LIGHTHOUSE VISION LOSS CENTER

Definitive Institutional History & Regional Needs Assessment

1985 – 2026

Serving Sarasota · Manatee · Charlotte · DeSoto · Highlands

Nationally Accredited Vision Rehabilitation Nonprofit

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Lighthouse Vision Loss Center is the primary nonprofit provider of comprehensive vision rehabilitation services across Southwest Florida. Founded in 1985 as the *Mana-Sota Center for the Blind and Visually Impaired*, the organization has evolved over four decades into a multi-county regional institution delivering rehabilitation training, assistive technology instruction, youth transition programming, and counseling services.

The organization's geographic footprint spans Sarasota, Manatee, Charlotte, DeSoto, and Highlands counties — a five-county service area encompassing densely populated coastal communities and rural inland areas where access to specialized rehabilitation services is otherwise limited.

1985	40+	5	511+	$5.66M	No. 1
Year Founded	Years of Service	Counties Served	Clients Annually	Net Assets (2024)*	Regional Provider

Over its history, Lighthouse Vision Loss Center has grown from a small volunteer-driven initiative with 35 clients in 1986 to a multi-million-dollar organization serving more than 511 clients annually and delivering nearly 10,000 hours of direct service each year. The organization maintains the only nationally accredited vision rehabilitation program in its five-county service region.

This report integrates institutional history, financial performance data drawn from IRS Form 990 filings (2011–2024), verified program outcomes, leadership chronology, and a regional needs assessment into a unified institutional narrative suitable for board governance, grant applications, strategic planning, and community engagement.

MISSION STATEMENT

To educate and empower individuals affected by vision loss so they may enjoy happy, healthy, and independent lives.

KEY FINDINGS AT A GLANCE

- **118% revenue growth** — from $1.32M (2011) to $2.88M (2024) over 13 verified fiscal years
- **88% net asset growth** — from $3.01M (2011) to $5.66M (2024), reflecting sustained financial strengthening (note: 2024–2025 net asset figure pending April 2026 board resolution)
- **1,360% client volume growth** — from 35 individuals (1986) to 511+ (2019–2020)
- **1,930% service hour expansion** — from 480 hours annually (1986) to 9,746 hours by 2019
- **Five-county footprint** established 2011, extending reach to Charlotte, DeSoto, and Highlands counties
- **Six executive leaders** have guided organizational growth across four decades since 1988
- **National accreditation maintained** — validating program quality and institutional credibility
- **Youth Transition Program launched 2009** — expanding impact to adolescents and young adults ages 14–22
- **Peepers / Lumination Low Vision Store (est. 2015; rebranded Lumination March 2025)** — consultation-based low vision retail destination specializing in electronic magnifiers and assistive products; e-commerce platform added November 2, 2020 during pandemic closure; rebranded Lumination in March 2025 following headquarters renovation; expanded to include Ray-Ban Meta AI smart glasses (2025) with dedicated client training program
- **Lighthouse Technology Solutions (LTS) established** — a community-facing IT services division whose proceeds fund Lighthouse Vision Loss Center programs, serving Sarasota, Manatee, and surrounding counties

HISTORICAL CONTEXT: VISION REHABILITATION IN THE UNITED STATES

The modern model of vision rehabilitation in the United States emerged from a recognition that medical treatment alone was insufficient to support individuals experiencing significant vision loss. Throughout much of the twentieth century, care for visually impaired Americans was dominated by clinical approaches focused on diagnosis and treatment of underlying eye conditions — leaving many individuals without the adaptive skills or support necessary to maintain independence in daily life.

Beginning in the mid-twentieth century, a network of nonprofit organizations commonly known as "Lighthouses for the Blind" began establishing community-based rehabilitation programs across the country. These organizations pioneered a holistic model of care that integrated medical support with practical skills training, including orientation and mobility instruction, braille literacy, assistive technology education, and independent living skills development.

The Lighthouse movement reflected a broader shift in disability services philosophy — from institutionalization and dependence to **community integration and independence**. Federal legislation, including the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 and the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990, further advanced this philosophy by establishing civil rights protections and mandating equal access for individuals with disabilities.

The Florida Division of Blind Services (DBS), established as part of the state's vocational rehabilitation infrastructure, became a critical funding and referral partner for community-based vision rehabilitation organizations throughout Florida. DBS contracts provided stable program funding that enabled organizations like Lighthouse Vision Loss Center to deliver services to clients regardless of their ability to pay.

The Lighthouse Model

The Lighthouse model of vision rehabilitation addresses four core domains of service, each targeting a distinct dimension of functional independence:

- **Independent Living Skills Training** — instruction in activities of daily living adapted for vision impairment, including home management, personal care, meal preparation, and financial management
- **Orientation and Mobility Instruction** — training in safe, independent movement through familiar and unfamiliar environments, including adaptive mobility aids and public transportation navigation
- **Assistive Technology Education** — instruction in adaptive software, devices, and techniques enabling access to information, employment, and communication

- **Counseling and Emotional Support** — services addressing the psychological and social dimensions of vision loss and facilitating healthy adjustment to disability

> **NATIONAL CONTEXT**
>
> *Approximately 12 million Americans over age 40 have vision impairment, including 1 million who are legally blind. Age-related conditions — including macular degeneration, glaucoma, and diabetic retinopathy — account for the majority of vision loss cases in adults. With the aging of the baby boom generation, prevalence of vision impairment among older adults is projected to double by 2050. (National Eye Institute)*

FOUNDING OF MANA-SOTA LIGHTHOUSE (1985)

The establishment of the Mana-Sota Center for the Blind and Visually Impaired in 1985 represented a decisive response to an unmet need in the Sarasota-Manatee region. In the early 1980s, residents of the area experiencing vision loss had no access to local community-based rehabilitation services. The nearest comparable programs were located in Tampa, creating significant barriers for individuals requiring regular, ongoing training and support.

Founding Leadership

Community leaders **Terri Blessing** and **Charles Rhein** recognized this gap and initiated a series of planning meetings that would culminate in the formal incorporation of the organization. Working alongside medical professionals, including Doctors Kingham, Pope, and Rutkowsky; civic organizations including the Palmetto Lions Club; the president of Tropicana; and the Aurora Foundation, the founding group assembled the community support and early financial commitments necessary to launch a new nonprofit organization.

Incorporation and Early Support

The Mana-Sota Center for the Blind and Visually Impaired was incorporated in the State of Florida in **October 1985**. The name "Mana-Sota" combined references to Manatee and Sarasota counties, reflecting the organization's original two-county service area.

Initial funding came from a combination of philanthropic contributions and community support. Regional Lions Clubs — which have a long national tradition of supporting vision-related causes — provided early financial

backing. Philanthropic foundations and individual donors contributed to the operating capital needed to launch programming.

In **1986**, the organization began offering its first rehabilitation training classes at Happiness House, a community facility that provided space for early programming. A critical milestone came in **1987** when the organization entered its first contract with the Florida Division of Blind Services, providing stable, recurring revenue that positioned the organization as part of Florida's official vision rehabilitation infrastructure.

> **FOUNDING VISION**
>
> *"Recognizing that residents experiencing vision loss in the Sarasota-Manatee region had limited access to rehabilitation services, the founders worked with healthcare professionals, civic leaders, and representatives of the Florida Division of Blind Services to establish a local provider of vision rehabilitation programs designed to help individuals maintain independence and remain active members of their communities."*

EARLY INSTITUTIONAL DEVELOPMENT (1985–1995)

The first decade of the organization's existence was defined by the work of establishing durable institutional infrastructure. The founding team built the programmatic, physical, financial, and governance foundations that would enable the organization to grow and sustain itself across subsequent decades.

First Executive Director (1988)

In 1988, the organization welcomed its first professional Executive Director, **Leslie Neese**. Simultaneously, the organization formally changed its name to *Mana-Sota Lighthouse for the Blind, Inc.*, adopting the "Lighthouse" identity that connected it to the national movement of community-based vision rehabilitation providers.

Leslie Neese served as Executive Director from **1988 through approximately 2000** — a tenure of more than twelve years that encompassed the organization's most formative institutional development. Under her leadership, the organization established its core programs, secured its permanent home, achieved national accreditation, and built community relationships that would support long-term growth.

Permanent Headquarters (1989)

In **1989**, the organization made one of its most significant investments: the purchase of a permanent headquarters facility at **7318 North Tamiami Trail in Sarasota**. This acquisition provided the organization with a stable, owned facility that eliminated dependence on leased space and created a permanent community presence.

National Accreditation (1994)

In **1994**, the organization achieved accreditation from the *National Accreditation Council for Blind and Low Vision Services (NAC)*. This recognition validated the quality and effectiveness of the organization's programming against nationally recognized standards for vision rehabilitation service delivery — enhancing credibility with funders, government partners, and referring healthcare providers.

Endowment and Long-Term Sustainability (1995)

In **1995**, the organization established its endowment fund, accompanied by the creation of the *Dr. James Morrish Sr. Golf Tournament* — a community fundraising event that has supported the organization's mission for three decades. The establishment of an endowment reflects a sophisticated approach to long-term sustainability: building a reserve of invested assets whose earnings protect against revenue fluctuations.

Year	Milestone	Strategic Significance
1985	Incorporated as Mana-Sota Center for the Blind	Founded the regional provider base in Southwest Florida
1986	First training classes at Happiness House; 35 clients served	Launched direct client services
1987	First Division of Blind Services contract executed	Established government partnership & stable funding
1988	Leslie Neese hired as first Executive Director	Transitioned to professionally managed organization

Year	Milestone	Strategic Significance
1988	Renamed Mana-Sota Lighthouse for the Blind	Joined the national Lighthouse movement
1989	Purchased headquarters at 7318 N. Tamiami Trail	Created long-term physical infrastructure
1994	5-year accreditation from National Accreditation Council	Validated program quality and institutional credibility
1995	Endowment fund established; golf tournament created	Built long-term financial sustainability

PROGRAM INNOVATION & TECHNOLOGY EXPANSION (1995–2010)

The period from the mid-1990s through the end of the first decade of the twenty-first century was characterized by rapid technological change that fundamentally transformed the landscape of vision rehabilitation. The emergence of personal computing, the internet, and digital assistive technologies created new opportunities — and new learning needs — for individuals with visual impairments.

Computer Lab and ZoomText (2000–2001)

Around **2000–2001**, the organization created a computer lab on-site, providing clients with direct access to computers configured with assistive technology software. The lab was equipped with **ZoomText magnification software**, enabling clients with low vision to access computer screens and digital content. This investment represented a significant commitment to technology-enabled rehabilitation.

The introduction of computer training aligned with a broader organizational evolution, marked in **2001** by a name change to *Lighthouse of Manasota*. This renaming reflected both a refinement of organizational identity and a connection to the broader Lighthouse network.

Youth Transition Program (2009)

One of the most significant programmatic innovations of this period was the launch of the **Youth Transition Program in 2009**. This program targeted a historically underserved population: students between the ages of 14 and 22 who were navigating the transition from secondary school to higher education and employment.

The program recognized that young people with vision impairment face distinct challenges in preparing for adult independence. Standard school-based special education programs often lacked the specialized vision rehabilitation expertise necessary to prepare students for the demands of college, vocational training, and employment. The Youth Transition Program filled this gap by providing individualized rehabilitation training, assistive technology education, and career readiness support.

> **YOUTH TRANSITION PROGRAM**
>
> *Serving students ages 14–22 with vision impairment, the program focuses on independent living skills, assistive technology proficiency, and career readiness — working in partnership with school districts, the Florida Division of Blind Services Vocational Rehabilitation program, and higher education institutions to create seamless transition pathways.*

Blind Babies Program (c. 1996–2010s)

As Mana-Sota Lighthouse for the Blind expanded during the 1990s, organizational leadership recognized a significant unmet need among infants and preschool-aged children who were blind or visually impaired. At the time, highly specialized developmental intervention services for blind babies and their families were not consistently available within traditional early childhood systems. In response, Mana-Sota Lighthouse became one of Florida's original Blind Babies Program pilot providers in approximately 1996, positioning the organization among the earliest agencies in the state to deliver blindness-specific early intervention services for infants and young children (Florida OPPAGA, 2001).

The Blind Babies Program emerged through collaboration between community rehabilitation agencies and the Florida Division of Blind Services, which sought to develop effective early intervention models capable of supporting visually impaired children within the home, educational, and community environments. Mana-Sota Lighthouse joined a select group of pioneering Florida agencies participating in the initial pilot initiative, helping establish what would later become Florida's statewide Blind Babies Program (Florida OPPAGA, 2001).

The program provided specialized services for children from birth through age five, emphasizing developmental growth during the most critical stages of early childhood. Services included home-based instruction, developmental intervention, family education, functional vision support, sensory development, orientation and mobility foundations, school-readiness preparation, and parent coaching. Certified Teachers of the Visually Impaired (TVIs) and rehabilitation professionals worked directly with families to help children build communication, motor, sensory, cognitive, and independent living skills.

The program reflected the organization's broader philosophy that blindness should never limit a child's opportunity to explore, learn, participate, and develop independence. Families received guidance on creating accessible home environments, encouraging developmental exploration, and supporting early learning through tactile, auditory, and sensory-rich experiences. The initiative also helped prepare children for successful transitions into preschool and kindergarten environments.

By the late 1990s and early 2000s, the pilot initiative had expanded statewide, and Florida formally established the Blind Babies Program through legislative action in 2000 (Florida Division of Blind Services, 2000). Mana-Sota Lighthouse remained an active participant in the evolving early intervention system and continued operating its Early Childhood Program throughout the following decades. Organizational impact reports from the late 2010s documented ongoing services for infants, toddlers, and preschool-aged children across Southwest Florida, including hundreds of annual service hours supporting children and their families (Lighthouse Vision Loss Center Impact Report, 2018–2019).

Over time, however, Florida's early intervention landscape evolved significantly. As additional providers and overlapping regional systems emerged, including organizations already delivering similar infant blindness and developmental intervention services, demand within the service area was no longer sufficient to sustainably support multiple specialized programs simultaneously. In response to these changing regional dynamics, Lighthouse Vision Loss Center ultimately transitioned away from direct Blind Babies and birth-to-five programming in order to focus organizational resources on other blindness rehabilitation, educational, assistive technology, transition-age youth, and independent living initiatives serving the broader community.

Although the Blind Babies Program eventually concluded, its legacy remains an important chapter in the organization's history. The initiative demonstrated Mana-Sota Lighthouse's willingness to pioneer innovative services in response to unmet community needs and reflected the organization's longstanding commitment to ensuring that individuals with vision loss receive support as early as possible in life.

Key Assistive Technologies Introduced

- **Screen reading software** (JAWS, NVDA) — enabling computer and internet access for individuals with no functional vision
- **Magnification software** (ZoomText, MAGic) — enabling access for individuals with low vision
- **Smartphone accessibility** (VoiceOver, TalkBack) — enabling mobile communication and information access
- **GPS and navigation applications** — enabling greater independence in community travel
- **Optical character recognition (OCR)** — enabling access to printed materials in digital form

Children's Program: Development & Reestablishment (Early 2000s; Relaunched 2025)

As Lighthouse Vision Loss Center expanded its rehabilitation and educational services during the late 1990s and early 2000s, organizational leadership increasingly recognized that school-aged children with visual impairments required specialized support extending beyond traditional classroom instruction. While local school districts provided academic services, many children and families continued to need blindness-specific training focused on independence, self-advocacy, mobility, assistive technology, social development, and life skills.

In response, the organization developed a Children's Program designed to provide supplemental blindness rehabilitation and enrichment services for school-aged youth. Historical organizational records and program materials indicate the program was active by the early 2000s and served children approximately ages five through early adolescence (Lighthouse Vision Loss Center Historical Materials).

Over time, the Children's Program became an important extension of the organization's broader mission to support individuals with vision loss across the lifespan. Activities evolved to include after-school programming, family engagement, community outings, recreational activities, independent living instruction, self-advocacy development, and pre-vocational skill building. The program emphasized helping children develop the practical and social skills necessary to succeed both academically and personally.

As the organization navigated broader operational and strategic transitions over the years, the Children's Program was eventually discontinued during an earlier restructuring period. Although precise historical records documenting the original launch date and temporary closure period remain limited, the program itself reflected Lighthouse's longstanding commitment to youth development and family-centered rehabilitation services.

Recognizing a renewed community need for blindness-specific youth programming, Lighthouse Vision Loss Center officially reestablished the Children's Program in April 2025. The relaunched program was designed

specifically for children ages five through thirteen and focused on providing supplemental instruction and support beyond what students typically receive within school systems alone (Lighthouse Vision Loss Center Program Announcements, 2025).

The modern Children's Program incorporates Expanded Core Curriculum principles and includes after-school instruction, weekend sessions, summer and school-break programming, orientation and mobility support, social skills development, self-advocacy training, assistive technology exposure, pre-vocational preparation, and family engagement services. Community-based experiences such as field trips, museums, recreational outings, and enrichment activities were also integrated into the program model to help children build confidence, independence, and community participation skills.

The relaunch of the Children's Program in 2025 represented a significant milestone in the organization's continuing evolution and reaffirmed Lighthouse Vision Loss Center's commitment to serving blind and visually impaired individuals across all stages of life. The program's return also reflected the organization's broader strategic emphasis on rebuilding youth services, strengthening family-centered programming, and expanding educational opportunities for children with vision loss throughout Southwest Florida.

MAJOR MILESTONES — CHILDREN'S PROGRAM

Year	Milestone
Late 1990s / Early 2000s	Lighthouse develops supplemental Children's Program for school-aged youth with vision loss
2000s	Program expands to include social development, independence training, mobility, recreation, and family engagement
Subsequent Years	Program discontinued during organizational restructuring and service realignment period
April 2025	Lighthouse Vision Loss Center officially relaunches the Children's Program
2025	Program reestablished for children ages 5–13 using Expanded Core Curriculum framework

REGIONAL EXPANSION & INSTITUTIONAL GROWTH (2011–PRESENT)

The period from 2011 to the present has been defined by geographic expansion, organizational scaling, and the evolution of leadership. The organization grew from a two-county provider to a five-county regional institution, significantly increasing both its service footprint and its community impact.

Five-County Expansion (2011)

In **2011**, Lighthouse Vision Loss Center formally expanded its services into Charlotte, DeSoto, and Highlands counties, establishing the five-county service region that the organization maintains today. This expansion addressed unmet rehabilitation needs in communities that lacked access to comparable services — particularly rural and inland counties where residents were often required to travel long distances to receive support.

Figure 7 *Lighthouse Five-County Service Region — Southwest Florida*

The five-county region encompasses both densely populated coastal communities and sparsely populated rural areas. Manatee and Sarasota counties are home to large urban and suburban populations; Charlotte, DeSoto, and Highlands counties include significant rural populations with fewer service infrastructure resources. Serving this geographic diversity requires both fixed-site programming at the Sarasota headquarters and robust outreach capacity.

Organizational Rebranding (2019)

In April **2019**, the organization rebranded from *Lighthouse of Manasota* to *Lighthouse Vision Loss Education Center*. This change reflected an evolution in organizational identity and mission emphasis — better

communicating the organization's focus on education and skill development as the core of its rehabilitation model, while broadening the geographic reference beyond Manasota.

Peepers / Lumination Low Vision Store (2015–Present)

The Lighthouse low vision store traces its origins to **2015**, when a Patterson Foundation consulting engagement produced a comprehensive earned income business plan to grow the store into the region's premier resource for vision aids. Following that plan, the store was rebranded and remodeled as **Peepers** — a consultation-based, brick-and-mortar destination providing individualized, hands-on low vision product demonstrations. When the COVID-19 pandemic forced the physical store to close in March 2020, Lighthouse pivoted swiftly: on **November 2, 2020**, an e-commerce platform was launched to maintain access to most of the store's product catalog across the full five-county service area — ensuring clients and community members could continue purchasing low vision aids regardless of the closure. Magnifying devices, which require hands-on fitting, remained available by waitlist appointment for when the store could safely reopen.

The store was subsequently rebranded as **Lumination Low Vision Store**, reflecting a refinement of its identity and its explicit focus on low vision solutions. The rebrand reinforced the store's positioning as a dedicated resource for the low vision community — complementing the organization's rehabilitation services with direct access to the products that support independent living, and generating supplementary revenue in support of the mission.

In **2025**, Lumination expanded its product offering to include **Ray-Ban Meta smart glasses** — AI-driven wearable technology designed to help individuals with low vision improve independence and daily navigation. The store showcases these glasses at the Sarasota headquarters, allowing clients to experience the technology firsthand before purchasing. Ray-Ban Meta glasses leverage artificial intelligence to assist with tasks such as identifying objects, reading text, and navigating environments, representing a significant advance in accessible assistive technology for the low vision community.

Alongside the store's expanded product line, the organization's **Assistive Technology department** developed dedicated training modules for Ray-Ban Meta glasses and now offers structured courses to clients who purchase them. This integration of retail and training reflects a distinctive organizational model: clients are not simply sold a device, but are supported through the full adoption process — from product demonstration through purchase and into hands-on skills training — ensuring that assistive technology translates into real-world gains in independence and daily function.

Store Origins: From Peepers to Lumination (2015–2025)

The origins of Lumination Low Vision Store stretch back to **2015**, when the **Patterson Foundation** invited Lighthouse to participate in its *Margins and Missions Ignition* program — a 30-month consulting engagement designed to help nonprofits strengthen mission impact through earned-income strategies. The resulting *Earned Income Business Plan* (finalized February 2016) set an ambitious course: grow the low vision store into the preeminent regional resource for vision aids, achieve dominant referral share from area eye care professionals, and reach a broader population of individuals living with vision loss and their caregivers. To signal that transformation, the store was **rebranded and remodeled as Peepers** — complete with a new logo, branded merchandise, interior and exterior signage, vehicle wraps, an upgraded point-of-sale system, and a dedicated marketing plan encompassing the website, social media, and email outreach.

Pandemic, Resilience, and the "Refresh" (2020–2021)

In **March 2020**, the COVID-19 pandemic forced the physical store to close for nearly a year. Lighthouse responded swiftly by launching an e-commerce platform that kept most of its product catalog accessible to customers across the region. One category, however, could not move online: **magnifying devices**. Because selecting the right magnifier requires hands-on, individualized testing, those sales were suspended — though customers who called requesting magnification appointments were placed on a waitlist for when the store could safely reopen.

By **2021**, post-pandemic headwinds — declining foot traffic, staffing instability, and suppressed sales — had caused the store's financials to deteriorate to the point where the board was seriously considering closure. Instead, Lighthouse returned to the Patterson Foundation and enrolled in a second consulting engagement: the *Margins and Missions Ignition Reboot and Refresh*. The five-week sprint of consulting sessions revealed a pivotal insight: the earned income model itself was not broken — its *execution and monitoring* were. A full reboot was unnecessary; what the store needed was a focused refresh.

The refresh strategy sharpened the store's focus decisively: concentrate on **high-margin electronic magnifiers** — the products that most directly serve clients with vision loss and generate the greatest return — and migrate lower-margin everyday items to the online store. Lighthouse positioned itself as the **largest retailer of magnifying products in Sarasota and Southwest Florida** and became an **authorized reseller of Eschenbach**, widely recognized as one of the highest-quality low vision product lines in the world. Crucially, the board approved the hire of a dedicated *Low Vision Magnification Technician* — a full-time, five-day-a-week specialist capable of delivering the individualized, one-on-one consultations required for magnification sales. The power of that decision was validated almost immediately: when the store reopened, the ophthalmic technician worked through the waitlist and assisted **28 customers between March and June 2021**, generating gross sales of **$21,000** in just four months.

Lumination: A Renewed Mission (2025–Present)

The completion of the Lighthouse headquarters renovation in **March 2025** gave the store a fresh start and a new name: **Lumination**. With the rebrand came a series of operational modernizations. In partnership with the accounting firm InDinero, Lighthouse migrated its entire inventory system to **Square**, aligning inventory management with payment processing and enabling real-time tracking of both retail sales and the assistive items issued directly to clients under two Division of Blind Services contracts. This positions Lumination as a *one-stop shop* for the full range of products that benefit individuals with vision impairment — from writing guides and bump dots to talking clocks, home safety products, and advanced electronic magnifiers.

The store's staffing model reflects the same client-centered philosophy that defines Lighthouse's rehabilitation programs. **Star Schloneger**, who previously served simultaneously as an ADL Instructor and part-time magnification specialist in the Peepers store, transitioned in April 2025 to a full-time role as *Lumination Store Specialist,* and in 2026*, Manager*. Her background combines years of customer service and eyecare experience with her work as an ADL instructor — a depth of expertise that translates directly into the individualized, unhurried consultations the store provides. She is supported by a part-time volunteer, **Timothy**, a retired optician with strong community connections in the area.

Outreach and community engagement are led by **Megan Kvedar**, who joined as *Low Vision Outreach Coordinator* in 2024. Trained by Star in personalized magnification consultations, Megan holds dedicated one-on-one appointment days — typically on Wednesdays, with additional dates added as demand requires — that give customers uninterrupted time to explore the full range of magnification devices with a specialist. She also schedules *Home Magnification Appointments* for customers who cannot travel to the store, and coordinates *Marketing and Magnification Events* at independent living communities, assisted living facilities, senior living campuses, and other organizations serving the visually impaired throughout the region.

Perhaps the most distinctive feature of the Lumination model is the **"dream team"** created by Star, Megan, and *Client Experience Coordinator* **Mary Boswell**. On magnification appointment days, after customers have completed their product consultations with Star or Megan, Mary joins them to discuss Lighthouse's full range of programs — and has frequently assisted customers in *applying for Division of Blind Services support on the spot*. This seamless handoff from retail customer to rehabilitation client represents a uniquely integrated model: Lumination is not simply a store — it is a well-appointed front door to the full Lighthouse mission.

Hurricane Ian and Resilience (2022)

In September **2022**, Hurricane Ian made landfall in Southwest Florida as one of the most powerful hurricanes in Florida history. The Lighthouse headquarters sustained significant damage during the storm, prompting planning for future capital improvements. The event underscored the critical importance of organizational resilience and the heightened vulnerability of clients with vision impairment during emergency situations.

Current Operations and Strategic Direction

Under the current leadership of CEO **Alexandra Elman Foley**, who assumed the role in 2023, the organization is advancing a period of strategic modernization and repositioning. The organization's current materials describe it as "the only nationally accredited nonprofit providing rehabilitation training in its five-county region" — a positioning that emphasizes both quality (accreditation) and regional exclusivity.

Lighthouse Technology Solutions

A further milestone in the organization's strategic diversification is the creation of **Lighthouse Technology Solutions (LTS)**, a formal division of Lighthouse operating under its own brand and website (lighthousets.org). LTS offers comprehensive in-home and remote technical support services to residents and businesses across our entire service area.

LTS provides a broad range of technology services to the general public, including computer troubleshooting and setup, virus and malware removal, data backup and transfer, data recovery, smart device setup and troubleshooting, home Wi-Fi optimization, operating system installation and upgrades, and phone and tablet repair. Services are delivered in-home, remotely, and as drop-off repairs — making professional technical support accessible to clients regardless of mobility or location.

The division's founding rationale is explicitly mission-driven: *all proceeds from Lighthouse Technology Solutions are directed back into funding the vital programs and services of Lighthouse Vision Loss Center.* This social enterprise model creates a self-sustaining revenue stream that reduces dependence on grant funding and philanthropic donations, while simultaneously serving the broader community. LTS also embodies the organization's vision of accessible technology — its stated mission is to deliver accessible and inclusive technical support, and its vision is to create a world where technology is accessible to everyone.

Lighthouse Technology Solutions operates with a referral incentive program, offering clients 33% off their first service when referred by an existing customer — a model designed to grow the client base organically through community word-of-mouth while extending the organization's presence across the region. LTS can be reached at

(941) 404-2003 and serves as a visible example of Lighthouse Vision Loss Center's commitment to innovation, self-sufficiency, and community service beyond its core rehabilitation mandate.

FINANCIAL DEVELOPMENT & ORGANIZATIONAL CAPACITY

Financial data derived from **IRS Form 990 filings** provides a rigorous, independently verified record of Lighthouse Vision Loss Center's fiscal performance across the period 2011–2024. This data documents the organization's growth in revenue, expense management, and net asset accumulation — collectively representing the strengthening of organizational capacity over more than a decade.

> **DATA NOTE**
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> *All financial data is derived from verified IRS Form 990 filings accessed through ProPublica Nonprofit Explorer. The 2024 figures include a one-time bequest that materially elevated revenue for that year and should be interpreted accordingly. Pre-2011 Form 990 data requires manual extraction from IRS PDF archives and is not included in this analysis. Net asset figures for fiscal year 2024–2025 are pending final resolution and will be presented at the April 2026 board meeting.*

Revenue and Expense Analysis

Over the 13-year period from 2011 to 2024, Lighthouse Vision Loss Center's total annual revenue grew from **$1.32 million to $2.88 million** — an increase of approximately **118%**. This growth was not linear; the organization experienced several years of revenue fluctuation before achieving more consistent growth in the later years of the period.

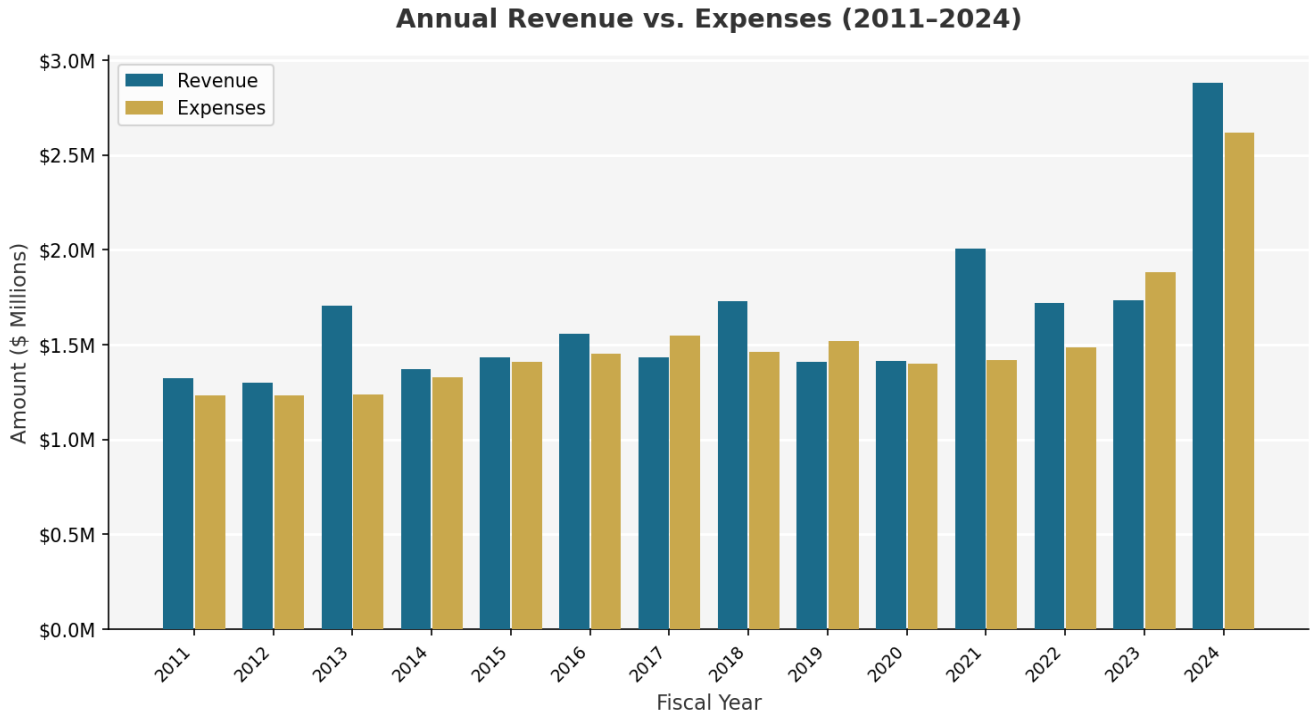

Figure 1 *Annual Revenue vs. Expenses — IRS Form 990 Verified (2011–2024)*

Key observations from the revenue-expense comparison:

- **2013:** Revenue spike to $1.70M driven by exceptional philanthropic activity; largest single-year surplus of $466,545
- **2017 & 2019:** Deficit years with expenses exceeding revenue by approximately $114K and $109K respectively
- **2021:** Second-largest single-year surplus ($589,846), reflecting elevated philanthropic activity during the pandemic period
- **2024:** Revenue of $2.88M significantly elevated by a one-time bequest; underlying operating revenue is closer to the 2023 level

Net Assets Growth

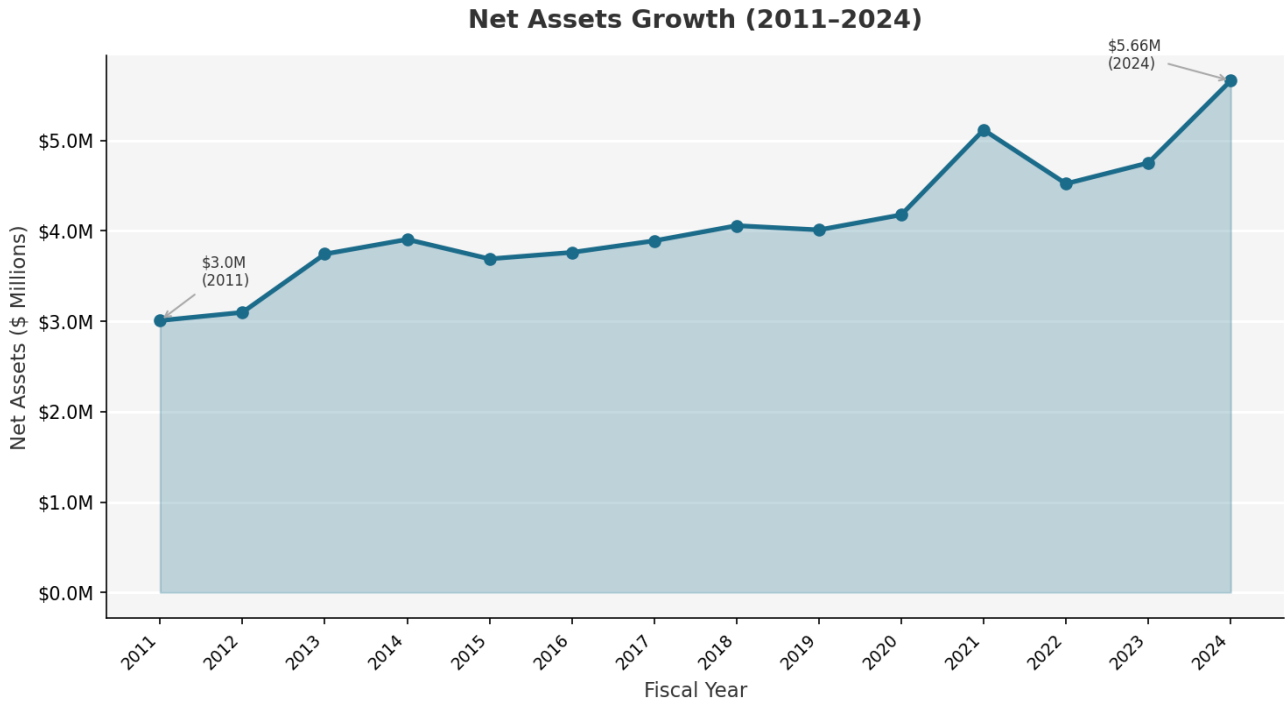

Figure 2 *Net Assets Growth Trajectory (2011–2024)*

Net assets — the difference between an organization's total assets and total liabilities — represent the accumulated financial resources available to support mission delivery. For Lighthouse Vision Loss Center, net assets grew from **$3.01 million in 2011 to $5.66 million in 2024**, an **88% increase** representing substantial strengthening of organizational financial position.

This growth reflects the organization's long-term financial trajectory: despite periodic operating deficits, the overall pattern has been one of asset accumulation. Strong net assets provide the financial cushion to weather revenue fluctuations, fund capital improvements, and invest in program development.

Chart legend: The teal shaded area and line represent annual net assets from 2011 to 2024. The upward trajectory of the line illustrates the overall directional growth in net assets across the period.

Annual Surplus / Deficit Pattern

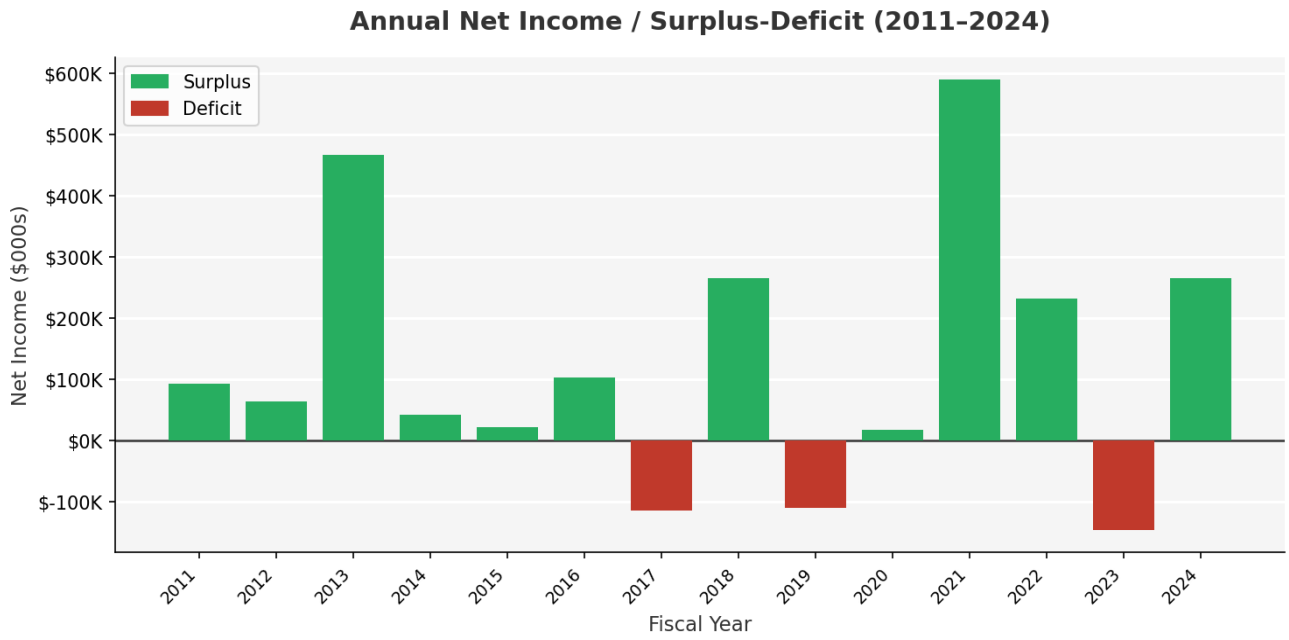

Figure 3 *Annual Net Income — Surplus and Deficit Years (2011–2024)*

The net income pattern over the 13-year period shows **eleven surplus years and three deficit years**. This ratio reflects a financially resilient organization capable of absorbing periodic downturns while maintaining long-term asset growth. The deficit years (2017, 2019, 2023) were offset by prior-year surpluses and did not impair the organization's long-term financial trajectory.

Operating Margin Analysis

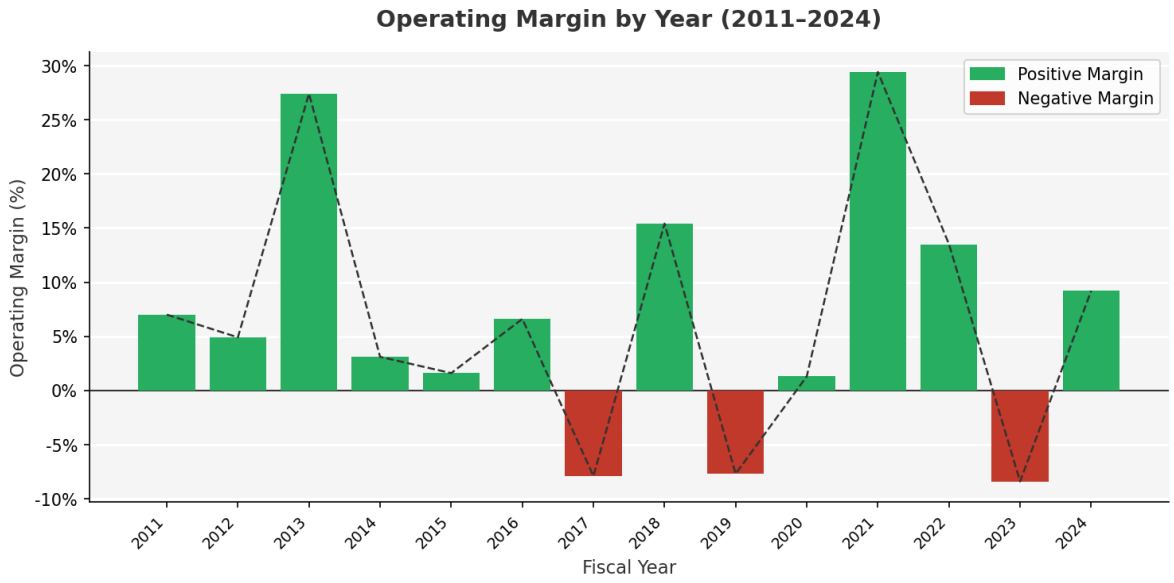

Figure 5 *Operating Margin by Year (2011–2024)*

Estimated Revenue Sources

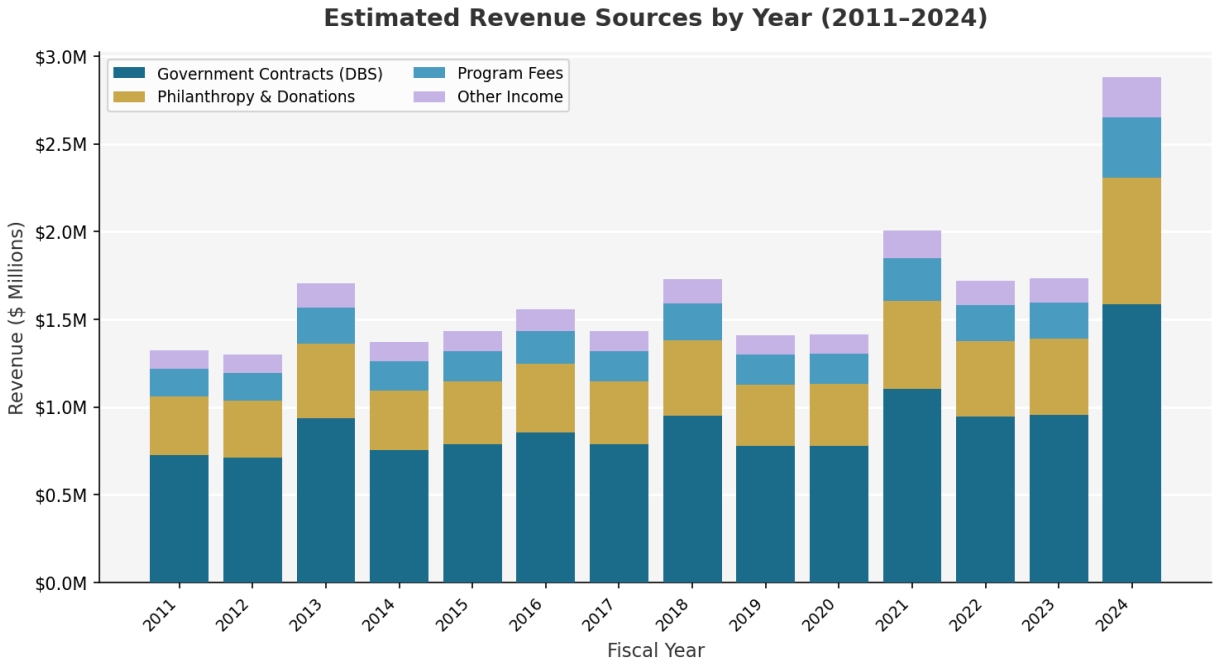

Figure 8 *Estimated Revenue Source Composition by Year (2011–2024)*

Note: Revenue source breakdown is estimated based on typical nonprofit vision rehabilitation organization funding structures. Actual per-year source data requires detailed review of Schedule A and other Form 990 attachments. The Division of Blind Services government contract represents the most stable and significant revenue source.

Financial Summary — IRS Form 990 Verified (2011–2024)

Year	Revenue	Expenses	Net Income	Net Assets
2011	$1,324,175	$1,231,634	$92,541	$3,008,873
2012	$1,297,357	$1,233,256	$64,101	$3,099,157
2013	$1,704,537	$1,237,992	$466,545	$3,744,543
2014	$1,369,323	$1,326,679	$42,644	$3,906,635
2015	$1,430,937	$1,408,413	$22,524	$3,691,058
2016	$1,555,770	$1,452,662	$103,108	$3,762,956
2017	$1,433,129	$1,547,004	($113,875)	$3,891,365
2018	$1,727,338	$1,461,388	$265,950	$4,058,860
2019	$1,411,771	$1,520,680	($108,909)	$4,012,072
2020	$1,415,986	$1,397,705	$18,281	$4,178,871
2021	$2,008,087	$1,418,241	$589,846	$5,118,810
2022	$1,718,494	$1,486,773	$231,721	$4,523,116
2023	$1,736,617	$1,881,797	($145,180)	$4,753,716
2024	$2,882,141	$2,616,455	$265,686	$5,663,267

PROGRAM OUTCOMES & COMMUNITY IMPACT

The growth of Lighthouse Vision Loss Center's program reach is documented across multiple independent sources spanning nearly four decades. Published outcome data drawn from organizational impact reports, case-for-support documents, and Florida Division of Blind Services meeting records provide a longitudinal picture of expanding community impact.

Client Volume Growth

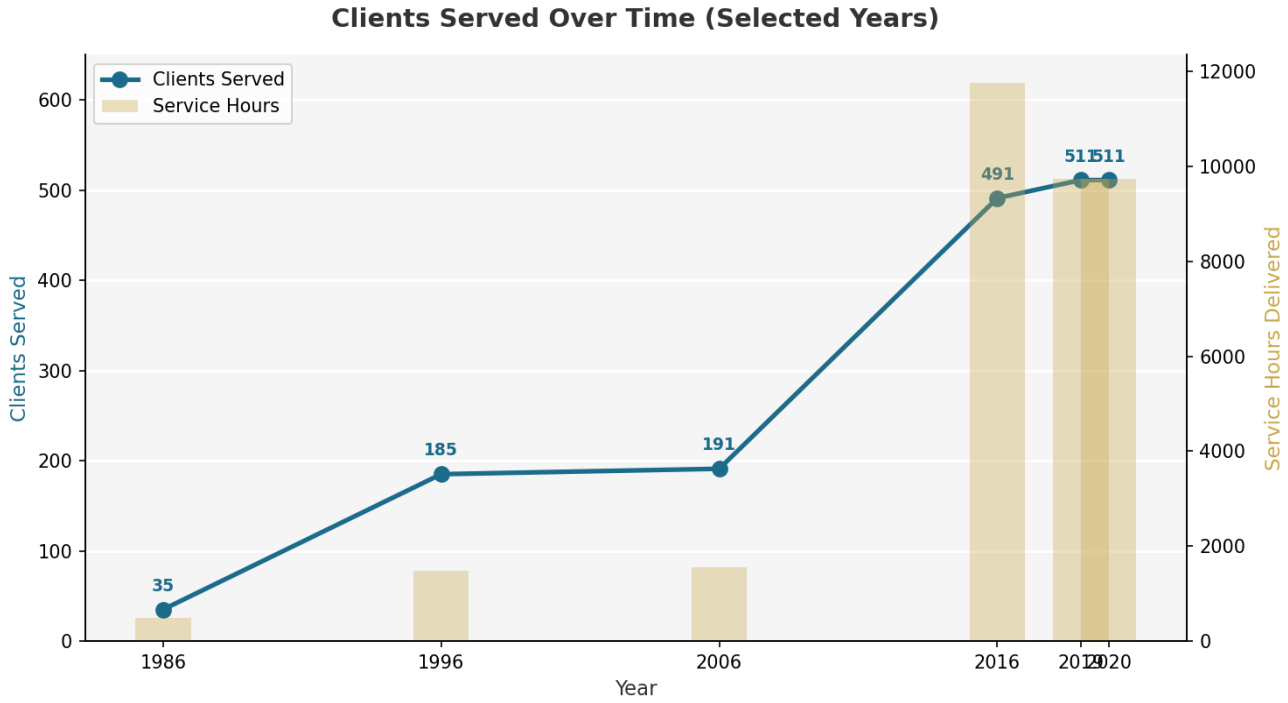

Figure 4 *Clients Served and Service Hours Delivered — Selected Years (1986–2020)*

The growth trajectory of client volume reflects both expanded organizational capacity and increasing community demand. From **35 clients in 1986** to **511+ clients annually by 2019–2020**, the organization grew its direct service reach by more than **1,360%** — a result of geographic expansion, workforce investment, and deepening community partnerships.

Verified Outcome Data

Year	Clients Served	Service Hours	Hrs / Client	DBS Clients	Outreach Contacts	Source
1986	35	480	14	—	—	Case for Support
1996	185	1,480	8	—	—	Case for Support
2006	191	1,562	8	—	—	Case for Support
2016	491	11,768	24	—	—	Case for Support
2019	511	9,746	—	—	—	Impact Report 2018–19
2020	511	9,746	—	399	12,550	FRCB Meeting Minutes

The 2020 FRCB Meeting data provides important granularity: of 511 clients served, **399 (78%) were referred through the Florida Division of Blind Services** — confirming the organization's central role in Florida's official vision rehabilitation infrastructure. The remaining 112 clients (22%) received services without DBS referral, reflecting direct community access.

The **12,550 outreach contacts** documented in 2020 demonstrate reach well beyond direct service clients to community members served through educational outreach, awareness events, and information provision — supporting early identification of vision loss and timely access to rehabilitation services.

Five Core Service Domains

Lighthouse Vision Loss Center delivers services across five interconnected domains, each addressing a distinct dimension of the rehabilitation continuum:

1. Independent Living Skills Training

Encompasses the practical techniques and adaptations necessary for daily life management without functional vision — including home management, personal care, meal preparation, and financial management. Mastery of independent living skills is foundational to community integration and enables clients to remain in their homes and maintain self-sufficiency.

2. Orientation and Mobility Instruction

Teaches clients to move safely and independently through both familiar and unfamiliar environments. O&M specialists provide training in adaptive mobility aids (white cane), sighted guide techniques, landmark identification, and navigating public transportation. Research consistently demonstrates that O&M training significantly reduces fall risk — a critical concern for older adults with vision impairment.

3. Assistive Technology Education

Provides clients with skills to use adaptive software, devices, and techniques to access information, maintain employment, and remain connected to their communities. Technology education has become increasingly central to the rehabilitation model as digital access has become essential to participation in modern life.

4. Youth Transition Programming

The Youth Transition Program (launched 2009) supports students ages 14–22 in developing skills for independent adult life, higher education, and employment — focusing on independent living skills, assistive technology proficiency, career exploration, and self-advocacy in partnership with school districts and vocational rehabilitation programs.

5. Counseling and Emotional Support

Vision loss is a significant life event that frequently triggers grief, anxiety, depression, and social isolation. Counseling services address the psychological and social dimensions of vision impairment, supporting clients in developing effective coping strategies and adjusting to disability in ways that preserve dignity and quality of life.

DOCUMENTED OUTCOMES

Published research and organizational outcome data indicate that vision rehabilitation services produce measurable improvements across multiple dimensions: increased independence in daily living tasks, reduced fall risk, improved psychological wellbeing, greater community participation, and enhanced employment outcomes for working-age adults. The economic value of preventing vision-loss-related disability, fall injuries, and care dependence is substantial.

EMPLOYMENT SERVICES: VOCATIONAL REHABILITATION & PILOT PROGRAM OUTCOMES

Employment Services: Vocational Rehabilitation & Pilot Program Outcomes

Lighthouse Vision Loss Center began integrating job-readiness instruction with Assistive Technology training in 2010 under the direction of Judi Boylan, Career & Assistive Technology Director. Through sustained client interaction, Boylan identified a persistent challenge: despite acquiring strong technical and adaptive skills, many individuals continued to face significant barriers to competitive employment.

Several systemic service gaps emerged over time. Clients lacked structured instruction in core employment competencies — including résumé development, interviewing, workplace communication, networking, and professional self-advocacy. Many also reported diminished confidence in navigating employment while managing vision loss, and no consistent pathway existed to connect training participation with measurable employment outcomes.

After nearly a decade of direct observation, Boylan recognized the need for a formalized Employment Services Program aligned with vocational rehabilitation outcomes. As she noted: "Over the years, I observed a recurring gap: while clients gained strong technical skills, many struggled to successfully transition into employment."

In 2020, Lighthouse launched a structured, module-based Employment Services Program designed to support participants across the full continuum of employment preparation — from career exploration through long-term workplace success. The program comprised six sequential modules:

- Target — identifying career interests and employment goals
- Accomplish — résumé and cover letter development
- Proceed — networking and professional branding
- Succeed — interviewing preparation and communication strategies
- Prepare — mock interviews and applied practice

- Success — benefits planning and the Ticket to Work program

The program was delivered entirely through a virtual platform, substantially reducing the transportation barriers that had historically limited participation among individuals with visual impairments. This model also improved service consistency and expanded geographic reach across the organization's service area. To enhance real-world applicability, the program incorporated guest speakers and subject matter experts from across the country, including attorneys, business owners, career coaches, a state supreme court justice, and employed professionals who are blind or visually impaired.

The program was structured as a blended service model, combining group instruction, individualized support, and applied engagement to provide both scalable training and personalized vocational guidance. Within approximately eight months of launch, it received recognition from the Florida Department of Education Division of Blind Services and was formally expanded as a pilot initiative, reflecting its alignment with vocational rehabilitation performance objectives. The program has since been fully integrated into broader vocational rehabilitation service delivery.

In developing the initiative, Lighthouse addressed several operational barriers. Staff created a standardized curriculum internally, as no prior model existed. Engagement and retention were supported through repeatable modules, progress tracking, individualized follow-up, and guest speaker participation. All program components were designed to align with vocational rehabilitation documentation standards and measurable employment outcomes.

Looking ahead, Lighthouse anticipates expanding virtual and hybrid delivery models, broadening national partnerships, strengthening outcome tracking systems, and developing specialized employment pathways for participants with diverse career goals. Long-term planning includes exploration of credentialing and certification-aligned workforce pathways to improve employment competitiveness and sustainability.

Program Summary — VR & Pilot Employment Services (Through December 2025)

Lighthouse Vision Loss Center's employment services operate through two distinct tracks: a traditional Vocational Rehabilitation (VR) program administered in partnership with the Florida Division of Blind Services, and a Pilot Program designed for individuals with more complex employment barriers. The following outcomes reflect 2026 Employment Services referral and placement tracking data for all active and closed cases through December 2025.

Since the program's inception, a combined total of 70 placements have been achieved across 130 referrals, representing an overall placement rate of 53.1%. The VR track produced a placement rate of 64.7% across 51

referrals, while the Pilot Program achieved a 45.6% rate across 79 referrals. Paid job placements account for the majority of outcomes — 27 through the VR track and 29 through the Pilot Program — with additional placements comprising non-paid work experience (3 each) and self-placements (3 and 4, respectively).

The Pilot Program's higher active client count — 27 of the 29 currently active participants — reflects its design for individuals requiring more intensive, longer-duration support. The lower placement rate within this track is consistent with the greater complexity of barriers faced by its participants, rather than indicative of reduced program efficacy.

Annual placement figures demonstrate consistent workforce engagement activity over a six-year period: 10 placements (2020), 8 (2021), 17 (2022), 10 (2023), 16 (2024), and 9 through the close of 2025. Together, the two tracks position Lighthouse to serve clients across the full spectrum of employment readiness, from those on a direct vocational rehabilitation pathway to those requiring sustained, individualized support.

Assistive Technology Program — Outcomes & Regression Analysis

The Assistive Technology (AT) Training Program is one of Lighthouse Vision Loss Center's most dynamic and rapidly scaling service lines. Launched in its current structured form in mid-2024, the program equips clients with the skills and confidence to use adaptive software, smart devices, screen readers, magnification tools, and emerging AI-powered technologies — enabling greater independence in daily living, education, and employment. The following analysis presents regression-based performance data spanning May 2024 through July 2025, drawn from monthly tracking of three core program metrics: Successful Closures, Deliverables Completed, and Active Clients Served. Linear regression models were applied to identify statistically significant trends and to quantify the relationships between program inputs and outcomes.

DATA NOTE

AT Program data covers the period May 2024 – July 2025 (15 months). Three metrics are tracked monthly: (1) Successful Closures — clients who completed their AT training goals; (2) Deliverables — total training activities and service units delivered; and (3) Active Clients — individuals enrolled and receiving services in a given month. Regression analyses were performed using ordinary least squares (OLS) with 95% confidence intervals. Statistical significance is defined as confidence intervals that do not cross zero.

Program Growth Trends (May 2024 – July 2025)

Active client enrollment in the AT program grew substantially over the 15-month observation period, rising from 48 clients in June 2024 to a sustained range of 85–94 clients by late 2024 and into 2025 — representing a near-doubling of active caseload within the program's first year. Linear regression confirms this trajectory is statistically significant (95% CI: [0.37, 5.25]), indicating genuine structural growth rather than random fluctuation. This expansion reflects growing community awareness of and demand for AT services, combined with the program's increasing capacity to enroll and support clients effectively.

Figure AT-1 *Active Client Participation in Assistive Technology Training (June 2024 – July 2025)*

The volume of training deliverables completed by the AT program showed the strongest and most consistent growth of any tracked metric. Monthly deliverables rose from approximately 157 in June 2024 to a sustained range of 275–376 by early-to-mid 2025 — more than doubling program output. Regression analysis confirms this growth is statistically significant (95% CI: [2.45, 26.40]), with a slope of approximately 14 additional deliverables per month. This metric directly reflects the program's operational capacity: as staff expertise, referral pipelines, and client enrollment matured, the program's ability to deliver individualized training sessions, assessments, and technology demonstrations scaled proportionally.

Figure AT-2 *Monthly Deliverables for Assistive Technology Training (June 2024 – July 2025)*

Successful program closures — clients who completed their AT training goals and were formally closed with measurable outcomes achieved — averaged 5–7 per month across the observation period, with a peak of 14 closures in August 2024 during the program's initial enrollment surge. While the linear trend for closures over time does not reach conventional statistical significance (95% CI: [−0.57, 0.73]), this is consistent with a program that expanded its active caseload substantially — reflecting intentional investment in building pipeline rather than maximizing near-term closures. As the current cohort of 85–94 active clients progresses through their training plans, successful closure volumes are expected to increase proportionally. The data confirms that program growth is front-loaded in enrollment and capacity, with closure outcomes following on a natural lag.

Figure AT-3 *Successful Program Closures — Assistive Technology Training (May 2024 – July 2025)*

Statistical Significance Summary

Regression analysis using 95% confidence intervals was applied across six model specifications to assess the statistical reliability of observed AT program trends. The chart below presents regression slope coefficients and their confidence intervals. Bars entirely above zero indicate statistically significant positive relationships; bars crossing zero indicate trends not yet distinguishable from natural variation.

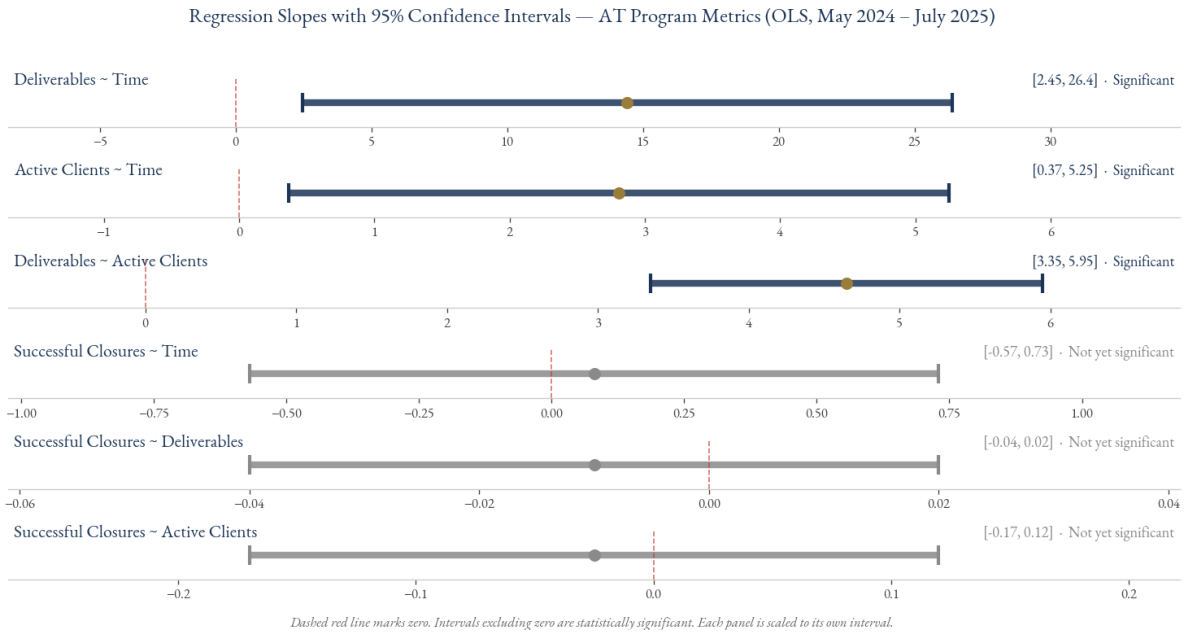

Figure AT-4 *Regression Slopes with 95% Confidence Intervals — AT Program Metrics*

Regression Model	95% CI	Significant?	Interpretation
Deliverables ~ Time	[2.45, 26.40]	Yes	Program output scaling consistently over time
Active Clients ~ Time	[0.37, 5.25]	Yes	Caseload growing; genuine demand expansion
Deliverables ~ Active Clients	[3.35, 5.95]	Yes	Each new client drives ~4.6 additional deliverables/month
Successful Closures ~ Time	[−0.57, 0.73]	Not yet	Program investing in pipeline; closures expected to rise
Successful Closures ~ Deliverables	[−0.04, 0.02]	Not yet	Closures driven by readiness, not volume alone
Successful Closures ~ Active Clients	[−0.17, 0.12]	Not yet	Client tenure and training depth matter more than headcount

Strategic Implications for the AT Program

The regression data collectively paints a picture of a program in healthy, evidence-based growth. Three findings are particularly significant for organizational planning and funder communications:

- Capacity is scaling, not stagnating. Both Active Clients and Deliverables show statistically significant growth over time. This confirms that the AT program is not experiencing a plateau effect — it is actively absorbing new referrals and expanding service volume, validating recent investments in staffing and infrastructure.
- Each additional active client drives approximately 4.6 more deliverables per month. The significant Deliverables ~ Active Clients relationship (CI: [3.35, 5.95]) provides a planning benchmark: for every 10 additional clients enrolled, the program should anticipate approximately 46 more deliverable units per month. This enables evidence-based staffing projections as the program scales toward its next growth phase.
- Successful closures reflect program quality, not volume shortcuts. The non-significant relationship between closures and both deliverables and active client counts indicates that successful outcomes are not simply a function of how many sessions are delivered or how many clients are enrolled — they reflect individualized training depth and client readiness. This is a mark of program quality: Lighthouse's AT team is not closing cases prematurely to inflate metrics. As the large active cohort matures through its training plans, this quality-oriented approach is expected to produce sustained and meaningful closure outcomes over the coming program year.

LEADERSHIP CHRONOLOGY

Six executive leaders have guided Lighthouse Vision Loss Center through its four decades of development. Each leadership era reflects distinct organizational priorities and external conditions, collectively tracing the arc from a small volunteer initiative to a regional institution.

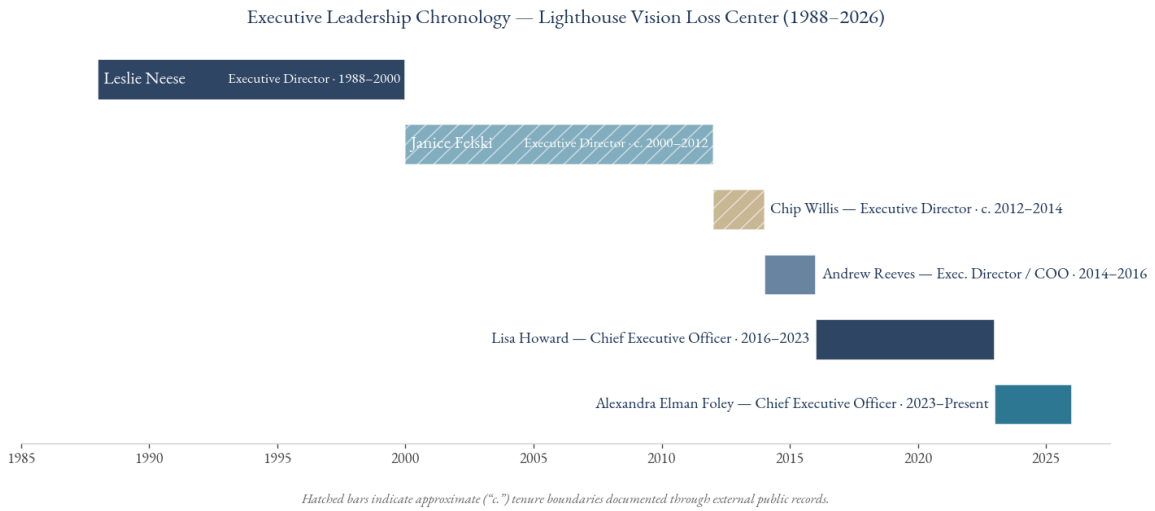

Figure 6 *Executive Leadership Chronology — Lighthouse Vision Loss Center (1988–2026)*

Leader	Title	Period	Key Contributions
Leslie Neese	Executive Director	1988–2000	First professional ED; established foundational programs; secured headquarters; achieved national accreditation; built DBS partnership
Janice Felski	Executive Director	c. 2000–2012	Led program expansion; hired long-tenured staff; guided technology transformation; validated through Sarasota Magazine and DBS records
Chip Willis	Executive Director	c. 2012–2014	Expanded services and institutional reach; documented in City of Sarasota and Patterson Foundation records
Andrew Reeves	Exec. Director / COO	2014–2016	Maintained operational continuity during leadership succession; confirmed via IRS 990 officer data
Lisa Howard	Chief Executive Officer	2016–2023	Led regional expansion; oversaw 2019 rebrand; elected Chair of Florida Agencies Serving the Blind (2021)

Leader	Title	Period	Key Contributions
Alexandra Elman Foley	Chief Executive Officer	2023–Present	Advancing strategic modernization, community partnerships, and next-phase institutional planning

Leadership Era Narratives

Leslie Neese — The Founding Professional Era (1988–2000)

Leslie Neese's 12-year tenure as the organization's first Executive Director encompasses the most critical formative period of the organization's history. Neese guided the organization through its transition from a volunteer-run initiative to a professionally managed nonprofit — overseeing the acquisition of the permanent headquarters, the achievement of national accreditation, the establishment of the endowment fund, and the development of the core program model that continues to define the organization today.

Janice Felski — The Program Expansion Era (c. 2000–2012)

Janice Felski is documented as Executive Director across the period approximately 2000–2012 through multiple independent sources including Sarasota Magazine coverage, Florida DBS newsletters, and internal staff confirmation. Her tenure coincided with the rapid expansion of digital assistive technology and the introduction of computer lab programming. Felski hired several long-tenured staff members who provided continuity through subsequent leadership transitions.

Chip Willis — The Institutional Reach Era (c. 2012–2014)

Chip Willis is documented as Director/Executive Director in City of Sarasota agenda materials (October 2012) and Patterson Foundation records. His tenure advanced institutional partnerships and community visibility. The five-county expansion that formalized in 2011 occurred during the transition between the Felski and Willis eras.

Andrew Reeves — The Transition Era (2014–2016)

Andrew Reeves served as Executive Director and Chief Operating Officer from 2014 until 2016, providing operational continuity during a period of leadership succession. IRS Form 990 data confirms Reeves' resignation in 2016 and the concurrent appointment of Lisa Howard.

Lisa Howard — The Regional Growth Era (2016–2023)

Lisa Howard's seven-year tenure as CEO was marked by significant organizational development: the 2019 rebranding to Lighthouse Vision Loss Education Center, sustained financial growth, and in 2021, election as chair of Florida Agencies Serving the Blind — a statewide recognition of her leadership. Howard transitioned in 2023 to focus on strategic partnerships as Alexandra Elman Foley assumed the CEO role.

Alexandra Elman Foley — The Strategic Modernization Era (2023–Present)

Alexandra Elman Foley was named CEO in 2023, marking the beginning of a new strategic chapter for the organization. Her leadership priorities include modernization of organizational systems, expanded community partnerships, and strategic positioning to address growing regional demand — opening a period of intentional institutional investment designed to position the organization for its next four decades of community impact.

GOVERNANCE & COMMUNITY PARTNERSHIPS

Board of Directors

Lighthouse Vision Loss Center is governed by a volunteer Board of Directors representing a cross-section of professional expertise and community commitment — including healthcare professionals, attorneys, business leaders, financial professionals, and community philanthropists committed to the organization's mission and long-term sustainability.

The Board provides oversight of organizational strategy, financial stewardship, executive performance, and community accountability. Key board responsibilities include approval of annual budgets, executive performance evaluation, policy governance, and fundraising leadership.

Key Community Partnerships

- Florida Division of Blind Services (DBS) — Primary government funder and referral partner; DBS contracts provide the foundation of program revenue and connect clients through Florida's official vocational rehabilitation system

- National Accreditation Council for Blind and Low Vision Services — Accreditation body; periodic cycles validate program quality and maintain the organization's nationally recognized standing
- Florida Agencies Serving the Blind (FASB) — Statewide coalition; CEO Lisa Howard served as FASB chair in 2021
- Local healthcare providers — Ophthalmology practices, optometry offices, and hospital systems providing patient referrals into rehabilitation services
- School districts — Collaborative relationships supporting the Youth Transition Program and enabling school-to-community transitions for students with vision impairment
- Lions Clubs International — Longstanding civic partnership; Lions Clubs were among the founding supporters of Lighthouse Vision Loss Center and continue to support the vision rehabilitation mission
- Philanthropic foundations — Including the Patterson Foundation and the Aurora Foundation, which provided critical early and ongoing philanthropic support

FACILITIES & INFRASTRUCTURE

Sarasota Headquarters — 7318 North Tamiami Trail

The organization's primary facility is its owned headquarters at 7318 North Tamiami Trail in Sarasota, Florida. Acquired in 1989, this facility has served as the organizational home for more than 35 years. The property provides dedicated space for all core programming activities and administrative operations, including:

- – Rehabilitation training classrooms equipped for independent living skills instruction
- Assistive technology laboratory with current adaptive software and devices for client training
- Orientation and mobility training areas supporting indoor mobility instruction
- Administrative offices supporting program coordination, client services, and organizational management
- Accessible design elements tailored to the needs of clients with vision impairment

Hurricane Ian Impact and Capital Planning

Hurricane Ian (September 2022) impacted the Lighthouse headquarters and prompted assessment of infrastructure needs and planning for future capital improvements. Infrastructure planning in the post-Ian period has identified opportunities to upgrade the facility to better serve clients and withstand future weather events.

Outreach and Mobile Service Capacity

To serve the full five-county region effectively, Lighthouse maintains outreach capacity extending beyond the Sarasota headquarters — including satellite programming at partner facilities in outlying counties, in-home service delivery, community outreach events, and coordination with transportation services.

The 2020 FRCB data notes approximately 27,600 hours of staff travel annually — reflecting substantial organizational investment in reaching clients across the five-county region. This outreach capacity is essential to the organization's mission of serving both urban and rural community members throughout Southwest Florida.

REGIONAL NEEDS ASSESSMENT

The demand for vision rehabilitation services in the five-county Southwest Florida region is driven by a convergence of demographic, epidemiological, and socioeconomic factors. Understanding these drivers is essential for planning organizational capacity, making the case to funders, and articulating the organization's community value proposition.

Aging Population

Southwest Florida has one of the highest concentrations of older adults of any metropolitan region in the United States. The five-county service area — and particularly the coastal counties of Manatee and Sarasota — has long attracted retirees. This matters critically for vision rehabilitation: the prevalence of vision impairment is strongly age-related. The most common causes of vision loss in adults — age-related macular degeneration, glaucoma, cataracts, and diabetic retinopathy — all increase substantially in prevalence with advancing age. Adults over 65 experience vision impairment at rates two to three times higher than younger populations.

AGING POPULATION IMPACT

Sarasota County has one of the highest proportions of adults aged 65 and older in Florida, with more than 30% of the county population in this age group. As baby boom cohorts continue to age, the population of older adults in Southwest Florida is projected to grow substantially through 2035, directly driving increased demand for vision rehabilitation services.

Leading Causes of Vision Impairment in the Region

Condition	Age Group Affected	Impact on Vision	Rehabilitation Relevance
Macular Degeneration	Adults 60+	Loss of central vision; difficulty reading, recognizing faces	High — eccentric viewing and magnification training
Glaucoma	Adults 40+	Progressive peripheral vision loss	High — mobility and orientation training
Diabetic Retinopathy	Adults with diabetes	Variable; can cause total blindness	High — all service domains
Cataracts	Adults 60+	Clouding; often treatable surgically	Moderate — transitional rehabilitation support
Congenital / Childhood	Youth	Variable severity	High — Youth Transition Program

Economic Vulnerability and Access Barriers

Economic vulnerability presents a significant access barrier to vision rehabilitation services in the region. Specialty rehabilitation services are expensive when paid out-of-pocket, and health insurance coverage for vision rehabilitation is inconsistent. DeSoto and Highlands counties — the most rural counties in the service region — have poverty rates substantially above the state average, compounding geographic isolation with financial barriers.

- DeSoto County poverty rate: approximately 18–20% — significantly above the Florida state average of approximately 13%
- Highlands County poverty rate: approximately 16–18% — also above the state average
- Transportation barriers in rural counties limit access to the Sarasota headquarters, requiring outreach service delivery
- Limited health insurance coverage for vision rehabilitation among lower-income populations increases reliance on government-funded DBS services

Regional Needs Summary

Factor	Description	Impact on Demand	Organization Response
Aging Population	High concentration of adults 65+ throughout service region	Primary driver of age-related vision loss prevalence	Adult rehabilitation services; healthcare partner outreach
Age-Related Conditions	Macular degeneration, glaucoma, diabetic retinopathy prevalent among older adults	Creates sustained, ongoing rehabilitation need	All core service domains; assistive technology training
Economic Vulnerability	Rural counties with above-average poverty; limited insurance coverage	Increases unmet need; reduces ability to pay	DBS-contracted services; philanthropy-funded scholarships
Geographic Disparity	Rural inland counties with limited transportation and service infrastructure	Reduces utilization without proactive outreach	Mobile outreach; in-home services; satellite programming
Diabetic Retinopathy	Florida has above-average diabetes prevalence	Increasing driver of vision loss cases	Partnerships with endocrinology and diabetes care providers
Youth & Young Adults	Congenital vision impairment in school-age youth	Creates need for transition-focused services	Youth Transition Program; school district partnerships

County-Level Data: Older Adult Population (65+)

All five counties in the Lighthouse service region carry substantial older adult populations, directly driving demand for vision rehabilitation services. Charlotte County leads the region at 38.7% of residents aged 65 or older, followed by Sarasota (34.1%), Highlands (32.9%), Manatee (30.5%), and DeSoto (26.2%). These figures reflect ACS 5-Year Estimates.

County	Population Aged 65+ (%)
Charlotte	38.7%
Sarasota	34.1%
Highlands	32.9%
Manatee	30.5%
DeSoto	26.2%

County-Level Data: Vision Difficulty Rates

Vision difficulty rates — the percentage of the population reporting serious vision difficulty — are highest in DeSoto and Highlands counties, the region's most rural and economically vulnerable communities. Highlands County has the highest rate at 8.2%, followed by DeSoto at 7.8%, Charlotte at 6.5%, Manatee at 5.0%, and Sarasota at 4.8%. The rural inland counties experience vision difficulty at rates approximately 1.7× higher than the coastal counties, reflecting the intersection of poverty, limited healthcare access, and higher rates of diabetes-related vision loss.

County	Vision Difficulty Rate (%)
Highlands	8.2%
DeSoto	7.8%
Charlotte	6.5%
Manatee	5.0%
Sarasota	4.8%

Poverty and Vision Difficulty: County-Level Correlation

Across the five-county service area, a strong positive correlation exists between county poverty rate and vision difficulty prevalence. DeSoto (poverty rate 21.5%, vision difficulty 7.8%) and Highlands (22.4%, 8.2%) present the most acute combined burden, while Sarasota (9.2%, 4.8%) and Manatee (11.1%, 5.0%) show considerably lower rates. This pattern underscores why government-funded DBS services and philanthropy-supported scholarships are essential to ensuring equitable access to vision rehabilitation across all five counties.

County	Poverty Rate (%)	Vision Difficulty (%)
Highlands	22.4%	8.2%
DeSoto	21.5%	7.8%
Charlotte	12.9%	6.5%
Manatee	11.1%	5.0%
Sarasota	9.2%	4.8%

Digital Divide: Broadband Access by County

Broadband access barriers compound vision-related disability by limiting clients' ability to use digital assistive technologies, access telehealth services, and participate in remote training. The digital divide heat map analysis assigns severity scores (higher = worse) to each county. Highlands County records the highest severity score (approximately 21), followed by DeSoto (approximately 18), Charlotte (7), Manatee (3), and Sarasota (near zero). Highlands and DeSoto — already the counties with the highest poverty and vision difficulty rates — face the greatest compounded barriers to accessing both in-person and remote rehabilitation services. This finding reinforces the strategic importance of Lighthouse Technology Solutions (LTS) and in-home outreach capacity for rural county clients.

County	Digital Divide Severity Score (Higher = Worse)
Highlands	~21 (Highest)
DeSoto	~18
Charlotte	~7
Manatee	~3

County	Digital Divide Severity Score (Higher = Worse)
Sarasota	~1 (Lowest)

Transportation Deserts: Highlands and DeSoto Counties

Highlands and DeSoto counties are classified as transportation deserts: neither county operates public transit or fixed bus routes. For clients with vision impairment in these counties, the absence of public transportation represents a severe and compounded barrier — vision loss limits the ability to drive independently, while no public transit alternatives exist. Without Lighthouse's mobile outreach, in-home service delivery, and coordination with partner transportation services, clients in Highlands and DeSoto would have effectively no means of accessing vision rehabilitation services. This structural gap directly justifies the organization's investment of approximately 27,600 hours of annual staff travel time to serve the full five-county region.

County	Public Transit	Rural Transportation Barriers
Highlands	None	High — No Bus Routes
DeSoto	None	High — No Bus Routes
Charlotte, Manatee, Sarasota	Available (varies)	Moderate

Data sources: ACS 5-Year Estimates (U.S. Census Bureau); Digital Divide Heat Map analysis; Transportation Desert Map — Highlands & DeSoto Counties. Tables inserted March 2026 by Jason Rhoades, PhD.

40-YEAR ORGANIZATIONAL TIMELINE

Year	Milestone	Strategic Significance
1985	Incorporated as Mana-Sota Center for the Blind and Visually Impaired	Established the regional provider base in Southwest Florida
1986	First rehabilitation training classes at Happiness House; 35 clients served	Launched direct client services

Year	Milestone	Strategic Significance
1987	First contract executed with Florida Division of Blind Services	Established government partnership and stable program funding
1988	Leslie Neese hired as first Executive Director; renamed Mana-Sota Lighthouse for the Blind	Transitioned to professional management; joined national Lighthouse movement
1989	Purchased permanent headquarters at 7318 North Tamiami Trail, Sarasota	Created long-term physical infrastructure and community anchor
1994	National accreditation from National Accreditation Council	Validated program quality; enhanced credibility with funders and partners
1995	Endowment fund established; Dr. James Morrish Sr. Golf Tournament created	Built long-term financial sustainability and community fundraising platform
2000–01	Computer lab created; ZoomText classes added; renamed Lighthouse of Manasota	Entered the digital era of assistive technology rehabilitation
c. 2000–12	Janice Felski serves as Executive Director	Led program expansion and technology transformation era
2009	Youth Transition Program launched for students ages 14–22	Added workforce and postsecondary readiness capacity
2011	Five-county service region established (Charlotte, DeSoto, Highlands added)	Expanded access across Southwest Florida; became regional provider
c. 2012–14	Chip Willis serves as Executive Director	Advanced institutional partnerships and community visibility
2014–16	Andrew Reeves serves as Executive Director / COO	Maintained operational continuity through leadership succession
2016	Lisa Howard named Chief Executive Officer	Began era of sustained regional growth and organizational development
2019	Rebranded as Lighthouse Vision Loss Education Center	Evolved organizational identity; broadened geographic name reference
Nov. 2020	Peepers low vision store e-commerce platform launched (November 2, 2020) as pandemic-era pivot; physical consultation-based store reopened	Expanded community access to low vision products; diversified organizational revenue

Year	Milestone	Strategic Significance
	2021; later rebranded as Lumination Low Vision Store	
2021	Lisa Howard elected Chair of Florida Agencies Serving the Blind	Statewide recognition of organizational leadership
2022	Hurricane Ian — facility damage; resilience planning initiated	Prompted capital improvement planning and infrastructure review
2023	Alexandra Elman Foley named CEO; Howard transitions to strategic partnerships role	New strategic chapter; modernization and institutional repositioning begins
2024	Lumination Low Vision Store expanded product offering; became authorized retailer for Ray-Ban Meta AI smart glasses; Assistive Technology department developed dedicated training modules and client courses	Positioned organization at the cutting edge of AI-driven assistive technology; integrated retail, demonstration, and skills training into a unified client support model
TBC	Lighthouse Technology Solutions (LTS) established as a division of Lighthouse Vision Loss Center; providing community IT services with all proceeds funding organizational programs	Created mission-aligned social enterprise revenue stream; expanded community technology access across the five-county region
April 2025	Children's Program officially relaunched for children ages 5–13, incorporating Expanded Core Curriculum principles; after-school, weekend, and summer programming; orientation and mobility support; self-advocacy training; assistive technology exposure; and family engagement services	Reaffirmed commitment to serving blind and visually impaired individuals across all life stages; expanded youth and family-centered programming in Southwest Florida
2024–26	Current operations under CEO Alexandra Elman Foley	Strategic positioning, modernization, and continued regional service growth

STRATEGIC POSITIONING & FUTURE OUTLOOK

Lighthouse Vision Loss Center enters its fifth decade of service from a position of institutional strength built over 40 years. The combination of a strong financial foundation, validated program quality, a unique regional market position, and dedicated leadership provides a platform for continued growth and impact.

Competitive Positioning

The organization's current materials describe it as 'the only nationally accredited nonprofit providing rehabilitation training in its five-county region.' This positioning reflects several distinct competitive advantages:

- Regional exclusivity — No other comparable provider offers the full spectrum of vision rehabilitation services across the five-county Southwest Florida service area
- National accreditation — Differentiates the organization from unaccredited service providers; validates program quality to funders and partners
- Government partnership — Long-standing DBS contract relationships represent established infrastructure difficult for new entrants to replicate
- Institutional history — Four decades of community presence, relationships, and reputation create significant trust capital with clients, funders, and partners
- Program breadth — The comprehensive service model, including youth transition programming, creates full-spectrum service delivery capacity unique in the region

Growth Drivers

- Population aging — The ongoing aging of the baby boom generation will drive increasing prevalence of age-related vision conditions throughout the service region for the next two decades
- Diabetes prevalence — Florida's above-average rates of diabetes, particularly in rural and lower-income populations, will continue driving diabetic retinopathy as a cause of vision loss
- Technology evolution — Rapid change in assistive technology creates ongoing need for training and skill development among clients of all ages
- Healthcare system partnerships — Growing integration of vision rehabilitation into healthcare transition planning creates new referral opportunities

Recommendations Informed by Stakeholder Feedback

Stakeholder feedback informs this report's framework. Key recommendations incorporated include:

- Financial chart annotations should distinguish one-time revenue events (such as the 2024 bequest) from recurring operating revenue to support accurate trend interpretation
- Regional needs data should be quantified where possible — tracking growth in the 65+ population across the service region and poverty rate trends at the county level to strengthen the grant narrative
- Leadership chronology should continue to be reconstructed through board minutes and 990 officer data, particularly for the period 2000–2012 where public documentation is less complete
- Program implementation dates under each CEO should be explicitly linked to leadership eras to communicate individual leadership impact effectively to funders
- Outcome data years should align with financial data years to support integrated narrative across financial and program performance

REFERENCES & SOURCE NOTES

Primary Source Documents

- IRS Form 990 Filings (2011–2024) — Accessed via ProPublica Nonprofit Explorer; primary source for all financial data presented in Section 7
- Lighthouse Impact Report 2018–19 — Published by Lighthouse Vision Loss Center; source for founding timeline, key milestones, and client outcome data
- Lighthouse Case for Support (2023) — Published by Lighthouse Vision Loss Center; source for historical client volume benchmarks (1986, 1996, 2006, 2016)
- Lighthouse "Our Story" page — Current organizational website; source for origin narrative and current service footprint description

Public Records and External Sources

- City of Sarasota Agenda Item (October 1, 2012) — Documents Chip Willis as Director of Lighthouse of Manasota
- Patterson Foundation Article — Documents Chip Willis as Executive Director of Manasota Lighthouse for the Blind
- Florida Rehabilitation Council for the Blind Meeting Minutes (October 29, 2020) — Source for detailed client volume, service hour, DBS client, and outreach contact data
- Florida Rehabilitation Council for the Blind Meeting (July 28, 2016) — Source for billable service hour data
- Sarasota Magazine — Multiple issues documenting organizational history, leadership, and programs; source for Janice Felski and 2019 rebrand documentation
- Business Observer — Source for leadership announcements and organizational developments
- Florida DBS Newsletter — Source for Janice Felski Executive Director documentation

Data Notes and Limitations

- Pre-2011 financial data: IRS Form 990 data prior to 2011 requires manual extraction from IRS PDF archives and was not available for this report. Financial analysis is therefore limited to fiscal years 2011–2024.
- Revenue source breakdown: The estimated revenue source breakdown in Figure 8 is based on typical nonprofit vision rehabilitation organization funding structures, not verified per-year data. Actual revenue source detail requires review of Form 990 Schedule A attachments.
- Leadership chronology: The period approximately 2000–2012 is documented through external sources but complete year-by-year reconstruction requires access to board minutes and full 990 officer data for each year.
- 2024 revenue: The 2024 figure of $2,882,141 includes a one-time bequest that materially elevated revenue. Underlying operating revenue is closer to 2023 levels ($1.74M).
- Net assets (2024–2025): An accounting matter affecting net assets for fiscal year 2024–2025 is in the process of resolution. The final figure is to be presented at the April 2026 board meeting and is not reflected in this report.

Charts and Visualizations

- Figures 1, 2, 3, 5, 8 — Generated from verified IRS Form 990 data (2011–2024) via ProPublica Nonprofit Explorer
- Figure 4 — Derived from published Lighthouse outcome data across multiple organizational documents as noted above
- Figure 6 — Leadership timeline constructed from cross-referenced public records, 990 officer data, and internal organizational documentation
- Figure 7 — Schematic service area map for illustrative purposes; county boundaries are approximate

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Serving Southwest Florida Since 1985

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