



40  
YEARS



Milestones, Memories, and Momentum  
2024-2025 Impact Report



**Providing Critical Early  
Vision Interventions  
and Parental Support**

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# A Message from Leadership

1985  
2025



Dear Friends of VIPS,

First, a heartfelt thank you as we celebrate 40 Years of Milestones, Memories & Momentum. Your support has allowed us to expand our impact year after year. Throughout this report, you'll see this theme woven into every page: Milestones highlight what we've accomplished, Memories come to life through alumni spotlights and family reflections, and Momentum shows how we're advancing our Five Strategic Aspirations and looking ahead.



The biggest news in our 40th year is the evolution of the VIPS acronym from Visually Impaired Preschool Services to Vision Interventions and Parental Support, reflecting the comprehensive services we provide to all children and families. This change underscores our commitment to empowering children with blindness or low vision to discover their strengths, embrace their potential, and thrive beyond limitations. Through a holistic, family-centered approach, VIPS equips parents and caregivers with the knowledge and confidence to support their child's growth long after intervention, creating lasting, transformative impact.

The redefinition also reflects our dedication to language that aligns with evolving standards of inclusivity. Terms like "visually impaired" no longer fully capture each child's individuality; by prioritizing children over labels, VIPS reaffirms that every child is so much more than their diagnosis.

This work is made possible by our passionate team of 45 staff members and 34 contractors, whose focus and dedication enable us to serve more children than ever. VIPS was again recognized as a "Best Place to Work," a testament to the excellence of our team.

We are deeply grateful for our supporters, donors, volunteers, partners, and advocates, whose generosity sustains our work. VIPS remains committed to being excellent stewards of donor dollars, and we remain #VIPSstrong because of your belief in our mission. Thank you for being an essential part of the VIPS family for 40 years and beyond.

Diane Nelson  
Executive Director

It's hard not to reflect on seasons of change during this exciting time at VIPS. Children grow, families adapt to new routines, and communities rally through shared experiences. I'm reminded of a quote from Warren Buffett: "Someone is sitting in the shade today because someone planted a tree a long time ago." How extraordinary that the idea of VIPS was planted 40 years ago, by the noble efforts of Sharon Bensinger, and today, thousands of children and families have sat beneath the shade of guidance, functional and educational support, and most importantly, hope that every child is capable of boundless potential.



My family was fortunate to receive the services of VIPS for our youngest child. The critical support from VIPS established a foundation of functional vision and early education. Today, our son is thriving in elementary school. I reflect on the time our family spent with VIPS, both in our home and in Kids Town Preschool, and I recall feeling a sigh of relief and reassurance that we had an entire organization dedicated to helping our son and our family with tools to navigate an uncertain road.

Providing Vision Intervention and Parental Support to young children and their families remains a 365-day-a-year commitment. This year, we celebrate a major milestone, 40 years of service to the community and to the families and young children who experience low vision. Throughout these pages, you'll see the progress that marks our agency's growth, the memories of graduates and families who remind us why this work matters, and the momentum carrying VIPS into the future. We are honored to share our legacy with you and look forward to your continued support in our critical mission.

Taylor Gehring  
President of the Board of Directors

VIPS empowers families by providing educational excellence to young children with blindness or low vision in order to build a strong foundation for reaching their highest potential.

Since 1985, VIPS has been the only nonprofit in Kentucky and Indiana dedicated to providing statewide early intervention and education services for infants, toddlers, and preschoolers who are blind or have low vision. Early intervention is essential; it fosters sensory development, strengthens adaptive skills, and builds a strong foundation for lifelong success.

VIPS delivers individualized, family-centered services designed to empower children with the skills, confidence, and independence they need to thrive. By addressing the unique needs of each child and engaging families as partners, VIPS ensures that early intervention creates a lasting impact.



## VISION INTERVENTIONS

### Core Programs & Services

- Home, Virtual, and Community-Based Visits
- Orientation & Mobility Instruction
- Deaf-Blind Instruction
- Kids Town Preschool
- Pre-Braille and Braille Instruction
- Child Advocacy and Transition Planning
- Consultation with Child Care Providers and Preschools



## PARENTAL SUPPORT

### Family Support & Resources

- Parent Lending Library (including lightboxes, braille books, switches, magnifiers, and braille writers)
- Parent Newsletter and Educational Events
- Family Service Program
  - » Annual Family Retreat
  - » Adaptive Family Events (e.g., Halloween, Beeping Egg Hunt, Holiday Party)
  - » Feeling This Life Podcast
  - » Playgroups
- VIPS “Can Do” Educational Video Series
- VIPS “Every Child Can” Educational Video

### What Sets VIPS Apart:

- VIPS is the first and only nonprofit organization in Kentucky and Indiana that provides vision-specific early childhood education to children and their families.
- VIPS operates Kentucky’s only full-time preschool for children who are blind or low vision, located in Louisville. The program is nationally accredited and was Jefferson County’s first five-star-rated early childhood educational facility.
- VIPS educates service providers in other specialties during VIISA training, presentations, and collaborative visits.
- VIPS partners with hospitals to introduce the NAVEG screener that identifies babies in the NICU who may have blindness or low vision, specifically Cortical Visual Impairment (CVI).

# The Year in Numbers

1985  
2025



204,940

**Miles Traveled**

12% increase since last Fiscal Year

4,467

**Home & Community Visits**

7% increase since last Fiscal Year

29,500

**Hours of Face Time  
with Children**

37% increase since last Fiscal Year

786

**Families Served**

4% increase since last Fiscal Year

374

**New Referrals**

77% increase since last Fiscal Year

54

**NAVEG<sup>1</sup> Screenings**

71

**Collaborations &  
Community Partnerships**

28

**Professionals trained on  
the VIISA<sup>2</sup> model**

990

**Volunteer Hours**

1,143

**Donors<sup>3</sup>**

285

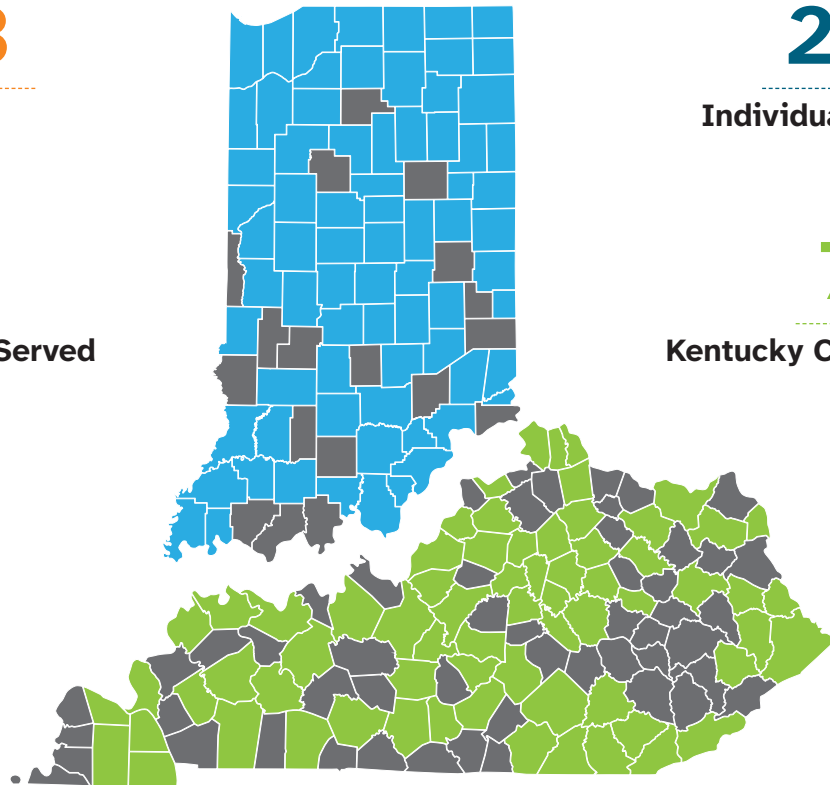
**Individual Volunteers**

74

**Indiana Counties Served**

71

**Kentucky Counties Served**



1. NAVEG is a newborn vision screening tool known as the Neonatal Assessment Visual European Grid.

2. Visual Impairment in the Service of America

3. Monetary and In-Kind



As we celebrate 40 years of service, it's important to share VIPS' strategic aspirations—our guiding light for the future. For each aspiration, we've highlighted a key accomplishment from this fiscal year that has created momentum, helping move the needle, define the impact we aim to achieve, and shape every decision, initiative, and investment as we move confidently into the next 40 years.

**1. Continuous Improvement | Striving to be better today than yesterday and better tomorrow than today, with a steadfast commitment to enhancing VIPS and advancing our mission.**

VIPS, formerly known as Visually Impaired Preschool Services, has updated its name to Vision Interventions & Parental Support (VIPS) to reflect its commitment to continuous improvement and empowering families through a holistic, child- and family-centered approach that highlights each child's individuality and potential rather than their diagnosis.

**2. Model of Excellence | VIPS aspires to be seen and respected as leaders in the field.**

Kathy Mullen, Director of Education, and Diane Nelson, Executive Director, presented and facilitated discussions on Unlocking Educational Success for Blind & Visually Impaired Students at the international VisionServe Alliance conference, sharing evidence-based strategies and innovative solutions with professionals across the field.

**3. Recruit and Train Specialized Teachers | Attract, develop, and retain specialized team members to ensure the delivery of state-of-the-art programs and services.**

VIPS created a new payroll scale model to ensure competitiveness with school systems and national standards.

**4. Voice | Ensure everyone knows who we are and understands the critical role we play.**

Paige Maynard and Sheila Klopfenstein, VIPS State Education Team Leaders, along with Kelly Easton, VIPS Intake Coordinator, have primary roles on the NAVEG team at Riley Children's Hospital in Indianapolis.

**5. Widen Our Impact | Ensure that all children with blindness and low vision have access to specialized, individualized services.**

VIPS is committing future resources to strengthen our reach and expand the network of providers through VIISA Training. VIPS is also committed to developing a comprehensive 'how-to' manual, enhancing online curriculum resources, and creating a pathway for broader implementation of the NAVEG CVI identification tool.



## Cupcake Classic

AUGUST 2024

On August 23, the 7th Annual Cupcake Classic 3K brought 150 runners to Wellington Park in Lexington, raising \$6,250. The event is organized by RaceRise.



## Pickleball Classic

AUGUST 2024

The 4th Annual Pickleball Classic took over the Louisville Indoor Racquet Club from August 16-18, drawing 157 players and raising \$33,289 to support VIPS' mission.

## Lynn Family Stampede

SEPTEMBER 2024

Despite Hurricane Helene forcing a last-minute pivot to a virtual format, the Lynn Family Stampede drew participants who completed their 5K at home over three weeks, raising an impressive \$60,902 for VIPS.

## VIPS Golf Tournament sponsored by Yum! Brands

SEPTEMBER 2024

The 2024 VIPS Golf Tournament at Wildwood Country Club on September 30 raised \$61,687, with Contec taking home the trophy and supporting VIPS' mission in a big way.



## Halloween at the Science Center/Halloween Spooktacular

OCTOBER 2024

In late October, VIPS hosted 15 families at our Halloween Spooktacular at the Family Resource Center. Kids in costumes trick-or-treated for sensory goodies and candy, met Kasey the fire dog, and received free dental screenings from the Smile Mobile.

VIPS welcomed 44 visitors from Kentucky and Indiana for an exclusive evening at the Kentucky Science Center museum. Kids explored exhibits like the Noodle Forest and Be in a Bubble, and parents and caregivers connected.

## Family Retreat & Conference

NOVEMBER 2024

15 families from Kentucky and Indiana gathered for the annual VIPS Family Retreat & Conference, engaging in hands-on activities and powerful storytelling. Keynote speaker Djenne-Amal Morris and other presenters shared real-life insights, inspiring and empowering families raising children with blindness or low vision.



## Pancakes with Santa

DECEMBER 2024

Forcht Bank's 10th Annual Pancakes with Santa on December 14, 2024, drew a record-breaking 300+ participants. Central Kentucky families enjoyed a pancake breakfast, arts and crafts, balloon and caricature artists, visits with Santa, and braille name lessons from the University of Kentucky's Pre-Optometry Club.



## Louisville Holiday Party

DECEMBER 2024

Nine families joined the VIPS Holiday Party at Kids Town Preschool, making thumbprint keepsake ornaments and enjoying a special visit with Santa. The event brought families together for festive fun and lasting memories



## Indiana Holiday Party & Storytime

DECEMBER 2024

In December, families joined VIPS for a festive Holiday Party and Storytime. Teachers led interactive stories and crafts while families connected over hot chocolate and cookies. Thanks to Indianapolis Toys for Tots, every child received a toy, even those who couldn't attend, making the celebration extra special.



## Homecoming Open House

FEBRUARY 2025

The Homecoming Open House, held at Kids Town Preschool in February, kicked off our 40th anniversary as an organization, welcoming back old friends, past graduates, and new faces



## Egg Hunt/Beeping Egg Hunt

APRIL 2025

Families gathered at VIPS for an inclusive egg hunt featuring beeping, light-up, and balloon-filled eggs, making the event accessible and fun for all children.

In April, VIPS partnered with the Cloverbrook Center for the Blind & Visually Impaired and the Indiana School for the Blind & Visually Impaired to host a Beeping Egg Hunt at ISBVI's temporary campus. Children used auditory cues to collect beeping eggs, traded them for goody bags, and enjoyed cookie decorating.

## VIPS Gala

MAY 2025

The Gala was held in Louisville on May 17 at a new location, Progress Park. This marked the first time we changed venues for the event. We welcomed over 300 guests and raised \$242,516



## Walking for Dreams

MAY 2025

On May 19, VIPS participated in Indiana's largest annual fundraiser at Crown Hill Cemetery, raising \$29,141.



## Beacon Awards & End of Year Celebration

JUNE 2025

Our 40th Anniversary Celebration at Lynn Family Stadium welcomed 150 guests for an evening of gratitude and impact. We honored volunteers, donors, and partners with the 2025 Beacon Award and shared the year's milestones, closing with the Big Four Bridge lit in VIPS colors.



## Day of Giving

JUNE 2025

In just one day, our 24-Hour Day of Giving raised \$37,812 to support children who are blind or have low vision.

Miracle “Mira” Blaise’s story begins with a miracle in every sense of the word. Mandy and James Blaise, parents to Mira, who happen to both be blind, had already faced loss and were navigating serious medical challenges when Mandy unexpectedly became pregnant. Early tests didn’t detect the pregnancy, and it wasn’t until seven months in that anyone, even Mandy herself, knew she was expecting. The combination of these impossibilities, being told they couldn’t have children, the hidden pregnancy, and the life-threatening birth, led James to turn to Mandy and say, “With everything we’re going through... why don’t we name her Miracle?” The name captured not just her survival, but the courage, love, and hope she brought to her family from her very first moments.

Mira’s early days came with complex medical challenges. High myopia impacts the health of her eyes, Stickler syndrome limits her mobility and functional vision, and the Pierre Robin sequence, a rare condition affecting jaw and airway development, required surgery to help manage her breathing. Feeding, movement, and communication each require careful attention. As blind parents, Mandy and James rise to every challenge, showing that they are just as capable as any other parents. They master G-tube feedings, diaper changes, therapies, and advocacy, turning every small victory into a milestone to celebrate and proving that love, determination, and support can overcome any obstacle.

Mira was referred to VIPS just weeks after her birth, through a combination of her ophthalmologist and her First Steps service coordinator. Starting services so early allowed her to benefit from interventions that supported her development from the very beginning. With guidance from her VIPS teacher, Miss Michelle, Mira has made remarkable progress. She has reached milestones in fine motor skills, like zipping and manipulating objects, and is growing



***“With everything we’re going through... why don’t we name her Miracle?”***

cognitively through engaging with books. “Yesterday was one of those moments,” Mandy recalls. “We were having a [community-based visit] at the zoo [with Miss Michelle], and Mira was actively interacting with another child while tracking the fish in the aquarium. Normally, she wouldn’t do that. It was such a proud moment for us.”

These milestones have created lasting memories for the Blaise family. Storytime sessions at the Family Resource Center, in-home and community-based visits, and accessible community outings allow Mira to fully participate, bringing joy and confidence to the entire family. Amanda says, “It’s given some pep back in our



family life. We're not alone, and Mira isn't limited by her challenges; she's thriving with the right support."

Miss Michelle's guidance has strengthened Mandy and James as parents. She offers practical strategies for Mira's growth, from positioning for visual engagement to adaptive techniques, while also instilling confidence in them as blind parents navigating a complex journey. "People question me all the time as a blind mother," Mandy says. "Miss Michelle has given me the confidence to know I'm doing things right." Looking ahead, the Blaise family is focused on momentum, preparing Mira for preschool, exploring adaptive tools like magnifiers and white canes, and teaching her to advocate for herself. They hope to mentor other families and help make educational settings more accessible, continuing to "Blaise" a trail for children like Mira.

Mira's story is more than a journey of milestones; it's a testament to courage, resilience, and the extraordinary power of support. Every step she takes, every new skill she masters, is a triumph over challenges that might have held others back. Through VIPS and the dedication of teachers like Miss Michelle, Mira's family has learned how to help her thrive while gaining confidence and community along the way. "Don't give up," Mandy says to all the teachers across Kentucky and Indiana. "You see and do so much more than you may hear or think. Thank you for seeing the family as a whole, because when parents

***"People question me all the time as a blind mother. Miss Michelle has given me the confidence to know I'm doing things right."***

are supported, the child thrives too." For donors, this is where your impact becomes real: your contributions provide the visits, tools, and guidance that transform moments of possibility into milestones, turning hope into achievement and dreams into reality. Mira isn't just surviving, she is thriving, and with your support, her story is just beginning.





## Hailey Naftel

I have a lifelong connection to VIPS, as I first received services here as a child following my diagnosis of Nystagmus and retinal scarring. The early support I received helped lay the foundation for my growth and success with a visual impairment. My journey led me to attend Vanderbilt University, where I earned my Master's degree in Visual Disabilities. Today, I am proud to return to VIPS as a contractor, now providing services to young children and their families. Being able to give back to the same organization that supported me is both meaningful and rewarding, and I strive to bring professional knowledge, encouragement, and lived experience to the families I serve.



## Alex and Abby Hitzelberger

Abby is attending the University of Louisville, majoring in psychology, and is active in volunteering at her church and the Ignite group on campus. Alex volunteers on Sundays as a greeter at church and attends the adult day program Zoom group a couple of days a week. He loves this group and enjoys hanging out with his friends there. He is also continuing to work with OVR/Helen Keller to try to find a job a day or two a week. His favorite activity is RISE fitness. He attends several days a week and loves being with everyone there.





## Liam Herrera

Liam is in 4th grade now. He is currently a blue belt in Taekwondo. Liam loves martial arts! His favorite activity is Sparring and Bo weapons. My favorite memory is when Liam could see a baby bird nest for the first time using a magnifier that VIPS helped him get. Prior to the magnifier, he could only hear the babies chirp. It was a whole new world opened for Liam. His excitement was priceless! Thank you, VIPS. We are forever grateful for VIPS!



## Hannah Castenir

We're so grateful to VIPS for the wonderful foundation they gave to Hannah! She's now in 5th grade and thriving—this year, she's proud to be part of her school's safety patrol, treble choir, and is enrolled in the Gifted & Talented (GT) program, and especially loves math!

Outside of school, she's an active member of the E-town Dolphins Swim Team and Grace Haertland Church. She is discovering a real love for music while learning to play the piano and taking voice lessons.

Thank you to all of her former teachers at VIPS for helping set her on this path. We're so appreciative of the nurturing and joyful start you gave her and the support you gave to our family!



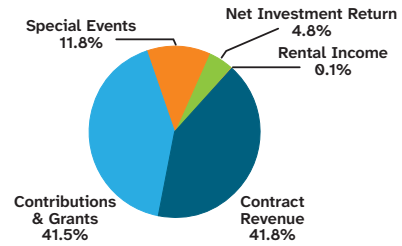
## Jai'Zion Buckner

Jai'Zion is doing amazing things these days. He's in school full-time now, and he has recently started using a communication board. Our time at VIPS was amazing, from everyone we talked to, and even the times coming into the office. Ms. Rita and Ms. Cheryl, if it wasn't for them, we wouldn't be where we are today. I will forever be grateful for them.



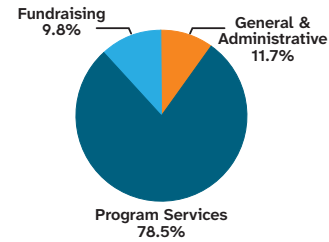
## Revenue

Contributions and Grants.....	\$1,707,340.19
Contract Revenue.....	\$1,720,252.42
Special Events.....	\$487,506.95
Net Investment Return.....	\$197,745.20
Rental Income.....	\$2,400.00
<b>Total.....</b>	<b>\$4,115,244.76</b>



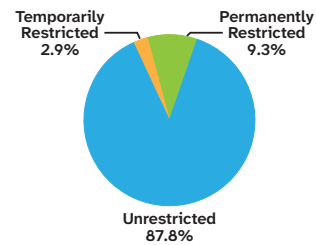
## Expenses

Program Services.....	\$2,737,975.63
General & Administrative.....	\$409,583.10
Fundraising.....	\$340,263.00
<b>Total.....</b>	<b>\$3,487,821.73</b>



## Net Assets

Unrestricted.....	\$6,359,463.86
Temporarily Restricted.....	\$208,999.95
Permanently Restricted.....	\$674,874.50
<b>Total.....</b>	<b>\$7,243,338.31</b>



All figures presented are unaudited and subject to change pending the completion of the official audit.

# Milestones

## Endowment Growth

Over \$500,000 is now invested in the Lion Dr. Ralph Stengel Endowment Fund, which benefits Kids Town Preschool. Since 2021, we've worked with generous donors to fully meet the Louisville Downtown Lions Club's \$250,000 challenge match.

## Record-Breaking Gala

Our Gala raised \$242,516, a 44% increase over last year's \$168,210, marking a record-breaking night of generosity and support for VIPs.

## Strong Investment Returns

Moving our endowment to Fidelity generated over \$197,000 in returns this year.





## Board

Taylor Gehring - President  
Mike Johnson - Vice President  
Loren Prizant - Secretary  
John Anders - Treasurer

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Leslie Bender  
Aaron Benson  
Dr. Jerry Bizer  
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Dr. Donna Brostek Lee

Jennifer Merrick  
Dr. Melissa Rice  
Andy Steinbach  
Missy Varga  
Sharon G. Bensinger



## Staff Leadership

Diane Nelson, Executive Director  
Kathy Mullen, Director of Education  
Christina Welsh, Director of Finance  
Justine Aycok, Director of Development  
Kelly Easton, Director of Intake & Community Outreach  
Meredith Howell, Director of Community Outreach & Advocacy



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