

The eyes have it

New program provides
vision services to
underserved population

By Kimberley Mathisen, The Star

Residents in Chicagoland and the South Suburbs struggling with health care issues are now able to receive much-needed vision care through an innovative new program.

Through the Illinois Eye Institute, the clinical arm of the Illinois College of Optometry, the Vision of Hope Health Alliance (VOHHA) was formed in 2003 as a network of community health and service agency partners to provide treatment to the area's medically underserved population.

South suburban residents receive referrals to VOHHA through the Access Community Health Network, which operates 46 locations in Chicago and its suburban area.

Network health services are provided in Chicago Heights at Access Family Health Society, 152 W. Lincoln Highway.

According to Joe McLaurin, manager of community affairs and business development for the Access Community Health Network, the federally funded program recently received a \$500,000 grant from the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, the United States' largest philanthropic organization devoted solely to health care.

McLaurin said industry experts estimate that more than 600,000 men, women and children in the Chicagoland area are not receiving proper health care.

The Access Community program is hoping to lower those numbers by providing medical and vision services to those in need.

"With this program, patients can see doctors for as little as \$15," McLaurin said.

Because the Access network does not provide eye care through its system, McLaurin said the VOHHA is ideal for patients.

"We are the only partner to make referrals for the South Suburbs," he said, noting that eye care is treated as a separate entity from mainstream medical services.

Patients needing the services of an eye doctor are sent to the Illinois Eye Institute, 3241 S. Michigan Ave., Chicago.

One satisfied patient is Maureen Passarelli, a Park Forest resident who recently took advantage of an eye care referral.

Passarelli, who is currently out of work, was in need of new eyeglasses as well as a thorough eye examination.

"It had been about 12 years since I had my eyes examined and updated my glasses," she said.

After receiving her referral from the Chicago Heights facility, Passarelli made the trip into the city.

"Everyone at the Eye Care Institute was very helpful and thorough," she said.

In addition to her examination, Passarelli was given a glaucoma test. She said the entire process took less than two hours.

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"I had my new glasses (made on the premises) within two weeks, and contrary to what I thought (for patients without insurance,) there was a good selection of frames to choose from," she said.

Transportation issues precluded Passarelli's return to the Michigan Avenue site, so her glasses were sent in the mail.

"If minor fitting adjustments would have been needed, they were going to refer me to a local optometrist," she said. "Luckily, there were no problems."

Passarelli also received a follow-up call from her case manager to obtain feedback about her experience.

"I had no idea these services were available until the doctor at Access Family Health Society told me about the program."

According to the VOHHA Web site, there is no other program similar to Vision of Hope anywhere in the United States.

"I'll definitely be going back for future check-ups,"

Passarelli said.

More than 100 patients from the South Suburbs have taken part in the program since last April, McLaurin said.

"Since April of this year, with all our partners we've had more than 1,000 referrals for eye care," she said. "That speaks to the need for a facility in the area for optometric care."

McLaurin said demographic information reflects the continued need for a variety of health care services in the South Suburbs.

"Areas such as Ford Heights and Chicago Heights have high infant mortality rates and a high rate of teenage moms — this is a medically underserved area," she said.

"We're hoping we can get more area communities and businesses involved in (sponsorship) of the organization." More information about the Illinois Eye Institute is at (877) 949-EYES. More information about the VOHHA is online at www.ico.edu/community_outreach/vision_of_hope.html.

Kimberley Mathisen may be reached at kmathisen@starnewspapers.com or (708) 802-8846.