

SOLUTIONS IN SIGHT

A Summit to Address the Vision Loss Crisis

What We Heard at the Summit

At the Solutions in Sight Summit on May 4, 2016 there were three panel discussions organized by the Massachusetts Association for the Blind and Visually Impaired (the fourth, on Employment, was coordinated by our colleagues at the Perkins School for the Blind and the Carroll Center for the Blind). Following each panel was an hour of lively, engaged audience brainstorming.

Throughout the day and after the event we heard participants say, “Please keep the conversation going.” To begin, we’re providing this summary of the important ideas and issues that were raised at each of MABVI’s three sessions. We plan to keep you informed on our work in these areas through occasional e-newsletters and direct partnership efforts. We hope you will continue to come to us with your own work and ideas as we all take up the challenges presented below.

Transformative Technology: Access, Collaboration, Innovation

Moderator: Kara Miller, WGBH Host and Executive Editor, Innovation Hub
Suman Kanuganti, Co-Founder & CEO, Aira
Erich Manser, Accessibility Tester and Consultant, IBM
Bilal Zuberi, Partner, Lux Capital

- Technology Access Problem 1: Affordability
- Technology Access Problem 2: The employment gap. Lack of technology training keeps people from jobs. Lack of access to databases and software keeps people from jobs. Lack of accessibility within programming/coding tools keeps people from STEM and tech jobs.
- Need to streamline products and functionality through Universal Design, centralized accessibility resources for developers and designers, training programs in inclusive design, programs to change corporate culture and mindsets.
- Access to basic household devices through single standards and easy communication with the devices.
- More user tools for accessibility, choices, using apps, web and social media more flexibly.
- All of these needs point to the need for Advocacy—pushing for legal standards and national commitment to accessibility as a standard from the ground up, not as an add-on.
- Connecting existing small products and technologies with larger emerging technologies, startups, VC funding, markets, government, making adaptive/accessible tech profitable by making technologies that work for many groups.
- Challenge of the tech needs/challenges of the aging population.
- Vision Rehabilitation Specialists need training in new technology so they can train their clients/consumers.
- Volunteers are an under-utilized resource in tech training.
- The potential of harnessing the “nerd” and corporate communities through hackathons, challenges.
- Opportunity for a challenge or prize to incentivize development of new technology or use of existing tech to solve difficult challenges related to blindness.
- How to best identify and prioritize needs and challenges.

Closing Gaps in Our Healthcare System: The Challenge of Health Care Reform

Moderator: Audrey Shelto, President of Blue Cross Blue Shield Foundation
Cathy Holden, Director of Clinical Operations and Rehabilitation, NewView Oklahoma
Paul Saner, Commissioner, Massachusetts Commission for the Blind
Scott Taberner, Chief of Behavioral Health and Supportive Care, MassHealth

- Advocacy around the need for Orientation & Mobility to be a service covered by insurance.
- Advocacy around the need for Certified Vision Rehabilitation Therapy to be a service covered by insurance.
- Creating a job-ready workforce as workers age out of the system and more consumers age in.
- Need for expanded Vision Rehabilitation OT/CVRT certification programs, online and in-person classes, and internships/fieldwork.
- Advocacy around the need for longitudinal studies on the cost-effectiveness of vision rehabilitation in relation to overall healthcare costs.
- There is a communications gap between vision rehabilitation practitioners and potential referrals sources/payers—outreach and education needed to increase access.
- Global payments and Accountable Care will continue to change the landscape of insurance payments. Vision rehabilitation practitioners need to be working with these entities closely.
- Thinking collaboratively about benefits, healthy aging, and broader funding for non-traditional health services: transportation, housing, nutrition, social isolation, exercise, long-term and more comprehensive in-home services after vision rehabilitation.
- How can technology affect outcomes, particularly social isolation? How can we ensure technology access, especially affordability and training on assistive technology devices.
- Encourage consumer-driven agendas.

Access to a Full Life: Addressing Mental Health Barriers and Reimagining Services for Active Living

Moderator: Michael Festa, State Director of AARP

Rebecca Alexander, Psychotherapist and Author

Alice Bonner, PhD, RN, Secretary, Executive Office of Elder Affairs

Ryan Knighton, Author, Screenwriter and Speaker

- Support Groups are one option for transition support but many people do not want to attend them. Men who have lost their sight may be particularly resistant. The provider community needs to be creative about how to make information available and helps individuals access services.
- Mental health services need to be integrated into the vision rehabilitation model. At the Summit, the Memorial Foundation for the Blind committed to funding a pilot program to integrate adjustment counseling by trained social workers into MABVI's vision rehabilitation programming.
- Need for counseling services provided by people with vision loss or experience in the field.
- A “full life” means many things to many people (some examples given were travel, athletics, accessibility at museums and in outdoor spaces). Supports and solutions need to be both far-reaching and individualized.
- Universal design, inclusive communities, livable cities all contribute greatly to quality of life for people who are blind or visually impaired, and leaders in these fields should be brought into the conversation.
- Blindness does not stand alone. Many social and access issues are relevant to other disability communities.
- To foster community acceptance of people who are blind and increased comfort level of individuals with their blindness, it is important to see more writing, media and campaigns such as: debunking stereotypes through public service campaigns; familiarization through stories in art and literature; sighted guide training and blindness education; use of social media; books by people like our panelists Rebecca Alexander and Ryan Knighton.
- Advocacy around education and accessibility—by individuals on their own behalf, by groups on behalf of the community—don't let the world get away with inaccessible apps, websites, amusement parks, paperwork, etc.