

North Central Sight Services maintains watch on those who need its assistance

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Leona is an independent 92 year old who has lived with age-related macular degeneration for the past 15 years.

Like most individuals with the condition, Leona started to struggle with everyday living tasks. She faced new challenges in her typical day. Reading labels on items in her kitchen became increasingly difficult and reading her newspaper simply was frustrating.

As time went on, Leona lost most of her central vision, making it difficult to recognize faces, and, then, driving was no longer an option.

"Some of these new challenges were easier to accept than others," Leona said. "Up until then, I had been very self-sufficient."

Although her family is very much involved in her life, her children do not live locally.

"My son helps me with all of my finances, but I needed some extra help getting to essential appointments. Then, we learned about North Central Sight Services."

Leona requested services about five years ago in hopes of staying independent in her own home.

"With (the agency's) assistance, Leona is still an independent woman who enjoys her life," said Heather Engle, programs and services director. "With a caseworker's assistance, she is able to obtain her groceries without relying on someone else to do it for her. She can get to her doctors' appointments without asking her son to take off work and travel here to take her. The caseworker also assists Leona with picking up her prescriptions, completing forms and paperwork, and reading mail when needed."

In support groups, Leona also has found a wonderful group of friends who have helped her find new ways of understanding and accepting her vision loss.

"Knowing that she is not alone with the feelings she has is comforting," Engle said.

"Leona is still able to enjoy a good book with the help of a talking book machine, as

well as a good cup of coffee, through the skills she has acquired through our Life Skills and Education group.

"Through our low-vision rehabilitation program, Leona has received instruction on various low vision aids, such as a talking clock, check writing guide, low-vision paper, 20/20 pens, magnifiers and a large print telephone directory. Leona ... (will) not let vision loss dictate how she will live."

"Our mission is to provide exceptional programs, services and employment to the blind and vision-impaired, as well as excellent education, prevention services and products to all customers. Our Agency philosophy focuses on helping people help themselves and emphasizes the abilities and capabilities of the blind and visually impaired people we serve," said Bob Garrett, president and CEO of North Central Sight Services. "To accomplish this ... we offer a variety of rehabilitation services, an industry program that provides various types of employment opportunities, and a prevention of blindness program that includes eye screenings, public education, referral services and low-vision aids."

Another woman the agency helps is Esther, an 83-year-old widow whose life has been changed by vision loss. Esther was diagnosed with macular degeneration, glaucoma and corneal dystrophy more than 10 years ago. She lives in her own home and would like to stay there as long as she can, according to NCSS staff.

"I like to do as much for myself as I can. I do all of my own chores but I struggle to read small print, which makes typical living skills sometimes very difficult."

Through NCSS programs and services, Esther has gained the skills and products to help her remain independent.

"She joined our support groups which she attends regularly," said Engle. "Through these groups, she has made a number of new friends and most importantly learned how to accept her vision loss. The vision rehabilitation therapist (VRT) has provided Esther with life skills and education lessons in her home, plus taught her a number of techniques that have enhanced her life.

"For example, the VRT has marked many items in her home, such as the thermostat, stove, washer and dryer with bump dots to help her indicate numbers that are too small for her to see. Having these items marked has enabled Esther to more easily

prepare her meals and launder her own clothes. A 20/20 pen has helped her to see her writing much clearer. A large print calendar helps her to schedule appointments and see when they are coming up."

The Lycoming County United Way allocated \$15,000 for the social services programs there this year.

"We are pleased to be able to fund these programs at North Central Sight Services because they make a real difference in the lives of their clients and their families right here in Lycoming County," said Scott N. Lowery, executive director for the local United Way. "Helping individuals to adapt to or to overcome obstacles and maintain their independence is critical to their quality of life."



Because of vision problems, Leona (left) and Esther (right), receive help from North Central Sight Services. The agency receives \$15,000 from the Lycoming United Way's annual funds distribution.