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**“EYES ON CAPITOL HILL” VISION ADVOCATES MEET WITH  
MEMBERS OF CONGRESS**  
*Prevent Blindness Ohio Celebrates Third Annual  
Citizen Advocacy Event*

**COLUMBUS** – Prevent Blindness Ohio and Prevent Blindness America, the nation’s leading volunteer nonprofit public health organization dedicated to preventing blindness and preserving sight, celebrated the success of the third annual “Eyes on Capitol Hill” campaign which was held from February 12-14 in Washington, DC. The national program was developed to allow Americans to meet with our nation’s leaders to discuss their vision challenges and to educate and empower the participants to become advocates in their own state.

“We would like to sincerely thank all of our Ohio delegates who passionately shared their stories with us and our government leaders,” said Sherill K. Williams, President and CEO of Prevent Blindness Ohio. “We would also like to thank Ohio Senators Sherrod Brown and George Voinovich and Representatives Dennis Kucinich, Ralph Regula, Tim Ryan, and Zach Space for visiting with our advocates and making the event possible.”

**Ohio’s delegates included:**

Laura and Kylie Glass, Alliance  
Richard and June Russell, Seven Hills  
Megan Wombacker, Kent  
Rick Bunner, Zanesville  
Lauren Abel (Kentucky Delegate), Cincinnati

More than 70 participants were selected from a nationwide search of those who have been affected by vision loss through eye disease or traumatic injuries.

“Vision loss isn’t just something that happens to others, it’s happening to our friends, neighbors, family and even ourselves,” added Williams. “As we enter in a period of potential economic slowdown, we need to educate our nation’s leaders on the importance of cost-effective funding for vision care programs and initiatives. Half of all blindness is preventable but our citizens must have access to those blindness prevention services. We want to continue educating Congress on the positive impact that vision loss prevention programs can not only have on patients, but our state and our national healthcare system.”

Half of all blindness is preventable and the number of blind and visually impaired is expected to double by the year 2030 if nothing is done to address the problem. Furthermore, it is estimated that the economic impact of visual disorders and disabilities costs approximately \$51.4 billion annually.

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Ohio advocates urged support for the Centers for Disease Control's National Vision Screening and Education Program which partners with Prevent Blindness America to raise awareness about potentially blinding eye diseases, identify individuals at risk for vision loss and assure that appropriate treatment is received.

Advocates also sought support for an appropriation to provide for screening, detection and early treatment of vision problems that would otherwise result in delayed learning and education in children and H.R. 507, the Vision Care Act for Kids, which establishes a fund to assist needy families in obtaining professional eye care for their children.

Richard Russell, delegate from Seven Hills, Ohio, said "June and I were grateful to participate in Prevent Blindness Ohio's Eyes on Capitol Hill. I hope our stories helped toward the goal of encouraging our government officials to recognize their responsibility of the growing need to fund research and prevention of visual impairment. We always felt blessed that our lives were full. We will always remember our introduction into this cause".

Prevent Blindness Ohio is already looking forward to next year's "Eyes on Capitol Hill" campaign and hopes to expand the number of patient advocates and raise awareness among Ohio's federal lawmakers about the importance and effectiveness of vision programs.

For more information on Eyes on Capitol Hill or on how you can contact your state representative to ask for their support on vision-related issues, please visit [www.pbohio.org](http://www.pbohio.org) or call 800-301-2020.

*Prevent Blindness Ohio, founded in 1957, is Ohio's leading volunteer nonprofit public health organization dedicated to preventing blindness and preserving sight. We serve all 88 Ohio counties, providing direct services to more than 800,000 Ohioans annually and educating millions of consumers about what they can do to protect and preserve their precious gift of sight. Prevent Blindness Ohio is an affiliate of Prevent Blindness America, the country's second-oldest national voluntary health organization. For more information or to make a contribution, visit our website at [www.pbohio.org](http://www.pbohio.org) or call 800-301-2020.*



*Prevent Blindness Ohio's **Eyes on Capitol Hill** delegates pictured from left to right are Rick Bunner (Zanesville), June Russell (Seven Hills), Megan Wombacker (Kent), Laura and Kylie Glass (Alliance), Angela Mikolajewski, Legislative Correspondent from Senator George Voinovich's office and Richard Russell (Seven Hills). Eyes on Capitol Hill was developed by Prevent Blindness America, with support from Pfizer, Inc. to allow Americans to meet with our nation's leaders to discuss their vision challenges and to educate and empower the participants to become advocates in their own state.*

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## **EYES ON CAPITOL HILL DELEGATES' STORIES... IN THEIR OWN WORDS**

### **Richard and June Russell Seven Hills, Ohio**

**Richard's Story:** *I am the caregiver for my wife June, who was diagnosed with AMD in 1990 and her first eye went wet in 2000. I am semi-retired, which for our circumstances makes it easier for me to adjust my time to help her live a more normal life. Prior to June getting AMD, we both had our own careers and each day we would go our separate ways. That all changed once she developed the disease. I never saw myself as a caregiver. I always thought a caregiver was a trained professional. As a married couple I was merely adjusting to her handicap.*

*My biggest challenge as a caregiver was learning to be patient. My career was highly competitive and waiting and patience did not fit in. However, in time, as June learned to revise her way of doing everyday chores, I also learned to be more helpful. I also realized that other caregivers must face greater challenges than I, such as those who have to work around their full-time jobs and employers who are asked to give time off to possibly key employees to take a family member, who can no longer drive, to their eye appointment.*

*Like all medical problems, early detection does make a difference and the medical profession is doing a great job in this area. Both June and I are examples of this. What the public needs to be made aware of is how our elected officials in D.C. have failed to provide funding for specific medical research, such as AMD, unless it suits their needs. The private sector is continually being bombarded for requests to fund projects of all types and they cannot do it by themselves. AMD is no longer a disease that effects only our older generation. I personally have met younger people who are also having to deal with the problem.*

**June's Story:** *In 1990 I was diagnosed with macular degeneration. In 200, my left eye became wet and in 2004 my right eye became wet as well.*

*I have been legally blind from age related macular degeneration for four years. I had no idea of the seriousness of my problem until my left eye became wet and I lost significant vision. I had Photo Dynamic Therapy at the Cleveland Clinic to stabilize my eye. Three years later my right eye became wet and there was not help for me at that time. The emotional impact was tremendous. I could no longer drive or live a normal life. With the help of my family, my doctor and the Cleveland Sight Center, I slowly regained my confidence and realized this is the way it is going to be the rest of my life.*

*I had to get used to the fact that I could no longer read or write without bright light and a magnifier. Moving about, especially in strange places was difficult without good light. I cannot recognize people*

*more than a few feet from me. I have had to give up sewing and crafts and my love of gardening challenges me all the time. Since AMD I have learned to face new problems every day.*

*Even though I had PDT, Macugen, and Lucentis to help stabilize my vision, this is only the beginning. There is no help for me anymore to get my vision back but there are thousands of people who will get AMD in the coming years. Research is the key to help these people to avoid getting this disease. Congress must be made aware and realize the seriousness of AMD and increase funding for research to find a cure.*

**Megan Wombacker  
Kent, Ohio**

*I am a graduate student at Kent State University pursuing the Masters of Business Administration. In October, I won the title, "Miss Scioto Valley" and will be competing for Miss Ohio in June. Although I have been passionate about eye care my entire life, I found the Miss America Scholarship Program to be a megaphone for educating the state and nation about the importance of vision awareness.*

*At the age of four, my youngest sister (one of seven siblings) suffered from a serious vision impairment. As she developed her fine motor skills, my family noticed delays and implications with her sight. My sister spent the first FOUR years of her life with nearly no vision at all! Due to vision negligence, the optometrist and family doctor did not catch her disadvantage.*

*My sister and family have suffered tremendously from her negligent eye care. Before receiving her first pair of glasses, my sister was walking down the stair case where there are enormous picture frames along the wall. She couldn't SEE where the stairs ended or what to hang on to...so she grabbed the wall looking for the railing, sending a picture frame to crash and break over her skull. She was rushed to the hospital immediately. The doctors had to shave part of her head in order to remove the glass that had severed into her skull. She came out of the operation with staples along the wound. It's devastating to realize that eye care could have prevented this traumatic experience from happening.*

*Vision is learned. From our earliest moments in life we develop our ability to use sight to match up information with our movement system and other senses to organize, confirm, and develop experience. Vision also becomes a primary influence in higher functions such as attention and concentration. Frequently the vision problems are not diagnosed even following normal eye examinations and vision screenings at school or doctors' offices. When vision problems are severe they can affect perceptual abilities and can even cause developmental delays.*

*Children who have vision problems are frequently diagnosed with Learning Disabilities and/or Attention Deficit Disorder. One of the main reasons for having LD or ADD can be vision problems that are undiagnosed and that cause the symptoms. The first four years of a child's neurological development is detrimental to their future. Since Shannon couldn't SEE what the rest of the world saw, she was at a disadvantage and was unable to learn. Shannon acquired "Attention Deficit Disorder." Although this is a common learning disability, Shannon was and is at an extreme. With her new glasses, she has struggled the last thirteen years of her life to catch-up with the other children in school. Unfortunately, she has yet to reach their level. She has to work ten times as hard to achieve 'average' results. She has had to go through speech rehab (as sight affects other senses), occupational therapy, extensive tutoring during the school year and in the summers, being a student in the learning disabled classrooms, and she has encountered the humiliation of other students thinking of her as 'dumb' or 'different' which therefore has made her develop social interaction problems. My parents have suffered through not only financing her but dealing with the frustration of a lack of improvement. My entire life, I have taken Shannon under my wing to try to mentor and help her as much as I possibly could. I have always taught her that nothing is*

*impossible. It is my dream to have Shannon be able to encounter the opportunities and experiences that I have over my lifetime.*

*It is extremely devastating to know that her physical, mental, and social disorders could have been PREVENTED by eye care. Luckily, the doctor caught her disadvantage when he did. I could only imagine what would have happened if she had become blind.*

*“The eye is the window of the human body through which it feels its way and enjoys the beauty of the world.” – Leonardo DaVinci (without sight, you would miss so many beautiful things!)*

**Laura and Kylie Glass  
Alliance, Ohio**

*I have three children: ages 7, 5, and 3. Two of them were born with congenital cataracts, but all three wear glasses. My oldest daughter has had one cataract removed and eye muscle surgery along with countless hours of patching. She awaits her second cataract surgery. For the first two years of my daughter's life, I repeatedly told the pediatrician that I thought something was wrong with her eyes. He kept telling me “squinting” was a habit and she would grow out of it. Because this was my first child, I “trusted” the pediatrician. When my second daughter was born, I took the opportunity to change doctors. On the very first visit she diagnosed my daughter with congenital cataracts. Within a few days we saw an ophthalmologist. Within a few weeks she had her left cataract removed. It has taken years to correct what could have been corrected in the first two years of her life. My second daughter has astigmatism and wears glasses. My son, who is three, had both cataracts removed earlier this year and then developed “second cataracts” and spent his summer with a retina specialist having surgery on both eyes again trying to fix them. So, I am caring for three children with chronic eye conditions with a long way to go.*

*Challenges are both financial and emotional. Financially, countless surgeries and keeping three children in glasses is a financial challenge. The Glass family received financial assistance for two of their three children from the BCMH (Bureau for Children with Medical Handicap and chronic illness). Cataracts fit into the bureau's criteria for assistance.*

*Emotionally, the family is worried about safety and wellness for three children with vision problems. Their son, the youngest of three children, is very active and the biggest concern.*

**Lauren Abel  
Cincinnati, Ohio**

*I have been very blessed to have good vision, something I inherited from my parents. Part of the reason we have good vision is that I was taught at a young age that your eyesight is one of the greatest gifts you have and you should take good care of it so that it will take good care of you! Because of this, my parents made sure that I got regular eye exams as a child. They did the same. It was a family event. We all got our eyes checked together.*

*As an adult, that important lesson has stayed with me. And it has with my parents too. I am 43 years old. I have 20/15 vision and have never needed any type of vision correction eyewear. My parents didn't need reading glasses until they were in their late 40's or early 50's. My parents are now in their 70's and my grandmother is nearly 95! My parents wear glasses today and continue to get their eyes checked each year. My grandmother is the same way. Our family knows the importance of protecting the gift of sight. We take care of our eyes and know that by doing so, we are protecting our ability to see all the beautiful things this world has to offer. I cannot imagine my life without good eyesight. The small amount of time and money it takes each year to protect that gift is a small price to pay for the joy of sight.*

**Rick Bunner**  
**Zanesville, Ohio**

*Prevent Blindness America Government Relations Chair*

*Rick has extensive experience at both the local and national levels with vision related issues. He began his career as a teacher of the visually impaired. Later, he went on to become a vision health consultant for the Ohio Department of Health where he developed vision screening standards, and created and managed a network of children's vision clinics staffed jointly by optometrists and ophthalmologists. Rick has served as the Chair of the Prevent Blindness Ohio Board of Directors and as a member of the Board of Directors of Prevent Blindness America. Currently, Rick serves as Chair of the PBA Government Affairs Committee.*