



Association of Clinicians for the Underserved (ACU)

Eye Care and Vision Service Program Patient Impact Stories

At the Association of Clinicians for the Underserved (ACU), we recognize the value and importance of patient stories to help community stakeholders understand the impact that health centers have on people's lives. As such, we ask that health center that receives a grant through ACU to start up or expand eye care and vision services work with us to identify patient stories. ACU asked each health center to identify patients who could share 1) challenges they may have had in accessing vision care and 2) the impact that the vision care program has had on their quality of life. In identifying patients to share their stories, ACU asked health centers to consider:

- Consumer representatives on their Board of Directors and Committees.
- The social determinants of health that patients experience and any benefits from having the vision program located in the same place where patients receive primary care.
- Those who are best served in a language other than English or who benefit from the cultural humility and responsiveness of the care team.

If you would like more information you can contact Luke Ertle, ACU Program Director, at lerdle@clinicians.org or (202) 213-9569.

Patient Stories, 2021

CANDY, 62



Candy is a long-time volunteer at the Literacy Council in Columbus, Ohio. When she noticed a decrease in her vision over 10 years ago, Candy initially thought that poor lighting was making it difficult for her to read the print in books. After some time, she realized that something was affecting her vision as she engaged less and less in one of her favorite hobbies, reading. At the time, she did not have health insurance, so when she received a referral to a vocational school program where she could receive affordable eye exams and glasses, she jumped on the opportunity. However, the clinic schedule made it difficult for her to continue receiving services there, so she had to look for more accessible options. It was then that she decided to get vision services from PrimaryOne Health which is where she regularly sees the doctor.

Candy credits her eye care provider, Dr. Gregory Graves at PrimaryOne Health, for not only improving her eyesight but also her quality of life. Having access to affordable care and eyeglasses at PrimaryOne Health helps her engage in activities that are meaningful to her like reading and bird watching. Candy also thanks Dr. Graves for showing her how to be more engaged and responsible for her own health care. His attentiveness to her needs and willingness to include her in medical decisions has set the standard for when she receives care elsewhere.

DENNIS, 56

NO PHOTO AVAILABLE

Dennis has been uninsured and unable to afford insulin for his diabetes for more than two years. While insurance is available through his wife's job, the monthly cost of the insurance premiums on top of copays, deductibles, and limited coverage for prescriptions make it unaffordable. Without being able to get consistent diabetes care and without insulin, Dennis' diabetes was not adequately managed and resulted in a toe amputation in March 2020. Dennis was discharged from the hospital following the amputation the same day that the country shut down due to COVID. With everything shut down and many care providers fearful of spreading COVID, Dennis was unable to schedule any in-person appointments to monitor the progress of his healing after the amputation and he eventually started having issues with infections. On top of that, he applied for Medicaid but was rejected because his wife made just enough money to make him ineligible. This left him with no option but to go the local emergency room when he needed care. His health continued to spiral downward, and his diabetes began affecting his eyesight so much that he can no longer see well enough to drive.

Only in the last few weeks did Dennis learn that he could receive vision services at Family Health Services of Darke County. His optometrist, Dr. Lindsey King, connected him to primary care services to manage his diabetes and is helping him navigate the Medicaid application process. According to Dennis, this is the first time he's met an eye doctor who has helped him push through the necessary hoops to get the care he needs. While he is still waiting for his paperwork to finish processing, he stated that he has finally found hope and finally feels more in the Christmas spirit. Dennis watched his mother and father give up when dealing with major health issues, and he resolved to never give up and kept fighting. Now, he is thrilled with Dr. King and the care he is receiving at Family Health Services of Darke County.

GARY, 73



Gary decided to get vision services from PrimaryOne Health in Columbus, Ohio after the doctor he sees for diabetes care urged him to get checked out by an optometrist. Over two years ago, Gary started having difficulty seeing at night and was experiencing slight headaches. Little things like watching TV became difficult. He looked around at other providers around Columbus, but few accepted Medicaid/Medicare for optical services. He also received a quote for \$700 for glasses which was not feasible especially in addition to the cost of the exam. Gary was happy to find out that PrimaryOne Health would accept his insurance for vision care. Gary stated that he does not know what he would have done if he was unable to receive services at PrimaryOne Health as it was getting hard driving anywhere. Now, he is able to see well enough at night to drive and engage in social activities like going to bible study.

JAMES, 59



James, a resident of Denver, Colorado credits Colorado Coalition for the Homeless (CCH) for not only saving his vision, but also his life. In only a matter of a few weeks, his vision began to quickly deteriorate to the extent that he could not continue working his job at a local mall. He initially sought eye care services around Denver, but his sight had worsened and he had difficulty filling out the forms needed to receive care.

At James's first visit at CCH, his optometrist told him that the pressure in his eyes was so low that he needed to be seen at the hospital immediately. CCH set an appointment for him at a nearby hospital, but James was worried about how he was going to get across town in such a short time by bus, which was his only mode of transportation. To assist James, CCH staff member, Nancy, arranged transportation to take him to the hospital.

During his visit at the hospital, he discovered that he had glaucoma and cataracts which would require surgery, but this would not be the end of his health issues. A short time later, James had surgery to remove his cataracts, but his blood pressure was so low, that the surgeon was not able to fully sedate him for the procedure. That meant James had to have his cataracts removed while under only local anesthetic. With the help of CCH, James was able to get follow up care to manage his blood pressure, attend all of his post-surgery follow up appointments, and access the prescriptions needed to improve his health. Now that his eyesight has vastly improved and he is receiving support to manage his health care needs, James is able to engage in the activities that allowed him to live more independently.

JESUS, 64

NO PHOTO AVAILABLE

Jesús began visiting the Northside Clinic at North Texas Area Community Health Centers about eight years ago to get routine medical care for diabetes and high blood pressure. The Northside Clinic was life saving for Jesús who lacked health insurance and previously experienced barriers to accessing health care services and much needed prescription medication. Due to his uncontrolled diabetes, Jesús' eye health began deteriorating and the blood vessels behind his left eye were damaged to the extent that he required surgery.

Jesús, who is best served in Spanish, received linguistically and culturally competent care from his team of providers. He has managed to lower his blood sugar significantly and now has his diabetes under control. Additionally, he was also able to get referral to a specialty clinic to receive the eye surgery to repair the damage in his eye.

MARCOS, 50

NO PHOTO AVAILABLE

Due to losing most of his eyesight from untreated diabetes, Marcos lost his job and was unable to pay rent which resulted in him losing his housing. Marcos was first seen by Colorado Coalition for the Homeless (CCH) in Denver, Colorado while receiving temporary shelter through the City of Denver after sustaining injuries from a serious fall related to his vision loss. CCH outreach workers, who regularly visit shelters and camp sites, worked with Marcos to identify a number of unmet health care needs related to his traumatic injury and vision loss. The outreach workers connected Marcos to primary care at CCH where he now receives diabetes treatment and works with a multidisciplinary care team to develop a plan to manage his diabetes. In developing the plan, the team took into consideration Marcos' housing situation, which impacted his ability to store insulin, and the cognitive impact of his traumatic injuries. To make things safer for him and to provide him with a place to store his insulin, CCH staff helped get him into an apartment. Additionally, he was connected to CCH's eye clinic where optometrists made referrals to specialty eye care and also guided him through the process of applying for Medicaid which is necessary for him to receive specialty services.

STACY, 50

NO PHOTO AVAILABLE

Stacy has family history of macular degeneration and glaucoma and watched her mother and grandmother's quality of life deteriorate due to vision loss. For this reason, Stacy has always been vigilant about eye care. Stacy had been receiving vision services for several years at Family Health Services of Darke County when she started noticing a change in her vision. At first, she noticed that all the paperwork she did at her job was becoming harder to see. Staring at the computer screen all day gave her headaches. Then, it started to become difficult to drive, and she even had to give up one of her favorite hobbies, reading, as it became too difficult to see the print on the pages.

After about a year of dealing with eye issues, Stacy decided to ask her optometrist for help. At her next appointment, her optometrist performed an optical exam which revealed that she had glaucoma. When Stacy's insurance wouldn't pay for the prescription she needed to treat the glaucoma, Family Health Services of Darke County helped her get the medication through their in-house pharmacy. Stacy and her family were so impressed by the help she received that now Stacy's mother and siblings all receive care at Family Health Services of Darke County to monitor their eyesight.

THERESA, 60



Theresa lost her insurance when her husband passed away in early 2021. With a family history of cataracts and other eye problems, Theresa has always been proactive about scheduling checkups with her optometrist, but after losing her insurance, she was not sure how she would be able to continue receiving eye care. Furthermore, she was concerned about the cost of replacing her glasses that she had recently broken by accident. Without her glasses, it was becoming increasingly difficult for her to do her job as a grant writer for a local non-profit as she could not see anything in much detail. Despite being uninsured, she was able to access eye care services at Family Health Services of Darke County in Greenville, Ohio where she had already been receiving medical care for several decades. The cost of receiving eye care was on a sliding fee scale which meant it was adjustable to Theresa's income. Staff at the clinic helped Theresa get a new pair of glasses at an affordable price, which she states, has made it possible for her to maintain her job and continue writing grant proposals for good causes.

THUMPER, 59

NO PHOTO AVAILABLE

Colorado Coalition for the Homeless (CCH) in Denver, CO has been Thumper's health home for roughly three decades where she receives medical, behavioral, and vision services. Thumper is grateful for the services she receives at CCH as they are the only clinic around that accepts her insurance. Furthermore, she states, they have helped her with many other needs including finding affordable prescription medications as well as stable housing when she having difficulty affording rent. Early in 2021, Thumper noticed that her vision started getting blurry, and it was increasingly difficult to see at night. Through her visits with the optometrist at CCH, Thumper discovered that she had cataracts which would require surgery. Without a ride, Thumper was concerned about how she would get home from the hospital after surgery as she would have to wear a patch on each eye. Additionally, the bus ride would be over an hour each way. Fortunately, CCH was able to set up transportation to and from the hospital for the cataract surgery as well for her follow up appointments. CCH also helped her get new glasses at no cost which has helped restore her vision.

YOLANDA, 59

NO PHOTO AVAILABLE

Yolanda has been a patient of Harvard Street Neighborhood Health Services (HSNHS) for the last 8 years because they provide a wide array of services including medical, dental, and vision. Yolanda states that when she went to other providers in the past, she had difficulty staying consistent with her care because she would have to schedule separate appointments for medical, dental, and vision on different days which translated to multiple days off work and multiple back and forth trips. When Yolanda learned that she could receive all these services under one roof at HSNHS and schedule all her appointments on one single day, she made the switch. Now, she could see her medical doctor, dentist, and optometrist and only take off one day of work. Furthermore, she feels that having all her care under one roof improved the quality of her care because all her doctors can see notes in her medical record and can collaborate and communicate with each other about all her health care needs.

Patient Stories, 2022

ANTONIO

NO PHOTO AVAILABLE

Antonio had been experiencing headaches and eye strain due to wearing an out-of-date pair of prescription glasses for the last few years. Unfortunately, there were few options for budget-friendly eyewear where he lived in Las Cruces, New Mexico. Having the wrong prescription was affecting everything in his life from his job to his mood. Antonio worked in an automobile paint shop and often couldn't see small defects in the paint job, and having to explain to customers that he couldn't see the defects created a lot of embarrassment. Furthermore, the constant headaches made him feel grumpy all the time.

Four months ago, Antonio moved to Soldotna, Alaska to be closer to his family. There, he learned about Peninsula Community Health Services of Alaska (PCHS) where he could get affordable healthcare based on his income. This was crucial for Antonio as he didn't have a job or insurance. At PCHS, he was able to get all his care under one roof and was able to get an affordable set of new glasses. Antonio was extremely happy with the care he received and how attentive the staff was. He remarked, "it's a small community, and everybody watches out for one another. I've never had service like this before."

CASSAUNdra



Cassaundra had been dealing with an out-of-date pair of glasses for several years making everything around her seem out of focus. She found herself constantly removing her glasses while working at the coffee shop she owns which caused them to deteriorate rapidly.

Living in a small town in Montana, Cassaundra had limited options for eye doctors with the best one being 85 miles away, but because she runs her own business, it was impossible to take off a half day or more for an eye appointment. Fortunately, Marias Healthcare Services Inc. (MHSI), where she already receives medical care, opened an optometry clinic early in 2022. At MHSI, she was able to get an updated prescription and new glasses. With her new glasses, Cassaundra can perform her job without the frustration she previously experienced. She states her vision is "10,000 times better", and she has been recommending the MHSI's eye clinic to everyone she knows.

CINNAMON



Cinnamon had been getting by the last 8 years with an outdated pair of glasses. Without a car, it was impossible for her to get a new pair as the closest eye clinic providing comprehensive eye care was 85 miles away. Losing or breaking her glasses was a constant worry as Cinnamon couldn't see clearly beyond a foot in front of her, and without her glasses, she felt she would be useless as a person, in her job, and as a parent of two children. A lack of access to eye care and affordable glasses also made Cinnamon feel like she had to hold back from enjoying life and engaging in her hobbies for fear of losing or breaking her glasses. When Marias Healthcare Services Inc. (MHSI) opened an eye clinic in her town, Cinnamon was finally able to get a comprehensive eye exam and updated glasses for herself and her son. Now with better access to affordable eye care and glasses, Cinnamon doesn't have to limit her activities for fear of losing her glasses.

ELDON

NO PHOTO AVAILABLE

Eldon had fallen out of care for his diabetes, chronic lung disease, and heart issues when he and his wife bought an RV and moved from Colorado to Kansas to be closer to family in 2020. In the fall of 2022, Eldon and his wife decided to find a permanent place to live and settled on moving to Soldotna, Alaska where the climate would make it easier for him to breathe with his lung issues. Having a permanent residence made it easier for Eldon to get back into care, and his primary care physician at Peninsula Community Health Services of Alaska (PCHS) helped him regain control of his blood sugar and other health issues. However, after being out of care for so long, diabetes had already started affecting his eyes, causing headaches and blurred vision, but he ignored these symptoms for several months because dealing with so many health issues was already overwhelming enough.

After getting his diabetes and other health issues back under control, Eldon began focusing on taking care of his vision problems. His primary care doctor helped get him an appointment at PCHS's vision clinic conveniently located in the same building. Getting care so close to home was a huge relief because otherwise, he would have had to drive 3 hours to Anchorage for an eye doctor, and his worsening vision would have made the drive extremely difficult.

ERIN



Erin first noticed something was off with her vision when everything started becoming a little blurry, and every time she blinked, her contacts shifted. After two weeks, the problem didn't go away, so she called her eye doctor who provided some tips on cleaning her contacts. Unfortunately, Erin's glasses distorted her vision, so without glasses as an option, she couldn't give her eyes a break from the contacts. Eventually, the issue got so bad, that it started affecting her job at a bridal store as she had to constantly interrupt customers to take out her contacts when her eyes needed a break. Her blurry vision also created safety issues as she constantly had to keep one eye closed while driving to allow her eyes to rest.

After nearly 6 weeks of blurry vision and frustration, Erin learned that Cherokee Health Systems (CHS) in Knoxville, TN opened an eye clinic close to where she lived, so she immediately set up an appointment. CHS's eye doctor discovered that Erin had an eye infection and prescribed a medication that quickly cleared it up. CHS also helped her get an affordable pair of new glasses. Now that the infection has cleared up, Erin is happier that she can better engage with customers at her job and doesn't feel like she is risking her life when driving.

JACQUELYN

NO PHOTO AVAILABLE

Jacquelyn is a 71-year-old retiree who loves to ride motorcycles and camp in her car, but due to deteriorating vision, she had to give up these hobbies the last few years. She hadn't seen an eye doctor for over 20 years as none in the area accept Medicare. While she could have paid out of pocket for an eye exam, she felt that it was pointless because then she wouldn't have enough money to afford new glasses. About 18 months ago, Jacquelyn felt her vision had deteriorated enough that she had to buy new glasses, so she started saving a little money every month. Shortly thereafter, Jacquelyn learned that El Dorado Community Health Centers in her hometown, Placerville, California, had plans already underway to open an eye clinic. Jacquelyn had already been a patient of El Dorado Community Health Centers for years, so it was a relief that she could continue getting care all of her care in one location. At her first appointment, she learned that her blurry vision was due to cataracts. Fortunately, her eye doctor was able to get her an appointment with a specialist the following week to decide if surgery was necessary. Now that she has access to affordable eye care, Jacquelyn looks forward to taking road trips with her sister and engaging in her hobbies again soon.

LORINA

NO PHOTO AVAILABLE

Despite having cataract surgery 3 years ago to correct her blurry vision, Lorina noticed her eyesight had continued to deteriorate. Everything up close was blurry and distorted which meant engaging in her favorite hobby, painting, became frustrating and stressful. Furthermore, driving became a frightening experience which led to her frequently cancel her appointments with healthcare specialists. While canceling helped her avoid the immediate stress of the drive, Lorina felt that in the long run, it just added more stress to her life as she would have to wait longer for the care she needed.

When Marias Healthcare Services, Inc. (MHSI) opened its first eye clinic in April 2022 in Shelby, Montana, Lorina finally felt like she could get the care she needed. The staff at MHSI made her feel welcome and listened to her. During her first visit, she learned that she had astigmatism, and the doctor prescribed her an appropriate pair of glasses that helped her see both at a distance and up close. Lorina often felt that at other doctor's offices the staff tried to get her in and out the door as quickly as possible due to having Medicaid and Medicare. For years, Lorina felt helpless and powerless when it came to making decisions about her life and health, but Lorina's new eye doctor included her creating her own care plan. Now Lorina feels empowered and in charge of her health and life.

MARIA



According to Maria, "I had never had my eyes checked until now, and it was because one of my daughters scheduled me for an eye appointment." Maria's daughter is a patient of North Texas Area Community Health Centers' (NTACHC) in Arlington, Texas. As a result, Maria became a patient and began seeing a primary care provider who treats her for diabetes. With the help of her daughter, Maria scheduled a diabetic eye exam with NTACHC's Northside Eye Care Center where she found that she had cataracts (a clouding of the natural lens in the eye). Although she was uninsured, Maria was able to qualify for cataract surgery at an affordable rate through NTACHC's partnership with a local surgeon. This surgery was remarkable for Maria's eyesight. She noted, "I'm able to see clearer now, and I'm not as dependent on my daughter for all activities of daily living."

MICHAEL



Over the course of 4 months, Michael noticed that his vision was getting blurry to the point that nighttime driving had become difficult. Michael hadn't seen an eye doctor in 3 years, so he knew it was time. Michael researched eye clinics in the area to find an affordable option, but none accepted his insurance. Disheartened, Michael started looking for more affordable options online, and it was then he learned that Peninsula Community Health Services (PCHS) in Soldotna, Alaska accepted his insurance and would cover the cost of his eye exam and updated glasses prescription. Michael's job working in hotel maintenance frequently takes him far from home for weeks at a time, so it was important that he get an appointment as quickly as possible. Fortunately, PCHS fit him in for an appointment the next day. Michael felt that this was the most thorough and well-explained exam he ever had as the eye doctor was extremely patient and helpful when answering Michael's questions. Additionally, with only a few days before Michael had to travel again for work, PCHS was able to expedite the shipment of his new glasses. With his new glasses, he felt he was ready to make the 1000-mile trip to his worksite for the next 3 weeks.

RAQUEL

NO PHOTO AVAILABLE

Raquel received a note from her seven-year-old son's teacher that he was having trouble reading. She brought him to Treasure Coast Community Health (TCCH) in Fellsmere, Florida, for a physical exam where a nurse verified, through a vision screening, that he was indeed having trouble seeing out of both eyes. TCCH's medical team referred Raquel and her son to the vision program for a comprehensive eye exam. Raquel, through a Spanish-speaking interpreter, said she was very happy to learn that TCCH has a vision program because it is close to her home. Her son was very excited to get glasses because "I need glasses in my life. I have trouble reading in class and I do a lot of tests."