

March 10, 2021

The Honorable Patty Murray
Chair
United States Senate
Appropriations Subcommittee on Labor,
Health and Human Services, Education
and Related Agencies
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable Roy Blunt
Ranking Member
United States Senate
Appropriations Subcommittee on Labor,
Health and Human Services, Education
and Related Agencies
Washington, DC 20510

As you develop the Senate’s Labor, Health and Human Services, Education, and Related Agencies appropriations legislation for Fiscal Year (FY) 2022, we—the 116 undersigned organizations that represent patients and consumers, public health professionals, providers, and community service providers across the vision and eye health spectrum—urge you to appropriate **\$5 million to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC)’s Vision and Eye Health program and \$4 million for Glaucoma**. This funding would allow the CDC to conduct critically needed national surveillance of devastating eye diseases and conditions, determine where gaps in access to care exist, and partner with states and communities to improve vision and eye health at the state, local, or systems level.

The COVID-19 pandemic has revealed¹ where the circumstances that lead to vision loss and eye disease—such as the presence of chronic disease, disparities across such populations as those belonging to diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds, socioeconomic circumstances, and age—intersect with the novel coronavirus and its most serious consequences. Vision impairments and eye disease often contribute to or are complicated by other serious and costly chronic health conditions, including diabetes, stroke, depression, social isolation, cognitive decline, and injuries related to falls. Access to quality, preventive eye care that can help detect sight-threatening eye disease for underserved communities and high-risk populations was fractured before the pandemic. Vision problems will likely worsen as children, working-age adults, and the elderly have been unable or felt unsafe to access preventive care during the pandemic.

Vision impairments will cost the United States \$177 billion in 2021². **Absent investments in vision and eye health as a public health priority, these costs will increase to \$717 billion by 2050.** The CDC addresses our national vision impairment and eye disease burden by conducting public health surveillance, research, and evidence-based public health interventions designed to complement state and community health efforts. Data from the most reliable surveillance and epidemiological tool available—the National Health and Nutrition Examination Survey (NHANES)—is critical to the CDC. The data generated from this survey allows the CDC to track state-level data on vision loss and eye disease, evaluate variances across subgroups and demographics, and implement findings into evidence-based, strategic public health interventions to deploy at the state and community level.

Allocating \$5 million for Vision and Eye Health will enable the CDC to utilize NHANES once again so that vision health stakeholders have the information they need to protect the sight of millions of Americans. Due to consistent underfunding of our national public health system, infrastructure, and capacity, the CDC has not been able to collect reliable prevalence data of vision impairment and eye disease since 2005 – 2008. **Consequently, our best available data on our national vision loss and eye disease burden is nearly 15 years old with interventions based on data that dates back as far as**

¹ Coronavirus Disease 2019 Case Surveillance — United States, January 22–May 30, 2020
https://www.cdc.gov/mmwr/volumes/69/wr/mm6924e2.htm?s_cid=mm6924e2_w

² “The Future of Vision: Forecasting the Prevalence and Costs of Vision Problems:” NORC University of Chicago (2014)

1999. We cannot respond to the needs of patients who are living with blinding eye disease, low vision, or vision loss using data that predates such trends as our rapidly aging population, skyrocketing rates of chronic disease, new stresses to our eye health such as technology, and rising costs of health care. We urge you to make this critical and timely investment in our vision and eye health.

Additionally, \$4 million allocated to the CDC's glaucoma program in FY 2022 will allow efforts on glaucoma detection, referral, and sustained treatment to continue through cooperative and cost-effective public-private partnerships and innovative outreach and service delivery projects that have successfully reached high-risk and underserved populations. Glaucoma is a leading cause of blindness for people aged 60 years and older. Today, our nation spends more than \$6 billion annually on the disease **with costs projected to rise to \$12 billion per year by 2032 at which time nearly 4.3 million people will face the disease.** In the early stages, glaucoma has no symptoms or noticeable vision loss; however, by the time symptoms or vision loss appears, permanent damage to the eye may have already occurred and vision lost cannot be restored. Public education, early detection, and treatment are cost-effective and fundamental approaches to slowing the progression of glaucoma and preserving remaining vision.

Our nation needs coordinated interventions that support key stakeholders and state-based public health systems to expand early detection, prevention, patient support, and research to lessen the burden of vision disorders on working adults and America's public health infrastructure. We urge the Senate to reinvest in the CDC's Vision and Eye Health program, and restore its work in surveillance and maintain the CDC's work in glaucoma so that Americans can look forward to a lifetime of healthy vision and eyesight. If you have any questions, please contact Sara Brown at sbrown@preventblindness.org.

Sincerely,

ACB Government Employees
ACB of Minnesota
ACB Radio Amateurs affiliate
Alliance for Aging Research
American Academy of Ophthalmology
American Academy of Pediatrics
American Association for Pediatric Ophthalmology and Strabismus
American Council of the Blind
American Council of the Blind of Connecticut
American Council of the Blind Diabetics in Action
American Council of the Blind of Indiana
American Council of the Blind of Maryland
The American Council of the Blind of New York, Inc.
American Council of the Blind Next Generation
American Council of the Blind of Ohio
American Council of the Blind of Texas, Inc.
American Glaucoma Society
American Macular Degeneration Foundation
American Optometric Association
American Society of Retina Specialists
Arkansas Council of the Blind
Association for the Blind and Visually Impaired SC
Association of Diabetes Care & Education Specialists
Association for Research in Vision and Ophthalmology (ARVO)
Association of Schools and Colleges of Optometry (ASCO)
Association of University Professors of Ophthalmology

Austin Lighthouse
Bay State Council of the Blind
Beyond Vision
Blinded Veterans Association
Bluegrass Council Of The Blind, Inc.
CABVI
California Agencies for the Blind and Visually Impaired (CAABVI)
California Council of the Blind
CCABVI - Chester County Association for the Blind and Visually Impaired
CCVIB (Colorado Council of the Visually Impaired & Blind.)
Center of Vision Enhancement
The Central Association of the Blind and Visually Impaired
Children's Vision Massachusetts
Community Center for the Blind and Visually Impaired
Department of Ophthalmology, UNC Chapel Hill
Envision Inc
Essilor Vision Foundation
EyeSight Foundation of Alabama
Florida Agencies Serving the Blind
Florida Council of the Blind
Georgia Council of the Blind
Georgia Eye Bank
The Golden Triangle Council Of The Blind
Greater Louisville Council of the Blind
Guide Dogs for the Blind
Foundation Fighting Blindness
Hadley
Hawaii Association of the Blind
I.E. Lighthouse for the Blind
Illinois assistive Technology Program
ILLINOIS COLLEGE OF OPTOMETRY
Illinois council of the Blind
Illinois Society for the Prevention of Blindness
Iowa Council of the United Blind
Kansas Association for the Blind and Visually Impaired
Kansas School Nurses Organization
Kansas Society of Eye Physicians and Surgeons
Kentucky Council of Citizens with Low Vision
Kentucky Council of the Blind
Lighthouse for the Blind & Low Vision
Lighthouse Central Florida
Lighthouse Louisiana
Lupus and Allied Diseases Association, Inc.
Michigan Council of the Blind and Visually Impaired
Minnesota Christian Fellowship of the Blind
Missouri Council Of The Blind
Mountain State Council of the Blind
Naples Lions` Club
National Alliance for Eye and Vision Research
National Association of Chronic Disease Directors
National Association of School Nurses

National Caucus and Center on Black Aging, Inc.
National Optometric Association
New Jersey Council of the Blind
New York Vision Rehabilitation Association
North Carolina Council of the Blind, Inc.
North Central Sight Services
North Dakota Association of the Blind
Oklahoma Council of the Blind
OneSight
Opticians Association of America
Perkins School for the Blind
Pennsylvania Council of the Blind
Prevent Blindness
Prevent Blindness Georgia
Prevent Blindness Iowa
Prevent Blindness North Carolina
Prevent Blindness, Ohio Affiliate
Prevent Blindness Texas
Prevent Blindness Wisconsin
Prevention of Blindness Society of Metropolitan Washington
San Antonio Lighthouse for the Blind
San Diego Center for the Blind
Society for the Blind, Sacramento, CA
South Dakota Association of the Blind
Spectrios Institute for Low Vision
Support Alliance of the Visually Impaired (SAVI)
University Of Illinois College of Medicine at Peoria, Division of Pediatric Ophthalmology
Valley Center for the Blind
Vision Health Advocacy Coalition
VisionCorps
Vision Forward Association
Vision Impact Institute
VisionServe Alliance
VOLUNTEER OPTOMETRIC SERVICE FOR HUMANITY WI CHAPTER
VOSH California
VOSH/International
VOSH Iowa
The Washington Council of the Blind
Wayfinder Family Services