



211 West Wacker Drive
Suite 1700
Chicago, Illinois 60606

toll free 800.331.2020
local 312.363.6001
fax 312.363.6052

PreventBlindness.org

September 5, 2017

The Honorable Jerome M. Adams, MD
United States Surgeon General
U.S. Department of Health and Human Services
200 Independence Avenue, S.W.
Humphrey Building, Suite 701H
Washington, DC 20201

Dear Dr. Adams:

On behalf of Prevent Blindness and its affiliates around the country, we would like to congratulate you on your appointment to be the 20th Surgeon General of the United States. I would like to take this opportunity to introduce our organization and mission to prevent blindness and preserve sight, as well as to specifically request that a national “Call to Action” is implemented to address the burgeoning impact of vision loss and impairment that our country faces.

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.

In addition, Prevent Blindness established the National Center for Children’s Vision and Eye Health (the “NCCVEH”) in order to accomplish objectives of nationally uniform standards for vision and eye health, surveillance and preventive interventions strengthen the nation’s public health approach for children’s vision. 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.

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. **A recently released Robert Wood Johnson Foundation study ranks eye disorders as the 5th leading chronic condition, requiring ongoing treatment and management over one’s lifetime, 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.

Vision impairments caused by refractive error, amblyopia, strabismus, and/or astigmatism are common conditions among children. Five to ten percent of all preschoolers have a vision disorder and nearly 1 in 4 school-aged children have a vision condition which requires treatment. If not detected and treated early, vision impairment could become a permanent condition that affect all aspects of life, negatively impacting a child’s cognitive, motor, and social development, ability to learn, athletic performance, and self-esteem.



The financial impact of vision problems across the age continuum is enormous. In terms of direct medical costs, eye disorders rank 5th among the top eight chronic conditions. 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. **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.

Elevating Vision and Eye Health Education and Awareness through a “Call to Action”

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.

Throughout the NASEM report, there are a number of recommendations that made a direct call for federal government action, including a request of the Secretary of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services to issue a Call to Action to motivate nationwide action toward achieving a reduction in the burden of vision impairment across the lifespan of people in the United States. **This recommendation specifically highlights the role of the Surgeon General in bringing your expertise to bear as the Call to Action describes the public health problem, and details a vision statement, general goals and key actions to support them.** Issuing a Call to Action will set in motion opportunities for collaboration with multi-sector stakeholders to increase public awareness, develop capacity for surveillance, and determine evidence-based guidelines that will ultimately drive clinical best practices, payment policies, and ultimately improve outcomes.

A Call to Action for vision and eye health in the U.S. can be further elevated by your office providing social media promotion, public and professional educational opportunities, and disseminating resources to support the Call and enhance health literacy. We believe that these strategies are critical in stemming the burgeoning tide of preventable vision loss and ensuring that Americans, through optimal vision, continue to engage with the world around them, see to work and learn, and maintain our independence as we age.

Conclusion

We look forward to a strong partnership with you 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