

Prevent Blindness
Testimony to the House Appropriations Labor, Health and Human Services,
Education, and Related Agencies Subcommittee
Submitted by: Hugh Parry, President & CEO, Prevent Blindness
March 8, 2017

Prevent Blindness appreciates the opportunity to submit testimony to the Subcommittee and respectfully requests the following allocation and support in Fiscal Year (FY) 2018 to promote eye health and prevent eye disease and vision loss in the U.S.:

- **Provide at least \$3,300,000 to expand vision and eye health efforts at the Vision Health Initiative of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC).**
- **Provide at least \$3,500,000 to the Health Resources and Services Administration's (HRSA) Maternal and Child Health Bureau (MCHB) to establish children's vision and eye health programs in ten states, and a technical assistance coordinating center.**
- **Provide at least \$3,294,000 for the Glaucoma Project at CDC to allow the program to continue to improve glaucoma screening, referral, and treatment by reaching populations that experience the greatest disparity in access to glaucoma care.**

Introduction and Overview

The National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine (NASEM) recently issued *"Making Eye Health a Population Health Imperative: Vision for Tomorrow."* Importantly, the report recognizes that for too long vision and eye health have not received the attention and investment they warrant, given their importance to public health. Prevent Blindness – the nation's leading non-profit, voluntary organization committed to preventing blindness and preserving sight – maintains a long-standing commitment to working with policymakers at all levels of government, organizations and individuals in the eye care and vision loss community, and other interested stakeholders to develop, advance, and

implement policies and programs that prevent blindness and preserve sight.¹ An estimated 80 million Americans have a potentially blinding eye disease, 3 million have low vision, more than 1 million are legally blind, and 200,000 are more severely visually blind. Vision impairment in children is a common condition that affects 5 to 10 percent of preschool age children, and is a leading cause of impaired health in childhood. Recent research showed that the economic burden of vision loss and eye disorders is \$145 billion each year, and could rise to as much as \$717 billion by the year 2020 if we don't increase attention to this concern. Vision-related conditions affect people across the lifespan. Good vision is an integral component to health and well-being. It affects nearly all activities of daily living and impacts an individual's physical, emotional, social, and financial status. Loss of vision has a devastating impact on individuals and their families. Alarming, while half of all blindness can be prevented through education, early detection, and treatment, the National Eye Institute (NEI) reports that "the number of Americans with age-related eye disease and the vision impairment that results is expected to double within the next three decades."² To curtail the increasing incidence of vision loss in America, and its accompanying economic burden, Prevent Blindness is requesting sustained and meaningful federal funding for programs that promote eye health and prevent eye disease, vision loss, and blindness. In a time of significant fiscal constraints, we recognize the challenges facing the Subcommittee and urge you to consider the ramifications of decreased investment in vision and eye health. Vision loss is often preventable, but without the necessary funding to better understand eye conditions, treatment options, and development of public health systems and infrastructure to disseminate good science and prevention strategies, millions of Americans face the loss of independence, health, and their livelihoods.

¹ For more information about Prevent Blindness and our federal government relations and public policy efforts, please visit www.preventblindness.org.

² "Vision Problems in the U.S.: Prevalence of Adult Vision Impairment and Age-Related Eye Disease in America," Prevent Blindness America and the National Eye Institute, 2008.

Vision and Eye Health at the CDC: Helping to Save Sight and Save Money

The CDC serves a critical role in promoting vision and eye health. Since 2003, the CDC and Prevent Blindness have collaborated with other partners to create a more effective public health approach to vision loss prevention and eye health promotion. CDC has also been able to explore a few model programs to promote early detection of glaucoma. However, severely constrained financial resources have limited the CDC's ability to take the work of the Vision Health Initiative (VHI) to the next level. The NASEM report acknowledges the essential role of the CDC in addressing the challenges that exist for vision and eye health, and calls on the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services to prioritize and expand CDC's vision and eye health program, in partnership with state-based chronic disease programs and other clinical and non-clinical stakeholders, to:

- a) Develop, implement, and evaluate evidence-based public health programs for the prevention of conditions leading to visual impairment;
- b) Develop and evaluate programs and models that facilitate access to, and utilization of, patient-centered vision care and rehabilitation services, including integration and coordination among health care providers;
- c) Develop and evaluate initiatives to improve environments and socioeconomic conditions that underpin good eye and vision health in communities and reduce eye health disparities.
- d) Develop a coordinated public health surveillance system to monitor eye and vision health in the U.S.

Investing in the Vision of Our Nation's Most Valuable Resource: Children

In addition to acknowledging the important – yet underfunded – role of the Vision Health Initiative at the CDC, the NASEM report committee acknowledged the HRSA-funded quality improvement work being led by the National Center for Children's Vision and Eye Health as

a leading example of the importance of continuous quality improvement among diverse stakeholders in advancing eye health in the U.S. Early detection and intervention for vision problems are incorporated into national goals and health care standards. Healthy People 2020 includes the following vision objectives – “Increase the proportion of preschool children aged 5 years and under who receive vision screening” (Objective V-1); “Reduce blindness and visual impairment in children and adolescents aged 17 years and under” (Objective V-20; and “Increase the use of personal protective eyewear in recreational activities and hazardous situations around the home among children and adolescents aged 6 to 17 years” (Objective V-6.1).

While the risk of eye disease increases after the age of 40, eye and vision problems in children are of an equal and time-sensitive concern. If left undiagnosed and untreated, eye diseases in children can lead to permanent and irreversible visual loss and/or cause problems socially, academically, and developmentally. Studies have demonstrated that optical correction of significant refractive error may be related to improved child development and school readiness.^{3,4,5} yet only 52% of children ages 3 through 5 are screened for vision problems⁶, and only one-third of all children receive eye care services before the age of six.⁷ But early detection can help prevent vision loss and blindness as many serious ocular conditions in children are treatable if identified at an early stage. In 2009, Prevent Blindness established the National Center for Children’s Vision and Eye Health (the Center), a national vision health collaborative effort aimed at developing the public health infrastructure necessary to address issues surrounding children's vision screening with funding support from a HRSA-MCHB grant opportunity.

³ Ibiroko JO, F. D. (2011). Child Development and Refractive Errors in Preschool Children. *Optometry and Vision Science*, 252-8.

⁴ Roch-Levecq AC, B. B. (2008). Ametropia, preschoolers' cognitive abilities, and effects of spectacle correction. *Arch Ophthalmol*, 187-98.

⁵ Atkinson J, A. S. (2002). Infant vision screening predicts failures on motor and cognitive tests up to school age. *Strabismus*, 187-98.

⁶ O'Connor, K. (2012). Overview of Health Care Access, Use, Unmet Needs and Key System Performance Measures for CSHCN by Vision Status. *Children’s Vision and Eye Health Federal Intra-Agency Task Force Meeting*. Washington D.C.

⁷ “Our Vision for Children’s Vision: A National Call to Action for the Advancement of Children’s Vision and Eye Health, Prevent Blindness America,” Prevent Blindness America, 2008.

The Center has established a National Advisory Committee to provide recommendations toward national guidelines for quality improvement strategies, vision screening and developing a continuum of children's vision and eye health. With this support the Center, will continue to: (1) provide national leadership in dissemination of best practices, infrastructure development, professional education, and national vision screening guidelines that ensure a continuum of vision and eye health care focused on children ages birth to 6 years old; (2) advance state-based performance improvement systems and screening guidelines (3) promote family education and engagement in their child's vision health, and (4) provide technical assistance to states in the implementation of strategies for vision screening, establishing quality improvement measures, and promote state-to-state sharing of promising practices. This funding will allow MCHB to assist states in developing children's vision screening and eye health programs and coordinate programmatic efforts across federal agencies. In the first year of this program the MCHB would award up to 10 competitive grants to states and territories and fund technical assistance through the National Center for Children's Vision and Eye Health allowing it to identify and develop resources as a part of vision health outreach and awareness.

Conclusion

On behalf of Prevent Blindness, our Board of Directors, and the millions of people at risk for vision loss and eye disease, we thank you for the opportunity to submit written testimony regarding FY 2018 funding for the CDC Vision Health Initiative, CDC Glaucoma Project, and the MCHB National Center for Children's Vision and Eye Health. Please know that Prevent Blindness stands ready to work with the Subcommittee and other Members of Congress to advance policies that will prevent blindness and preserve sight. We are happy to be a resource to Subcommittee members and your staff. We very much appreciate the Subcommittee's attention to – and consideration of – our requests.