The eyes have it: Baltimore’s visionary fight against glaucoma

The Maryland Optometric Association’s (MOA) “The Eyes Have It” program offers monthly glaucoma screenings at four rotating hospitals throughout the city of Baltimore. With the slogan “Baltimore’s Visionary Fight Against Glaucoma,” the program also assists low-income citizens without medical insurance in locating programs or doctors who will provide treatment at little or no cost.

“The program aims to create awareness at all levels of the city’s population as to the risk of glaucoma and the importance of regular eye examinations to detect glaucoma and to position Baltimore as a model of a new and cooperative effort to fight glaucoma,” said MOA Secretary and Healthy Eyes Healthy People® (HEHP) Consultant Nina Nhi Doyle, O.D.

“Glaucoma is the often called ‘The Silent Thief,’ because it can cause permanent vision loss without any early warning signs to its victims,” Dr. Doyle said.

“Individuals at risk for glaucoma include African-Americans over the age of 40, those with a family history of glaucoma, anyone over the age of 60, and diabetics. Studies have shown that glaucoma is three to four times more common and six and a half times more likely to cause blindness among African-Americans. According to the 2000 Census, 64 percent of the citizens of Baltimore are African-American. Many of these citizens may have an eye disease they don’t even know they have.”

The screening process consists of six parts. Participants complete a short questionnaire regarding ocular, systemic and family history. Volunteer optometrists or ophthalmologists perform a visual field screening using a portable Humphrey FDT perimeter is performed by lay volunteers. Finally, volunteer optometrists and ophthalmologists perform perimetry to determine corneal thickness, opthalmoscopy to view the optic disc and applanation tonometry with a Tono-pen to measure intraocular pressure.

With this information, the volunteer doctor then assesses the patient’s risk for glaucoma and the need for further glaucoma evaluation.

During 2008, its inaugural year, The Eyes Have It program screened nearly 400 Baltimoreans. Nearly three-quarters of those screened were black. Some 22.8 percent of participants were referred for further glaucoma evaluation and another 18 percent were referred for vision or other ocular-related issues.

“Not only were the glaucoma screenings valuable in detecting glaucoma, they provided an opportunity to educate the community about the importance of comprehensive eye examinations,” said Dr. Doyle. “Many participants had systemic issues, such as diabetes or hypertension, but were unaware of the potential ocular and visual complications.”

The Eyes Have It is collaborative effort involving a number of entities, including the Maryland Optometric Association, the Polakoff Foundation and the Maryland Society for Sight.

Sixteen members of the Maryland Optometric Association volunteered for these screenings, often more than once throughout the year.

Partial funding for the project is provided under a grant from the AOA’s Healthy Eyes Healthy People® program.

“The MOA and its leadership are very proud of our Maryland HEHP project (The Eyes Have It), and our many volunteers’ commitment to serving our communities,” said Thomas A. Wong, O.D., president of the Maryland Optometric Association.

“The Eyes Have It program is a groundbreaking effort to save the sight of a high-risk, underserved population in the city of Baltimore,” said Samuel R. Polakoff, the chair of the board of the Polakoff Foundation. “I don’t know of a similar campaign that has successfully engaged volunteers from so many aspects of the private and public sectors. The MOA is one of our most cherished volunteer members. Without the support of so many caring optometrists, our program would not have experienced its phenomenal success during our maiden year.”

The Maryland-based Polakoff Foundation was established in 2006 to support glaucoma research and related efforts.

The Eyes Have It is among 57 innovative eye and vision care outreach projects in 35 states that are being supported this year through grants from the AOA Healthy Eyes Healthy People® program.

The AOA Healthy Eyes Health People® Committee hopes to expand the program to all 50 states in the coming months.

The AOA Healthy Eyes Healthy People® program was established by the AOA Board of Trustees to support the vision-related objectives of the U.S. Department of Healthy & Human Service’s Healthy People 2010 goals, which constitutes the nation’s public health agenda.

The Healthy Eyes Healthy People® program is written by grants from Luxottica and Vision Service Plan, which have given $1 million to more than 200 projects in 46 states since the program’s inception in 2004.

For more information, visit www.aoa.org/healthp.xml.
HEHP grant funds Missouri project to educate schools about children’s vision law

The Missouri Optometric Association (MOA) offered seminars to educate school districts about the recently implemented Children’s Eye Exam Law, which requires all children entering kindergarten to have a comprehensive eye exam.

Mark Curtis, O.D., examines Madeline, a Missouri kindergartner. The state’s Children’s Eye Exam Law requires all children entering kindergarten to have a comprehensive eye exam.

Funding and educational resources for the seminars were made possible through the MOA’s 2008 Healthy Eyes Healthy People® grant.

Local optometrists conducted the seminars as part of the “Implementing Children’s Eye Examinations” grant project.

“The first seminar was conducted in Johnson County, Missouri, and was organized by a small group of optometrists from different practices,” said Mark D. Curtis, O.D., who volunteers for the MOA and serves on his local school board. “They invited the school nurses, administrators and kindergarten teachers from the five school districts in the county. A reporter from the newspaper was in attendance. The local state representative, David Pearce (R), provided a warm opening welcome.”

Missouri passed the Children’s Eye Exam Law in 2007 after a great deal of work and a grassroots effort by optometrists across the state.

“As challenging as it was to pass the law, it has been equally challenging to implement it,” said Dr. Curtis. “There were two compromises necessary to get the law passed. First, parents are allowed to ‘opt out’ of the required eye examination with a written notice to their local school. Second, the law ‘sunset’ in 2011, when the data collected from 2007-2011 will be analyzed by the Children’s Vision Commission. This commission will then recommend whether or not the law should be continued. We believe the data will confirm that a mandatory eye exam reduces the number of children with undiagnosed vision disorders.”

Submitting the examination data to the commission is the responsibility of the local school nurses.

“The MOA has done a tremendous amount of statewide education about the new law,” said Dr. Curtis. “Even so, the level of implementation of the law across Missouri ranges from 100 percent compliance all the way down to schools recommending that parents opt out of the exam. The majority of schools, though, recognize the importance of the examination, but have struggled with implementation. The Missouri ranges from 100 percent compliance all the way down to schools recommending that parents opt out of the exam. The majority of schools, though, recognize the importance of the examination, but have struggled with implementation. The most common concerns are financial, followed by scheduling, data management and parent education.”

To educate and address educators’ concerns, the seminar included a PowerPoint presentation that covered the following topics:

- Common vision disorders in children
- History and details of the law
- Vision research data
- The difference between a screening and an examination
- Resources for help

“Everyone in attendance walked away with a better understanding of the Children’s Vision Law,” said Dr. Curtis. “It also helped unite everyone in the common goal to reduce the number of school-age children with undiagnosed vision disorders. Perhaps the biggest benefit was simply to allow school personnel to put ‘faces to names’ and establish better communication between the schools and the optometrists’ offices. The next day, the optometrists hosted the seminars reported great success.

“Passing the law was a grassroots effort working with state legislators,” said Dr. Curtis. “Developing a good plan and positive working relationship between schools and ODs has been a real grassroots effort as well. Every optometrist has a story of a young patient who ‘slipped through the cracks’ and has suffered with an undiagnosed vision disorder. Preventing this from happening again begins with better communication between schools and the local optometrists. The Luxottica-funded Healthy Eyes Healthy People® grant ‘Implementing Children’s Eye Examinations’ has gone a long ways to improve that communication in Missouri.”

Together, Luxottica and VSP have given $1 million to more than 200 projects in 46 states since the Healthy Eyes Healthy People® program’s inception in 2004.

For more information, visit www.aoa.org/hehp.xml.