Bringing Care to Communities
Doctors of optometry are improving awareness about healthy eyes and expanding access to care in underserved populations, thanks to a grant program from the AOA Foundation.
A federally designated Medically Underserved Area, Boardman, Oregon, on the banks of the Columbia River, is home to 3,200 people. Many are served by the community health center bearing the river’s name, but vision care wasn’t a priority until a collaborative opportunity presented itself to Rebecca Chown, O.D.

In April 2016, Oregon Health & Science University’s (OHSU) Head Start program teamed up with Dr. Chown to ensure 26 children—who had been on a one-year wait list for care—could receive follow-up care from an eye doctor.

Dr. Chown agreed to volunteer her time and conducted comprehensive eye exams on the 3- and 4-year-olds. “It wasn’t just a little bit of farsightedness or nearsightedness,” she says. “We’re talking three diopters of astigmatism and significant amounts of farsightedness or nearsightedness. These children were in sincere need.”

She knew that an occasional visit wouldn’t be enough and began brainstorming with her Head Start and OHSU partners. They found a new partner in Columbia River Health, a federally qualified community health clinic, which allowed them to set up a portable clinic. The community need was evident, and the partnership started working toward a permanent solution at Columbia River Health. But equipment is expensive, so Dr. Chown pitched her project to Optometry Cares®—The AOA Foundation.

The Healthy Eyes Healthy Children Community Grants Program, sponsored by the Essilor Vision Foundation, is an Optometry Cares initiative that focuses on increasing outreach of vision services to communities, families, schools, and the medical community with special attention to underserved children. The program furnishes up to $5,000 in grant money to projects that help support those goals and align important optometric care within the community.

By taking a grassroots approach through the optometric community and working through existing community-based vision care models nationwide, funding is intended to spread awareness and increase vision services to address uncorrected vision in each community.

“Our communities don’t know how often they should be getting an eye exam. They don’t know that kids should be having routine eye exams, and they don’t know kids should be seen on a regular basis,” Dr. Chown says.

Closing the gaps
This year, the Healthy Eyes Healthy Children Community Grants Program awarded $65,500 across 15 grants, helping doctors of optometry reach an estimated 32,500 children in 11 states. Funded by Essilor Vision Foundation, which also provides in-kind lens and lab support, the program received 27 applications in 2018.

Carol Record, O.D., Optometry Cares board member and Healthy Eyes Healthy Children Community Grants Program committee co-chair, explained to AOA Focus
that funding falls into several categories, including supporting transportation to optometric care, purchasing equipment for pediatric examination sites, purchasing children’s eyeglasses and providing education regarding the importance of comprehensive eye care among children.

“The projects funded through the Healthy Eyes Healthy Children grant process will help to close the gaps in care, either through direct examination of children or education of the need for eye examinations to parents and community leaders,” Dr. Record said in December 2017.

Once a month Dr. Chown, who practices in Hood River, Oregon, makes the four-hour round trip to Boardman to conduct exams. As of July 2018, she’s provided 85 exams and donated 80 pairs of glasses. She’s examining children ages 2–18 referred from Head Start or Columbia River Health, as well as their siblings who accompany them to the exam. She’s still working through a significant waiting list but hopes to eventually open the program to adults—parents who bring in their kids often ask if they can have an exam as well.

“Oftentimes in this clinic, this is the first eye care experience these kids have ever had,” Dr. Chown says. “We’re setting up a lifetime of healthy vision for these children.” She also takes the opportunity to talk with parents about the importance of eye care, how often children should be examined and what follow-up care they might need.

The program has been so successful that Columbia River Health is planning to expand and build an eye clinic so it can have an eye

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care provider on-site more often, or maybe even full-time. Right now, Dr. Chown sets up her lane in a small corner—with poor lighting—in a huge room usually used for emergency care or dental care. “Nothing about this situation is ideal other than the fact that we are serving a great community that needs to be served. We are very much looking forward to the expansion of an actual eye clinic so we’re more efficient and able to see more patients,” she says. “We’ve had a couple of doctors with complex eye cases come over and do same-day consults. The patients who have been through have been over the moon that we have this service that we’re able to provide them. It’s opened an opportunity in a rural community to be able to provide services they wouldn’t otherwise receive.”

Improving awareness statewide
The Nebraska Optometric Association, in conjunction with the Nebraska Foundation for Children’s Vision, was awarded its grant to focus on public awareness and education among key stakeholders. The goal was to improve delivery of eye care services to Nebraska children. State law requires an eye “evaluation” before students start school, but it’s easy for parents to sign waivers to opt out. “It was great to tie all that together and provide some public awareness to the group,” Dr. Geist says. With that framework, the participants broke into work groups to address the challenges to providing eye care to underserved children. “We’re hoping this will lead to a more concrete action plan,” Dr. Geist says.

Make great things happen
The ways you can educate on, support and provide healthy vision to your community are endless. It takes time and money, but grants such as the Healthy Eyes Healthy Children Community Grant can offer financial assistance. Community and industry partnerships also can help. “There are a lot of community partners out there who, with just a little brainstorming, can really come together and make great things happen,” Dr. Chown says. Melanie Padgett Powers is a freelance health writer in the Washington, D.C., area, and Will Pinkston is a senior content producer for the AOA.