**AER Strategic Plan 2023-2026**

# Introduction

“One Community – One Voice.” This phrase encapsulates a bold vision for AER to pursue over the course of its fifth decade of existence set to begin in 2024. With a new staff leader working in partnership with a member-elected board of directors dedicated to providing visionary and strategic leadership, and following significant community engagement, AER recently laid out a plan to address the most critical opportunities and challenges facing the organization, its members, and their professions. Those challenges are significant and the path to successfully addressing them runs through AER’s most exciting opportunity: to learn what can be accomplished by acting decidedly as one community and speaking powerfully with one voice.

The greatest challenges identified through the community needs assessment activities undertaken at the outset of AER’s strategic planning process centered around the personnel shortage impacting the availability of services for people young and old who are blind or who have low vision. This complex and intractable set of issues is not new to the professions served by AER. In fact, it has been a substantial concern for all four decades of AER’s existence. We believe that the path toward progress on this challenge lies through collaboration and clear, unified communication.

The role of AERis to amplify the voices of our members to drive the systemic changes that are most important to them and to those they serve. The work of AER is to be the convener of its diverse membership, propel a process of building meaningful consensus around the highest priority opportunities for the membership, and then support, inspire, and help lead the change process. To do so effectively requires a robust and engaged membership and a strong and sustainable organization. The three strategic opportunities that make up this strategic plan reflect these core elements.

# Opportunity 1: PURSUING SYSTEMS CHANGE

In response to the big question of how AER can ensure that the concerns of the professionals we serve and the individuals they serve are heard and can effectively influence systems change, the planning team focused its attention on three strategies selected to bring about the following impact:

**AER equips, trains, mobilizes, and coordinates AER members and our allies to successfully implement systems change initiatives.**

The selected strategies address the challenges of developing consensus around a shared systems change agenda for AER, building infrastructure and identifying resources to implement systems change initiatives, and building partnerships to collaborate effectively around issues where we share core principles and desired outcomes with other organizations that are engaged in, or would like to participate in, effective systems change work.

Strategy 1.1: AER will develop a process for building consensus around a systems change agenda and then use it to identify the core principles around which we will advocate and a prioritized agenda for action. Our ultimate goal is to accrue substantial member engagement in this process that leads to widespread support among AER members for a prioritized systems change agenda. We expect at least 20% of voting members to participate in the process in some form and 80% of members responding to a survey to express support for the core principles and prioritized systems change agenda.

Strategy 1.2: AER will build the organizational infrastructure and develop the resources needed to implement a robust systems-change initiative. This includes determining how to staff the initiative and how to track results. We will create a sustainable, multi-year systems change action plan including goals, measurable objectives, tools, and action steps for implementation at the central, division, chapter and individual member levels. Then, we will implement the action plan. Measures or milestones for showing the direct impact of this work on the systems we are trying to change will be formulated along the way. We will track and expect to report 20% engagement of AER members and at least 80% engagement of AER divisions and chapters in systems change implementation efforts.

Strategy 1.3: AER will identify potential partners and build effective collaborative relationships with them to work on issues where we share core principles and desired outcomes. We will build substantial capacity by increasing interaction with partner organizations such that, compared with 2024, 50% more of our current partners tangibly exhibit engagement and support through actions such as “signing on,” sharing the information with their constituencies, or using our language in their communications. Goals for annual year over year increases will be set once we begin implementation of the systems change work. We will also engage in collaboration with two new organizations each year (one every six months) associated with historically underrepresented people and groups in an effort to hear and magnify their voice within our systems change efforts. Through collaboration, we will extend the reach of AER systems change messages by 20% as determined by the reported reach of partner communications.

# Opportunity 2: INCREASING AND EFFECTIVELY COMMUNICATING MEMBERSHIP VALUE

In response to the big question of how AER can build widespread awareness of the value of and benefits associated with membership and motivate greater participation in the organization’s mission-centered activities, the planning team focused on three strategies to bring about the following impact:

**Membership shows robust growth and participation flourishes at all levels of AER. The Council of Division Chairs (CDC) and the Council of Chapter Presidents (CCP) have significant membership participation. Leadership development thrives across the organization.**

The selected strategies address how membership packages are defined and marketed to have broader appeal, how AER can appeal to an expanded range of groups to come under the AER umbrella, how AER can strengthen ties to and focus on common areas of interest with sister organizations that have evolved alongside of AER, and how AER can build a brand strategy to better understand and consistently communicate the value of AER to all.

Strategy 2.1: AER will sharpen its membership marketing focus, resources, and tools. This includes tailoring membership packages to attract both traditional and nontraditional interest groups, and developing and delivering new programs to help members access what they need most from AER, including a speakers bureau, a “find a mentor” program and, possibly, a “find an internship” program. We plan to enhance onboarding of new AER members and create a process to immediately connect and engage them with their nearest chapter. In a practical way, success in this strategy requires adding staff capacity to better serve our membership. It also requires enhancing the Membership Committee of the Board with additional expertise and perspectives relevant to the goals outlined in this strategy. By 2025, we expect to see 33% growth in AER membership compared to the total number of members as in 2022. We also expect to see a 10% increase in people running for AER offices and board positions, chairing AER divisions, and taking leadership within AER chapters. We anticipate a 10% annual increase in the percentage of AER members from professional groups that are not a part of AER’s typical historic membership compared to 2022. By 2025, we anticipate that members from these groups will be active in 20% of AER chapters and divisions.

Strategy 2.2: AER will identify and build internal and external strategic collaborations to enhance the visibility of AER and awareness of AER membership value with professionals and organizations that serve or engage with people who are blind or have low vision in their work. We expect to increase awareness of and interest in AER as measured by behaviors taken by participants following events where AER is present, including signing up for AER action alerts and joining AER.

Strategy 2.3: AER will identify the unifying principles and priorities that can bring together the sub-groups within AER (and those that have diverged from AER) into a sense of being one community. We plan to accomplish this by promoting a shared understanding of the common ground among us all and how joint efforts can result in mutual benefit. High priority relationships with organizations representing consumers, stakeholders, and agencies will be managed by the Executive Director and the AER Board of Directors. An ad hoc committee on community building will be formed to lead the balance of this initiative, creating a list of the “sister” organizations and creating plans to approach and engage them in partnerships. We will create a partnership protocol to underpin these outreach efforts and develop materials that promote participation and collaboration with AER to be used at conferences held by our partners. We expect to see evidence that members increasingly see themselves as part of one community, conveying awareness and value of a variety of perspectives, and exhibiting willingness to speak with one voice in response to time sensitive issues. AER members and partners surveyed will exhibit a 25% increase in respondents who “agree” or “strongly agree” with statements reflecting these perspectives and attitudes. We plan to form at least six new partnerships (one every six months)between AER and prioritized sister organizations.

Strategy 2.4: AER will create a brand strategy to guide consistent communication of AER’s value to current and potential members and supporters. We will begin by taking a forensic look at our existing communications across all channels to consider style and media. We will develop an understanding of our brand in terms of our target audiences, value propositions, and messaging. We will develop a clear understanding of AER’s brand (the favorable impression we always want people to have when they come into contact with AER on any of its platforms - website, e-mail, conference, etc.). AER will adjust communications to carry through these messages and impressions on every channel. To “level up” AER communications and brand recognition, we will reestablish the Communication and Marketing Committee of the Board and explore the viability of creating a new staff position dedicated to communication and marketing. We expect to see a 10% increase in traffic on the AER website, attract at least 500 new visitors to the website each year, increase in branded search volume by 10% compared to 2023, increase mentions of AER in targeted news outlets and industry publications by 10% (as tracked by Google Alert), and increase of followers, posting, and sharing on our social media channels by at least 10%.

# Opportunity 3: BUILDING KNOWLEDGE, CONNECTIONS, AND RESOURCES

In response to the big question of how AER can tap into new sources of knowledge, perspectives, connections, and funding that can help the organization grow its reach and mission impact, planning participants focused on three strategies selected to bring about the following impact:

**AER thrives with the guidance and engagement of sustainable and diverse volunteer leadership, infrastructure, and funding.**

The selected strategies address the creation of an advisory board to expand the knowledge, connections, perspectives, and resources available to AER, the creation of new strategic corporate partnerships bringing a range of funding and visibility opportunities, and the creation of a robust development plan and infrastructure to expand the funds available to support AER operations as well as the establishment of scholarships and an endowment fund to underpin the mission in the long-term.

Strategy 3.1: AER will create a board of advisors composed of properly vetted and recruited individuals that share AER's values to enhance the capacity and reach of the organization, particularly in the philanthropic and commercial sectors. We will structure the group to support resource development for AER and provide knowledge, critical thinking, and analysis to increase the confidence of the leadership of AER as it moves into unfamiliar territory. We expect to increase leads for fundraising opportunities by 10% each year compared to fundraising leads in 2023. Through advisory board members opening doors and developing beneficial relationships, we will increase connections to individuals who can provide valuable perspectives and support by 15% each year, enhancing resources and decision making.

Strategy 3.2: AER will identify and build new strategic corporate partnerships that have the potential to strengthen our connections and build our network in beneficial ways. These include sectors that are, or should be, engaging with people with vision loss, e.g., home health and skilled nursing care, pharmaceutical companies, and mainstream technology manufacturers. We expect to develop six new corporate partnerships over the course of the strategic plan (one every six months).

Strategy 3.3: AER will identify fruitful opportunities for raising funds for AER operations, scholarships, and endowment. To accomplish this, we will develop and implement a comprehensive fundraising plan incorporating the most appropriate approaches for AER. These approaches are likely to include annual fundraising among AER members, corporate sponsorships, foundation grants, planned gifts including bequests, and major gifts. To carry out these activities, AER will form a Development Committee of the Board and determine how to staff the fundraising function of AER in a way that is sustainable. Additional revenue strategies we will pursue include expansion of revenue from AER publications and enhanced accreditation offerings. Through this strategy, we expect to increase revenue by 10% or more each biennium compared to the baseline biennium of 2021/2022. This increase in revenue will be comprised of increases in revenue from fundraising, membership, publications, conferences, and accreditation. We also intend to secure 100% participation of board members in annual giving through individual contributions of an amount that is personally significant by no later than June 1, 2024.

# Conclusion:

# The leadership of AER is taking steps to ensure that the organization becomes an even greater resource for stakeholders, engaging diverse perspectives around issues of critical importance; acting as one community and speaking with one voice to deliver systems change impact; attracting and engaging members from the wide range of professions connected to AER’s mission; and bringing more resources to bear on carrying out the mission. We firmly believe that the actions proposed in this strategic plan will contribute to AER realizing our vision of “One Community – One Voice.”