

ADDRESS BY
HIS EXCELLENCY MAJOR GENERAL MICHAEL JEFFERY AC CVO MC
GOVERNOR-GENERAL OF THE COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA
ON THE OCCASION OF
VISIT TO VISION AUSTRALIA HEAD OFFICE
VISION AUSTRALIA VICTORIA HEAD OFFICE, MELBOURNE
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May I acknowledge the traditional owners of the land on which we meet today; their traditional wisdom, history and culture.

Marlena and I are pleased to be here to see Vision Australia in action and present the Further Education Bursary Awards.

There are not nearly enough opportunities to say thank you for the wonderful work you do to assist the 300,000 or so people in Australia who are blind or have low vision.

Your role is so important in terms of improving the quality of life of those so impacted and is also demanding in the variety of matters you need to address.

As a national peak body, you are very much involved in setting service standards delivery, policy development, lobbying government, and in dealing with occupational health and safety for clients, staff and volunteers - the list goes on!

As such, you are the hub of an enormous network connecting governments, service providers, the medical and nursing professions, manufacturers and the community.

So not only are you making a practical and beneficial difference to the lives of thousands of Australians every year, Vision Australia is driving and influencing change at every level and in other organisations, governments and firms across Australia.

Your role will continue to be of critical importance as the number of people with vision impairment increases, with estimates that this will nearly double to around 600,000 within 15 years.

Today is also a welcome opportunity to say thank you to the staff and volunteers - more than 1000 staff and 3,700 volunteers nationwide.

The volunteers in particular do a tremendous job in assisting with orientation and mobility, employment, independent living, information, low vision and recreation.

Volunteers are in many ways, the lifeblood of this organisation; out in the community, actively providing the personal support that makes the crucial difference and in so doing, developing life-long friendships in many cases.

Volunteering is a sign of a caring society - we have some five and half million volunteers nationwide but we could always do with more.

On behalf of the nation, Marlena and I thank all the volunteers and the staff here for going the extra mile on behalf of the people you assist.

I was very impressed to hear of the new Client Services Model in which services can be tailored to suit

an individual's preferences; with 55 service modules to choose from, across eight life themes of education, emotional support, communication, independence in the home and community, recreation, social options, information and employment.

And I am looking forward to being interviewed for Vision Australia Radio, a tremendous initiative and one which makes a real difference to reducing the sense of isolation which people with vision impairment may experience.

Walking through your office I can see a great deal of thought has been put into its design to assist vision impaired staff, volunteers and clients.

We can all learn something from your commitment to ensuring all people have equal access to facilities and services.

I understand you also run a packaging business, employing vision impaired staff and, in turn, providing them with essential skills for future employment.

Just one more of your many commendable initiatives.

Marlena and I had the pleasure earlier this year of hosting a reception at Admiralty house in Sydney for Vision Australia, when we heard more about the I-access project to redress the inequity arising from only 3 to 5 percent of all information being accessible to people who are blind or have low vision.

In today's information age, this can be an enormous handicap, especially when seeking employment.

Since that time my Official Secretary, Malcolm Hazell and his staff have been looking at how we can improve the accessibility of our own website at www.gg.gov.au.

This is of some significance as we have been receiving more than 700,000 hits to the site per month and I am keen that this key channel of information on Australia's government and governance be fully accessible to everyone with vision impairment, wherever they live.

A member of the Official Secretary's staff has visited this office to discuss how we can make the website more accessible and developments are in train to do just that.

In fact, a few changes have already been implemented, including providing alternate text for images, for easy reading with screen reading software.

Ladies and gentlemen

It is a pleasure to be here today to learn more about how you are helping people with vision impairment and to present the Further Education Bursary Awards to support people participating in further education.

You are making a real difference to the lives of many people and importantly giving them options and the ability to make choices about what they do in life and how they do it.

As our term in office comes to a close in a few months time, Marlena and I wish you every success in the years to come in continuing this vital work.

Thank you.