

Senate Health, Human Services and Aging Committee  
Senator Lynn Wachtmann, Chairman  
November 10, 2004

Proponent Testimony of  
Sherill K. Williams, President & CEO, Prevent Blindness Ohio  
The Honorable Joan Lawrence, Director, Ohio Department of Aging  
And  
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Representing  
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**Sherill K. Williams, President & CEO, Prevent Blindness Ohio:**

Good afternoon Mister Chairman and Members of the Senate Health, Human Services and Aging Committee. I am Sherry Williams, President & CEO of Prevent Blindness Ohio, a position I have served in for the past 18 years. Joining me are Joan Lawrence, Director of the Ohio Department of Aging and Dr. Robert Newcomb, a Professor of Clinical Optometry at The Ohio State University. We all appear before you on behalf of Ohio's Aging Eye Public Private Partnership, a coalition of 25 statewide organizations concerned about the impact of vision loss among Ohio's seniors and the doubling of eye disease among Ohio adults in the next 30 years as the baby boom population ages.

According to a recent study by the National Eye Institute and Prevent Blindness America, an estimated 1.3 million Ohioans have a potentially blinding eye disease, 142,655 have low vision (which means that an individual SEES 20/40 or worse in the better eye, even with eyeglasses, and cannot read ordinary newspaper print or have an unrestricted drivers license) and 42,702 are legally blind. (Legally blind means the best corrected vision can only see the big E on the top of the chart or even less).

We all know that vision is critical to conducting activities of daily living, is a portal for language, and affects developmental learning, communicating, working, health, and quality of life.

And while it is believed that half of all blindness can be prevented, the number of Americans and Ohioans who suffer from vision loss continues to increase. Vision disorders and impairment are major public health problems.

It is estimated that by 2030, the number of blind and visually impaired people will double if nothing is done to curb vision problems. The number of Ohio seniors affected by these diseases is expected to double over the next 30 years as the Baby Boomer generation ages, largely resulting from the eye diseases of diabetic retinopathy, cataract, glaucoma, and age-related macular degeneration (AMD). More than 2.5 million Ohioans will be affected.

- Today, 71,113 Ohioans have age-related macular degeneration.
- Year 2020: 142,226 Ohioans will have age-related macular degeneration.
  
- Today, 216,861 Ohioans have diabetic retinopathy.
- Year 2020: 433,722 Ohioans will have diabetic retinopathy.
  
- Today, 91,884 Ohioans have glaucoma.
- Year 2020: 183,768 Ohioans will have glaucoma.
  
- Today, 879,217 Ohioans have cataract.
- Year 2020: 1,758,434 Ohioans will have cataract.

How much value do Ohioans place on their gift of sight? A recent Gallup poll found that people list loss of their vision as the third most feared health problem – following cancer and heart disease.

To put a human face on how our aging population in Ohio values their gift of sight, I'd like to share with you a letter we received last month from Sharon LaWarre, the Vision Clinic Clerk at the Warren County Combined Health District:

*On October 28<sup>th</sup> the Warren County Health Department held our Vision Clinic. We had an older gentleman walk in our office at 8:10am. He said he was there for his vision clinic appointment. I looked him up, but his exam wasn't scheduled until 10:00am. I told him he was early, and would have to wait in our waiting room. He just smiled and said that was fine. This gentleman waited, and never complained or asked to be fit in early. I called him back for his appointment at 9:30am. When we were reading over his paperwork, we noticed his source of transportation was walking. With that in mind, we asked him if he would be able to make the doctor appointment we assigned to him. He then commented that he left his home at 3:00am to get to our Vision Clinic on time. This gentleman walked from Franklin to Lebanon just to make his appointment with us! His eyes were that important to him. He was the most pleasant patient we have ever dealt with and I thought you should hear his story. This man's story touched me, and I needed to share it with you. Thank you.*

I don't know if you've walked from Franklin to Lebanon, Ohio recently, but the distance is about 10 miles one way!

Now, I'd like to turn our comments over to Joan Lawrence, the Director of the Ohio Department of Aging.

**The Honorable Joan Lawrence, Director, Ohio Department of Aging:**

Sherry talked about how Americans and Ohioans value their gift of sight. As a senior myself, my appreciation of good vision grows more and more with each passing day, realizing how much I depend on good vision to function successfully, to enjoy my leisure time and to remain independent and mobile.

Due to my personal interest and public service responsibilities for all of Ohio's seniors, I became involved as Co-Chair of Ohio's Aging Eye Public Private Partnership, a coalition of statewide organizations – all concerned with curbing the serious effects of vision loss among Ohio's adults through early detection and treatment.

The Aging Eye Public/Private Partnership is a volunteer-driven initiative supported by the Ohio Department of Aging whose mission is to develop a strategic plan of action to address issues relating to vision care public policy, vision care services, vision education, and vision research that impact the quality of life for Ohio's seniors now and in the future. The formation of the Partnership and its on-going work is supported by a Proclamation from the Governor of Ohio. Goals of the Partnership are:

- Build partnerships and collaborations to provide input to various state agencies and organizations concerned with Ohio's aging population to insure a consistent and comprehensive statewide plan of action.
- Advise and make recommendations as to ways of increasing awareness about the growing future vision needs of Ohio's aging population.
- Examine and recommend best practices for seniors in the area of identifying eye problems and maintaining healthy eyes.
- Identify ways to increase vision research and vision research collaborations that seek the causes of and cures for sight-robbing eye diseases.
- Provide annual reports which identify and assess the status of its work within Ohio and recommend appropriate actions by both the private and public sector.

The Partnership, which was formed in 2003, has met several times and has the following projects completed or underway:

- An Eye-Opener Legislative Breakfast was held on May 19, 2004 where SCR 33, legislation to form the Task Force to Preserve Adult Vision was announced.
- An Ohio Vision Loss Prevention Research Symposium planned for June 6, 2005 at COSI – the Center for Science and Industry, Columbus. The goal of this effort is to increase vision research and commercialization of research discoveries into products and services to benefit the eye health of Ohioans.
- Development of an Ohio Vision Research Directory which is posted on the Aging Eye Public Private Partnership Website. [www.preventblindness.org/ohio/agingeye](http://www.preventblindness.org/ohio/agingeye). The Research Directory lists 75 current basic or clinical vision research projects being conducted in Ohio.
- Senior Eye Health Vision Screening Training for health care professionals and others. Over 200 health professionals have been trained.

- Inclusion of an optional Vision Module in the Ohio version of the 2005 Behavioral Risk Factor Surveillance Survey, the Centers for Disease Control's nationwide survey of health habits among citizens. This is a first and will give us good data upon which to chart future needs.
- Numerous news articles and other educational activities, such as formal presentations by organizations at our planning meetings and information booths at professional conventions in the state, to raise awareness within the Partnership's diverse coalition partners.

We have a wide range of statewide organization membership on the Aging Eye Public Private Partnership:

*Members of Ohio's Aging Eye Public/Private Partnership are: Association of Philanthropic Homes for the Aging, Association of Area Agencies on Aging, Association of Ohio Health Commissioners, Council for Older Adults, KnowledgeWorks Foundation, Ohio Council for Home Care, Ohio Association of Gerontology and Education, Ohio Agencies Serving the Visually Impaired, NASA Glenn Research Center, Ohio Department of Aging, Ohio Department of Health, Ohio Department of Insurance, Representative Kathleen Chandler, Ohio Nurses Association, Ohio Ophthalmological Society, Senator Steve Stivers, Senator Randy Gardner, Ohio Rehabilitation Services Commission, Ohio Osteopathic Association, Ohio Optometric Association, Ohio Veterans Visual Impairment Services Team, Opticians Association of Ohio and Prevent Blindness Ohio.*

Senator Steve Stivers, the sponsor of this legislation, is a member of the Aging Eye Public Private Partnership and we applaud his efforts. We also thank Senators Randy Gardner, Ray Miller Jeffry Armbruster, David Goodman, Bill Harris, and Ron Amstutz for their co-sponsorship of this legislation.

SCR 33 was modeled after another successful effort led by Senator Randy Gardner in 2001 – The Ohio Task Force for Better Vision - which was formed by SCR 11. The Task Force convened seven public hearings between August 2001 and May 2002, hearing from numerous individuals and organizations. The Task Force solicited and received opinions, documentation and invaluable testimony from vision service providers, educators and others.

The Task Force for Better Vision examined the current delivery system of vision services to Ohio's preschool and school-age children. The composition of the Senator Gardner's 6-member Task Force for Better Vision is the same as proposed by SCR 33:

- Two members of the Senate, appointed by the President of the Senate, who belong to the same political party as the President.
- One member of the Senate, appointed by the Senate Minority Leader, who belongs to the same political party as the Senate Minority Leader.
- Two members of the House of Representatives, appointed by the Speaker of the House of Representatives, who belong to same political party as the Speaker.

- One member of the House of Representatives appointed by the House of Representatives Minority Leader, who belongs to the same political party as the House of Representatives Minority Leader.

Senator Gardner and The Task Force for Better Vision can be gratified that many of their recommendations to improve children's eye health in Ohio have been successfully implemented.

Also, similar to Senator Gardner's Task Force, the passage of SCR 33 will require an investment of time on the part of the appointed Task Force Members, but has no other associated costs.

Utilizing Senator Gardner's model, it is our hope that the passage of SCR 33 will create similar successful initiatives to benefit the eye health of Ohio's aging population and prepare the State of Ohio for the growth of aging eye challenges in our future.

We hope that the Senate Health, Human Services and Aging Committee supports this measure to help preserve good sight for life in Ohio.

Now, I'd like to introduce Dr. Robert Newcomb, the co-chair of the Ohio Aging Eye Public Private Partnership:

**Robert Newcomb, OD, MPH, The Ohio State University College of Optometry:**

You stated that the cost of establishing the Task Force to Preserve Adult Vision will require only an investment of time on the part of the General Assembly, not money. Now I'd like to share some my experiences as an optometrist who practiced in the Department of Veterans Affairs Outpatient Clinic here in Columbus for 17 years prior to joining the faculty at Ohio State.

As an eye doctor in the VA, I was exposed every day to the meaning of "an ounce of prevention is better than a pound of cure." Most of my patients were World War II-era veterans who were not there for treatment of service-connected eye conditions, but rather were there to be treated for their cataracts, glaucoma, age-related macular degeneration, and diabetic retinopathy. And it is a national tragedy that most veterans treated in the VA's 5 blind rehabilitation centers are there as a result of these four preventable eye diseases.

I saw patients with these potentially-blinding eye diseases every day; and although cataracts are now usually treated quite successfully by an outpatient surgical procedure, the other three diseases are much more complex and have a more guarded prognosis. We can and must do better for the Baby Boom generation through more eye care education, research, and prevention.

Passage of Senate Concurrent Resolution 33 would not only save vision; it would also save money. I am aware of the significant economic and societal burden of vision-related disabilities. Based on a 2004 study published by the National Eye Institute, the annual economic costs of visual disorders and disabilities in Ohio are estimated to be over \$2.7 billion. The cost of visual disorders and disabilities in Ohio can reach over \$5.5 billion annually by the year 2030 because of the growth in the aging Baby Boomer population!

We know that at least half of vision loss is preventable with early detection and treatment. With all this great economic and societal cost looming in the future, the Ohio Aging Eye Public Private Partnership believes the work of the Task Force to Preserve Adult Vision formed by SCR 33 will be critical in Ohio's efforts to prepare ourselves for the challenges that lie ahead.

The work of the Task Force to Preserve Adult Vision formed by SCR 33 will be critical in Ohio's efforts to prepare ourselves for the dramatic increase in aging eye disease and the challenges that go hand-in-hand with this.

The role of the Task Force to Preserve Adult Vision will be to:

- Examine the current status of vision services available to Ohio adults and recommend best practices to be used in identifying ocular diseases and disorders and in maintaining ocular health;
- Recommend ways to increase public awareness about the future vision needs of Ohio's aging population;
- Examine ways to encourage Ohio institutions to undertake vision research projects and research collaborations into the causes of and cures for ocular diseases and disorders that cause blindness and vision impairment;
- Review all existing statutes and programs in Ohio pertaining to vision services for adults;
- Review other states' vision programs and services for adults;
- And, request testimony from health care professionals, senior care givers and other individuals who provide services to adult Ohioans.

Currently there is no local or state government agency that has responsibility for addressing the eye health concerns of Ohio's adults. That's why the Aging Eye Public Private Partnership was formed – to provide for a volunteer movement to bring this important concern to the attention of the Ohio decision-makers and the general public.

The Aging Eye Public Private Partnership strongly encourages your support and expeditious action in regard to passage of SCR 33 in the 125<sup>th</sup> General Assembly, so that the Task Force may begin its work early during the 126<sup>th</sup> General Assembly. With your support of SCR 33, you will show your partnership in concert with our volunteer-driven movement to help Ohioans enjoy good sight for life. Healthy eyes are an essential part of healthy lives.