

MAKE ACCESS TO EYE HEALTH AND VISION CARE A PRIORITY:
CO-SPONSOR NHSC IMPROVEMENT ACT (HR 1195)



SUMMARY

- *Optometrists are the frontline providers of eye health and vision care in communities across America, but are excluded from certain Federal health programs, like the National Health Service Corps (NHSC), which are open to other providers. Such exclusions restrict patient access to essential eye health and vision care.*
- *Only 11% of community health centers (CHCs) have a full-time eye care professional on staff and less than one-third (30%) offer any on-site vision services. A recent study recognized the lack of access to eye care services through CHCs in rural and low-income areas as “a major public health crisis.”*
- *The AOA supports the bi-partisan McMorris Rodgers-Ross NHSC Improvement Act (HR 1195) to end the exclusion of optometrists from the NHSC programs and make eye health and vision care access a priority in underserved communities. U.S. House members are asked to co-sponsor HR 1195.*

To expand access to eye and vision care in communities where it is most needed, Reps. Cathy McMorris Rodgers (R-WA) and Mike Ross (D-AR) have introduced the *National Health Service Corps Improvement Act (HR 1195)*. HR 1195 will bring optometrists into more underserved communities by ending the misguided exclusion of doctors of optometry from the National Health Service Corps (NHSC) student loan repayment and scholarship programs. The objective of HR 1195 is endorsed by:

- ✓ **National Association of Community Health Centers**
- ✓ **National Rural Health Association**
- ✓ **National Commission on Vision and Health**
- ✓ **Prevent Blindness America**
- ✓ **American Optometric Student Association**
- ✓ **Association of Schools and Colleges of Optometry**
- ✓ **American Optometric Association**

The situation facing working men and women, children and seniors in underserved areas that are in need of primary eye care services has grown more urgent. Only 11% of community health centers nationwide have full-time eye care professionals on staff and less than one-third (30%) even offer any on-site vision services, according to a 2009 report by the George Washington University School of Public Health and Health Services. The GWU study recognizes the lack of access to eye care services through community health centers in rural and low-income communities as “a major public health crisis in America.”

HR 1195 will not expand any Federal program or authorize any new Federal funding. It seeks only to allow optometrists to compete for loan repayment and scholarship support on a level playing field under existing requirements. In a time of difficult choices, the bill represents a responsible and effective way to make access to essential vision and eye health care services in underserved areas a greater priority.

CO-SPONSOR HR 1195

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The NHSC provides access to quality health care services for millions of Americans who might otherwise be forced to do without or delay care until conditions become emergencies. As part of this mission, the NHSC student loan repayment program helps bring together dedicated health care providers with the rural and urban community health centers that need their services. The program provides financial support specifically aimed at easing the debt burden associated with a professional education, and allows carefully selected clinicians – including primary care physicians, nurse practitioners, dentists and dental hygienists, mental and behavioral health professionals, physician assistants and certified nurse-midwives — to undertake an extraordinary, multi-year commitment to safeguarding public health.

MAKE HEALTHY VISION A TOP HEALTH CARE PRIORITY. MEMBERS OF CONGRESS ARE URGED TO SUPPORT EXPANDED ACCESS TO PRIMARY EYE AND VISION CARE IN UNDERSERVED COMMUNITIES BY CO-SPONSORING HR 1195.

For more information, please contact Alicia Kerry Jones (akjones@aoa.org) of the AOA Washington Office at 1-800-365-2219 or Rep. Cathy McMorris Rodgers (Attn: Kimberly Betz) at 5-2006.

Doctors of Optometry are trained to recognize critical health issues while examining a patient's eyes:

- *A man in his 20s thought he needed eyeglasses because he had been having severe headaches and blurred vision. It turned out he had critically high blood pressure. "He didn't need glasses; he needed to be hospitalized," said Dr. Lee. "He was in kidney failure and was on dialysis within 2 days."*
- *A farmer came in to have a piece of metal removed from his eye. While removing the object, the doctor recognized he had glaucoma. "This early detection may have saved his sight," said Dr. Burton.*
- *While performing an eye health exam, an optometrist recognized a condition that needed urgent evaluation and treatment by a neurologist on a priority basis. "She was diagnosed one week later with a brain tumor," said Dr. Lewis. "Due to the timely referral, it was successfully treated."*
- *At a health fair in conjunction with the 2008 annual meeting of a leading national veterans' organization, the group's past national commander complains to Dr. Giedd of blurred vision. The commander was examined and the preliminary diagnosis was a detached retina. The patient was referred for further testing and, within 48 hours, his sight was saved following successful surgery.*

The members of the American Optometric Association — America's Family Eye Doctors — are the nation's frontline providers of eye and vision care. Doctors of Optometry serve patients, including America's seniors, school-aged children, veterans and military service personnel, in about 6,500 communities across the country.

INCREASE ACCESS TO EYE and VISION CARE in UNDERSERVED AREAS

Cosponsor H.R. 1195, the National Health Service Corps Improvement Act of 2011

Dear Colleague:

Please join us in cosponsoring H.R. 1195, *the National Health Service Corps Improvement Act of 2011*. The National Health Service Corp (NHSC) is charged with improving the health of our nation's rural and urban underserved communities by providing access to care for millions of Americans who might not otherwise receive it. As part of this mission, the NHSC student loan repayment program helps bring together educated health care providers with the rural and urban community health centers that need their services. And while the program was restructured in 2002, optometrists, our nation's frontline providers of eye and vision care, were accidentally left out of the program.

H.R. 1195, *the National Health Service Corps Improvement Act of 2011*, would reinstate optometrists in the NHSC student loan repayment program and help bring qualified eye doctors to the rural and urban areas where they are needed.

The exclusion of optometrists from the NHSC student loan program has resulted in severely restricted access to primary eye care services. As a result, individuals may have more difficulty in school or at work. In fact, a 2009 report by the George Washington University School of Public Health and Health Services acknowledges that poor visual health can adversely affect school and work performance and result in billions of dollars in unnecessary medical care. The GWU study further recognizes the lack of access to eye care services through community health centers in rural and low-income communities as "a major public health crisis in America."

In 2005, the House and Senate Appropriations Committee recognized the need for expanded eye and vision care in community health centers and called for the inclusion of optometrists in the NHSC student loan repayment program. This directive was widely supported by the National Association of Community Health Centers, the National Rural Health Association, the American Optometric Association, and the Association of Schools and Colleges of Optometry.

Please join us in supporting expanded access to eye and vision care by cosponsoring H.R. 1195, the National Health Service Corps Improvement Act of 2011. If you have additional questions, or would like to cosponsor, please contact Kimberly Betz (McMorris Rodgers) at kimberly.betz@mail.house.gov or Kate Callanan (Ross) at kate.callanan@mail.house.gov.

Sincerely,

Cathy McMorris Rodgers

Mike Ross

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137 Co-Sponsors of 111th Congress Legislation Identical to HR 1195*

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Bright (D)

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Young (R)

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Franks (R)
Giffords (D)
Grijalva (D)
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Mitchell (D)
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Woolsey (D)

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Carson (D)
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Boswell (D)
Braley (D)
King (R)
Latham (R)
Loebsack (D)

Kansas
Moran, Jerry (R)
Tiahrt (R)

Kentucky
Chandler (D)
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Whitfield (R)
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Maine
Michaud (D)

Massachusetts
Capuano (D)
McGovern (D)
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Michigan
Ehlers (R)
Miller (R)
Peters (D)
Rogers (R)
Schauer (D)

Minnesota
Bachmann (R)
Ellison (D)
McCollum (D)
Peterson (D)
Walz (D)

Mississippi
Childers (D)

Missouri
Akin (R)
Carnahan (D)

Nebraska
Terry (R)

Nevada
Berkley (D)
Heller (R)
Titus (D)

New Hampshire
Hodes (D)

New Jersey
Adler (D)
LoBiondo (R)
Rothman (D)
Sires (D)
Smith, C. (R)

New Mexico
Heinrich (D)
Teague (D)

New York
Arcuri (D)
Bishop (D)
Clarke (D)
Hall (D)
Lee, C. (R)
Maffei (D)
Maloney (D)
McHugh (R)
McMahon (D)
Murphy (D)
Owens (D)
Tonko (D)

North Carolina
Kissell (D)
Miller (D)
Shuler (D)

North Dakota
Pomeroy (D)

Ohio
Austria (R)
Bocchieri (D)
Driehaus (D)
Kaptur (D)
Kilroy (D)
Ryan, (D)
Schmidt (R)
Wilson (D)

Oklahoma
Fallin (R)
Lucas (R)

Oregon
DeFazio (D)
Schrader (D)
Wu (D)

Pennsylvania
Altmire (D)
Carney (D)
Dent (R)
Doyle (D)
Gerlach (R)
Murphy, T. (R)
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Schwartz (D)

South Dakota
Herseht Sandlin (D)

Tennessee
Cohen (D)
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Wamp (R)

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Virginia
Boucher (D)
Connolly (D)

Washington
Larsen (D)
McMorris Rodgers (R)
Smith, (D)

Wisconsin
Moore, G. (D)

* HR 1884—111th Congress