

OPENING EYES FOR SPECIAL OLYMPICS ATHLETES

Wisconsin eye doctors provide benevolent care at the 2015 Special Olympics Opening Eyes Program

MADISON, WI – The first Special Olympics Opening Eyes Program event of 2015 was held on Saturday, April 11 in Oshkosh, WI, where volunteer Wisconsin doctors of optometry and their staff were on-hand to provide quality vision and eye health care to Special Olympics athletes. The Special Olympics Lions Clubs International Opening Eyes Program hosts biannual, statewide Special Olympics competitions each year in Wisconsin.

Special Olympics provides year-round sports training and athletic competition in a variety of Olympic-type sports for children and adults with intellectual disabilities, giving them continuing opportunities to develop physical fitness, demonstrate courage, experience joy, and participate in a sharing of gifts, skills, and friendship with their families, other Special Olympics athletes, and their community. The Opening Eyes program and the benevolent vision and eye health care provided by volunteer optometrists is part of the Healthy Athletes Program. Despite a mistaken belief that people with intellectual disabilities receive the same or better health care than others, in actuality, they typically receive sub-standard care or virtually no health care at all.

Wisconsin Optometric Association (WOA) Past President and Milwaukee and Madison area optometrist Dr. Kellye Knueppel is the Clinical Director in Wisconsin for the Special Olympics Opening Eyes program, a position she has held for the past 14 years. This year, she was joined in her volunteer management of the program by fellow Milwaukee area optometrist Dr. Heather Navarro, in charge of recruiting volunteer doctors for the program. According to Dr. Knueppel, "Each time we hold an Opening Eyes event, we find several athletes who have significant vision problems who do not have glasses."

Dr. Knueppel reported that volunteer optometrists and para-optometric staff saw a total of 144 Special Olympics athletes on April 11 in Oshkosh. They prescribed 87 pairs of glasses and 81 pairs of prescription sports goggles, as well as distributed 51 pairs of sunglasses and 13 pairs of plano sports goggles. In regards to prescribing sports goggles, Dr. Knueppel noted that "It is extremely common for athletes with very high prescriptions to not wear their glasses out of fear they will get broken, and it is of tremendous benefit to these athletes to have sports goggles to use during competition."

A total of 60 volunteers participated in this event, including 15 optometrists, 7 optometry students, 7 paraoptometric technicians and opticians, and 20 Lions Club members. Since 2001, Special Olympics Opening Eyes events have been held 27 times in Wisconsin. The program has seen 2,072 total volunteers, funding for whom is provided for by Lions Clubs International. A total of 126 unique Wisconsin optometrists (almost entirely composed of WOA members) have volunteered to help with the program, many of which have volunteered on multiple occasions, while 43 total optometry students have volunteered as well. In the past 14 years, 6,830 eye assessments have been conducted on Special Olympics athletes, and 5,158 pairs of glasses and sports goggles have been prescribed.

The Special Olympics Opening Eyes Program is made special and successful because of the volunteer optometrists, paraoptometric technicians, and the many other volunteers who donate their time and services to help those with special needs to both enjoy this fun effect and to see the world more effectively every day. **The second Special Olympics Opening Eyes event of 2015 will be held on June 5 in Stevens Point, WI, where volunteers expect to see about 300 total athletes.**

To volunteer or learn more about this amazing, benevolent program, please contact Dr. Kellye Knueppel at contact@thevtc.com or Dr. Heather Navarro at heathernavarro@thevtc.com, or call 262-784-9201.

About the Wisconsin Optometric Association

The Wisconsin Optometric Association (WOA) is a nonprofit affiliation of licensed doctors of optometry and associated businesses dedicated to the preservation and enhancement of the vision welfare of the people of Wisconsin. The WOA accomplishes its goals through: education and dissemination of information, organized governmental activity, legislation and regulation, mediation with consumer and public interest groups, and provision of collective benefits to its members. Approximately 630 doctors of optometry are currently members of the WOA, located in nearly every county in the state. All members must be licensed to practice optometry by the State of Wisconsin. For more information, visit WOA's website at www.woa-eyes.org.