



2023

Annual Report



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Consumer Summary



From the President/CEO,
MARCI BOUCHER

This was such an exciting year as we created a strategic plan to help more people and expand our services in the future. Planning involved many staff members, board directors, and agency leaders as we dug into who we are and where Independence First is heading. We identified how to move the organization forward in 2024 including an in-depth advocacy plan, increasing the number of diverse employees and consumers, increasing the number of individuals served in outlying counties, increasing the number of new consumers, and keeping those currently served. To accomplish this we will look to diversify and increase our funding streams.

Moving quickly on our plan, we opened two new offices in Waukesha and West Bend, hired a policy analyst, a Diversity, Equity and Inclusion Supervisor, a supervisor to expand our reach in Waukesha, Washington, and Ozaukee counties, an Information and Referral Specialist, a Community Living & Transition Coordinator, a grant administrator, and a Director of Development. We were able to hire several multilingual and culturally diverse staff throughout the agency. We believe we have positioned the agency to continue to grow and expand our services into 2024.



From the CFO,
WENDY HUOT

In 2023, Independence First performed well financially increasing revenue and net assets over 2022. This growth came by diversifying revenue streams including new grants and partnerships. One new \$410,000 grant was for our WisLoan and Telework program, providing low interest loans to people with disabilities. Many who were approved for our loans may not otherwise have been able to secure funding for necessary assistive technology.

In 2023, we provided 35% more loans than in 2022. Seventy percent of those who applied were approved. One example was a consumer with limited ability to stand. With a WisLoan through our program, he was able to add a ramp to his house so he could to get to and from work. Overall, our ability to assist consumers with great outcomes motivated three of our current grant sources to increase our grant funding.

As a non-profit, our largest expense is our people which we see as an investment. Employee wellbeing and mental health are an important part of their ability to serve others in the community. Our extensive Wellness Program includes weekly educational videos, Lunch & Learns, biometric screenings, vaccination clinics, and an onsite accessible gym.



From the COO,
KATHY ACEVEDO

Independence First devoted its time, tirelessly serving 3,438 consumers through our Independent Living Skills programming. Many participated in classes, asked for referrals, got expert advice for assistive technology and consultations for home modifications.

In addition, we were able to focus on assisting people with disabilities with whatever they needed to return home after a hospitalization. With the help of a grant from the Craig Nielsen Foundation we worked alongside Froedtert Hospital and our Hospital to Home program helped 22 survivors of gunshots and other violently acquired spinal cord injuries re-enter the community.

Our Personal Assistance Services (PAS) Department served more than 600 consumers and supervised even more caregivers in our four-county service area. To streamline this service, we took the lead in the state's mandated Electronic Visit Verification process (EVV), bringing caregiving into the digital age. We were recognized by state officials and asked to contribute at the state policy level.



From the Board Chair,
BILLIE TORRENTT

It was an inspiring year as Independence First's mission of full inclusivity was evident through those who sat alongside me on the Board of Directors. Sixty-nine percent of the board are persons with disabilities. The workforce echoes this sentiment of "nothing about us without us" with fifty-two percent of staff being persons with disabilities.

It has been a pleasure to watch the expert staff and leaders increase advocacy efforts, for systemic change. They did this appearing before lawmakers, giving 737 testimonies on legislative issues.

In 2023, the growth of Independence First's reach was remarkable. 240 independent living workshop sessions were given. That's a 210% increase. That translated in more than 12-hundred people with disabilities attending and expanding their knowledge and skills. The need is there, and Independence First is meeting that growing need.

A “thank you” for our new grants ...and what they mean for our mission



Independence First is so thankful to our supporters who donate their time and dollars to make the world a better place. We’ve developed new partnerships, and were able to expand existing ones. There are so many to thank! Here are a few examples.

- Our new partnership with the Otto Bremer Foundation with an award of \$60,000 to fund Independent Living Services programming.
- The City of Milwaukee with a grant of \$100,000 and the County of Waukesha with a grant of \$25,000 for home modifications to keep people with disabilities in their homes instead of having to go into institutions.
- United Way increased our grant to \$75,000 to remove barriers to employment.
- Jackson and his dad brought in a \$150 check in memory of Jackson’s grandmother, who was an Independence First volunteer.

Independence First given fund to help people with disabilities buy items that bring independence



The Association on Community Living (ACL) gave Independence First \$410,000 in grant funding for downpayment assistance to help people buy vans, ramps, and other items that will help them live independently.

Independence First already administers statewide low interest loan programs that help with expensive purchases. The downpayment assistance will help even more to get equipment into the hands and homes of those who need it most.

New offices and growth

Come visit us at our new offices!



In addition to our accessible main building at 540 S. 1st street, in 2023 Independence First was able to add to our satellite offices in the outlying communities.

We opened new locations in Waukesha located at 2607 N. Grandview Blvd. Waukesha, and in Washington County, inside the Moraine Park West Bend Campus at 2200 Green Tree Road in West Bend. We continue to celebrate the success of our Ozaukee County office inside the Ozaukee County Nonprofit Center at 2360 Dakota Drive in Grafton.

Independent Living Skills Classes + Assistive Technology in demand



From cooking, to gardening, to hiking in the community, the Independence First staff held 240 workshop sessions covering 40 different topics. 1261 people with disabilities attended. That's a 185% increase!

In addition, staff conducted workshops in 28 local high schools for students with disabilities and 28 community programming sessions.

280 people with disabilities, family members and/or service providers learned about adaptive equipment before they purchased.

A statewide loan program administered by Independence First (WisLoan) for people who want to purchase assistive technology helped 22 people get what they needed. That's a total of \$327,832.00 in loans.

Community Events & Outreach

International visitors tour Independence First



Independence First was honored to be selected by the U.S. State Department to host an educational delegation from Turkmenistan. Independence First presented the Independent Living Philosophy, discussed services, and shared insights.

Youth leadership



Independence First hosted its annual Youth Leadership Summit. The summit is an event for high school students with disabilities in the Milwaukee area. Participants had a great opportunity to meet other youth with disabilities and gain valuable skills and experiences to become more involved in the community. The experience included workshops with Independence First and partner organizations.

Disability Mentoring Day



Disability Mentoring Day 2023 was another big success. The program introduces teens to various jobs. Cody was able to get a firsthand TV experience and a behind-the-scenes look at Fox6 sportscasting. Another youth group tried out zoo-keeping at the Milwaukee Zoo and other site visits! Disability Mentoring Day allows youth to experience different jobs.

Senior Food Distribution



Independence First continues to serve as a distribution site for the senior Stockbox Program with Hunger Task Force which provides free, healthy foods including rice, cereal, juice, pasta, vegetables, and other items to low-income seniors in our community every month.

The Equipment Reuse Program at Independence First supports these monthly distributions with other free resources including adult diapers, canes, and other sanitary products and assistive devices. Individuals and groups of volunteers help load food into cars in an outdoor drive-through, and often take a tour of our Milwaukee office following the distribution.

In 2023, we were thankful to receive volunteer support from University of Wisconsin–Milwaukee, Milwaukee School of Engineering, MATC, GRAEF, Target, Zurn Elkay, Edward Jones, and Project SEARCH through Goodwill. 70 volunteers served in 2023 for a total of 188 hours serving 733 seniors in our community.

Community Outreach



In 2023, staff went to 47 different events in the community to share information about resources offered by Independence First. We went to disability-focused resource fairs, farmers markets, education-focused events, inclusion events, senior-focused resource fairs, and other general public events.

Community Partnership



Independence First was excited to collaborate with Porchlight Book Company. We co-sponsored an author conversation with Meg Zucker and Porchlight at the local indie bookseller Boswell Book Company. Meg's book "Born Extraordinary" explores the trials and joys of parenting children with differences or disabilities. We loved her talk and the book!

Staff Outreach Day at the Zoo



In 2023, internal and external staff came together for a day at the Milwaukee County Zoo. Personal care workers, their consumers, and office staff learned about ways to access pathways to continued success and career growth at Independence First as well as removing barriers.

We shared a meal and enjoyed a sunny day at the Zoo joined by consumers, guests, and the Board of Directors.

Empower Events



Independence First organized several events engaging the community in discussions of inclusivity and the empowerment of people with disabilities. These unique events attracted new people to our organization and brought in new donors, volunteers, partnerships, and other community members.

Empower Movie, brunch, and talk-back



Independence First partnered with the Avalon Theater for a brunch, movie screening, and talk-back with the star and producer of the documentary film "Move Me."

The movie featured a young dancer and her journey after becoming paralyzed in a diving accident in Wisconsin.

Empower Art/Photo Gallery + Panel



Independence First partnered with a local photographer and artist to feature men who survived gunshots and other violence in our community. The survivors engaged in a panel discussion with the community, hosted by Nō Studios.

These spinal cord injury survivors are part of Independence First's peer support group, the W.H.E.E.L. (We Heal Each and Every Life) Project.

Empower Concert



Independence First brought musician and disability advocate Victoria Canal to Milwaukee for our Empower Concert. Canal also performed live on 88.9FM for a session, promoting Independence First and the concert. Independence First partnered with the Milwaukee Public Library to host the first concert in decades at the downtown library's Centennial Hall venue.

Victoria Canal, who was born with a limb difference, shared stories of personal empowerment as she entertained the crowd with piano, guitar, and her amazing vocals. Canal shared the stage with ASL interpreters.

Independence First Advocacy

Universal Changing Stations



Independence First was there as universal changing stations were established in the Wisconsin State Capitol. This move made the capitol more accessible and open for all to enjoy and participate in government.

Independence First was front page news



Independence First helped the Milwaukee Journal Sentinel with an investigation into the backlog of disability payments. They not only spoke with our experts, they featured an Independence First staff member and her story on the front page.

Saving paratransit taxi service



Independence First hosted and participated in a listening session to address questions from community members regarding a proposed phase-out of the Transit Plus taxi service. Following an outcry from disability groups, the Milwaukee County Finance Committee unanimously voted to restore funding in the 2023 budget. In addition, an Independence First representative was appointed by the City of Milwaukee's Public Safety and Health Committee to sit on the Pedestrian and Bike Plan Advisory Commission.

Partnership with Milwaukee Mental Health Task Force



Independence First partnered with the Milwaukee Mental Health Task Force to host community meetings in our accessible space. One of those conversations increased awareness of mental health and improved access to support. Milwaukee County Executive David Crowley highlighted opportunities in the state budget to improve mental health services.

Independence First Joined National Advocacy Efforts



Our staff joined the National Council on Independent Living for a march on the nation's capitol on the 33rd anniversary of the signing of the Americans with Disabilities Act. The ADA prohibits discrimination against individuals with disabilities and promotes equal access.

Advocating at the state capital



Independence First spoke to the state legislature's Joint Finance Committee to advocate for disability rights in the Wisconsin State Budget and to give Independent Living Centers the first increase in funding in 20 years.

Personal Care Assistance

18 years of caring



Meet Denise, a personal care worker, and Mike, her long time consumer. Denise has been Mike's caregiver through Independence First for more than 18 years. Their bond has grown strong over the years. Mike says, "She's more than a caregiver. She's like a mother to me. We enjoy doing things together. I go on trips with her family." Denise refers to Mike as her adopted son. Denise says she enjoys taking care of him, which is evident in their warm smiles when you see them together.

They both credit Independence First for connecting them and providing the support they need. "They are an agency that really cares," they both said. Denise shares, "It's a good company to work for."

Denise and Mike are just one example of hundreds of people with disabilities and caregivers in the Personal Assistance Services program through Independence first.



Our 2023 Numbers at a Glance



69 % of the Board of Directors are persons with disabilities

52 % of staff are persons with disabilities

1,175 intake consumers were served

737 testimonies on legislative issues were given

3,438 people received information and/or referrals

240 independent living workshop sessions were held

437 individuals received peer support services

788 consumers received housing related assistance

6 individuals were transitioned from a nursing home, with one in progress

47 individuals received diversion services to avoid entering an institution

22 WisLoans were approved to fund devices and more for independence

345 individuals received a home modification assessment or computer training

2022 – 2023

BOARD of DIRECTORS

Billie Torrentt–Chair
Scott Luber–Vice–chair
David Frank–Treasurer
Brad Holz–Secretary
Karen Hunt–At Large
Paul Wierzba–At Large
Joanne Williams–At Large
Jakeim Jackson–Bell
William Crowley
John Dziewa
James Guckenber
Kawanza Newson
Ryan Ramos
Samantha Tadych
Beverly Walker
Kent Walters

2023 – 2024

BOARD of DIRECTORS

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David Frank–Treasurer
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Scott Luber–At Large
John Dziewa–At Large
Jakeim Jackson–Bell
William Crowley
Kawanza Newson
Beverly Walker
Kent Walters
Paul Wierzba
Christine Brooks

STATEMENT of ACTIVITIES



Year end December 31, 2023

27.2M TOTAL REVENUE

U.S. Department of Health and Human Services

ACL Centers for Independent Living	851,888
ACL Independent Living State Grants	8,363
ACL Assistive Technology	39,936
ACL National Institute on Disability, IL and Rehabilitation Research	10,000

Wisconsin Public Service Commission 43,750

State of Wisconsin Department of Health Services

Center for Independent Living	30,659
AODA	196,245
ACL Independent Living State Grants	22,554
Title VII CH 1 Part B Independent Living Services	2,280

Foundations / Grants 274,118

United Way 136,314

Fund Development 61,932

Personal Assistance Services Program 22,125,858

Entrepreneurial Efforts 5,019

Program Service Fees 261,305

Net Investment Return 2,912,760

Rent Income 196,157

Other Revenue 15,415

Total Revenue 27,194,553

25.1 M EXPENSES

Salaries / Burdens	22,157,818
Operational	824,099
Contractual Services	656,246
General / Administrative Expenses	1,423,141
Total Expenses	25,061,304
Change in Net Assets	2,133,249
Net Assets, Beginning of the Year	27,266,464

29.4 M NET ASSETS

Net Assets, End of Year 29,399,713

This audited consolidated statement includes Independence First, Inc. and Independence First Foundation, Inc.

2023 CONSUMER SUMMARY

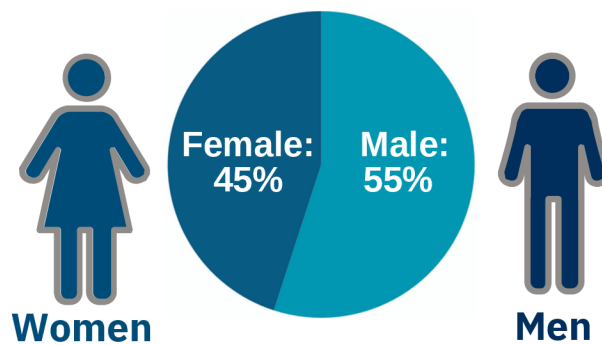
Total number of people served in 2023

5,939

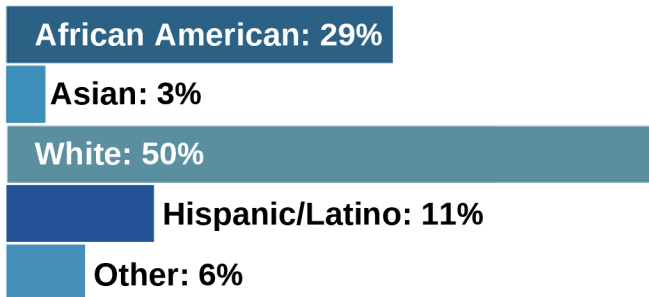
11,851

Additional individuals impacted through staff community activities

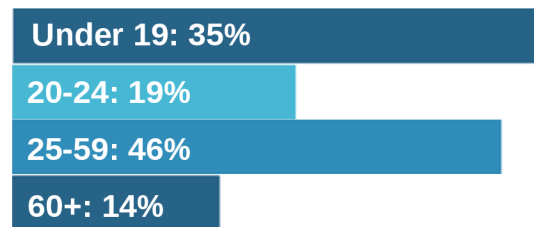
GENDER



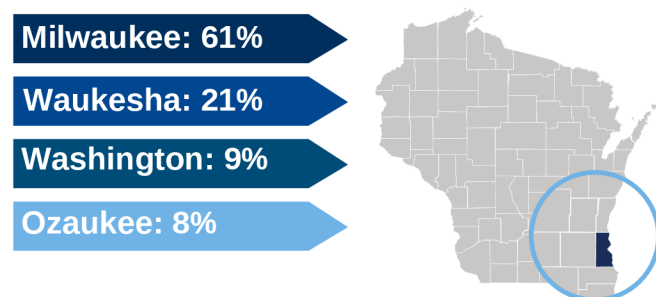
RACE AND ETHNICITY



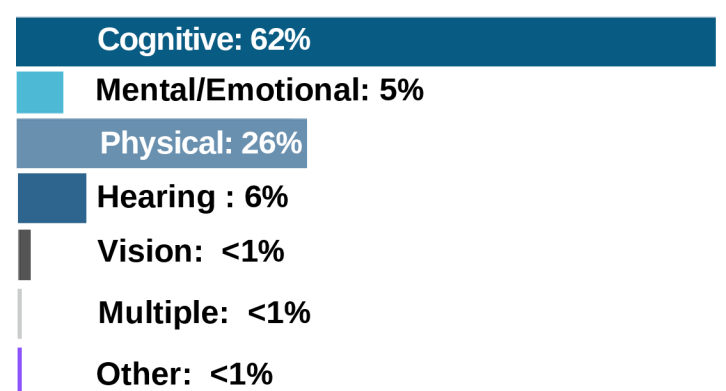
AGE OF CONSUMERS



PEOPLE SERVED BY COUNTY



DISABILITY OF PEOPLE SERVED



2023 CONSUMER SUMMARY

PROGRAM SERVICES IMPACT



1,735

People benefiting from the
Independent Living
Services Program



816

Individuals who receive
Personal Care Services
in their homes



3,438

Number of people
utilizing Information
and Referral Services



1,016

Individuals who received these specialized services:
Assistive Technology, Substance Use Disorder Services, Benefits
Counseling, WisLoan/Telework, Transition/Diversion, and Youth Transition

MISSION STATEMENT

The mission of Independence First is to effectively facilitate empowerment of individuals with disabilities through the core services of Advocacy, Independent Living Skills, Information and Referral, Peer Support, and Transition.
