

Philanthropy Profile

Promoting the Importance of Screenings for Healthier Sight and Sound

Each morning when we wake up, before we plant our feet on the ground next to our bed, we open our eyes and look around without a second thought. In North Carolina, over 270,000 individuals do not have the privilege of greeting their day through sight, due to blindness and vision loss [1]. For the citizens of North Carolina, the North Carolina Lions, Inc. (NCLI) works to improve the overall quality of life for these individuals.

Established in 1934, the NCLI, the charitable organization for the Lions of North Carolina, is a 501(c)3 nonprofit organization. The NCLI works closely with the North Carolina Lions, community members, universities, and institutions to meet the day-to-day needs of North Carolina citizens through caring, enriching, and serving. The work of NCLI is focused on three primary areas: services and programs for the blind and visually impaired, prevention of vision loss, and aid to North Carolina citizens. NCLI is able to meet these goals through a number of programs including Camp Dogwood for the Blind and Visually Impaired, the Mobile Screening Unit, mobility and support canes, and clinical eye research.

NCLI has an interest in each citizen's vision. Since May of 1999, the See The 21st Century Mobile Screening Unit (MSU), a service project of the Lions of North Carolina, has provided free vision and hearing screenings to individuals throughout the state. The focus of the MSU is to identify those citizens who suffer from eye diseases and ocular concerns that may not have otherwise been discovered due to the lack of proper treatment or education on the importance of regular eye exams. The MSU is more than a passion project for the North Carolina Lions; it is an opportunity to increase awareness and improve the overall health and wellness of North Carolina citizens.

Owned and operated by the NCLI, the MSU is based out of an office at Camp Dogwood for the Blind and Visually Impaired, located on Lake Norman in Sherrills Ford, North Carolina. A 40-foot

long customized trailer is equipped with state-of-the-art equipment in order to conduct vision and hearing screenings. Continuous improvements are made to the MSU through the support of NCLI, the North Carolina Lions, fundraising projects, and grants to ensure the needs of North Carolina citizens are met accurately and efficiently. The MSU is managed and maintained by the MSU coordinator, an NCLI staff member. The coordinator schedules screening dates with local Lions Clubs, provides resource information to the community, is responsible for the driving and set up of the unit, trains all of the Lions and volunteers, and conducts appropriate screening follow-ups for community members. The local Lions Clubs that request the services of the Mobile Screening Unit assist the MSU coordinator in securing an eye care professional for support during the screenings.

Since implementation, the MSU has screened 117,665 individuals. Out of those community members, 10,254 individuals had never been screened before; 66,883 patrons were referred for further screening and treatment. The MSU is also engaged in school screenings and has seen 114,865 school-aged students. Bryan Hoover, the MSU coordinator, reflects on one particular case in Beaufort, North Carolina, where a routine screening saved someone's life: "The eye doctor on the Mobile Screening Unit saw signs of a tumor when examining the patron. Due to this find, the individual unfortunately lost her eye, but remains alive to tell her tale." If this community member had not attended the mobile screening unit, it is not guaranteed that the tumor in her eye would have been found.

The screening tests that are conducted exam-

Electronically published March 31, 2017.

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0029-2559/2017/78217

ine an individual's visual acuity, field of vision, eye pressure, as well as hearing. Once a screening is finished with the assistance of the Lions, volunteers, medical professionals, and the MSU coordinator, the results are evaluated, and personalized recommendations are made as to when a full eye exam should be completed. If there is an immediate need, participants will be asked to go straight to the eye doctor for review. For screening eligibility, all individuals must be at least 6 years of age; if under 18 years of age, they must be accompanied by a guardian; and finally, the individual should be able to communicate their questions and concerns or have someone available to communicate on their behalf. This public service gives patrons access to services and information which might not be normally available to them.

Many individuals who engage in screening or suffer from vision loss also have diabetes or glaucoma or both. According to the Glaucoma Research Foundation, glaucoma is a complicated disease in which damage to the optic nerve leads to progressive irreversible vision loss. Glaucoma is the second leading cause of blindness [2]. Since 1999, the North Carolina Lions have screened a total of 8,047 diabetics and discovered 7,491 glaucoma suspects. "We had a patient come in at 13 years of age and she had never had an eye exam before. Her grandfather was blind from glaucoma. From her screening she was referred and later diagnosed with glaucoma at the Duke Eye Center," relates Bryan Hoover. Through the use of the MSU, this young patient was able to be diagnosed, begin treatment, and learn to understand the effects glaucoma will have on her life.

The MSU service project enables the Lions to live and achieve the Lion's motto: WE SERVE! Through their desire to serve, the Lions were able to help a man from Pleasant Gardens, North Carolina who suffered from severe cataracts. The

gentleman found the MSU in his area and went for a screening. He was homeless and had no form of insurance. The Lions Club, with support from Services for the Blind, was able to assist this man with cataract surgery and transportation to and from treatment. Following his surgery, the Lions joyfully shared with Mr. Hoover that the citizen "was pointing out the details of the scenery on the way back from surgery—he was so excited to see!" The positive shift in this individual's life was due to the work of the MSU.

The See The 21st Century Mobile Screening Unit is more than a screening tool: it's a saver of sight, hearing, and even life. "With early detection of vision problems and proper education, if we can prevent one person from losing their sight our efforts are successful," states Steve Walker, former NCLI executive director. Please join the North Carolina Lions, Inc. in promoting the importance of vision and hearing screening to North Carolina citizens so they can live happier and healthier lives. NCMJ

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Acknowledgments

To learn more and to support the See the 21st Century® Mobile Screening Unit and North Carolina Lions, Inc. please visit www.nclionsinc.org or call the NCLI Office at 828-478-2135, ext. 222 for more information.

Potential conflicts of interest. H.E. has no relevant conflicts of interest.

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