

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

For more information:
Prevent Blindness America
Sarah Hecker
(312) 363-6035

PREVENT BLINDNESS AMERICA LEADS EFFORT TO SECURE FEDERAL FY 2010 FUNDING AND COVERAGE OF ESSENTIAL EYE HEALTH SERVICES

***National Non-profit Provides Written Testimony to House and Senate
Appropriations Subcommittees and Open Letter to Senate Finance Committee***

CHICAGO (June 10, 2009) – Prevent Blindness America, the nation’s oldest volunteer eye health and safety organization, continues to lead the effort to secure federal funding for programs that prevent blindness and preserve sight. Prevent Blindness America provided written testimony to the House and Senate Appropriations Labor, Health and Human Services, Education and Related Agencies Subcommittees. The testimony urged Congress to support increased funding for federal vision health and eye programs at the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and at the National Eye Institute for fiscal year 2010.

Specifically, Prevent Blindness America requests that the subcommittees provide the following allocations to help promote eye health and prevent eye disease and vision loss:

- \$4.5 million to the CDC’s Vision Health Initiative-- an effort to address the growing public health threat of preventable vision loss among older Americans, low-income and underserved populations;
- \$736 million for the National Eye Institute (NEI); and
- \$32.4 billion for the National Institutes of Health (NIH) to support biomedical research.

“The key to preventing unnecessary vision loss is to provide programs today to save financial resources and ensure quality of life in the future,” said Hugh R. Parry, president and CEO of Prevent Blindness America.

The need for additional FY 2010 funding for vision health and eye research is demonstrated by the fact that more than 80 million Americans are at risk for a potentially blinding eye disease, such as diabetic retinopathy, glaucoma, cataract, and age-related macular degeneration (AMD). With an aging population this problem will only worsen over time. In fact, if nothing is done, the number of blind Americans is expected to double by 2030. This is especially troubling, because almost half of all blindness can be prevented through early intervention and treatment.

A recent study by Prevent Blindness America estimated the annual costs associated with adult vision problems in the United States at \$51.4 billion. “*The Economic Impact of Vision Problems: The Toll of Major Adult Eye Disorders, Visual Impairment, and Blindness on the U.S. Economy*,” examined both the costs to the individual and their caregivers, and the impact on the U.S. economy of vision conditions including AMD, cataract, diabetic retinopathy, primary open-angle glaucoma, refractive error, visual impairment and blindness.

As healthcare reform moves through Congress, it is clear that preventive eye and vision healthcare services can improve the individual’s health and reduce the fiscal burdens on the healthcare system as well as individuals and their families. Prevent Blindness America continues to advocate that eye and vision health remain components of any healthcare reform legislation adopted by Congress and the Obama Administration, recently sending a letter to Sen. Max Baucus (D-MT), and Sen. Charles Grassley (R-IA) of the Senate Finance Committee urging committee members to:

- Incorporate vision care services into all federally-funded health plans and programs, including Medicare and Medicaid;
- Include a covered referral to an eye care professional for examination of any suspected vision problem(s) identified during the Medicare initial preventive physical examination;
- Ensure public and private coverage for all necessary eye care services including eyeglasses, contact lenses, and any other care, service, or benefit that the eye care professional determines necessary;
- Encourage individuals to utilize vision care services by making such benefits affordable (e.g., low or no deductibles or co-payments) and accessible; and
- Create incentives for vision screening and eye health services to be incorporated into chronic disease management and prevention efforts.

“No national plan for healthcare reform should be considered complete without integrating adequate coverage and reimbursement for eye and vision care services,” added Parry.

To read Prevent Blindness America’s open letter to the Senate Finance Committee, please go to: <http://preventblindness.blogspot.com>.

Prevent Blindness America encourages the public to support this effort, and other vision related policies, by becoming a vision advocate. Information about Prevent Blindness America’s advocacy activities can be found at www.preventblindness.org/advocacy or by calling (800) 331-2020.

About Prevent Blindness America

Founded in 1908, Prevent Blindness America is the nation's leading volunteer eye health and safety organization dedicated to fighting blindness and saving sight. Focused on promoting a continuum of vision care, Prevent Blindness America touches the lives of millions of people each year through public and professional education, advocacy, certified vision screening and training, community and patient service programs and research. These services are made possible through the generous support of the American public. Together with a network of affiliates, divisions and chapters, it's committed to eliminating preventable blindness in America. For more information, or to make a contribution to the sight-saving fund, call (800) 331-2020 or visit us on the Web at preventblindness.org.

###