outdoor settings. Connie can navigate sidewalks, negotiate driveways, and identify corners. She uses her hearing to safely determine the appropriate times to cross at intersections. Connie also uses an audible traffic signal to help her cross the busy highway that runs through her town. Connie has learned how to use public transportation to run her errands and pick up groceries.

Connie has learned self-advocacy skills. She has learned techniques for shopping alone by requesting a store associate to assist her in selecting items for purchase. She can not only create a shopping list, but she can cross off the list herself by doing her own shopping.

Connie has learned how to cook and bake with no vision! By wearing a blindfold during training, Connie learned how to use the hot oven and stovetop safely. She learned how to tell when her ground meat was cooked to perfection by using time, touch and smell. She learned how to identify pantry items with tactile markings and how to follow a recipe that has been converted from print into an accessible format. Connie learned how to bake cookies, spacing them evenly on the cookie sheet through touch rather than by sight. She tells their doneness with a gentle push of her finger. She enjoys baking treats for her family.

In 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic brought isolation to Connie as she did her best to keep herself safe from the virus. Connie's ILRT suggested that she join a telephone blindness support group as a way to socially interact with others. After attending her first support group meeting, Connie said "It was a good, good time. It was really cool to be with people who are blind. I felt so good afterward. My soul was lifted after hearing others out there!"

Connie continues to regularly participate in these weekly telephone support group meetings. She is also learning Braille through a study group that meets following each support group meeting. Literacy through Braille further enhances Connie's level of independence.

Connie is an avid volunteer in her community. She also wants to give back to her blindness community. Connie's goal is to join the IDB Independent Living Advisory Committee (ILAC) in

2021. Connie attended her first ILAC meeting in December 2020. She wants to contribute to the Independent Living Program that has helped her so much.

Connie is more than “grateful” for the services she has received from IDB. No one word can adequately express her feelings about how the Iowa Department for the Blind has impacted her life.

Joan’s Story

Joan, an 84 yr. old retired pharmacist, contacted the department when she began to have trouble as a result of macular degeneration and cataracts. Once very independent she found herself leaning on her husband for help with every day activities. Joan had been an avid cook but could not see to read recipes or set her appliances. She had always taken care of the family finances but could no longer see to write a check or balance her checkbook.

Together Joan and her Independent Living Rehabilitation Teacher worked on alternative techniques to get back in control of those activities she used to enjoy doing. With the use of the writing guides and a talking calculator she was able to get back to the book keeping. Using bump dots we were able to make her appliances usable to her again. Her recipes were put into large print. After a demonstration of the Pen Friend Audio Labeler Joan purchased the device so she could label her many spices and canned goods. She also used this to label her medications and take notes.

Joan had also expressed an interest in magnification. A handheld magnifier was not of much help to Joan so she was interested in trying something stronger, a video magnifier. After trying a loaner portable video magnifier, she was interested in purchasing something. Her teacher was able to provide her information on various vendors and ultimately purchased a closed circuit television. This allows her to read her bills, her local small town paper, and other pertinent information.

Joan and her teacher had discussed her attending a community based training or IL Integration but once the pandemic hit these were not able to be offered. However, her teacher was able to do a virtual community based training which she attended. During this training, she was able to connect with others who are also blind. She worked on alternative techniques such as pouring and measuring, Introduction to braille, and communication skills. This enabled her to keep her learning going and further her independence.

Susan’s Story

IL SUCCESS STORY MARCH 2020
BY MARK EDGE

Susan is a 76-year-old blind Iowan whose vision loss is due to pigmentary retinal dystrophy. When she first applied for Independent Living Program services in August 2018, she was living alone in her family’s farmhouse outside of town while her husband was a patient in a nearby care facility. Soon after his death in the fall of 2018, Susan moved in with her daughter’s family in town.

When Susan and her Independent Living Rehabilitation Teacher (ILRT) first developed her training plan, Susan indicated that she was having difficulty with mobility. She was fearful of falling. Soon after, the ILRT provided Susan with a long, white cane and training on how to use

it. Susan quickly adapted to using the cane. She reported having greater confidence and independence.

Susan's household includes two family dogs. Part of Susan's daily routine is to take the dogs for a walk. She depends on her long, white cane to detect cracks, potholes, and heaved pieces of concrete that pose as tripping hazards in the sidewalks of her older, established neighborhood. Susan uses her cane to identify curbs and ramps at the end of each block she walks. She likes the fact that her cane gets the attention of passing motorists as she and the dogs wait patiently for just the right time to cross the street.

Susan recently shared with her ILRT a day in her life. She and some friends like to get together occasionally for breakfast at the local café. On one particular day, after the breakfast meeting, Susan also had an afternoon eye appointment with her doctor. Susan accepted a ride from a friend to the café. After enjoying breakfast with her friends, she dismissed her driver not telling the driver about her afternoon eye appointment. Susan explained that the driver would feel the need to "take care of her" and "direct" her from the time they left the café to the time she walked into the doctor's office.

Susan further explained that she can get around just fine on her own using her long, white cane, so she didn't need anyone to escort her. On that day, Susan left the café and went browsing at various shops around the town's square in order to pass the time until her eye appointment. She also did a few errands. As her appointment time grew closer, Susan walked to her eye doctor's office.

When Susan's eye doctor greeted her, he let her know that he had observed Susan from his window as she walked towards his office. He complimented her on her cane skills. This made Susan feel good to be recognized by a medical eye professional for her blindness skills and abilities.