



# SIGHTFIRST: LIONS' VISION FOR ALL



Lions Clubs International  
**FOUNDATION**



# SightFirst: Lions' Vision For All

**SightFirst: Lions' Vision for All** is the strategic plan for the second phase of the Lions Clubs International Foundation's (LCIF) SightFirst program. Developed in close collaboration with blindness prevention experts and key partners, the plan is used to facilitate grant making and guide project efforts. This document summarizes the plan and provides Lions, their partners, and LCIF stakeholders with a synopsis of SightFirst history as well as the program's mission, values and funding priorities.



We Care.  
We Serve.  
We Accomplish.

## BUILDING UPON SUCCESS

In her 1925 address to the Lions Clubs International Convention in Cedar Point, Ohio, USA, Helen Keller challenged the Lions to be “knights of the blind in the crusade against darkness.” Since then, Lions have dedicated themselves to preventing blindness, restoring sight, and improving eye care services.

Since its inception in 1990, and through the involvement of Lions, the SightFirst program has helped restore sight to 30 million people around the world. SightFirst grants totaling more than US\$255 million have been invested in eye care services, the improvement of hundreds of eye care facilities and the training of thousands of eye care professionals.



### Historic Milestones

- SightFirst has awarded more than US\$70 million for nearly 600 **cataract**-related projects throughout the developing world. This includes support for eight million sight-restoring cataract surgeries, equipment for and renovation of thousands of eye care facilities, and training of hundreds of eye care personnel. In Brazil, India and Mexico, SightFirst and local Lions' efforts have influenced the establishment of national, government-subsidized cataract surgery programs.
- SightFirst has invested more than \$12 million in **trachoma** control efforts in nine African countries including training for hundreds of surgeons, funding for thousands of trichiasis surgeries, the distribution of 42 million doses of azithromycin and construction of over two million latrines and water wells.
- SightFirst has played a lead role in the fight against **river blindness**, providing more than \$30 million to support training for 500,000 community health workers and the distribution of Mectizan to approximately 150 million people in 14 African and Latin American countries.
- SightFirst, in collaboration with the World Health Organization, has invested almost \$7 million in the establishment of 34 one-of-a-kind eye clinics to combat **childhood blindness**. The program has trained nearly 40,000 eye care professionals in pediatric ophthalmology and the clinics have seen a combined total of more than 100 million children.
- Lions Clubs International is the first international volunteer service organization in China and **SightFirst China Action** is one of LCIF's largest and most successful initiatives. In partnership with the Chinese Disabled Persons Federation and the Ministry of Health, SightFirst has invested more than \$33 million in the delivery of five million cataract surgeries, the establishment of 100 new surgical eye care facilities and strengthening of 200 secondary eye care facilities in 300 rural counties.
- The lack of properly trained eye care personnel, particularly in developing countries, is a major barrier to controlling preventable and reversible blindness. In Africa, for example, there are often only a handful of ophthalmologists and support personnel serving millions of people. To address this problem, SightFirst supports training programs for ophthalmologists, specialist nurses and eye surgeons at the African Institute of Tropical Ophthalmology (IOTA, Bamako, Mali). SightFirst has awarded seven grants totaling \$7.4 million to IOTA for the training of 339 students from 17 French-speaking African countries.

## Critical Issues

Despite the extraordinary success of SightFirst, much work remains. While the number of people impaired from infectious eye disease has greatly reduced in the last 20 years, the rapid increase in life expectancy and the growing prevalence and incidence of vision-threatening diseases put millions at risk of vision loss or blindness. Experts predict that by 2020, the world's blind population could double to 75 million and those with low vision may grow to nearly 250 million.

- The major causes of visual impairment are: uncorrected refractive error (nearsightedness, farsightedness or astigmatism) – 43%, cataract – 33%, and glaucoma – 2%.
- According to the World Health Organization, approximately 90 percent of visually impaired people live in developing countries.
- About 65 percent of people who are visually impaired are aged 50 and older and with an increasing elderly population in many countries, more people will be at risk of age-related visual impairment.
- An estimated 19 million children are visually impaired. Of these, 12 million are visually impaired as a result of uncorrected refractive errors that can be easily diagnosed and corrected. 1.4 million children are irreversibly blind.



In response, the Lions have recently raised another US\$200 million to continue and expand SightFirst. These funds enable the program to maintain its efforts to control and eliminate avoidable causes of blindness – like cataract, trachoma and river blindness. This also allows SightFirst to broaden its reach to combat emerging threats to vision – including diabetic retinopathy, uncorrected refractive error and childhood blindness. And, for the first time, SightFirst will also support education and rehabilitation for those who are blind or have low vision as well as vital public health research.

*“I do not fear river blindness because my family takes Mectizan® two or three times a year. When my father was older, he became blind. We have conquered this blindness thanks to the Lions, who coordinate the distribution teams. There are no longer new cases of blindness...I hope this will be forever...”*

—Francisco and Amelia Morales  
Chiapas, Mexico

## MISSION

The Lions' SightFirst program strengthens eye care systems in underserved communities, enabling them to fight blindness and vision loss and assist those who are blind or visually impaired.

## STRATEGY

Lions orchestrate SightFirst projects in partnership with local health authorities, eye care professionals and other non-governmental organizations. Lions are actively involved in project management, fundraising, advocacy, coordination of outreach events and publicity. SightFirst project employ one or more of the following strategies:

- Deliver eye care services
- Train eye care professionals and management personnel
- Upgrade the infrastructure of existing eye care systems
- Improve access to education and rehabilitation for persons who are blind or visually impaired
- Increase public awareness of the importance of eye health

## VALUES

SightFirst supports the development of **comprehensive eye care systems** that provide preventative and diagnostic services and treatment for all relevant eye diseases as well as rehabilitation for those with irreversible blindness or low vision.

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SightFirst prioritizes aid to **underserved populations** unable to access eye care, education and/or rehabilitation because of economic, social or geographic barriers.

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SightFirst delivers **equitable, high-quality** eye care and rehabilitation services.

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SightFirst creates **sustainable** eye care systems by improving existing infrastructure and training local personnel to provide **cost-effective** services.

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SightFirst is **data-driven**, determining project feasibility through the analysis of surveys and assessing project integrity through regular monitoring and evaluation.



## Focus

## SightFirst Funding Priorities

### Cataract

Cataract is a clouding of the lens of the eye that impedes the passage of light. There is currently no way to prevent the commonest forms of the disease, but it can be treated through a cost-effective surgical intervention in which the affected lens is removed and replaced with an intraocular lens (IOL). According to the World Health Organization, age-related cataract accounts for 39 percent of world blindness or 33 million people.

SightFirst underwrites cataract surgeries in communities where incidence of the disease is high and alternative funding for the procedure is either unavailable or significantly limited. SightFirst surgical subsidies are for disadvantaged, bilateral cataract-blind patients.

SightFirst human resource training and infrastructure upgrades enable hospitals and clinical programs to increase and sustain improved cataract and eye care services.

### Childhood Blindness

Childhood blindness is caused by a number of eye diseases and conditions that occur in early childhood, and when left untreated, result in blindness or visual impairment. Approximately 57 percent of all childhood blindness is unavoidable. The remaining 43 percent of cases are either preventable through improved primary health care services, especially prenatal care for women, or treatable through improved primary and specialty eye care and low vision services.

SightFirst supports the Lions-World Health Organization (WHO) Project for the Elimination of Childhood Blindness and similar programs to strengthen pediatric eye care centers around the globe. The centers provide primary eye care to prevent certain causes of childhood blindness, low vision services, screening for refractive errors and glasses as well as specialty training in pediatric ophthalmology to increase the number of eye care personnel available to perform pediatric cataract surgery and screen and treat retinopathy of prematurity.

### Diabetic Retinopathy

Diabetic retinopathy occurs when the blood vessels of the retina, the light sensitive tissue at the back of the eye, swell and leak or grow abnormally. Once vision is lost, it cannot be restored, but progression of the disease and vision loss can be reduced by 90 percent with improved control of diabetes and diabetic retinopathy laser or vitrectomy treatment. Diabetic retinopathy is the leading cause of vision loss of working-age adults in industrialized countries.

SightFirst diabetic retinopathy projects strengthen established diabetes and/or eye care clinics in communities where diabetic retinopathy is a significant cause of blindness and where appropriate diabetes case management exists. The provision of equipment, improvement of facilities and personnel training enables these programs to care for disadvantaged diabetic retinopathy patients in close collaboration with their diabetes care providers.

## Focus

## SightFirst Funding Priorities

### Education and Rehabilitation for those who are Blind or Visually Impaired

Eighty percent of the nearly six million children who are blind or visually impaired live in developing countries where less than one out of every 10 has access to education. Delayed identification and a lack of awareness often inhibit these children from being offered the opportunity to attend school. A severe shortage of trained teachers and alternative format teaching materials and equipment compounds the problem.

The World Blind Union estimates that, in some countries, adults who are blind or visually impaired are five times more likely to be unemployed than the general public. Misperceptions about their capabilities and limited training and technology in developing countries exclude them from the workplace.

SightFirst projects provide teacher training, equipment, technology and materials to increase the capacities of national or regional school systems to better accommodate students who are blind or visually impaired.

SightFirst funds organizations that provide training, mentorship and microenterprise opportunities for entrepreneurs who are blind or visually impaired.

And, through the development of expansion of community-based awareness initiatives, SightFirst advocates for the inclusion of blind or visually impaired children and adults in schools and the workplace.

### Eye Health Education

Community-based eye health education programs prevent vision loss by promoting early detection and timely treatment of eye diseases. A variety of messages, materials and events can be used to encourage at-risk individuals to regularly visit an eye care professional.

SightFirst supports the development of national-level eye health education initiatives in countries with well-established eye care systems as well as the creation of eye health education materials to supplement SightFirst service delivery projects.

### Low Vision

Nearly 80 million people in the world have low vision, a form of visual impairment where vision is significantly and irreversibly reduced. Rehabilitation and the use of adaptive devices, which are accessed by a mere five percent of those with the low vision, can help people learn how to use their remaining vision and maintain quality of life.

SightFirst projects provide human resource training and equipment to develop or expand low vision services for adults and children at secondary and tertiary eye care institutions. SightFirst also supports the development of community-based outreach and referral efforts, especially those serving schools for the blind and homes for the elderly. SightFirst funds regional training seminars for specialized low vision services.

## Focus

## SightFirst Funding Priorities

### Public Health Research

Operational and evaluative research can be used to inform the interests and efforts of SightFirst and the larger blindness prevention community by assessing needs, determining barriers, and evaluating and testing approaches.

SightFirst supports public health research related to issues of equity, capacity building and sustainability in the delivery of eye care. SightFirst also supports project/program-based surveys that rapidly assess needs, identify barriers, evaluate the effectiveness of an approach or intervention and inform global estimates of disease prevalence.

### Onchocerciasis (River Blindness)

River blindness, a parasitic infection primarily endemic to Africa and parts of Latin America, is transmitted by a black fly that breeds in fast flowing rivers. The disease causes various skin ailments and if the parasite invades the eye, the infection can lead to low vision or blindness. Nearly 37 million people are infected with the disease, of which approximately 300,000 have been blinded.

Annual doses of Ivermectin prevent further progression of visual disabilities and blindness and lessen the frequency of transmission. Large-scale distribution efforts have resulted in significant reduction of the blinding form of the disease. As a result, SightFirst support for the disease is being gradually scaled back between now and 2015 and significantly reduced by 2020.

SightFirst has supported river blindness efforts with The Carter Center in Cameroon, Ethiopia, Nigeria, Sudan, Uganda and Latin America, partnership projects with other non-government organizations in Senegal, Guinea, Cameroon and Mali and a Lions-led project in the Democratic Republic of Congo.

LCIF does not currently accept SightFirst applications for new river blindness projects.



*“The recent SightFirst grant from LCIF will immediately benefit visually impaired students throughout Kansas. Providing quality low vision services utilizing the outdated centralized approach was not effective in reaching the majority of visually impaired Kansas students. It will serve as a model for other states and countries to follow when developing this type of service.”*

—Kendall Krug, Optometrist  
Kansas, USA

## Focus

## SightFirst Funding Priorities

### Trachoma

Trachoma is the world's leading cause of preventable blindness, accounting for 3.6% of the global burden of blindness. Trachoma is spread through contact with people with the eye disease that is transmitted by flies. After years of repeated infection, the inside of the eyelid may be scarred so severely that the eyelid turns inward and the lashes rub on the eyeball, scarring the cornea. If untreated, this condition leads to the formation of irreversible corneal opacities and blindness.

Trachoma control can be achieved through implementation of the "SAFE" strategy; surgery to reverse trichiasis, antibiotics to treat active infection of the disease, facial cleanliness, to reduce the opportunities for disease transmission and environmental change, to improve access to water and sanitation.

SightFirst supports the provision of sight-saving trichiasis surgeries, a simple and cost-effective procedure performed by trained ophthalmic assistants and nurses in less than 20 minutes, as part of an integrated "SAFE" program.

### Uncorrected Refractive Error (URE)

Refractive errors - myopia (nearsightedness), hyperopia (farsightedness), astigmatism and presbyopia - occur when the eye is unable to properly focus images on the retina resulting in blurred vision. Refractive errors can be easily corrected with glasses or other refractive interventions, but when left uncorrected or when the correction is inadequate, they can cause severe visual impairment and even blindness.

It is estimated that of the 153 million people visually impaired from URE, eight million are blind. When combined with the other 161 million people visually impaired from all other causes, URE becomes the main cause of moderate and severe visual impairment and the second leading cause of global blindness.

SightFirst URE projects develop and expand systems for the manufacture and distribution of new glasses rather than the provision of individual spectacles. Human resource training and equipment for community-based early detection and referral services and diagnosis and provision of glasses at eye care centers target underserved school-aged children where early intervention prevents significant years of vision loss.

## PROGRAM MANAGEMENT

The SightFirst Advisory Committee (SAC), comprised of Lions leadership and global blindness prevention experts, reviews SightFirst policy and grant applications in January and August. The SAC Secretariat is a technical consultant from the World Health Organization.

The LCIF Sight Programs Department provides support to Lions during project development and guidance throughout the application process. Regional program coordinators on staff have a background in project management and are familiar with the grant criteria, project and partnership development strategies as well as local language and customs.

SightFirst technical advisors are eye care professionals or public health experts contracted by LCIF to consult with Lions clubs or districts within an assigned geographic area on the development, implementation and evaluation of SightFirst projects. They have experience managing blindness prevention or other public health initiatives, including project planning, budgeting, monitoring and evaluation. They are familiar with local public health issues, language and customs and have connections with government authorities, non-government organizations (NGOs) and other medical professionals. SightFirst technical advisors serve as a liaison between project sites, local Lions and the LCIF Sight Programs Department.

Lions' districts (single, sub or multiple) work with their regional SightFirst technical advisor to assess local eye care needs and develop project proposals. Preparation of a SightFirst grant application begins after positive discussion of the project with local Lions leadership, the national blindness prevention or VISION 2020 committee and project partners including local health and government authorities, eye care professionals and other NGOs.



*"I was helping remove the bandage from one elderly gentleman who just the day before was able to see only from one eye. I asked the patient how his vision was and he cried loudly 'I can see better than in my sighted eye! Dherai khushi lagyoy (I am very happy).' This is what it means to be a Lion, saving the sight of my fellow countrymen"*

—Girdhari Sharma, Multiple District SightFirst Chairperson  
Nepal

## FOR MORE INFORMATION

For more information about the SightFirst program and the grant application process, please visit [www.lcif.org](http://www.lcif.org). The LCIF Sight Programs Department can be contacted by phone at 630-468-3848 or through e-mail at [SightFirst@lcif.org](mailto:SightFirst@lcif.org).



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