

ASPIRE!

"Labels can only confine. Aspire to be undefinable."

- Colin Wright

A publication of United Disability Services

WINTER/SPRING 2026





Moving Forward Together: Developmental Disabilities Awareness in Akron

A Message from Brian Thomas, President/CEO

Every March, UDS joins the nation in celebrating **Developmental Disabilities (DD) Awareness Month**. Established by presidential proclamation in 1987, this month serves as a vital reminder that our community is strongest when every member—regardless of ability—has the opportunity to lead a productive, fulfilling life. In 2026, the theme "**The Power of Support**" highlights the essential roles that caregivers, local organizations and accessible infrastructure play in fostering true inclusion.

Breaking Barriers in Transportation

For many individuals with developmental disabilities, independence begins with reliable transportation. UDS provides critical supports through an extensive Transportation fleet. Our transit vans and buses drive individuals to and from day programs. The highly accessible vehicles also transport to and from medical appointments for people with and without disabilities who are supported by Summit County Job and Family Services. For-hire services are offered to other nonprofits and events such as the All-American Soap Box Derby, Special Olympics and Leadership Akron.

Recreation: The Heart of Inclusion

Inclusion isn't just about getting from point A to point B; it's about what happens when you arrive. The greater Akron community excels in providing adaptive recreational opportunities that celebrate every ability:

- **Inclusion Days at the Akron Zoo:** From February 28 to March 2, 2026, the Akron Zoo partners with Summit DD to offer free

admission and parking to guests wearing orange, the official color of DD awareness.

- **Inclusive Art and Performance:** On March 12, 2026, the Inclusive ArtWalk at Summit Artspace will showcase local talents, while the Hudson Conservatory of Ballet offers "Joyful Movement," an inclusive dance program for youth.
- **Active Play:** Sites like the indoor playground **We Rock the Spectrum** provide sensory-safe environments for children to play, offering special admission discounts during awareness week to encourage community engagement.
- Every year, nearly 500 people of all abilities compete in the inclusive **All-Star Training Club** which is operated by UDS. The spring sports of soccer, bocce and track & field will soon begin. You can also sign up for the summer season that includes golf, bowling, gymnastics, cornhole and kickball.

A Call to Action

As we paint the county orange this March, the goal remains clear: to move beyond mere awareness toward active participation. Whether it is attending the **Developmental Disabilities Awareness & Advocacy Day** on March 4 at the Ohio Statehouse or simply supporting policies that enhance accessibility, every action contributes to a community where everyone can thrive.

Developmental Disabilities Awareness Month is a time to celebrate achievements, but it is also a challenge to ensure that the "Power of Support" remains a year-round commitment to our neighbors.

Brian



Work Hard. Play Hard. Game on.

Celebrating Developmental Disabilities Awareness Month

Arriving bright and early each weekday morning, Keenan greets friends and staff members at UDS with a charming smile and occasionally a fist bump. During his 13 years in the Prevocational Services program at UDS he has become an asset, learning nearly every production job that has come through the doors.

Bob Ewing, UDS service coordinator, has seen Keenan's progress firsthand. "Once he is trained in a new job he is extremely good at following directions and produces quality work. He is very independent, knows his work routine and is diligent about getting things done." This reliability has allowed Keenan to take on additional responsibilities in recent years.

Training for the Future

Within our agency there are jobs that Prevocational Services participants can work on to increase positive work behaviors and develop vocational skills. These skills may translate into a community employment setting or residential living. For an hourly minimum wage they handle light housekeeping at UDS, janitorial work, material handling and mail delivery, to name a few. As a result, Keenan has been vacuuming the second-floor office areas weekly and sanitizing the kitchenette area each day after his lunch break — and it has never looked better!

Training participants like Keenan to complete these tasks around the agency and get paid



Keenan makes UDS look good by vacuuming and sanitizing the kitchen area of the second floor.

for the work they do has been a win-win for everyone.

He isn't afraid of a challenge either. Last summer he refurbished a weathered gliding bench that used to be at the Sweitzer location. Keenan remembers "sweating bullets because it was so hot outside," but he did a fantastic job restoring the bench and was proud of the end result. Now people at the agency can sit outside and enjoy the glider anytime, weather permitting, thanks to Keenan.

Community

Inclusion is at the heart of programming at UDS. All participants are encouraged to spend time in the community where there are opportunities for learning, volunteering and

connecting with people in other programs. Individuals can choose areas of interest and transportation is provided to and from various locations. Last year Keenan explored the work on display at the Akron Art Museum and encountered some interesting animals at Majestic Meadows. He also spent several days volunteering at the Akron Food Bank packing up donations for people in need.

Gaming

Keenan is active and very social. He enjoys playing basketball and watching the NBA. According to his mom, "Keenan is happiest when he's playing his video games." And Keenan agrees. He is currently immersed in the post-apocalyptic world of Days Gone, with a long-term goal of monetizing his gaming passion on YouTube someday.

Be Kind

Keenan might struggle to stay on task at times but mom says, "he is a great helper and a great person." Reflecting on DD Awareness Month she shares a simple but powerful reminder: "Be kind. Smile and say 'hi' because they are just people living with a different set of challenges."

At UDS, during this month and throughout the year, we celebrate the abilities of everyone. And it doesn't take that much effort to simply be kind. To learn more about Prevocational Services contact **Kristy Mulneix** at 330-762-9755 or kmulneix@udsakron.org.



**“Your uniqueness is your superpower.
Embrace it and let it shine.”**

- Haben Girma

Disability rights lawyer and speaker and the first DeafBlind person to graduate from Harvard



Help us strike up some fun for inclusive sports!

UDS
ALL-STARS AT THE ALLEY

**Saturday, July 25
6-9 p.m.**

Clutch Lanes & Sports Center
Cuyahoga Falls



Safety is Our Priority in Every Season

While most people hunker down and stay home during inclement weather, our drivers are out navigating snow-covered roads to ensure patients make it to their appointments, people arrive at their day programs and students get to school. They grip the steering wheel with steady hands, drive with skill and pack their patience.

Each day they are outside for 15-30 minutes doing pre- and post-trip vehicle inspections. Once they are on the road, they assist passengers getting in and out of the vehicles. In some cases they are in the elements even longer if they need to assist someone from their home to the bus and then back to their home on the return trip.

We truly appreciate all of our drivers like Tony Elton for going the extra mile, dealing with difficult traffic conditions and getting people where they need to go safely. Their fortitude is what

keeps us moving. Elton is our longest-tenured driver and will celebrate his 30th anniversary with UDS next month.

In an effort to be the best transportation provider we can be, we are in the process of acquiring our ambulette licensure so we can continue transporting passengers who use wheelchairs to their medical appointments. To receive this endorsement, we will go through an audit by Ohio Emergency Medical Services. They will check our employee files and inspect all of our vehicles to make sure they are roadworthy and equipped properly (fully stocked First Aid kit, fire extinguishers secured, oxygen tank holder, etc.). By taking this step, we further prioritize the well-being and safety of those we serve.

For more information about our services contact Transportation Supervisor **Jim Acton** at 330-762-9751 or jacton@udsakron.org.

Increase Your Impact with a Matching Gift

Did you know that many companies offer charitable giving programs that match employee donations? When you donate to UDS your employer may match your gift, often dollar for dollar. Each company has its own guidelines about which charities are eligible, how much they'll match and how you request the matching contribution.

Ask your supervisor or HR department if your company matches donations and review their specific guidelines. Most provide a form or online portal for requests, and we can supply any required details.

Employer matching programs are an easy way to increase the value of your donation. If you haven't used this benefit before, now is a great time to start. You'll feel good knowing your donation will go even further and have a greater impact in your community and beyond. Please consider making a gift to United Disability Services today. Your support helps create inclusive opportunities for people of all abilities—right here in our community. Every dollar makes a meaningful difference. For more information on ways to donate, visit udsakron.org/donate.

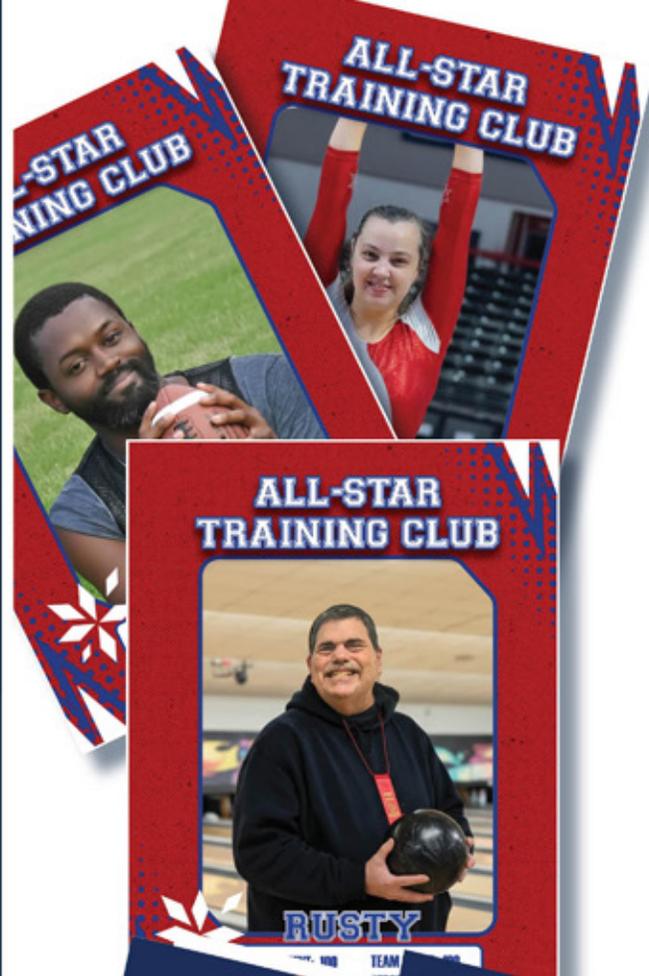




Hearty Bowls, Helping Souls

In early February millions are preoccupied with the gridiron, point spreads, the halftime show and commercials. But, at UDS, our focus is on a different extravaganza—BraVo!'s annual Souper Bowl! Each year employees (and sometimes family members) submit slow cookers filled with simmering soups to be judged in this savory competition. Sixteen soups were evaluated by our esteemed panel of judges (shown below) who chose a stuffed pepper soup made by Greg Curtin, service coordinator for Prevocational Services. Patrons of the event cast votes for their favorites as well and Kay Shellenberger, vice president of program services, went home with the Taster's Choice Award for her chicken chile relleno. In addition to the soup competition, there were baked goods to enjoy and raffle prizes to be won.

While we love an excuse to eat and get together with friends, the purpose of the annual BraVo! Souper Bowl is to raise funds for local nonprofits. This year all proceeds benefit the Peter Maurin Center, a 100% volunteer community service organization that "nourishes the mind, body and spirit" of unsheltered and marginalized individuals in the Greater Akron area (www.petermaurincenter.com). Thanks to everyone who participated in the event we raised \$1,113 dollars for the organization and provided them with donated items to restock hygiene products as well.



ALL-STAR TRAINING CLUB

A PROGRAM OF UDS

Have you signed up yet? What are you waiting for? Get ready to run, flip or swing into spring! Track & field, gymnastics, soccer, golf and bocce are starting soon. Children and adults of all abilities and skill levels are welcome. Year-round sports available. Register now for spring and summer! Go to AllStarTrainingClub.org or contact Kelly Maze at 330-762-9755.

- BASKETBALL
- BOCCE
- BOWLING
- COACH PITCH/KICKBALL
- CORNHOLE
- CROSS COUNTRY
- FLAG FOOTBALL
- GOLF
- GYMNASTICS
- SOCCER
- TRACK & FIELD
- VOLLEYBALL

Who Can Benefit from Low Vision Services?



Older Adults

Low vision assessments and aids can help seniors experiencing age-related vision loss such as macular degeneration, glaucoma and diabetic eye disease maintain their independence. Our senior patients can often return to reading, managing their finances and safely navigating in their home and community.



Working Adults

Receiving low vision care can be a critical factor in a working-age person's ability to find work or keep their current job. Our services can provide adaptive equipment and training to better function in the workplace, and in some cases, help maintain a valid driver's license.



Youth

Children with vision impairments benefit from our services in the classroom and in life. Our low vision team works with the student and provides helpful guidance to their parents and teachers to create an environment in which the child can learn and thrive. Infants and preschoolers can benefit from specialized testing.

While Low Vision Awareness Month (February) has come to an end, at UDS, our commitment to individuals with low vision never fades. We are here year-round to help you see what you've been missing and maximize the vision you have left. One patient says, "They offered practical solutions and made excellent recommendations for in-home modifications and shared tips and tricks that I can use. I truly appreciate the option to borrow and test the items as well!"

Dr. Jocelyn Pettitt and Office Coordinator Heidi Seymoure are here to meet the needs of people with low vision in all stages of life. They want to help you by providing:

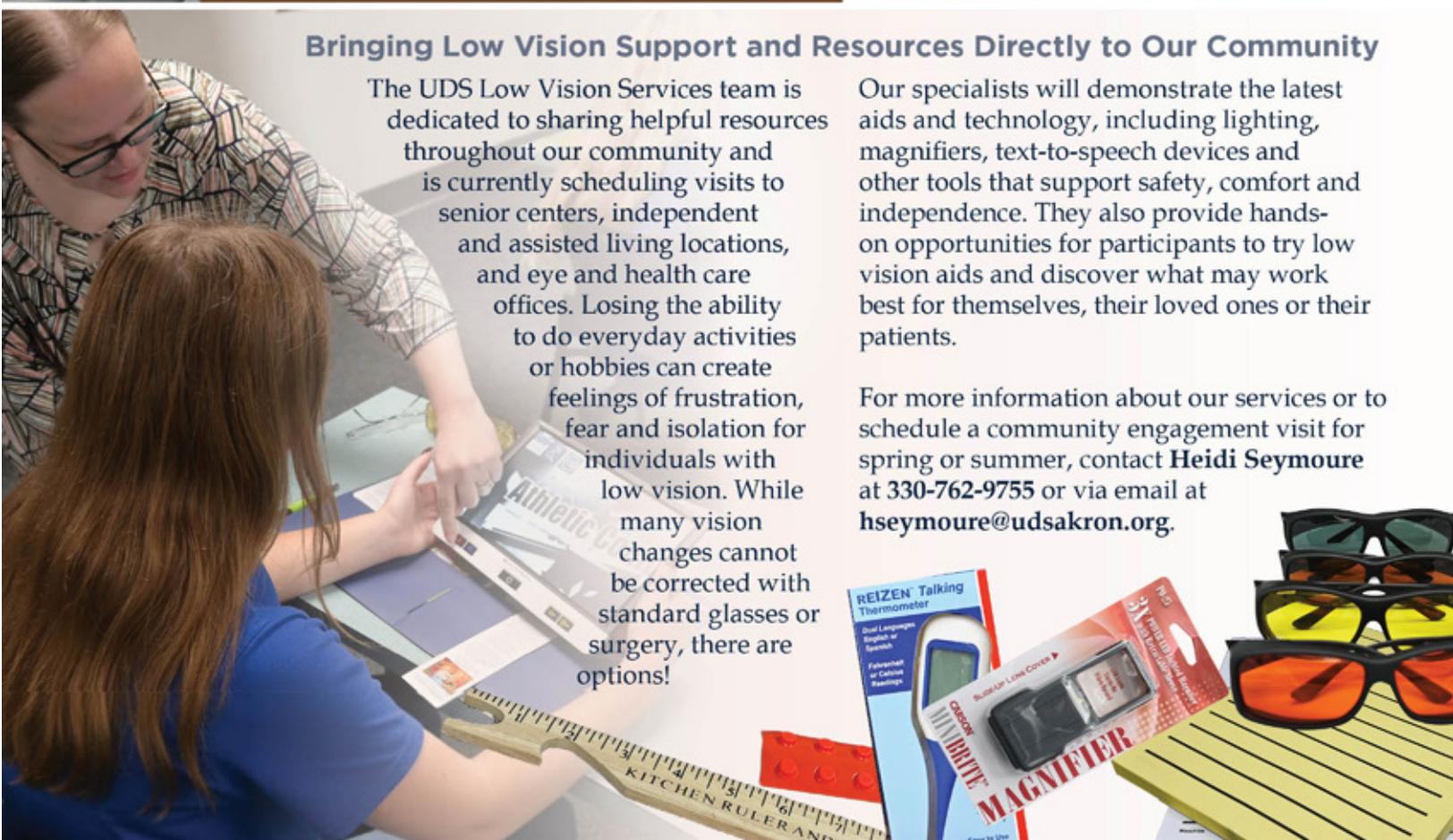
- **Low vision assessments** for all ages
- **Northern Ohio Bioptic Driving Program** (collaboration with Heights Driving School)
- Demonstrations of desktop and portable **video magnifiers** and assistive **text to speech readers**
- **Devices for daily living** to help promote independence in the home

Bringing Low Vision Support and Resources Directly to Our Community

The UDS Low Vision Services team is dedicated to sharing helpful resources throughout our community and is currently scheduling visits to senior centers, independent and assisted living locations, and eye and health care offices. Losing the ability to do everyday activities or hobbies can create feelings of frustration, fear and isolation for individuals with low vision. While many vision changes cannot be corrected with standard glasses or surgery, there are options!

Our specialists will demonstrate the latest aids and technology, including lighting, magnifiers, text-to-speech devices and other tools that support safety, comfort and independence. They also provide hands-on opportunities for participants to try low vision aids and discover what may work best for themselves, their loved ones or their patients.

For more information about our services or to schedule a community engagement visit for spring or summer, contact **Heidi Seymoure** at 330-762-9755 or via email at hseymoure@udsakron.org.



United Disability Services

701 S. Main St., Akron, OH 44311
330-762-9755

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Aspire! is published quarterly by
United Disability Services

701 S. Main St., Akron, Ohio 44311-1019

The mission of UDS is to provide and support
inclusive, life-enriching options through
person-centered programs and advocacy.

UDS is a non-for-profit organization
[501(c)(3)] with programs accredited by
the Commission on Accreditation of
Rehabilitation Facilities (CARF).

Bob Chess, chairperson
Brian Thomas, president/CEO
Lisa Armstrong, director of
communications and external relations
Sandy Palmer, editor
Amy Tubergen, writer

◆
You can make a difference in the life of someone
with a disability by donating today.
To learn more visit: www.udsakron.org/donate



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Volunteer Feature: This Could Be You



If your new year's resolution was to "give back" or your company or club is looking for a team building activity, we can help. UDS offers a variety of volunteer opportunities for individuals, students, retirees and groups. Our Toy & Resource Center needs volunteers to clean, sort and prep toys for lending on Tuesday, Wednesday and Thursday afternoons. Volunteers are welcome at our four adult day programs to assist with craft, educational and music activities during the week. Athletes in our All-Star Training Club appreciate volunteers who help them participate fully in various sports on weeknights and weekends.

For more information about volunteering for any UDS program, reach out to **Amy Tubergen** at 330-762-9755, ext. 243 or atubergen@udsakron.org or visit our website at udsakron.org.

