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Blind Citizens Australia

40th ANNUAL REPORT: 2014-2015

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# President’s Report

Greg Madson, President

Although BCA has faced significant challenges throughout the past year in an ever changing disability sector environment, the organisation has been able to continue its work in supporting members and representing Australians who are blind or vision impaired. In this report please find a sample of what has been achieved. I am pleased to introduce the 40th Annual Report of Blind Citizens Australia (BCA) for the year ended 30 June 2015.

During the reporting period, BCA continued its key activities in peer support, information dissemination, individual and systemic advocacy, and advice to government and the community.

Despite the challenges it has been another productive year for our organisation. Some highlights of the year were:

* Held a BCA Leaders’ Summit with the objective of considering the ways in which BCA could best serve the needs of its members and others who are blind or vision impaired in the foreseeable future
* Worked with a consortium led by Australian Federation of Disability Organisations (AFDO). BCA along with 9 other disability group consortium partners engaged in media campaigns, lobbying government to return funding, and explored alternative funding sources for consortium members
* Continued involvement in the inquiry into improving the employment of people with disability
* Worked closely with the Australian Blindness Forum, Vision 2020 Australia and the Australian Federation of Disability Organisations (AFDO) to ensure that the voice of people who are blind or vision impaired was heard by Government
* Continued coordination of a group Disability Discrimination Act claim against the ABC in regard to the lack of audio description on their free to air TV service
* Renewed the memorandum of understanding between Vision Australia and Blind Citizens Australia. This has enabled the two organisations to continue the sharing of resources, knowledge and collaborating on issues to improve the lives of people who are blind or vision impaired
* Liaising closely with the Australian Communications Consumer Action Network, Vision Australia and Media Access Australia in continuing the campaign for the introduction of a permanent AD TV service
* Completing a submission on the Disability Standards for Accessible Public Transport Review
* Developed a set of toolkits for each state in Australia. The kits will provide useful local information for people who are blind or vision impaired in their state
* Continuing improvement of the BCA website—giving us the ability to circulate audio content as podcasts, manage and maintain content in-house, creation of further on-line forms allowing registrations, memberships, feedback and contact with the BCA office in an accessible form, improved BCA social media circulation, providing better download capability for our audio productions and continued monitoring of the use and security of the website
* The Governance Committee finalised documents on Board confidentiality and a code of conduct, with the Committee then turning its focus to continuing the review of the BCA Constitution. This review has resulted in amendments to address anomalies and ensure that it accedes to the Charities Act 2013 and other legislative changes, to reflect current practices of the organisation, and to ensure where possible that the language used is easily understood
* Finalising and adopting a new set of Branch bylaws, providing flexibility for BCA Branches in their running;
* Participating in the stakeholder engagement and review of the National Disability Strategy
* A Blind Citizens Australia submission developed and forwarded to a Senate Enquiry into the Department of Social Service’s management of the community organisations’ funding process
* Submitted feedback on a discussion paper regarding the NDIS Information, Linkage and Capacity Building (ILC—previously known as Tier 2)
* Continued submissions to government in support of the Marrakesh Treaty
* Improve member engagement through the introduction of teleconference member forums

## Finances

Our dedicated Finance and Audit Committee members, Chief Executive Officer, Operations Manager, past Bookkeeper (Robyn McIntyre), and new Bookkeeper (Jun Xia), have ensured that our organisation has good financial processes in place, and is prudent in its budgeting. Once again, this year we have achieved a surplus with our 2014/15 budget.

I would like to thank our Finance and Audit committee members, Tony Starkey, Mick Baker, Bruce Ind and Bill Jolley for their valuable advice, insight and time throughout the year.

The generosity of our Pre-Authorised Credit Card Program participants continues, remaining strong contributors to BCA, and I would like to especially thank them for their ongoing support.

After receiving one of our appeal letters, we have had many kind supporters taking the trouble to donate. I would like to formally thank all those donors for their generous donations and support. I have continued the responsibility of phoning each person who has made a significant donation in response to our appeal letters. During those conversations I have been gratified to hear that the work of BCA is appreciated.

BCA receives annual funding from a range of sources including the Australian Government through the Department of Social Services, the Victorian Government through the Department of Health and Human Services, Vision Australia, the Royal Society for the Blind, the Jeffrey Blyth Foundation, and other fundraising activities and donations from members and other supporters.

For many years we have received a substantial proportion of our operating funds from the Australian Government, through a grant that has been administered most recently by the Department of Social Services (DSS). DSS advised that they were changing funding arrangements for a wide range of community organisations, including all of the peak representative disability organisations, including Blind Citizens Australia. We were advised that the current BCA funding agreement with the Department would conclude at the end of February 2015, but were subsequently advised of an extension to our current funding agreement to the end of June 2015. While the funding extension was good news, and BCA is fortunate to have some reserve funds that will allow us to sustain our current operations, we need to look to a future where government funding cannot be guaranteed, and alternative funding sources will need to be established.

The AFDO led consortium in which BCA is a member, through negotiations with the Federal Department of Social Services, in late June was granted capacity building funds to be distributed to the consortium partners. This was welcome news with further opportunity for funding via the consortium a possibility during the 2015-16 financial year.

## Our Employees

In December of 2014 our Executive Officer Rosemary Boyd resigned due to personal reasons. I would like to take this opportunity to formally thank Rosemary for her contribution to the organisation.

In late 2014 John Simpson kindly volunteered his time to step in and oversee the running of the BCA office while the Board focused on a replacement Executive Officer. I would like to thank John for that assistance. In March the BCA Board employed Tony Iezzi as Operations Manager to lead the office team through the transition up to the recruitment of the new Chief Executive Officer. I would like to thank Tony for that stabilising work, and appreciate his time and effort.

After an exhaustive recruitment process, in late June 2015, Leah van Poppel was offered, and accepted, the position of Chief Executive Officer for Blind Citizens Australia. Leah will bring with her extensive experience and knowledge of the sector. I wish Leah all the best in her new role and would like to thank Brooker Consulting for their great assistance with the recruitment process.

Throughout a difficult year our BCA national office team have managed to continue the smooth running of the office; supporting members, providing information in many formats, producing submissions, reports and policy advice, dealing with sometimes stressful phone conversations, and generally supporting each other. I would like to thank all in the BCA national office for their dedication to the organisation and their support throughout a difficult period.

With limited resources at hand, employees in the office cannot undertake all that is needed at all times; we rely on a wonderful group of volunteers who have supported and enhanced the work of our paid employees. This work involves answering the phones, conducting internet research to assist in our policy work, audio CD duplication, labelling and stuffing envelopes and the production and editing of SoundAbout and New Horizons. Many of our volunteers are blind or vision impaired and great examples of hard working, capable, employment-ready people.

## Communications

We communicate with our members via a range of media:

* Blind Citizens News, our twice-yearly member newsletter is produced in large print, audio CD, Braille and electronic formats;
* Blind Citizens Update is very popular, and is made available between Blind Citizens News issues, so members can access useful information throughout the year;
* The BCA website has given the organisation greater flexibility allowing better coordination of message and information streams. We are able to quickly upload content, edit, change or redesign parts or even the whole website as needed.
* SoundAbout, our quarterly audio magazine continues to be a favourite of many of our members. Current and past editions of SoundAbout can now be directly downloaded from the BCA website;
* New Horizons, our weekly radio program has now been made available as a podcast, and also continues to be broadcast across the Radio for the Print Handicapped Network. We are grateful to Vision Australia for allowing us to use their studios to produce the program and to RPH Australia for distributing the program across the network;
* Parent News is our national quarterly newsletter aimed at providing up-to-date information about key issues of interest to parents and the sharing of stories, strategies, tips and tricks by parents and people who are blind or vision impaired;
* The Women’s Branch publication Aspirations provides interesting articles, cooking information and recipes, and tips and tricks that might assist in reducing some barriers faced by women who are blind or vision impaired;
* BCA-L our email discussion list provides a forum for discussion and information dissemination;
* Our increased use of social media such as, Twitter, Facebook and Audioboom, has drawn many people and organisations towards BCA to take a closer look at what we do.

## Branches

We have introduced new bylaws for Branches that provide options on how a Branch might govern itself, and has suited some of our smaller Branches with large geographic areas that find it difficult to meet on a regular basis and, attract office bearers needed as per the previous Branch by-laws.

Most of BCA’s grassroots advocacy is conducted by our local Branches. This work is a crucial part of our awareness program, ensuring the needs of people who are blind or vision impaired are at the forefront of those who have responsibility for the built environment, transport, access to information and other aspects of being part of a community.

I would like to thank all those members who give up their time to willingly participate in Branch committees, focus groups, local council access committees and other points of interaction.

## Board

The Board of Directors for the reporting period consisted of:

* Greg Madson (President)
* Tony Starkey (Vice President and Treasurer)
* Barry Chapman (coordinating SoundAbout)
* Emma Bennison (governance and management advice)
* Stephen Belbin (Chair of NPDC)
* Erika Webb (Coordinating BCA social media presence)
* Chelsea Bartlett (Young Blind Citizens advice)
* Mick Baker (Finance Committee member)
* John Simpson (governance advice)
* Lauren Henley (retired March 2015)

I would like to take this opportunity to thank all BCA Board members for their guidance throughout a very difficult year. I have found their advice, assistance and council extremely supportive.

I would also like to thank all members of the National Policy and Development Council; the Finance and Audit Committee; Branch Presidents, and those members who sit on various state and national committees for their ongoing support. All of these members give their time voluntarily to provide assistance to the organisation.

After two years as President of BCA I unfortunately need to stand down. With increasing demands on my time to undertake other responsibilities, I feel I will be unable to dedicate the time needed to properly fill the role as President. I have learnt a lot over the past few years and appreciate the opportunity I have been privileged to have been given.

I commend this annual report to you; it is in no way a full reflection of the work carried out over the past year, but a brief overview of the work of all who make up Blind Citizens Australia.

Greg Madson  
President  
Blind Citizens Australia

# State Conventions 2014

Hanna Mazzeo, National Advocacy and Policy Officer

The 2014 NSW/ACT, QLD, VIC/TAS, and WA State Forums/Conventions were a huge success. Organised and run by the Branches of each state or territory, over 160 individuals collectively attended the State Conventions.

There were in excess of 70 guest speakers, session chairpersons and panel members across four states, which saw participants travel from all across Australia to attend. Members provided feedback about these events via an online evaluation survey, over the phone or in person.

## Western Australia

Blind Citizens WA hosted this event in Perth on Saturday 12th July with attendees being provided with a ‘day of inspiration, discussion, news and activity’. Sessions included Great Gadgets and Top Tips, Speak up to Make a Difference, and Confidence Building in Small Social Gatherings.

Informal feedback indicated that the session which informed attendees about the NDIS and the WA NDIS My Way programs was well received, providing insights into the potential for future engagement when the Schemes are rolled out more widely.

## Victorian/Tasmania

The Victorian/Tasmanian State Forum was held on October 4, with the theme ‘Putting Yourself Forward’; which looked at how you can be proactive in your life and create opportunities for yourself to be empowered, independent and knowledgeable about your entitlements and rights as someone who is blind or vision impaired.

Immediate Past President of the World Blind Union (WBU) and General Manager Advocacy and Engagement at Vision Australia Maryanne Diamond AO’s, keynote address was very popular, with 94% of survey respondents rating this session either excellent or very good.

An informative and interactive session presented by one of Centrelink’s Financial Information Services Officers was also received extremely well, with 88% of survey respondents scoring this session as either excellent or very good.

The 39th Annual General Meeting of Blind Citizens Australia was contained within the proceedings, which included updates from the National Office.

## NSW/ACT

Held on the October 11 and 12, the 2014 NSW/ACT State Convention showcased a line-up of fantastic speakers, who empowered, informed and inspired. The convention’s theme ‘Achieving Your Goals and Aspirations’ looked at the challenges we face in our everyday lives, and how changes to society, legislation, technology and community attitudes are creating more inclusive environments than ever before—allowing people who are blind or vision impaired to achieve their personal goals, dreams and aspirations.

Over the two day convention there was a great selection of presentations; from travel to education, employment, sporting and recreational activities, technology, the NDIS, access to services and entertainment.

Ron McCallum AO, Emeritus Professor in the Faculty of Law of the University of Sydney and Deputy Chair of the Board of Directors of Vision Australia, gave an excellent keynote address about a number of remarkable people who are blind from history including Jacques Lucien of France and David Blunkett of the UK. 89% of survey respondents found his address excellent or very good.

Overwhelmingly however, the most popular session of the NSW/ACT convention was the NDIS session, ‘where are we now’, with 94.44% of survey respondents saying that this session was excellent or very good, with many stating it was their highlight of the convention. This session included a number of panel members, from service providers, to NDIS staff, to BCA members who are participants in the scheme. There was much lively discussion about the great work that is being undertaken, some of the challenges and where the NDIS is headed in the future.

The sport and recreation session also proved to be very popular, with 83% rating this session as either very good or excellent.

## Queensland

The BCA Brisbane Branch organised the Queensland State Forum this year, which was held on Saturday October 18. The forum theme ‘Are you Engaged?’ looked to prepare delegates to engage with the NDIS, give some practical tips and hints on how to engage with others in social situations, and explained how you can engage advocacy support, seek advice and find policies and resources developed by the BCA National Office.

Evaluation responses for the QLD forum showed that each of the sessions was very well received, with each of the four sessions presented receiving scores of between 82% and 100% satisfaction ratings.

BCA would like to acknowledge the great work of all of the Branches, BCA members, guest speakers, individual directors and BCA employees, who commit each and every year to making each year’s forums/conventions better than the last.

BCA Summit

The Summit brought together 34 BCA members, including members of the Board and National Policy and Development Council; representatives from most of our regional and special interest Branches; former leaders of the organisation; and members who have been active in a range of roles across the organisation.

The objective was to consider the ways in which BCA can best serve the needs of its members and others who are blind or vision impaired in the foreseeable future in an ever changing community environment.

There were fifty six recommendations from the Summit, which are now being considered by the Board and National Office for implementation.

# National Advocacy and Policy Officers Report

Hanna Mazzeo and Rikki Chaplin, National Advocacy and Policy Officers

## Submissions

This year has been a busy year for submissions across a range of topics at both state and federal levels. Despite short time frames for consultation, we made robust submissions to the Access to Premises Standards review, and the Disability Education Standards review. Sadly, in both instances, we had to report that little has changed for the better since the last reviews of these standards which took place in 2010. This highlights the ongoing need for BCA to be observant and vigilant so as to be able to report these continuing issues in a way that represents the lived experiences of people who are blind or vision impaired.

Other submissions we made include the review of the National Disability Advocacy Framework in light of the introduction of the NDIS, and a submission to the Victorian Department of Justice regarding the review of requirements for statutory declarations.

## Individual Advocacy

This financial year the National Advocacy and Policy Officers dealt with 73 individual advocacy cases across Australia, and 319 calls for information or referral. These numbers do not reflect the work of the administration team, who are the first point of contact for members and the community, and often provide referrals or information. Advocacy cases covered a myriad of topics and ranged in length from a day to two, up to six months in duration.

The National Advocacy and Policy Officers submit four advocacy data reports each year to the Department of Health and Human Services in Victoria, as well as a self-assessment, two audit tools, and the Disability Service Commissioners Annual Complaints report.

## Concession Card Consultation

The Department of Human Services (DHS) was considering changing the Disability Support Pension (DSP) Blind Pensioner Concession Card. In particular DHS wanted feedback about the using descriptors such as “blind”, the letter “B” or “VI” or no reference at all. DHS also wanted to know about the impact on individuals and whether they felt it was a breach of their privacy to have these descriptors on the card. There are no other changes planned for the card other than this.

The Concession Card Survey was promoted in the June edition of BC News, which was posted in all formats on Friday May 29. It was then promoted on the BCA website, BCA-L, Facebook and Twitter on June 1.

Of the 162 respondents:

* 72% wanted to the word “Blind” to remain in full on the Pension Concession Card.
* 89% agreed that having the word “Blind” on the Pensioner Concession Card is “mostly a good thing, I have no problems with it.”
* 50% selected the option: “I like having the word “Blind” on my concession card and I would say having the word “blind” on the card has a positive impact on me.”
* 2.5% of respondents felt that the word “Blind” breached their privacy. A report was developed with all of the findings and submitted to DHS.

## Toolkits

Navigating the maze of services to find what you need, as well as being aware of the benefits you are entitled to as someone who is blind or vision impaired, can be a complex and frustrating process which can go on for months or even years if you do not have access to accurate, accessible and timely information about benefits and services.

BCA has produced a toolkit for each state and territory in Australia (except for Tasmania and Western Australia —however these will both be available early in the 2015-16 financial year

## Member Forums

Over the last few months we have been conducting an ongoing survey to capture what most concerns members, and what their areas of interest are. To build on that survey, we will be conducting a series of member forums via teleconference at the start of the new financial year, to be held every two months. These forums will be run on a trial basis through to the end of 2015, and a decision will be made on the frequency of the forums thereafter. We believe that ongoing engagement with our members needs to be one of our most important priorities in the area of advocacy and policy, so it is envisaged that we will continue the forums in a manner which is suitable for all into the future. We will provide summaries of the forums after they occur, in future editions of BC News.

## Currency

In November 2014, BCA held a confidential focus group in conjunction with the Reserve Bank of Australia to determine the most appropriate design for tactile bank notes which will allow people who are blind to easily identify different note denominations. A small group of members provided feedback based on the presentation from the Reserve Bank, and reached agreement about a tactile design which would work most effectively for our members. The Bank has officially announced that a tactile feature will be introduced in the next issue of bank notes.

The cash test card has been renewed. These cards are still available from the BCA office.

## Identification

BCA has ceased production of the BCA Photo ID Card as of January 1, 2015. Since then, we have been contacted at the BCA office by several members who have raised concerns about their photo identification not being accepted by major corporations as being legitimate. BCA recognises what a significant issue that refusal of other forms of photo identification —such as the Keypass produced by Australia Post —has been for members who have been affected, and for other members who may well experience the same problem in the future.

BCA has made contact with Australia Post, both to alert them to the issue of the Keypass being refused as a legitimate form of identification by major corporations, and to urge them to campaign for the Keypass to be accepted by all Australian states as a legitimate form of identification. Currently, the Keypass is not recognised in NSW or Western Australia, due to these states having their own form of photo identification issued by their respective departments of transport. However, even these cards have been known to be rejected by some venues such as clubs, or companies. Rest assured that we are aware of the seriousness of the issue, and we hope to work closely with Australia Post to both promote the value of the Keypass, and to lobby the NSW and Western Australian state governments to recognise the Keypass, so that it may become a nationally recognised form of identification.

## Audio Description

As part of a collaborative campaign to increase the prevalence of Audio Description on television, 29 complaints against the ABC were lodged with the Australian Human Rights Commission (AHRC). Conciliation took place with the ABC and has now closed. Mixed results were achieved from this mediation process. In a great step forward, the ABC is now providing Audio Description for selected programs via its iView platform. Audio Description has been rolled out for iPhones using the iView app, with support for the Android platform to follow shortly. iView on the PC will be supported last.

While this development is welcome, it does not address the needs of television viewers who do not own smartphones or have internet access. This cohort of members is significant when it is taken into account that the majority of people who are blind or vision impaired are over the age of 65 years.

Although conciliation has been completed and the matter closed by the AHRC this fight is not yet at an end. Tweed Valley Branch member Suzy Hudson is being supported by BCA and the Public Interest Advocacy Centre to sue the ABC for not providing Audio Description on free-to-air TV in real time. BCA will continue to advocate for Audio Description in all forms as we go forward.

## Marrakesh Treaty

In March 2015, a position statement was written supporting the ratification of the Marrakesh Treaty. This treaty was developed by the World Intellectual Property Organisation in conjunction with many governments around the world to allow publications in alternative format to be shared across borders by organisations with the appropriate qualifications to do so. Twenty countries need to ratify the treaty before it comes into effect. Australia is now well on the way towards ratification of the treaty. BCA has lodged a submission with the Joint Standing Committee on Treaties urging them to find in favour of ratification, in addition to developing our position statement earlier this year. Australia’s copyright law would be amended to allow the sharing of alternative format material both within and across our borders, opening up a world of literature which until now has never been readily available and accessible to people who are blind or vision impaired.

## Electoral Matters

We attended the meeting of the Australian Electoral Commission’s (AEC) Disability Advisory Committee in May 2015. It was unanimously agreed at this meeting that the successful trial of the iVote system in NSW has set the benchmark which both state and federal Governments must work towards. This system, implemented alongside other existing options for casting a secret, verifiable vote in an accessible manner, allowed people who are blind or vision impaired to cast a vote online for the very first time in Australia. It has already been demonstrated that the ability to vote from home, even via telephone, has resulted in a significant increase in the number of people taking up the option of casting an accessible vote. The iVote system has further confirmed this finding, and overwhelmingly positive feedback was received both by BCA and by the Australian Electoral Commission on the system.

Issues identified by all states at the AEC Disability Advisory Committee meeting were regarding:

* the continuing difficulty in being able to find fully accessible buildings in which to create polling centres,
* the need for staff manning these centres to be adequately trained in the use of accessible technology for people who choose to cast a vote at a centre and use screenreading technology which has been developed for this purpose.

At a Federal level, the necessary legislation is not yet in place in order to allow a system similar to iVote to be developed. This is a frustration for all parties, and is something the AEC is pushing hard to have rectified. There are also ongoing concerns at a Federal level about the security risks of enabling online voting to take place.

## Public Transport

In Victoria, we regularly attend meetings of Disability Advisory Committees for the Taxi Services Commission and Yarra Trams. These are important links to maintain, as we are able to consistently raise ongoing issues and work with these organisations, to embed practices which promote equality and accessibility into their everyday operations. We encourage branches in all states to form strong and ongoing relationships with their local transport providers.

In early 2015, the Ferry and Hydrofoil policy was added to the suite of public transport documents. The document covering water transport was put on hold due to the concern that not enough evidence could be gathered which would cover all of the issues faced by people who are blind or vision impaired and who utilise this form of transport. Consultation was conducted with BCA members in an attempt to gather further evidence, and the NPDC worked hard to identify issues specific to travel on ferries and hydrofoils. The policy is now available as part of the Public Transport policy suite on the BCA website, or by contacting the BCA office.

## Medication Labelling

In early 2015, Webster Care was contacted as the result of a concern raised by a member regarding the braille on the company’s medication packs. Webster Care were very obliging in allowing their product to be reviewed and in accepting recommendations for changes. They have since developed a new prototype in which more conventional braille labelling has been implemented.

On a broader level, South Australian NPDC representative David Squirrell, has worked hard to establish contact with the Pharmacy Guild so we can begin working with them on developing and implementing a policy on accessible medication, labelling and packaging, and training for pharmacists. David’s invaluable experience as a doctor, prior to losing his vision, will be of tremendous assistance to us as we work to develop this policy.

## Education

As mentioned in the submissions section of this report, we lodged a submission to the Review of Disability Standards on Education. Our submission to the 2015 Review of the Disability Standards for Education is available by contacting the BCA office.

A recent meeting of the Disability Advisory Committee for the Victorian Department of Education demonstrated significant commitment to inclusion of children with disabilities in every aspect of the educational experience. Policy staff in education in Victoria are hoping to implement a program that will lead by example, rather than force schools to comply. The aim is to attempt to encourage other schools that it is worth adopting inclusive practice by demonstrating the significant benefits for both students and teachers of including children with disabilities in all aspects of education.

## Onkyo World Braille Essay Contest

The Onkyo World Braille Essay Contest is a worldwide initiative planned and sponsored by Onkyo Corporation Ltd. and the Braille Mainichi in Japan, and is implemented by the World Blind Union-Asia Pacific (WBUAP).

It is administered locally by the Australian National Onkyo Selection Committee for the World Braille Essay Contest, which comprises representatives from Blind Citizens Australia, the Australian Braille Authority, the Roundtable on Information Access for People with Print Disabilities, and Vision Australia.

The purpose of the contest is to promote Braille literacy and encourage the reading and writing of Braille; and to encourage cultural and social interaction among blind and vision impaired persons through their writings.

In May 2015, five Australian entrants were shortlisted for international consideration.

## Professional Development Training for the Advocacy and Policy Team

In March, we attended some invaluable training conducted by the Public Interest Advocacy Centre in Sydney. The training focussed on the skills involved in developing a campaign to address a specific issue, and how to raise awareness via communication channels and the media on the impact issues have on the groups of people represented by advocates. The workshops consisted of two main topics, those being Advocacy Strategies and Advocacy Skills. This training has allowed us to develop skills in designing campaigns, and making clear links between individual cases and cross system issues.

# BCA Membership

During the 2014-2015 financial year the membership comprised 3153 individual members and seven organisational members. The breakdown of this membership is as follows.

### Full Members: 2979

Eighteen years or over, permanent residents of Australia and classified as blind or vision impaired.

### Junior Members: 4

Under the age of eighteen years, permanent residents of Australia and classified as blind or vision impaired.

### Associate Members: 170

Persons who identify with the aims of the organisation, but who are ineligible to be Full Members.

### Organisational Members Class (A): 3

Incorporated organisations within Australia where the membership and governing body comprise a majority of blind persons or the parents of blind or vision impaired children under the age of 18 years, or which have a substantial involvement in representing the interests of persons with vision or print disabilities from the consumer perspective.

* Association of Blind Citizens of NSW
* Retina Australia
* Retina Australia (VIC) Inc.

### Organisational Members Class (B): 4

Incorporated organisations which identify with the aims of Blind Citizens Australia but which are ineligible as Class A Organizational Members.

* Deafblind Association of NSW
* RPH Australia
* SensWide Services
* Statewide Vision Resource Centre

# External Representation

Contributions for this article are thanks to Tony Iezzi, Rikki Chaplin, Barry Chapman, Erika Webb and Greg Madson.

We continue to be active in organisations beyond BCA, in order to formally represent Australians who are blind or vision impaired. In so doing, we believe it is critical to liaise with other organisations to receive information, to give advice and ensure that when these organisations speak out, or develop policies on blindness or disability related matters, they incorporate our views. We have enjoyed productive working relations with many external bodies, and we value the contacts we have made and the information and advice we have received.

## Accessible Transport Advisory Committee (ATAC) NSW

This committee is concerned with the accessibility of all public transport in NSW. This includes trains, buses, light rail, taxis and ferries.

The committee meets quarterly, with additional focus group meetings as required. At each meeting, there are presentations about various aspects of public transport.

Some of the issues covered during the year were:

* The new North West rail link which is currently under construction
* The light rail through the city, which will involve the closure of part of George Street to traffic other than light rail
* The closure of the Newcastle heavy rail line, to be replaced by light rail. The presentation mainly focused on arrangements for commuters during construction
* Taxis and M40 dockets (a card system in NSW which is still under consideration)
* The Opal card and provisions for people who are vision impaired
* Wheelchair accessible buses
* Ferries, including accessible signage
* iPhone apps for risk avoidance and way finding in railway stations

## Australian Blindness Forum (ABF)

During the 2014-2015 financial year, Greg Madson and Rosemary Boyd (up to December 2014) were the BCA representatives on the ABF Board. The ABF is an association of many of Australia’s major blindness service provision agencies with BCA being the national consumer representative organisation.

It is a function of the ABF to appoint the Australian delegates to the World Blind Union General Assembly. The four Australian delegates during this year were: Greg Madson (BCA President), Rosemary Boyd (BCA Executive Officer – up to December 2014), Kevin Murfitt (Chair of Vision Australia) and Andrew Daly (Executive Director of Royal Society for the Blind).

In November, the World Blind Union held its 2014 Asia Pacific Mid-Term Regional General Assembly in Hong Kong. BCA was represented by Tony Starkey (BCA Vice President) and Rosemary Boyd (BCA Executive Officer).

## Australian Federation of Disability Organisation (AFDO)

The Australian Federation of Disability Organisations (AFDO) is the national voice representing people with disability in Australia. AFDO and its member organisations are run by and for people with disability.

BCA as a member of AFDO, is entitled to nominate a person to sit on the AFDO Board. Once on the AFDO Board each member is not a representative of their organisation, but sits on the Board as an individual. During the 2014-15 financial year Greg Madson held a position on the AFDO Board as Deputy Chair.

AFDO also leads a consortium of disability organisations, comprised of member and non-member organisations who have come together to further the interests of disability specific representative groups run by people with disability and their families. Greg Madson represented BCA as part of the consortium.

Consortium partners engaged in media campaigns regarding cuts in funding to disability organisations, successfully lobbied government on funding opportunities in the wake of the removal of funding from the Department of Social Services, and explored alternative funding sources for all members, including those who currently have no funding at all.

## NSW Electoral Commission Committee

The method of accessible voting which was used at the state election is called iVote. The original impetus was to enable electors who are blind or have low vision to cast an independent vote, although the eligibility to use the iVote system was broadened to electors who have reading difficulties, or have other disabilities, live more than 20 kilometres from a polling place, or would be interstate or overseas on election day. Voting was by computer or telephone during the pre-poll period and on election day.

## Standards Australia ME-064 Committee

Erika Webb represented BCA on the ME-064 Standards Australia Committee. This ME-064 Standards Technical committee is responsible for monitoring, developing and reviewing Australian Standards relating to access to the built environment for people with disabilities.

Erika attended full day teleconferences monthly (one or two days) and has attended 6 out of 9 meetings during the 2014/2015 financial year.

The ME-064 Committee is currently creating and drafting a new Australian Standard on wayfinding in the build environment, which is nearing completion and will be made available for public comment soon.

The Australian Network for Universal Housing Design ANUHD is a national network of housing industry bodies, housing professionals, government professionals, designers, builders, researchers and home occupants who believe that the homes we build for today’s Australia should be fit for all of tomorrow’s Australians. Erika Webb has re-joined ANUHD, attending monthly teleconferences, as information gained within this group is of assistance to her work on the ME-064 Committee.

# Local Branch Reports

## ACT Branch

The Branch held bi-monthly committee meetings throughout the year by phone hook up until February. At the last AGM all officers were re-elected. Due to the President’s personal circumstances Peter Granleese has taken over management of the Branch and meetings have been on an as-needs basis.

The ACT Branch received a grant from the Southern Cross Club to run seminars, and held a successful forum on public transport issues. Throughout the year public transport has been a strong focus, with members involved in successfully lobbying for audio announcements on buses. The major bus interchanges in Canberra now also have devices which provide audio announcements about upcoming arrivals. Other bus stops throughout the city all have Braille and large print signage of stop numbers, alongside a phone number to call for information about upcoming services.

Issues around pedestrian safety on shared pathways and the development of light rail options were also addressed by the Branch throughout the year.

## Adelaide Branch

David Squirrel, Branch President

The Branch has met regularly throughout the year and is proud of its active member base. Adelaide Branch has been very active and successful in advocating for change over the past year, with over twenty instances of formal advocacy. These have included submissions on issues such as access to health services, cyclists on footpaths, and airport access, representation at forums (such as a forum on social inclusion), and individual advocacy matters of a diverse range. Some individual advocacy matters have led to formal complaints to Members of Parliament and equal opportunity bodies.

The Branch has also maintained contact with National Office through attending the Leader’s Summit and by discussing the resources and policies available at a national level with office staff. This has included access to BCA's policy suite to assist in Branch advocacy efforts.

## Brisbane Branch

Lyn Eagers, Branch President

The Branch committee met every month. Members have been invited to come to meetings to discuss issues raised by the NPDC. The Branch has regular appearances on RPH and a newsletter sent electronically and in audio hard copy.

Throughout the year, we held two very successful social activities. Last October we had a driving day, which helped build the Branch. It was quite popular and we had great feedback, but the timing was difficult for some younger members as it came very close to university exams. The Branch is planning for another driving day in March 2016. As is noted elsewhere in this report, we held a State Forum and dinner with approximately 20 attendees.

We have also continued affiliation with the Queensland White Cane Committee and the Queensland Rail Reference Group.

## Central West NSW Branch

Graham Hedrick, Branch President

The Branch meets every month in conjunction with a Vision Impaired Friendship Group in Mudgee, which has good access with tactile indicators. Many Branch members are over the age of eighty, so age and distance can make attendance at meetings difficult. We have tried to organise teleconferences and have sent written correspondence and emails to members several times to try and increase participation.

When we are able, we have guest speakers at our meetings such as a local representative from Vision Australia. The Branch is also actively represented on the local Council Access Committee and Transport Committee.

## Macleay/Nambucca Branch

Patricia Quirk, Branch President

Over the past financial year the Nambucca Branch has had an outing every month and a meeting every month in Kempsey. From now on we will be combining the two so that members don’t need to travel so often.

At the meetings we discuss our finances and where we’ve been going and what we’ve been doing. For our outings we go on bus trips with the Kempsey RSL and have a volunteer driver. We decide where we’re going – such as going to a local pub.

Over the past year we’ve been concerned that our Branch numbers are falling. We’ve had ads in the paper, in all the chemists and doctors surgeries to try and increase membership. Some new members have come along recently, but this seems to be through word of mouth

## Newcastle Hunter Branch

Stephen Belbin, President

The Newcastle/Hunter Branch still continues to be a very active voice in the Hunter Region for the blind and vision impaired community. Always upholding the rights of its members, whilst promoting awareness of the Branch and its importance to people who are blind or vision impaired to the wider Newcastle population.

The Branch continues to advocate and address issues at a local level, these can include but not be limited to:

* Access to the built environment
* Access to transport
* Equity in the delivery of education, and greater opportunities around employment
* Access to all forms of recreation

The Branch also realises the power in partnering with other Branches, and service providers such as Vision Australia, and Guide Dogs to have a louder voice when attempting to address systemic issues at a local level.

It was decided this year for the Branch to focus on one particular issue around access to the built environment especially in the Newcastle and Hamilton areas. This became a priority as a result of the truncation/closure of the heavy rail service at Hamilton station.

Besides access to Hamilton station being compromised as a result of the upgrade currently being carried out, there were some concerns raised around safety, especially for people who are blind or vision impaired of which there are a lot who use the Hamilton rail service.

The other challenge is that Newcastle City Council has disbanded its Access Committee, which removes the ability for the branch to raise any access issues with a committee which would be made up of people who have lived experience and understand the challenges around access to the built environment for people who are blind or vision impaired.

### NSW/ACT BCA State Convention

In October 2014 it was the Newcastle/Hunter Branch’s turn to host the Convention. This was a real highlight for the Branch, not only to be able to host and put convention together, but also to be able to meet other BCA members from all over NSW and ACT.

## Sydney Branch

Lee Smith, Branch President

Throughout the year the Branch held meetings in different locations in Sydney and via teleconference, which attracted some new attendees. We organised several specific presentations, including a feedback session on the iVote system and a demonstration of a Thermomix kitchen device by a blind user.

## Toowoomba Branch

Joyce Jones, Coordinator

Toowoomba Regional Branch of BCA has welcomed the new administrative model where we have been able to replace the committee with a coordinator and sub-coordinator. Joyce Jones from Toowoomba is the coordinator, and Kevin Rowley from Stanthorpe is the sub-coordinator, and takes care of the finances.

Meetings are no longer held at the community room in Little Street, but at selected restaurants, where they are combined with a social gathering.

This year’s project is the new Toowoomba Bus Transit Centre, which is a renovation of an old bus centre. On May 7, BCA Toowoomba held a meeting and wrote down our complaints about the lack of facilities for people who are blind or have vision impairment. Joyce is a member of the Toowoomba Regional Council Access and Disability Advisory Committee, and passed on the complaints along with a copy of the BCA Bus Policy. BCA Toowoomba are awaiting a reply, and possible improvements to the service.

Joyce represented Toowoomba at the BCA Summit In Melbourne in June, and will attend the National Convention in October.

The NDIS will commence in Queensland in July, 2016. Joyce has been monitoring the news of the NDIS from BCA, and will pass this on to Toowoomba residents with vision impairment, as it is not yet clear how the new system will benefit us.

Joyce has updated the member list, helping the Branch to identify a challenge in recruiting younger members.

## Tweed Valley Branch

Doreen Gibson, Secretary

BCA Tweed has had a busy year. We have a new volunteer Secretary, Doreen Gibson, and also a number of great volunteers which we could not do without. The Branch meets once a month with a combination of social and formal meetings, and we attract between 20 and 25 people to each meeting. Sometimes there are guest speakers, but we also try to talk to members and make sure they are getting their entitlements, because many of our members do not have the internet and are not aware of what they are able to get assistance with.

We had a successful Christmas party and it was enjoyed by all, especially the Secret Santa. We also held a number of other social events, including a BBQ at Kirra Hill, an Easter raffle and a morning out to see a variety show.

We are currently seeking funding for the purchase of iPads so our members can train each other to use them.

## WA Branch

Deanne Ferris, President

The WA Branch has a mix of formal and social meetings on a regular basis. Throughout the year we held a Street Appeal and a Bunnings Sausage Sizzle to fundraise. The Branch was also the recipient of a $250 grant for an event from the Disability Services Commission.

We hosted several social events, including our Quiz night, an Audio Described movie night and a Christmas party. Members of the Branch were involved in a range of access committees throughout the year, including focusing on Audio Description and pedestrian safety. We also monitored information about the introduction of the NDIS and My Way trials in WA.

The Branch will be facing challenges in terms of funding in the next financial year, as the WA Disability Services Commission has decided to change funding for individual advocacy and is reviewing systemic advocacy program funding as well.

WA Branch would like to say thank you to Kerry Cameron for 15 years of service to Blind Citizens WA as Administration/Advocacy Officer. Thank you also to Ray Kerwin for his commitment over many years on the Executive Committee.

# Special Interest Branch Reports

## Computer Users’ Group

Peter Scanlon, President

The Computer User’s Group has continued to provide peer support for blind people around Australia, as it has done since 1988. The amount of information and access to it has changed in recent years and this has led to the Branch giving consideration to what form and direction the Branch may take. I wish to thank all members for their contributions to these discussions.

This year our membership has increased slightly, embracing members from around the country. We have continued to provide three ways for members and visitors to join our meetings;

1. in person at Vision Australia at Kooyong
2. by telephone on a free conference call
3. or by Skype

Members are also able to download recordings of the meetings.

In the past twelve months we have had a range of interesting guest speakers, covering new and updated products and services available to blind people in the information and communication field. We also ensure that there is time allocated at meetings for general discussion of technology topics and peer support. We also have a email list where members can share information and seek help.

Over the past 12 months our running costs have reduced substantially, thanks to support from Vision Australia with software and hardware which we use to conduct our meetings.

The CUG has always supported the concept that adaptive equipment and software be easily available to all. We applaud the efforts of NV Access Limited in the ongoing development of the NVDA software. At our June meeting we decided to donate $2000 to NV Access.

I wish to thank the members of the CUG Committee for their work and valuable contributions to discussions over the past 12 months.

## Overseas Branch

During the past financial year, the Overseas Branch was heavily involved in providing support to Sri Lankan organisations, including:

* Donated $5,450 to Sri Lanka to the Tangalle School for the Blind and Welfare Society for the Blind
* Several hundred pairs of spectacles sent to Sri Lanka to the Federation of the Blind
* A number of canes sent to Sri Lanka to the Federation of the Blind and to Sri Lanka Council for the Blind

## National Women’s Branch

Karen Passmore, Branch President

President: Karen Passmore, Western Australia

Vice President: Janene Sadhu, Victoria

Secretary: Joyce Jones, Queensland

Treasurer: Joan Richardson, South Australia

NPDC Rep: Julie Sutherland, South Australia

Committee: Cathy Horner, New South Wales; Leonie Barber, Queensland

We had the one resignation due to health issues midway through our year – Lisa Hayes of New South Wales.

Membership of Branch: 223 including 7 new members. This figure differs yearly due to members passing away, moving overseas or resigning.

Meetings are held on the first Thursday evening of each month at 8.30pm EST by tele conference, every month except in January 2015.

### Activities:

We have continued our workshops at State Conventions, with the topic in 2014: “Confidence Building in Small Social Gatherings”. Feedback from attendees was very positive with our guest speakers presenting their differing aspects of mixing, some even attending functions on their own and enjoying a meal out by themselves. There was much to learn and gain from these discussions. We hope that all States will embrace our workshops in their future Forums/Conventions. The committee had compiled a flyer as part of our new project “Reaching Out To Rural & Regional women” and these were emailed to regional libraries, CWA’s, women’s health centres, radio stations, and some distributed to others to pass on.

Our audio cookbooks are still available, and currently we offer MP3, memory stick and electronic versions. We have sold 13 cookbooks in differing formats this year, earning us $310.00. We currently are holding three MP3 disks at a total of $90.00 and hope these will be sold at our National Convention in October.

We still run our women talk email list and also the VIP grandparents email list, and both remain friendly, supportive and informative.

Our twice-yearly NWB Aspirations magazine remains very popular with members and is edited by Jennifer Dawson. This year we decided that the magazine not be available to all on the BCA website, so that it now only goes out to women’s Branch members.

# Blind Citizens Australia Funding

Blind Citizens Australia would like to acknowledge our funding partners; The Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) Victoria, The Jeffrey Blyth Foundation, The Department of Social Services, Vision Australia and our generous members.

## Blind Citizens Australia’s Work under the Vision Australia Memorandum of Understanding

Blind Citizens Australia (BCA) has a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) with Vision Australia (VA), which talks about the ways the two organisations have agreed to work together.

The MOU covers:

* Making sure that VA and BCA work together respectfully, collaborating where possible on issues which affect people who are blind or vision impaired and agreeing to respect differences when they exist
* Sharing resources. For example, VA agrees to provide office space on an as-needs basis for BCA. BCA agrees to provide free Convention registrations for four VA nominated people
* Undertaking joint advocacy campaigns when appropriate, both to government, business and the public

As part of the MOU, Vision Australia also makes a significant annual financial contribution to the work of BCA. Because the MOU is designed to ensure the independent voice of each organisation, this funding is aimed at strengthening the voice of people who are blind or vision impaired across Australia.

During the 2014-15 financial year, the MOU was renewed for the period of 2014-2017. The MOU was fulfilled by BCA in a number of ways. For example, one of the major activities we worked together on was audio description. This included:

* Supporting complaints against the ABC about the lack of Audio Description on television
* Work to establish, improve and promote the Audio Description trial on iView
* Lobbying the Communications Minister for legislative change

BCA appreciates the contribution that Vision Australia makes to supporting an independent voice for people who are blind or vision impaired, and looks forward to continuing collaborations into the future.

# Blind Citizens Australia National Office staff

Executive Officer

* Rosemary Boyd (July-December 2014)

Acting Administrator

* John Simpson (January-February 2015)

Operations Manager

* Tony Iezzi (February 2015-August 2015)

National Policy Officer

* Lauren Henley (July-September 2014)

Advocacy and Policy Officers

* Thai Nguyen (July-August 2014)
* Sharyl Brockett (September-November 2014)

National Advocacy and Policy Officers

* Hanna Mazzeo (August 2013-)
* Rikki Chaplin (October 2014-)

Administration Officers

* Samantha Marsh
* Anna Volpe (July-December 2014)
* Madeline Seiter (November-December 2014)

Project Officer

* Sue Hastie (July-January 2015)

Bookkeeper

* Robyn McIntyre (July-January 2015)
* Junxia Xu (March 2015-)

## Blind Citizens Australia National Office volunteers

Office administration and mailouts:

* Madeline Seiter

Mailouts:

* Leighton Boyd
* Adua Merola
* Simon Chong

BCA would like to acknowledge the tireless work of all of our volunteers assisting in Branches or on committees for productions such as New Horizons and Soundabout.

# BCA Contact Details

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