

PUBLIC HEALTH PROGRAM SURVEY- Maternal and Child Health

Contact Information

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Short Title: Children's Vision Screening Improvement

Program Location: North Carolina

Objectives and Goals:

The program goal is to prevent unnecessary vision loss in school-aged children. The primary objective is to promote and improve mass vision screening in schools so as to accurately identify children with vision problems in need of comprehensive eye care.

- Vision disorders are the 4th most common disability among children
- Undetected vision problems seriously affect a child's ability to learn.
- 1 in 4 school-aged children has a vision problem significant enough to impact their learning.
- If "lazy eye" is not detected and treated before a child's 6th birthday, lifelong vision damage may occur.

With early detection and treatment, most vision problems can be easily corrected. However, only 14% of children receive comprehensive eye examinations before entering kindergarten or first grade; less than 50% of children receive a vision screening in pediatric offices; and only 21% of preschool age children are screened for vision problems. School is a logical setting for conducting regular vision screenings because large numbers of children of all ages are readily accessible and can be tested in a short period of time with relative ease. If vision screenings are provided at no cost within the school system, then problems can be detected and corrected to not only improve a child's quality of life, but also help them to realize their full potential in the classroom.

Methods:

The program, led by Prevent Blindness NC and the Children and Youth section of the Department of Health and Human Services, offers training and certification for volunteer vision screeners, as well as follow up services. It is based on a 3-hour vision screening certification curriculum endorsed by the NC Pediatric Vision Screening Task Force. PBNC collaborates directly with locally based school nurses who coordinate the mass screenings in each school, assist in

identifying community volunteers, and conduct referral and follow-up activities for children identified as needing care. PBNC serves as a school vision screening program consultant to the nurses, coordinates and conducts locally-based vision screening certification trainings, and distributes screening tools. PBNC distributes vouchers for free eye exams and glasses to all eligible children identified with possible vision problems who cannot afford follow-up eye care.

Program Length:

The program has been available in all 100 NC counties since 1995.

Number of target population reached by effort:

Annually: Approximately 7,000 volunteer vision screeners conduct screenings for over 500,000 school children. At least 40,000 children are referred for follow-up eye care. Over 2,100 vouchers for free eye exams and glasses, if prescribed, are provided to eligible financially needy children referred from screening for follow-up eye care.

Demographic Info:

The program serves children in all 100 North Carolina counties. School systems are encouraged to focus on mass screening children in Kindergarten through sixth grade as they are most at risk of having an undetected vision problem. Low-income children are more likely to have undiagnosed vision problems despite the availability of vision care services. Of North Carolina's 2.2 million children (age 0-17), approximately 20% live in poverty and 13% are uninsured.

Overall Cost:

Direct program costs equal \$419,000 annually. An additional \$457,000 in vouchers for free eye exams and glasses are provided to PBNC as in-kind donations from Vision Service Plan, a nationwide vision service plan, and North Carolina eye care professionals.

Funding Sources:

<u>48</u> % State	
<u>2</u> % Local	<u>In-kind services donated by local eye care professionals</u>
<u>50</u> % Other	<u>In-kind vouchers for exams and glasses donated by VSP, a nationwide vision service plan</u>

percentages are NOT estimates

Outcomes:

Mass school vision screenings are conducted in a uniform manner for diverse populations across North Carolina. As a result, the rate of children identified and referred for possible vision problems has consistently remained between 7% and 9% since the program's inception. School nurse reports indicate that 71% of children referred from screening are confirmed as receiving necessary follow-up eye care and treatment. 100% of eligible applicants who have been identified as

needing eye care but cannot afford such care are provided vouchers for comprehensive eye care.

Did you make any estimates regarding costs deferred, outbreaks averted or deaths prevented?

Through this program at least 40,000 NC children are identified with possible vision problems annually. Vision impairments left undetected can cause vision problems severe enough to require the child to receive special education services. The average per-pupil expenditures for children with visual impairment/blindness are estimated to cost between \$15, 514 - \$22,108 per year. Furthermore, in North Carolina \$15,299 per year in state services is needed to care for a blind person.

Additional Information:

The program facilitates the certified vision screening of approximately half a million school children annually for less than \$1 per child screened. The success can be attributed to the service delivery model which leverages national, statewide, and local community-based relationships to serve the greatest number of children in the most efficient and cost-effective manner. Prevent Blindness NC relies heavily on its collaborative relationship with local school based nurses to identify and recruit the most reliable human assets available in each individual community. School staff, high school health occupations students, local nursing students, parent volunteers, and local community groups such as Lions Club and Junior League are targeted to serve as volunteer vision screeners. Prevent Blindness NC's national affiliation with Prevent Blindness America and its statewide relationship with the societies of eye care professionals further allow the program to provide the latest in best practice screening standards while also closing the "prevention loop" through donated follow-up eye care services.

Future Plans:

The program receives a recurring appropriation through the NC state legislature. As costs continue to rise and state budgets shrink, the organization will seek outside support through individual, corporate, foundation, and special event fundraising. Efforts are also being made to expand the vision screening training and certification program into the pediatric office and community health center setting.