A blind BIT OF difference

Blind Citizens NZ

Focus

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How Blind Low Vision NZ's approach to Counselling lost its way - And what comes next

by Áine Kelly-Costello, Focus Editor

"In a way I felt like two people, and now I am one again."

This is how Blind Low Vision NZ (BLVNZ) client Kay Clark describes the impact of the counselling she received while she was losing her vision. Clark, a parent with low vision in her early 60s, says she was privileged to receive counselling from Gary Veenstra, who she describes as "an amazing, supportive, professional person" who she trusted deeply. Until his retirement in 2019, Veenstra was a mainstay of BLVNZ's combined counselling and social work service for almost 34 years.

It's a service which had, in the past, assisted many a parent of a blind child, and anyone losing their sight who sought it, to regain their confidence and sense of self. But now, Clark is advocating for BLVNZ to recommence offering in-house counselling, after BLVNZ management quietly outsourced the service to Habit in May 2021, discontinuing the roles of all BLVNZ's remaining counselling staff.

On one level, this is a story about how a service previously run and well-maintained by our main blindness service provider lost its way, and what comes next. On another level, it's a story about accountability, and a lesson in what can go wrong when those in charge of guiding blindness service provision lack an articulated philosophy to orient it.

Until 2019

Until his 2019 retirement, Gary Veenstra had spent two decades as the BLVNZ Practice Advisor (team leader) for Child and Family Social Work/Counselling. In 1987, Veenstra was tasked with starting a “children’s" service for BLVNZ.

Till that time, social workers did needs assessments, provided emotional support, did basic indoor orientation and mobility, basic Daily Living skills, and delivered CCTV’s and talking books.

During a 1991 restructure within BLVNZ focusing on rehab, "Social Workers" became "Child and Family Social Workers", and the counselling service for adults was eventually combined with this service. The counsellors worked with everyone, from sighted parents with blind or low vision infants, to youth, to adults and older people losing their sight. It encompassed a wide skillset: from perceptiveness about how parents' relationships dynamics may be challenged if one of them is carrying out much of the advocacy for their blind little one, to finding what networks and resources an older person losing their vision could draw on (home supports, equipment training, community groups, friends etc.) to help maintain their self-esteem and self-confidence.

The service combined counselling and social work aspects. The social work part could involve referrals to health professionals, Work and Income for financial support, or to Ministry of Health-funded supports among others. Initially, the team mainly comprised people with a social work background who had counselling modules added to their knowledge, but in the 2010s, more counsellors were employed. Veenstra, in charge of hiring, sought mature people with considerable life experience, true understanding of grief and loss, and the ability to facilitate trusting relationships.

Induction and training processes were key. As Veenstra explains, approaching clients with background knowledge on the types of vision changes they were experiencing, as well as being equipped both for stages of grief and guiding them to gain back their independence and autonomy, was crucial for building trusting relationships from the get-go. Counsellors would be equipped for knowing that grief associated with vision loss can often trigger other forms of trauma and grief from the past including things like the death of a loved one or abuse.

When appropriate, they would know to ask questions like: "As you're losing your vision are you seeing anything creepy?" Charles Bonnet Syndrome, involving visual hallucinations, often appears as people start losing their sight. When Clark's counselling with Veenstra was in progress, she told him she was seeing ants in her vision and she appreciated that Veenstra knew about Charles Bonnet syndrome. It's this kind of knowledge Veenstra, and Clark, worry has been lost with the outsourcing of counselling.

Until 2019, the two-three day induction for new hires covered scenarios they may encounter, as well as shadowing two different more experienced colleagues on visits, to ensure they gleaned a range of perspectives. For a time, BLVNZ had also set up an additional, compulsory, in-house training for all rehab staff including counsellors on understanding vision loss and common eye conditions. Veenstra also equipped members of his team with a book called "As You Can See" by Ross McKenzie. He described it as their "professional Bible" as included a plain English glossary of eye-related terms, and diagrams for understanding visual acuity, eye structure and eye conditions. Such thorough processes contributed, in Veenstra's view, to the counselling service being an "outstanding quality team", as he said was reflected in feedback received over many years and nominations for internal staff awards.

Outsourcing

From 2019-21, Veenstra's institutional knowledge was no longer overseeing the team. Perhaps more significantly, BLVNZ Management and the organisation's Board (the RNZFB Board) agreed on a major restructure in 2019. A consequence of this was the disestablishment of practice advisors. Practice Advisors were the team leaders. Veenstra says his practice advisor role was a critical one, covering accountability to ensure appropriate and safe service was being provided, as well as motivating the team, supervision and checking in, and ensuring the team had the resourcing they needed to work.

The restructure overall contributed to the considerable internal cultural dissatisfaction among staff which led to the Board commissioning an independent inquiry which is currently nearing completion.

Meanwhile, a pilot of a limited form of service outsourcing commenced in 2019. Some Adaptive daily Living services were outsourced to Habit at this time, the idea being that the more straight-forward forms of assistance could as easily be administered by a third party with qualified occupational therapists all over the country. The Board agreed to this pilot at the time. It did not involve discontinuing the roles of existing BLVNZ staff.

In May 2021, BLVNZ Management subsequently took the decision to outsource counselling and discontinue the in-house staff roles. On what grounds this decision was made it is hard to be sure. In a disappointing lack of accountability, BLVNZ Chief Executive John Mulka declined to be interviewed or to comment for this article. RNZFB Board Chair Judy Small says the intention would have always been to maintain a good service. Habit does employ qualified counsellors, and has staff based all over the country, so should theoretically be more easily able to meet clients outside the main urban centres for in-person appointments. However, Veenstra says that to his knowledge, issues with geographical gaps in service previously arose only when position vacancies were not filled. Small also acknowledges that data on service satisfaction with counselling, in particular prior to 2019, was extremely limited.

Could outsourcing counselling work?

Amanda Stevens, Executive Officer of the Deafblind Association NZ, but speaking in her personal capacity, says there are, in principle, benefits to outsourcing. It may lead to more choice over counsellors and thus more opportunity to find a good personal fit. She wouldn't want the only option to be asking someone within BLVNZ, who could be a friend, to make a counselling referral for her.

For d/Deafblind people, there may be a small number of people within BLVNZ skilled in hand-on-hand communication who are then asked to assist with counselling. Being deafblind herself, she explains this raises issues of boundaries, informed consent, confidentiality, and how neutral that person can be especially in cases where a concern a client has relates to BLVNZ itself. She said the role of counsellors in relation to social work needs to be much clearer for clients.

That said, the prevailing view among those Focus talked to for this piece is that the decision to outsource, in particular without consultation, was ill-advised. Margaret Gilbert is a BLVNZ client in her sixties who has been progressively losing her vision over several years. When she first sought counselling support from BLVNZ, she describes a positive experience. She worked with a blind counsellor employed by BLVNZ who "listened and then provided guidance", including by indicating specific areas like IT where BLVNZ could assist further. Over time, her vision worsened and she sought further counselling. By this stage, the service had been outsourced and she was passed to Habit. She describes her two appointments as "more than a little disappointing", noting that her Habit counsellor "didn't seem to have any understanding or knowledge of vision issues". A contractor negotiator by trade, reading was critical to her previous work. She disclosed to her Habit counsellor that she wasn't able to read any more, and was allegedly told that in fact now she has more time to read and that she needed to make more of an effort to be happy.

Gilbert feels BLVNZ made a mistake by outsourcing counselling and would like to see it brought back in-house. "If I could find a counsellor who was not just going to listen but was actually going to help, I'd jump at the chance," she said. "I'm normally self-sufficient but this one has really gotten to me."

Gilbert says she is speaking out because she doesn't want others to have the sorts of negative experiences she did when seeking support, and she'd like to see relevant training in place for counsellors working specifically with people losing their vision.

RNZFB Board Chair Judy Small is not sure if any specialised vision-related training is in place for Habit staff nor whether Habit would know to refer clients to BLVNZ if a need for additional blindness skills support or other services was identified. She said these were operational questions. However, Small explained that when clients first approach BLVNZ, they talk to a Primary Service Provider, whose role it is to get a picture of their needs and direct them to relevant BLVNZ services and supports accordingly.

In June this year, Kay Clark wrote to the RNZFB Board, asking them to consider reinstating the service in-house. " For the families of young children born with vision loss, as well as new and existing clients, it is imperative this service be delivered by compassionate counsellors, employed by BLVNZ who have trained in this specific field," she wrote. Clark said that she was aware from reputable sources that the timeframe to receive help has lengthened and that at times, BLVNZ staff and volunteers not trained as counsellors or social workers have needed to fill this gap. She noted the provision of in-home service is no longer available.

Blind Citizens NZ National President Jonathan Godfrey says the organisation accepts that sometimes BLVNZ will need to use outsourcing to top up its ability to provide services like counselling but that BLVNZ had gone too far. "Totally outsourcing a key service that is important to our members without proactive consultation is an insult to the needs of blind, deafblind, vision-impaired and low-vision people who could find themselves in need of counselling," Godfrey said. "Blind Citizens NZ looks forward to the review of services in order to ensure that the RNZFB Board is left in no doubt about which core services members believe should be provided by BLVNZ staff."

Future directions

In 2023, the RNZFB Board will begin its review of services slated last year, including with a "deep dive" into the area of counselling and peer support. In addition, an objective in BLVNZ's recently-adopted two-year Business plan reads: "Continued growth and expansion of community based emotional support and deafblind programmes with the key principle of frequent contact with those members in isolating circumstances."

RNZFB Board Chair Judy Small emphasised the ongoing changes from the pandemic, as well as the diverse needs of clients, and the importance of catering to them and ensuring they can access supports that work for them. She noted that many clients have multiple disabilities and mental health needs, as well as a range of cultural backgrounds, and that it was important BLVNZ looked to find its role within this wider picture. She gave the example of ensuring that those not comfortable in receiving counselling in English could access an interpreter for this, and said this would be the sort of thing BLVNZ itself would need to administer.

Small suggested that peer support, such as by bringing together groups of refugees, older people, or people of a similar age, may be a significant part of the mix. She also noted that many people had reported positive experiences with BLVNZ's TeleFriend service, a form of phone-based peer support administered by trained BLVNZ volunteers. She said that options were open and Habit may not be the only counselling service provider BLVNZ uses going forward. She noted that the roll-out of Enabling Good Lives, where individuals would be purchasing services directly was also an important consideration for what the make-up of options would look like. Other factors of relevance were the eventual phasing out of telephone landlines as well as ensuring options remained in place for clients without internet access or skills.

Amanda Stevens, meanwhile, would like to see BLVNZ engage with the New Zealand Association of Counsellors to develop service pathways for clients. She also suggests BLVNZ could offer a training module within the counselling Masters programme specialising in working with blind, d/Deafblind, and low vision people so that this reaches all counsellors completing that qualification. She cautioned that group peer support sessions should not be conflated with counselling and that doing so could place both clients and staff at risk.

RNZFB Board director and Chair of the newly-reestablished Client services committee Clive Lansink says an important part of reviewing counselling, and all services, is to understand the main objective behind why BLVNZ provides that service. He said Board directors, himself included, need to "have a better handle on the outcomes we are seeking, know whether or not they are delivered, and make sure they are in line with our objectives and currently accepted disability philosophy."

If there is alignment between the RNZFB Board, BLVNZ management and the membership's prevailing view on what principles should guide the provision of counselling and social work for the blind, low vision/vision impaired and d/Deafblind community, future services may once again be intentional about meeting the community's diverse and ever-evolving needs. They may again glean the appreciation and praise BLVNZ's in-house counselling had once widely received, before its ways of working and institutional knowledge were lost. For now, the organisation has a big job ahead of it in providing space for a nuanced and open-minded discussion on the service's future directions, reflecting openly on what is and is not working and seeking to regain the trust of members who feel let down by a lack of transparent, member--driven decision-making.

Hold the Cheese
Why disabled people aren't smiling about the proposed Accessibility Legislation
Jonathan Godfrey, National President

It’s a cloudy summer day as I write this column sitting outside at a friend’s home in the Netherlands. One of those days that you wonder if it will clear and fry everything in sight, or more cloud will roll in and spoil the chances of a late afternoon beer in the sun. I’m here because I am recovering from the examination of NZ’s progress on the UNCRPD (Disability Rights Convention), and the associated meetings, both formal and informal.

As a lactose intolerant person, I often say something like “hold the cheese”, but last week was full of camera-wielders asking people to say cheese and hold it while group photos were taken. It’s fascinating, to me at least, how many languages I need to learn to say “I cannot eat cheese” in, while practically everyone the world over says "cheese" for the camera.

New Zealand was sandwiched in between Japan and South Korea; their delegations were considerably larger than ours so there was plenty of opportunity to interact with disabled people in the UN during the day, and at our hotel over breakfast and into the evening. I have to admit that my ability to interact with Japanese people has an advantage courtesy of learning the language at high school (OK not the whole language) and a number of trips to Japan since that have kept my skill level above an embarrassing level.

Having a common language is useful, but having a common topic of interest created much greater keenness to understand each other. So, while I was being stretched using Godfrey translate, my DPO Coalition colleagues were using a mix of sign language (tourist sign, not NZSL), drawings, and Google Translate. The messages we shared were pretty clear though; disabled people around the world want equal rights and equity of outcomes (my choice of words).

My choice of words included two formal speeches as Chair of NZ’s Independent Monitoring Mechanism (IMM), and being involved in the five presentations made by the DPO Coalition during the private briefing with the UN Committee. Involvement of DPOs in an IMM process is so uncommon internationally, that we had to explain how we are treated as equal partners and that we are actually independent of our partners and independent of Government. I do believe that we also proved that independence in the speech I gave about the Access for New Zealanders bill that has just had its first reading in Parliament.

In my speech I observed that the new bill places no compulsion on anyone to do anything. It creates an advisory committee that will report to the Minister for Disability Issues, and it is the Minister that then has the control, not disabled people. It is true that this new committee can decide what is discrimination or an access problem affecting disabled people, but their opinion is just that, an opinion. It is true that the new committee can discuss issues arising in local government and the private sector, but once they tell the Minister what is wrong, the Minister is then only able to discuss the issue with the relevant parties. In fact, the Minister’s direct control is limited to her own portfolios, and so issues of discrimination or access barriers of any kinds occurring in health, transport, education, justice, and many other agencies across Government are beyond her control; she will need support from another Minister to get anything done in those crucial areas that affect our lives.

Sure, the Minister for Disability Issues, on the advice of a selected group of disabled people and whānau, will be able to ask that standards and regulations are developed. Yes, she will be able to make statements about what the private sector must do for disabled people.

But her chances of making sure a major supermarket chain or hardware store actually does have an accessible website are zero.

The chances that we will see more audio-described content on TV are good, but this will come because we continue to see development without new legislation.

The already-existing Disability Action Plan is a tool to help Government agencies make progress for disabled people using their services. They can make progress without the new committee, and the existence of the new committee won’t raise the pace either. Blind Citizens NZ and the DPO Coalition are working with agencies on implementing this action plan. I can’t yet see how going the long way around via a committee and a Minister or two will help us do our work.

Your ability to get help to resolve a personal issue where you are being discriminated against will not improve by way of this legislation. You will still need to make a complaint through the Human Rights Commission or another similar entity. You will not see your effort in raising an issue with the new committee being rewarded unless it is important enough to the committee to take further.

So what changes might make the legislation do enough for disabled people to make disabled people believe their lives will be improved? Well, I think it comes down to a very small list of big changes.

The bill doesn’t guarantee that it will remedy failings of the private sector or local government; disabled people need improvements in access to be a comprehensive solution being worked on by everyone.

The bill doesn’t actually state what access standards there will be, or that regulations must be created We need to know that solutions will actually be created if they aren’t in the bill. The Minister for Disability Issues can’t give us this certainty.

The bill makes a committee of disabled people responsible for telling a Minister what needs to change. We need changes on the issues to actually be determined as a list of issues that must be addressed.

The only powers the committee has are to advise a Minister. The committee can’t decide anything that isn’t then subject to Ministerial oversight.

Why should disabled people have to convince a Minister that the issues are worthy of action? This makes disabled people second class citizens who must appeal to a committee of disabled people who must then appeal to a Minister. We know what many of the issues facing disabled people are; DPOs have been bringing such issues forwards for decades.

The bill doesn’t stop anyone from carrying on as if the bill didn’t exist. There is no enforcement even if an issue is found to be an access barrier. It doesn’t offer any resolution services which improve on the options available to us under the Human Rights Act.

So, what will the proposed regime provide? Unfortunately, I suspect it will either fail to bring issues affecting disabled people forwards because we don’t see the regime as worthy of our engagement, or it will bring so many issues forward that the Minister can’t handle the workload.

The only way to get change will be for the committee to be upgraded to something more like a commission. Having a Commission that can make public decrees which must be actioned by the person or agency that is responsible for creating an access barrier. If the people who are currently creating access barriers don’t get forced into removing the problems they made, the barriers will remain.

So, I am left asking if any disabled people are smiling about this new legislation. We certainly will not be saying “cheese” if the bill is not seriously improved so that it will matter to disabled people. If it does not, it could actually entrench the problems we have now and make it harder to make progress.

While Blind Citizens NZ will make a submission, the Select Committee needs to hear from as many of you as possible.

Making a submission is fairly easy, whether you do it online or using a hand-written letter. We all need to contribute if we don’t want to be given an Inaccessibility for some New Zealanders Act.

Blind Citizens NZ 2022 Award Recipients

Rose Wilkinson, Chief Executive

Blind, deafblind, vision impaired, and low-vision people together with whanau and supporters from across the motu joined together at Blind Citizens NZ's 2022 AGM and Conference on 7 and 8 October. They were part of the festivities and celebrations when awards were presented during the Conference Dinner on 8 October. As we finalise our Focus issue, the timing is great to share news about who received awards, presented during the two-day event.

Blind Citizens NZ has two supreme awards which are not necessarily awarded every year. The first of these is the Beamish Memorial Medal. This can only be presented to an Ordinary Member of Blind Citizens NZ who has made an outstanding contribution to society in their particular field of service to the community. The second is the Extra Touch Award. This recognises an individual or organisation where, as part of the process of catering to the general public, an outstanding contribution is made towards improvement in access or service to blind, deafblind and vision-impaired people. Here now is information about the recipients of each of these awards.

Beamish Memorial Award: It's fair to say this was perhaps the best-kept secret as the person receiving it was our own National President Jonathan Godfrey. It's not often that he is stuck for words – but when Board Member Martine Abel-Williamson presented him with the award there is no doubt that on this occasion he was taken by surprise. There is much that can be said about Jonathan's contributions during his 30 plus years as a member of Blind Citizens NZ. Most importantly is the leadership Jonathan demonstrates whenever and wherever he believes necessary.

He is always at pains to ensure the needs of blind, and disabled people are recognised. Perhaps this is why several years ago, Minister Sepuloni invited him to present to her Social Wellbeing Cabinet Committee about the need for disability data, and for officials to engage directly with disabled people. Today Jonathan is recognised by many government agencies for his knowledge and expertise about data and evidence.

Receiving his award Jonathan said, “I’ve never sought the accolades that have come when I’ve done good things. Contributing to the work of Blind Citizens NZ over the last twenty years, and for other disabled people over the last seven or so, has been a labour of love. Receiving an honour from my own people is a huge thank you, and is even more special given it was not looked for. Thank you all for what you do - it just makes me want to do more.

Extra Touch Award: this was presented to the Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet (DPMC) in recognition of the significant effort this agency made during COVID-19. Championing accessibility and coordinating information across other agencies for publication in alternate formats for disabled people including for blind people in Braille, Audio, Braille Ready Format Files and Large Print. Fiona Weightman Head of Communications & Public Engagement, COVID-19 Group DPMC, received the award virtually. Fiona recognised the leadership of DPMC’s Dr Rory McKenzie, Principal Advisor Engagement COVID-19 in all this work.

In receiving the Award, DPMC say… “Thank you to the Association of Blind Citizens of New Zealand for awarding DPMC the important ‘Extra Touch Award’. We are very grateful to have our team at DPMC recognised for our work to provide accessible information to blind people during the COVID pandemic. It has been an important focus for DPMC to provide accessible material to disabled people on health information and decisions on COVID settings. We have provided the key information in 27 languages and five alternative formats on the Unite Against COVID website.

This has been a team effort in DPMC, working closely with other agencies such as Whaikaha, the Ministry of Health and Te Whatu Ora. Also I would like to thank Blind Citizens NZ who have provided us with guidance and support on communications' needs, information gaps and providing accessible information which is very much appreciated."

Johnston Trophy for Leadership: Hannah Pascoe is the recipient of the Johnston Trophy for Leadership. Hannah attended one of Blind Citizens NZ's first Leadership Seminars in 2005. One of the key elements of the Johnston Trophy is recognising members of Blind Citizens NZ who accept leadership responsibilities both inside and outside the blindness community, and who create an environment where members can be recognised for leadership in their field of endeavour. Hannah Pascoe has achieved all this and more, and many will know also of her Paralympic endeavours and achievements. As the National President was building up to present the award to Hannah, her excitement for that person was evident.

She says "It's very rare someone can catch me off guard and I can honestly say, I was truly getting excited for the other person only to hear my name being announced. Sitting in other conferences in years past, hearing the names of other recipients who have contributed, it makes me feel honored to be one of these people. I think if Doug sent me out today to hand out chocolate, this would be an easier task compared to 2005. It takes a village, and thanks to a huge village of individuals who have guided, mentored and inspired me over the years, I am lucky enough to have this reward. A special shout out to Carolyn Weston, Victor West, Gordon Georgel, Andrea Courtney, Elmer Curry and Maxine Baker who were on the committee when I first joined Blind Citizens NZ."

Blind Bit of Difference Award: On Friday evening, on behalf of the Southland Branch and its Chair Carolyn Weston, the National President presented Amanda Anderson of the Southland Building Society (SBS) with the Blind Bit of Difference Award.

The award recognises the extent of support Amanda has provided Southland Branch, and her efforts going that extra mile and supporting blind, deafblind and vision-impaired Southlanders.

Sharing your experiences with the Royal Commission on Abuse in Care

Why you might want to, and what’s involved

Jonathan Mosen

An eight-year-old boy wakes up shaking. He doesn’t have the vocabulary to articulate what is happening to him, but he’s hyperventilating and having a panic attack, triggered by the possibility of the teacher who physically abused him in the swimming pool last week doing it again.

Seeing his distress, the boy’s mother finally gets all the facts out of him. She’s not one for challenging authority, but the maternal instinct to protect her boy is what dominates and she marches to the Deputy Principal’s office demanding answers.

The system protects the powerful people in this story. They deny the abuse. It’s a child’s word against the words of several authority figures. The boy is sent off to a child psychologist so they can find out why he is making up stories. Emboldened, the teacher embarks on a pattern of psychological abuse and humiliation that in many ways does more long-term damage than the physical abuse.

That boy was me, and last year, I met in a private session with the Royal Commission on Abuse in Care to record my experiences.

Although I had heard about the Commission’s work via the media, until last year I was unaware that Homai College, the school for the blind I attended from 1974 to 1980, came under the Commission’s jurisdiction.

I was reluctant to give evidence at first. While what I went through was profoundly distressing, some of the evidence already made public by the Commission caused me to think that there were people who had a far worse time than I did, and that my abuse didn’t reach a high enough threshold. I have upsetting memories of being Chair of the RNZFB Board, raising at Board level the need for the organisation to acknowledge past failings and apologise for them. At the time, there was a view expressed that it wasn’t fair to judge yesterday’s practices by today’s standards. I came out of those discussions feeling deeply hurt, and that there was something wrong with me for feeling the way I did about what happened to me. Worst of all, I felt an enormous sense of guilt that I couldn’t persuade the Board of the time to tackle this issue and say sorry. I have carried that guilt as the biggest personal failing in my professional life ever since.

Giving evidence about my experience has helped me come to terms with the fact that even when you chair a Board, you are still only one member of it. The RNZFB will not be able to avoid making an apology for much longer, I feel sure of it. There is an argument that it isn’t necessary for today’s leaders to apologise for yesterday’s abuse and neglect. I disagree. Today’s individual Board members are not responsible personally, although they may choose to express personal regret. However, collectively, the Board must in my view apologise as the current custodians of the organisation’s legacy. It is a legacy they have inherited, and a legacy that must be acknowledged and atoned for.

Giving my evidence in private in November last year wasn’t easy, but as has been the case with all my interactions with the Commission, I was well-supported and treated with consideration, kindness and compassion.

Those of you who know me even a little will know that I don’t mind speaking in front of a group. In fact, I am one of those odd people who enjoys it.

But giving public evidence at the Commission’s hearing in July was one of the most difficult things I have ever done. I nearly pulled out several times, but I hung in there because I knew that if someone with my experience was finding it difficult, other survivors might find it even more difficult.

Only you can decide if approaching the Commission is right for you, but I hope the following points will help you to make an informed decision.

First, abuse comes in many forms, and neglect is a form of abuse. If, for example, your life trajectory was altered because you weren’t given Braille instruction as a child despite a clear prognosis that your vision would deteriorate, the Commission is interested in hearing about that kind of neglect. Knowledge of such decisions, which often stem from a desire to ration scarce resources, could influence the Commission’s recommendations around creating a less disabling society in future. Please don’t think the issues you experienced are too trivial. That is not a response you will get from the Commission. The issues are real, they are a source of regret, pain or anger. They matter.

Second, your evidence is treated with absolute confidentiality, and the Commission will explain how they safeguard it. You can testify in a range of settings. I was most comfortable testifying via Zoom. You can have people supporting you if you wish. My wife was on the Zoom call supporting me. While a few people give evidence at public hearings, there is no pressure to do so and this is the exception, not the norm.

Third, it’s not too late. If you want to tell the Commission about what you experienced, either as a healing process for yourself and/or because you want to do something to help build a better future, you can visit the Commission’s website, https://AbuseInCare.org.nz or phone them on 0800-222-727.

Redress as a result of this process will be critical. If redress is inadequate, survivors will feel betrayed. Yet for me, the process has already been helpful in ways I didn’t expect. After giving public evidence, I felt so much lighter somehow, like a weight I have carried much of my life has been lifted from me. I wondered if the feeling would pass over time. It has not. I still had an unmet need to be heard and acknowledged, and after the system branded me as a fantasist as a child, I realise I still desperately needed to be believed.

I have been open about my journey with the Commission on my podcast, Mosen at Large. Several survivors have written to thank me, saying that it has encouraged them to approach the Commission. That is why I am writing this article. Even if it starts a process that provides some healing to one more person, it will have been worthwhile.

I thank the Commission for their vital work and the careful way in which they are completing it. If you approach them, I wish you healing and peace. The long-overdue opportunity finally exists for you to speak your truth.

Outcome of Blind Citizens NZ 2022 Scheduled Election

Rose Wilkinson, Returning Officer

Nominations for the positions of National President and two Member-at-Large positions closed at 4pm Thursday 18 August. Only one nomination for National President, and two nominations for the two Member-at-Large positions were received.

For the position of National President Jonathan Godfrey is duly elected uncontested.

Martine Abel-Williamson and Chrissy Fern are each duly elected uncontested and will fill the two Member-at-Large positions.

The term of office for all three candidates is three years. Their respective term commences immediately following the conclusion of the 2022 AGM and Conference, concluding at the end of Blind Citizens NZ’s 2025 AGM (and Conference if held).

Congratulations go to Jonathan, Martine and Chrissy.

Then and Now - by Kay Clark

I was broken, divided in two.
Without direction, not knowing
who the person was looking up at
me from puddles on the ground.

The autumn wind swirled around me,
my mind confused like the surface on
the lake, rippled no longer calm.

Over mountains covered in the winter's
snow, and through valleys dark and cold,
I feared I had lost my way.

As pastures new beckoned, I drew on
my strengths, and opened the gate that
barred my way. The landscape was now
visible, and the horizon no longer hazy.

Spring flowers adorned the path in
front of me, helping to heal my soul as I
ventured on a journey of discovery.

Gathering richness from the forest floor,
and with the protection of the canopy
above, I once again found beauty in the
birdsong that surrounded me.

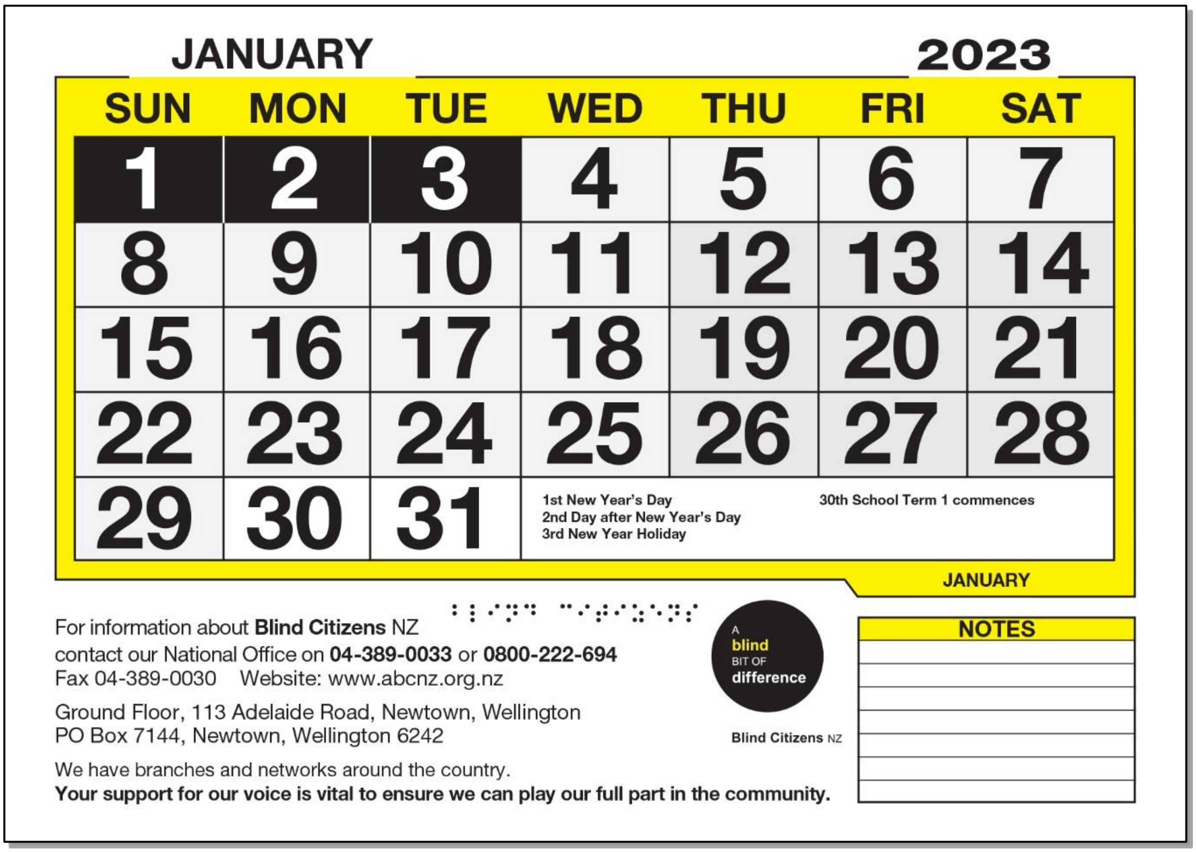
The reflection in the puddles, after the
summer's rain, now belongs to me, and
makes me proud that I had the courage to
walk through the open gate.

I can once again smile, as the sun's rays
shine down upon my face, and trust the
stars that twinkle in the dark of night will
guide me, as I continue my journey in life.

Large Print Calendars
Produced by Blind Citizens NZ

Our 2023 Large Print Calendars are now available. These are ideal for anyone needing, or preferring to have larger sized dates. The Calendars are approximately 59 cm wide and 42 cm long. They can be purchased for $10 through our National Office, or your local Blind Citizens NZ Branch or Network. When posted from our National Office there will be additional costs. The most cost-efficient option therefore, is to purchase these direct from your Branch or Network.

Phone our National Office on 0800 222 694 to purchase one of our Large Print Calendars. We can put you in touch with your local Branch or Network, or arrange delivery to you direct. Postage incurs additional costs. These vary depending on the number you require and where in the country they are being sent. Here is the first month for 2023… While somewhat smaller, this gives an indication of size.



JANUARY 2023

SUN	MON	TUE	WED	THU	FRI	SAT
1	2	3	4	5	6	7
8	9	10	11	12	13	14
15	16	17	18	19	20	21
22	23	24	25	26	27	28
29	30	31	1st New Year's Day 2nd Day after New Year's Day 3rd New Year Holiday		30th School Term 1 commences	

JANUARY

For information about **Blind Citizens** NZ
contact our National Office on **04-389-0033** or **0800-222-694**
Fax 04-389-0030 Website: www.abcnz.org.nz

Ground Floor, 113 Adelaide Road, Newtown, Wellington
PO Box 7144, Newtown, Wellington 6242

We have branches and networks around the country.
Your support for our voice is vital to ensure we can play our full part in the community.

A blind BIT OF difference

Blind Citizens NZ

NOTES

Blind Citizens NZ – Board and National Office

Board

- **National President**: Jonathan Godfrey: a.j.godfrey@massey.ac.nz
- **Members-at-Large**:
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