# NORTH AMERICAN CARIBBEAN REGION

# WORLD BLIND UNION

# REPORT FOR THE QUADRENNIUM 2021 – 2025

## Overview

This has been a challenging quadrennium for the North American Caribbean (NAC) Region, as it has undoubtedly been for all regions in our union. As we recover from a worldwide pandemic, lasting economic pressures, changing political perspectives and priorities, and social isolation, our regional members remain committed to collaboration and the principles and strategic priorities of the World Blind Union (WBU). In our quadrennial report for 2021-2025, we present highlights of our work under the four key areas of emphasis for the world organization: advocacy and policy development, capacity building, raising awareness, and collaboration and partnerships.

## Advocacy and Policy Development

Our regional leadership recognizes the important role we play in helping to advance advocacy priorities for the blind around the world. Specifically, we continue to coordinate efforts with world leaders—North America is home to many of the world’s most influential technology companies and is a leader in the development of autonomous vehicles. Through our active engagement with the WBU Accessible and Assistive Technology Working Group and regulation coordination with the WBU CEO, we work to add value to our collective digital-accessibility and built-environment priorities.

For more than a decade our region has led WBU’s advocacy efforts to address the concerns posed by hybrid and electric vehicles that do not produce enough sound to be heard by blind travelers. In February 2008, representatives of the National Federation of the Blind first traveled to Geneva, Switzerland, to urge the United Nations World Forum for the Harmonization of Vehicle Regulations (also known as WP-29) to work on the quiet car issue. The United Nations created the Quiet Road Transport Vehicle (QRTV) group to do this work. Over the next several years, the National Federation of the Blind represented the World Blind Union at the QRTV meetings, and ultimately WP-29 adopted Regulation 138, which is a part of the 1958 agreement. This regulation is currently in effect in sixty-four countries.

Several years ago, WP-29 asked the QRTV Group to review and potentially update Regulation 138. Since March 2023, the National Federation of the Blind and the German Federation of the Blind and Partially Sighted have worked in partnership to represent the World Blind Union at these meetings. Over the past two years there have been two meetings per year in Geneva, several in-person meetings elsewhere in Europe, and approximately fifteen virtual meetings. We have provided critical oral feedback in all of these meetings, as well as written comments.

Most recently, Merve Sezgin from the German Federation of the Blind and Partially Sighted and John Pare from the National Federation of the Blind represented the World Blind Union at the Groupe Rapporteur Bruit et Pneumatiques (GRPB) meeting, held from February 6 to February 9, at the United Nations in Geneva, Switzerland. The GRPB is the Committee of Experts on Noise and Tires. The proposed Regulation 138 is an amendment to Regulation 51. The first objective on behalf of WBU was to protect the existing beneficial provisions in the regulation. Their second objective was to urge the group to make mandatory the sound a vehicle must make when it is traveling in the forward direction between 20 and 30 kph. It is currently optional. They were not able to get the group to make this change and the sound remains optional. The good news is that several vehicle manufacturers do make this optional sound. Their third objective was to require a mandatory sound when the vehicle is stationary and the gear shift is either in forward or reverse. It is currently optional. They were able to get the group to change Regulation 138 to mandate a sound when the vehicle is stationary and the gear shift is in reverse. The sound remains optional when the vehicle is stationary and the gear shift is in forward, but here again several vehicle manufacturers do make this optional sound.

While this amendment has been adopted, there is already discussion of making additional changes. It is important that the World Blind Union is represented at these meetings to ensure our ability to travel independently is protected. In coordination with the WBU officers, efforts are underway to transfer the bulk of the advocacy leadership on this issue to the European Blind Union, but experts from our region will continue to provide critical support, technical assistance, and attendance at meetings, as needed.

## Capacity Building

As noted in our report for the last quadrennium, our primary effort to build capacity exists in the Caribbean, where populations are small and economic resources are limited, which is a barrier to active participation in the region and world organization. While considerable work remains to fulfill the commitment to include very small countries in our region, we believe that the constitutional amendment adopted at the last general assembly has proved helpful to small countries wishing to be members. Our region held a virtual meeting led by Kim Charlson (regional president) and Charles Mossop (past regional president) to educate Caribbean members on their new options for delegate representation under the WBU Constitution. This resulted in several parties ultimately taking the single delegate approach. More work is needed to increase communications and engagement with these members in our region.

To address the issue of capacity building, the region has been exploring the establishment of a Regional Development Fund (RDF). A committee led by Charles Mossop created a concept paper, which was officially adopted by the region in September 2022. The goal is to allow member organizations to incorporate NAC RDF contributions into their yearly organizational budgets and payments. The region will also conduct research into potential partnerships and grant opportunities to grow the fund to support capacity-building priorities. This is certain to be a priority for the region during the next quadrennium.

In addition to these efforts, the region continues to provide leadership within, and is fully committed to the work of, both the WBU Women’s Committee and Youth Committee. The region anticipates seeking more ways to connect world-level work and priorities to the capacity-building efforts in the region during the next quadrennium.

## Raising Awareness

All members of our region remain committed to challenging stereotypes and misconceptions about blindness. As a region we continue to coordinate efforts and share information about projects and priorities being led by individual member organizations. By sharing the achievements of member organizations, we help to amplify positive stories of blind people making a difference throughout society and we shatter misunderstandings. Especially at a time of resistance to diversity and inclusion efforts, we believe that bringing our stories to scale through cross promotion is more important than ever before.

## Collaboration and Partnerships

Our region values partnerships to address emerging issues within our region and throughout the world. Two examples from this quadrennium are our support for the Haiti Rice for the Blind Fund and our coordination of efforts to raise funds to support blind people affected by the war in Ukraine. Haiti is experiencing a severe humanitarian crisis characterized by widespread violence, food insecurity, displacement, and a collapse of essential services. At the urging of our member in Haiti, we mobilized efforts to raise money to deliver food and cooking oil to Haiti’s blind population. The region was able to generate nearly thirty donations totaling $5,385.

In March 2022, our region reached out to the WBU office to determine if we could help with any efforts to assist blind people affected by the new war in Ukraine. In our region, the National Federation of the Blind of the United States helped to coordinate fundraising, logistical support, and communications with the WBU office and Jonathan Mosen of New Zealand (who, along with others, handled the primary content collection). Out of this collaboration the WBU established the Ukrainian Unity Fund and the primary vehicle for generating support for the fund was the “We’re with U” Ukraine benefit concert [hashtag #BlindWithU on social media]. The online concert, held on April 16, 2022, significantly amplified the message of blind people working to support other blind people and resulted in nearly $100,000 raised for the WBU’s fund. We enjoyed broad support across our region for this effort and the collaboration across countries and organizations demonstrates the power of working together. Our region will continue to seek opportunities to collaborate across borders and leverage member resources and expertise in order to assist our blind partners around the world. It is our firm belief that this type of global action among the blind is exactly why we have a world organization.

## Regional Leadership

During the past quadrennium, we have had the following individuals serving in the leadership of the region:

* Ms. Kim Charlson (USA) - President
* Mr. Mark Riccobono (USA) - Vice President
* Mr. Kenneth Suratt (Trinidad and Tobago) - Member-at-large
* Mr. Charles Mossop (Canada) - Member-at-large

It is worth noting that Ms. Diane Bergeron (Canada) was originally elected as our vice president but with her election to a table officer position we elected a new vice president for our region. In May 2025, Ms. Charlson stepped down as regional President due to significant health concerns that made it impossible for her to serve through the general assembly. In addition to these leadership changes, during the course of the quadrennium our region has suffered from having fewer meetings than is typical for our region—only meeting virtually. In August 2025, the region will meet and elect representatives for the next quadrennium with terms beginning at the close of the upcoming general assembly. It is our hope that our region can return to in-person meetings and that we will be able to have more stability in the leadership than we have in recent times. We continue to be grateful for the volunteer leadership of each of our elected representatives in the region.

## Conclusion

While this quadrennium has been a disruptive one in our history, we continue to remain committed to the principles and values of the World Blind Union. We are proud that our region continues to contribute in many ways to the world effort and we gain much from being part of the global movement. Despite the global challenges that continue to threaten our collective efforts to advance the position of the blind in the world, we are optimistic that together we will continue to raise expectations for the blind the world over. We anticipate the opportunity to join with our colleagues at the General Assembly in Sao Paulo, Brazil.

In closing, we must extend our deepest gratitude to Charles Mossop for his extensive leadership in our region and his commitment to building greater capacity among our small countries. We also want to acknowledge the outstanding dedication and leadership of Kim Charlson, who was the first woman elected as president in our region. Although a number of health concerns affected her ability to accomplish all she wanted to as our regional president, her continued commitment to raising expectations for blind people and making the connections needed to achieve our goals continues to be extraordinary. With our submission of this report, we ask that our blind colleagues around the world extend wishes of strength and good health to Kim as she deals with her current situation. She continues to be a mentor to all in our region and a clear example of the leadership we need within our world movement.

Any omissions of significant achievements from our region during the past quadrennium from this report are due to the emergency need of the author to compile this report on behalf of the region when our president needed to resign. There are most certainly important advocacy and collaborative moments that have not been fully documented here as each of the member organizations in our region are working hard each day to advance the world movement. Thank you for the opportunity to serve this organization.

Respectfully submitted,

Mark A. Riccobono

Acting President

North American Caribbean Region