

Holding an Eyeglass Drive for the Medically Underserved in Developing Nations

Abstract

More than one billion people in developing countries need eyeglasses but cannot afford them, while there are more than four million pairs of eyeglasses disposed of annually in North America. Collecting eyeglasses in local communities is a great way to involve students in improving conditions in developing countries, while applying concepts of disease prevention and control. Once the used prescription eyeglasses and non-prescription UV protected sunglasses are collected, Unite for Sight, a nonprofit organization dedicated to preventing blindness worldwide, brings them to African and Asian countries.

Action

To organize an eyeglass drive in your school or in your community contact Unite for Sight to receive a manual and posters, or download these materials from their website at <http://www.uniteforsight.org>

Basic steps to initiate the eyeglass drive include:

Teachers, Parents and Staff

- Keep Unite for Sight eyeglass bins in the classroom, school library, or front office.
- Help students contact local eye doctors for permission to put eyeglass bins in their offices.
- Issue press releases to the media.

Students

- Make posters and flyers and put them around school and in the community. These should include the purpose of the drive, how people can get involved, and how they can get information about the drive.
- Decorate T-shirts (using paints and pens) with facts about the need for eyeglasses worldwide in order to spread awareness,
- Plan group activities to involve classmates and the community (car washes, parties and games). Ask eye doctors and teachers with bins to help organize the events.
- Release a "press release" through the school's morning announcements if possible.

The Drive

- Eyeglass drives are ongoing and can last anywhere from one month to one year.
- Once the used prescription eyeglasses and non-prescription UV protected sunglasses are collected, a Unite for Sight representative will either pick up the eyeglasses from your site or request that you ship them to another location.

- After Unite for Sight receives the eyeglass collection, the organization brings them to developing countries such as Africa and Asia. Unite for Sight distributes the eyeglasses to people whose vision fits the prescription.

*This service project can be integrated into both science and geography curriculum. Reflection includes critical and independent thinking about global health problems and the motivation to pursue further actions by establishing sustainable solutions that are of genuine benefit to the community.

Context

In the United States, an estimated one in 20 preschoolers has a vision problem that could lead to permanent vision loss due to amblyopia (lazy eye), if left untreated. If diagnosed and treated by the age of five, amblyopia can be corrected. However, 500,000 children become blind in one eye annually because of the untreated condition. Additionally, one in four school-aged children has a vision problem, and only 14 percent of children receive comprehensive vision examinations before entering school. Ten million children (25 percent) in the United States were expected to begin the 2002-2003 school year with an undetected vision problem, and the numbers for 2004-2005 are comparable.

Jennifer Staples came up with the idea for Unite for Sight after working at Danbury Eye Physicians (Danbury, Connecticut) where she served as a clinical ophthalmology research associate, working with glaucoma patients, while attending Yale University. Glaucoma is a gradual disease and Jennifer thought she could help people understand early detection is important by offering preliminary screenings. She received a grant to obtain the necessary equipment to start the nonprofit organization, whose primary objective is to prevent blindness.

As of 2007, there are 90 chapters at universities and medical schools, and Unite for Sight has an international network of 4,000 students who work to build healthier communities through disease prevention, eye health promotion, and health education. Each chapter works with local community infrastructures to improve access to health programs.

Programs include:

- Free preliminary vision screenings for children and adults in soup kitchens, homeless shelters, schools and libraries. (Unite for Sight volunteers — who participate in a brief training session to learn how to conduct the exams using an eye chart with shapes or letters — are able to detect vision problems and then encourage everyone screened to receive a complete eye examination by a doctor.)
- Enrollment in insurance and free health coverage programs
- General health education programs
- Vision education programs
- Internationally Unite for Sight designs and implements eye camps and eye health education programs in developing countries, including India, Thailand, Ghana, Kenya, Tanzania, Uganda, Cameroon, and Benin

- Chapters in North America and Europe collect eyeglasses for donation and distribution by Unite for Sight volunteers in developing countries
- Collection of medical textbooks, journals and health-related books for donation to secondary schools and universities in developing countries.
- Free website health coverage program portal for the medically underserved

Unite for Sight is funded by major foundations and universities across the country.

Outcome

- Eye problems are detected before causing serious vision loss.
- All children and adults screened by Unite For Sight are matched with free health coverage programs so that even if they are uninsured, they will still have the resources to receive a comprehensive eye examination by a doctor.
- Additionally, Unite For Sight is initiating a pen pal program in which children in African and Asian countries will correspond with the children collecting eyeglasses in North America.
- Service-learning students who carry out an eyeglass drive are immersed in critical thinking about global health problems and are a part of establishing sustainable solutions that are of genuine benefit to the community.

Evidence

- In 2000-2001, the first year of the organization's founding, more than 1,200 pairs of eyeglasses were collected at Yale University and the University of Connecticut.
- During the 2003-2004 academic year, 10,000 eyeglasses were collected in universities and communities throughout the United States and Canada.
- In the year 2006-2007, Unite for Sight has provided services to 200,000 and sponsored close to 10,000 sight-restoring surgeries.

Contact

Jennifer Staple, Founder, President & CEO

Unite for Sight

E-mail: JStaple@uniteforsight.org

Website: <http://www.uniteforsight.org>