

Sight Savers hosts free eye exam clinic

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Dr. Marcela Frazier from UAB gives an eye exam to one of the children.

More than 100 children in Perry County received free eye exams at an eye clinic on July 14.

The clinic was made possible through a partnership between Sight Savers America, UAB Department of Ophthalmology and Essilor Vision Foundation's Changing Life Through Lenses program. Jennifer Williams, chief program officer for Sight Savers America, said the clinic has been an annual event since 2004, although it was on hold for two years during the COVID-19 Pandemic.

"This is our follow-up eye care program," Williams said. "We utilize an individualized case management system to ensure children are referred to us because of a failed vision screening at school. Or otherwise referred by a parent, a pastor or a teacher noticing a child having visual difficulty in school."

Working with the family is an important part of the program. Williams said they have an optometrist or ophthalmologist give the children dilated eye exams at a clinic as close to their home as possible.

"We really want to provide families the means to have recurring eye care," she said. "Once you get one pair of glasses, that prescription is likely to change over the years."

After it is determined a child needs a dilated eye exam, Williams said they try to contact the family, although that can be difficult. She said they send letters, emails and call on the phone. If that doesn't work, they will go back to the original referral source to see if they can help.

"We help undeserved kids. Everything is free for undeserved families," Williams said. "We serve kids on Medicaid or our state child health insurance program, All Kids, or for children in the gap who don't qualify for Medicaid or All Kids, but their family can't support eye care."

They refer families who have insurance to eye care facilities in the area. The services provided by Sight Savers America does not stop with the exam. Williams said they make sure the children get whatever they need, from glasses to therapy to surgery.

That includes transportation to the exam if needed. Sight Savers America serves all of Alabama's 67 counties with a network of optometrists and ophthalmologists that provide the services. There is no eye care professional in Perry County, which is why the optometrist and ophthalmologist from UAB travel to Perry County to provide services.

Sight Savers America has other services, some of which focus on children with severe vision impairments. They can even provide certain electronic magnifiers and other equipment to children in need. If you have a child who you think has vision problems that need to be addressed, contact Sight Savers America at 1-877-942-2627, extension 235.