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NAACP endorses optometric vision therapy at its 100th Anniversary Convention

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A routine visit to the eye doctor resulted in a national resolution that was passed by the NAACP at its 100th Anniversary Convention held in New York City, endorsing optometric vision therapy as a way to help some prisoners become productive members of society.

When Charles Brittingham, President of the Wilmington, DE Branch of the NAACP, went for his yearly eye exam, he was amazed to learn how vision problems can impact academic performance, contribute to high school dropout rates, juvenile delinquency and prison recidivism. Once he learned how these vision problems can be treated, and read what parents and children had to say about how their lives were changed academically, behaviorally and even emotionally by receiving optometric vision therapy, he knew he had to do something.

Working together with his optometrist and life NAACP member, Dr. Alton A. Williams, Brittingham wrote a resolution that was passed unanimously by the NAACP Delaware branch. The resolution acknowledged the role that vision therapy can play in reducing the high rate of recidivism and encouraged members to "take aggressive action to have Vision Therapy included in all re-entry programs for formerly incarcerated persons." But that wasn't enough for Brittingham, he wanted to make sure that this issue received national attention.

Unfortunately, due to his daughter's passing, Brittingham was unable to attend the NAACP 100th Anniversary Convention, but he was thrilled to learn that the resolution was passed unanimously.

Christine Waters, Education Committee Chairperson, NAACP Freeport Roosevelt, Long Island, NY, spoke in support of this resolution, "...current research indicates that approximately 1 in 4 children has vision disorders that interfere with their ability to learn. The problems can exist and yet teachers and parents are not aware of them. The symptoms mimic attention deficit disorder, and so I move that... we adopt this resolution." In addition, Waters proposed amendments that focused on prevention, which were also passed unanimously.

Waters, a teacher at Barnum Woods in East Meadow, NY with 30 years of experience in elementary education, knows firsthand the impact that vision problems can have on a child's education. Nine years ago vision therapy changed her son's life. He used to complain about headaches, and struggle with completing classwork and homework. She had no idea that he was seeing double images when he tried to read. Like most children, he had no idea that wasn't normal vision. Once his vision problem was corrected through vision therapy he became more confident and was able to complete required tests, classwork and homework. This past May he graduated from the University of Hartford with a Bachelor's Degree in Fine Arts and Music Education. Without vision therapy this would not have been possible.

The NAACP resolution calls for its members and units to educate the community, elected officials and correctional facilities about the merits of optometric vision therapy in helping to reduce the recidivism rate in some prisoners thereby increasing opportunities for persons reentering society.

According to the American Optometric Association, over 60% of children who have difficulty with learning have undiagnosed vision problems which are not detectable by routine vision screenings. Dr. Carol Scott, a developmental optometrist from Springfield Missouri and President of the College of Optometrists in Vision Development (COVD), shares, "Considering that 85 percent of all juvenile

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delinquents nationwide have reading difficulties, it is vital that everyone support the NAACP and ensure that not only are juvenile delinquents and prisoners screened for learning related vision problems, but all children who have any difficulty with learning; even the bright underachievers."

"I applaud the NAACP for acknowledging vision therapy as a valid treatment for the outcomes it is able to achieve," said ophthalmologist and NAACP member from Delaware, Dr. Bruce Sumlin, "Optometric vision therapy makes sense. It is very similar to other kinds of treatment and therapies we provide in the medical disciplines which help to develop neural connections in the brain."

John B. Ferguson III, MD, a Delaware ophthalmologist who has been in practice for over 34 years, was not always a strong believer in vision therapy. When asked what made him change his mind, Dr. Ferguson shared, "Among ophthalmologists, vision therapy has been thought to be reserved for certain eye muscle disorders. I was unaware, and I believe many other ophthalmologists are also unaware, of the significant effects that these eye muscle disorders have on the attitude and behavior of some children. I thought that at the most these children, if left untreated, might experience headaches or read less efficiently. However, I had the opportunity to speak with children and the parents of children who went through vision therapy and I was very impressed by the dramatic and positive academic and behavioral changes they experienced."

Arizona Cardinals 2008 NFC West Champions' wide-receiver, Larry Fitzgerald, has freely shared that the vision therapy that he received as a child helped him tremendously not only with school but in his football career. His grandfather, Dr. Robert Johnson, a developmental optometrist from Chicago received the G.N. Getman Award from COVD in 1977 for his role in bringing behavioral vision services to the disadvantaged youth in Chicago. Dr. Johnson was also the first African-American to achieve Fellowship in COVD.

"We would like to thank Mr. Brittingham and the NAACP for their appreciation of the impact that vision problems can have on juvenile delinquents and prisoners. And for taking a stand to help educate our leaders in government that help is available for those in need of vision therapy," said COVD President, Dr. Scott, "We invite everyone to visit our website at www.covd.org to learn more about the critical link between vision, learning and behavior."

SOURCE: College of Optometrists in Vision Development (COVD)

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