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April 25, 2025

The Honorable Susan Collins
Chair
Senate Appropriations Committee

The Honorable Patty Murray
Ranking Member
Senate Appropriations Committee

The Honorable Lindsey Graham
Chair
Senate Subcommittee on State and
Foreign Operations

The Honorable Brian Schatz
Ranking Member
Senate Subcommittee on State and
Foreign Operations

Dear Senator Collins, Senator Murray, Senator Graham, and Senator Schatz:

On behalf of Prevent Blindness, the nation's leading patient advocacy organization dedicated to preventing blindness and preserving sight, and IAPB, the Global Alliance for Eye Health we write to respectfully urge your continued support for U.S. Government funding for global eye health programs.

For over four decades, the United States Congress has shown extraordinary bipartisan leadership in addressing global visual impairment and avoidable blindness. U.S. investments – particularly through USAID – have changed millions of lives while reinforcing American leadership in innovation, public health diplomacy, and economic development. US Government funding has reduced the instances of blindness caused by Neglected Tropical Diseases, been instrumental in the fight against blindness caused by Non-Communicable Diseases such as diabetes, significantly increased opportunities for those needing visual aids through the AT-Scale programs and delivered critical Childhood Blindness Programs.

In 2019, USAID funding was sequestered for Neglected Tropical Diseases. Two of these diseases, trachoma and onchocerciasis (river blindness) are the leading causes of blindness by infection – painfully stripping away an affected individuals' sight. With the help of this funding, countries have worked towards a faster elimination of these terrible diseases – Colombia, Guatemala, Mexico and Ecuador are now free of river blindness; nineteen countries as a result, including Mexico and Ghana, have eliminated trachoma.

AT-Scale initiatives are part of a global partnership to ensure assistive technologies (including eyeglasses) are available to people in developing countries with limited or no access. USAID funding has ensured that vulnerable populations have access to spectacles, in addition to wheelchairs, hearing aids and prostheses.

The primary example of USAID-supported initiatives directly saving sight has been its Childhood Blindness Program. Since its inception this program has invested more than \$32 million, reducing instances of avoidable blindness and significantly improving educational outcomes for beneficiaries. It has also brought tangible economic benefits to both recipient countries and the United States.

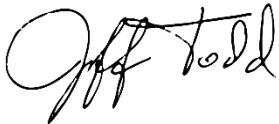
The 1991 Congressional Directive, House Resolution 2621, determined that “not less than \$1,000,000 shall be made available for private voluntary organizations to be used to finance operations for blind children.” Since that time, the program has reached over 12 million children and implemented activities in more than 50 countries around the world to restore sight. This is a legacy of which the United States can be proud.

USAID funding through the Childhood Blindness Program has been catalytic. The investment has paid dividends internationally, but also at home for the US. Successful international programs have brought benefits to the American economy and workforce and led to even greater innovation. Examples include increased procurement via US-based spectacle supply chains, cutting-edge contact lens development at American research institutes, and research into ground-breaking treatments at United States Universities and Medical Centers. As a benefactor nation, the United States has in return reaped the benefit of being at the forefront of investments in low- and middle-income countries – being first-in-line to benefit from shared expertise and knowledge makes the United States safer and stronger.

The economic impacts in recipient countries have been significant; an investment in the eye health of children today is an investment in the working age population of tomorrow. Childhood Blindness Programs have ensured that more people are in jobs. Children with poor vision learn approximately half as much in school as those with good or corrected vision. Every year, this accumulates to 6.3 million years of schooling being lost globally, with a future economic productivity loss of \$173 billion/year. However, early intervention to correct a child's vision in school can boost their individual lifetime earnings by up to 78%. When the Childhood Blindness Program is considered, together with the support for the Neglected Tropical Diseases and Non-Communicable Diseases program and the AT-Scale partnership, the economic resilience created has been enormous.

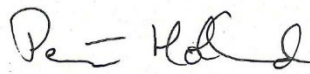
We understand the challenging times in which the world finds itself and the need to make calibrated decisions about how and where to spend tax-payer money. For the reasons set out above we urge you to continue with US Government investment in avoidable blindness and eye health – especially the USAID Childhood Blindness Program, support for Neglected Tropical Diseases, investments in assistive technologies, and transactional research. These contributions continue to be an exemplar of American ingenuity and investment and have a real impact on tackling one of the world's largest health challenges, whilst bringing benefits to hard-working Americans at home.

Sincerely,



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cc:

- The Honorable Marco Rubio, U.S. Department of State
- The Honorable Dorothy Camille Shea, U.S. Mission to the United Nations
- The Honorable Gus Bilirakis, Co-Chair, Congressional Vision Caucus
- The Honorable Marc Veasey, Co-Chair, Congressional Vision Caucus
- The Honorable Tom Cole, Chair, House Appropriations Committee
- The Honorable Rosa DeLauro, Ranking Member, House Appropriations Committee
- The Honorable Mario Díaz-Balart, Chair, House Subcommittee on National Security, Department of State, and Related Programs
- The Honorable Lois Frankel, Ranking Member, House Subcommittee on National Security, Department of State, and Related Programs