

August 8, 2017

The Honorable Brenda Fitzgerald, MD
Director, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention
Administrator, Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry
1600 Clifton Road
Atlanta, Georgia 30333

Dear Dr. Fitzgerald:

On behalf of Prevent Blindness and its affiliates around the country— including Prevent Blindness Georgia serving your home state— we would like to congratulate you on your appointment as Director for the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and Administrator, Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry. I would like to take this opportunity to introduce our organization and mission to prevent blindness and preserve sight, as well as to commend the CDC for its important work in vision loss prevention over the past 14 years. Our partnership with the CDC has been an essential element to our work in serving this nation and we hope to continue to serve as a resource to you in your work.

Prevent Blindness: Bringing Americans to Eye Care

Founded in 1908, [Prevent Blindness](http://PreventBlindness.org) is the nation's leading not-for-profit, voluntary eye health and safety organization. We touch the lives of millions of people across the age continuum each year through our mission of preventing blindness and preserving sight. Prevent Blindness is first and foremost a public health organization committed to eliminating preventable blindness in America. As such, we focus on improving the nation's vision and eye health by enhancing state and community capacities through our core competencies of early detection, patient support, care coordination, public policy, advocacy, research, public awareness, and health education. Half of all incidents of blindness can be prevented, yet this can only occur through these essential interventions.

Our Collective Eye Health

Eyesight is highly valued: it is central to an adult's employability, a child's success in school, and sustaining our independence as we age. Among people over the age of 40, vision-related eye diseases are unnecessarily common: cataract (24.4 million); diabetic retinopathy (7.7 million); macular degeneration (2.1 million); and glaucoma (2.7 million). A recently released Robert Wood Johnson Foundation study ranks eye disorders as the 5th leading chronic condition among those aged 65 years and up and 7th across all age groups. People with vision impairment are more likely to experience other chronic conditions, including diabetes, hearing impairment, heart problems, hypertension, joint symptoms, low back pain, and stroke as well as falls, injury, motor vehicle collisions, depression, social isolation, diminished health-related quality of life, and premature death.

The financial impact of these problems is enormous. In direct medical costs, eye disorders rank 5th among the top eight chronic conditions. **These problems are currently costing our country \$145 billion in health care costs and lost productivity. Without significant planning and intervention, these costs could rise to as much as \$717 billion by the year 2050.** And yet, vision and eye health is consistently overlooked as a public health concern. A coordinated approach to interventions that support key stakeholders and state-based public health systems is needed to expand early detection, prevention, patient support, and research to lessen the burden of vision disorders on working adults and our nation's public health infrastructure.

National Center for Children’s Vision and Eye Health at Prevent Blindness

Prevent Blindness has considered healthy vision for America’s children as one of our core missions since our founding. In 1926, we developed the first volunteer-run preschool vision screening program and to this day, we remain involved in the direct provision of care through the training for, and delivery of, vision screening and eye care referral services to millions of children in communities across the country.

Vision impairments caused by refractive error, amblyopia, strabismus, and/or astigmatism are common conditions among children, affecting 5 to 10 percent of all preschoolers and nearly 1 in 4 school-aged children. If not detected and treated early, vision impairment could affect all aspects of life, negatively impacting a child’s cognitive, motor, and social development, ability to learn, athletic performance, and self-esteem. Vision problems in children bring with them a tremendous long-term cost to our economy. Annually, the economic burden of eye conditions among the U.S. population younger than age 18 is \$6.1 billion, and untreated amblyopia alone costs the U.S. nearly \$7.4 billion in earning power.

To accomplish objectives of nationally uniform standards for vision and eye health, surveillance and preventive interventions, Prevent Blindness established our [National Center for Children’s Vision and Eye Health](#) (the “NCCVEH”) to strengthen the nation’s public health approach for children’s vision, as well as our own capacity to better serve the needs of states requesting technical assistance. The NCCVEH is committed to conducting this work through strong partnerships, sound science, and strategic programmatic initiatives. The impact that vision problems have on our country’s overall health is clear; it will take strong state-level initiatives with a coordinated national approach to turn the tide for children’s vision and eye health.

Establishing a Surveillance System for Eye and Vision Health

Recently the National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine (NASEM, formerly the Institutes of Medicine) issued a report, [Making Eye Health a Population Imperative: Vision for Tomorrow](#) highlighting the significance of our nation’s increasing vision impairment problem and making recommendations to address it. **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.** We understand the enormous fiscal challenges you face at the CDC in securing our nation’s readiness to respond to existing and emerging threats to our public health. However, we believe the bulk of this work can be accomplished by the states, with the CDC serving as a leader, to ensure that preventable vision loss or impairment is not an additional burden to these immense challenges.

Throughout the NASEM report, there are a number of recommendations that made a direct call for federal government action. **Among these were recommendations for the CDC to:**

- Develop a coordinated surveillance system for eye and vision health in the United States, and to
- Build state and local capacity by prioritizing and expanding the CDC’s vision grant program, in partnership with state-based chronic disease programs and other clinical and non-clinical stakeholders, to
 - a. Design, implement, and evaluate programs for the primary prevention of conditions leading to visual impairment, including policies to reduce eye injuries;
 - b. Develop and evaluate policies and systems that facilitate access to, and utilization of, patient-centered vision care and rehabilitation services, including integration and coordination among care providers; and
 - c. Develop and evaluate initiatives to improve environments and socioeconomic conditions that underpin good eye and vision health and reduce injuries in communities.

Vision Health Initiative

We greatly appreciate the commitment the CDC has made to the nation's vision and eye health through the impressive efforts of the Vision Health Initiative (VHI). Since its establishment in 2003, the VHI has created a more effective public health approach to vision loss and eye health promotion by integrating vision health into broader disease prevention and health promotion, identifying and preventing problems through community-based strategies, and improving upon and collecting critical vision health data.

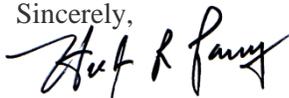
However, the NASEM report acknowledges the important—yet underfunded—roles of the VHI. Currently, the federal government allocates \$3.806 million toward prevention of vision problems – **with only \$512,000 funding the VHI since sequestration began in FY 2011**. This means that for every \$37,720 vision problems are costing our country, we are only allocating a *single dollar* toward their prevention. **We ask that you ensure adequate resources are directed to the VHI in order to develop and implement critical surveillance systems and state grant programs necessary to drive down the staggering costs of vision problems.** The impact of this work can be felt at state and local levels as some of its main objectives include helping states increase their capacity to implement programs that improve access to needed eye care and combat the impact of eye diseases as they play a role in high cost conditions such as diabetes and depression.

While funding to the VHI was cut significantly during sequestration, the important work has continued. However, under considerably deeper cuts to the CDC, the future of this work is unclear. As you begin to focus on your national public health strategy, we ask that you ensure that vision and eye health does not continue to be pushed to the side of the healthcare dialogue.

Conclusion

We look forward to a continued strong partnership with the CDC in our efforts to improve vision care in the United States. We would welcome an opportunity to introduce ourselves in person and further discuss the work of Prevent Blindness to you in the near future. Should you have any questions, or if we can be of any assistance, please do not hesitate to contact me or Sara D. Brown, Director of Government Affairs, at (312) 363-6031 or sbrown@preventblindness.org.

Sincerely,



Hugh. R. Parry
President and Chief Executive Officer