

## **CNIB Submission: Advancing Inclusion and Quality of Life for Canadian Seniors (HUMA Study)**

### **Issue:**

Currently, there is no Vision Health Plan in Canada to address the issue of chronic eye disease and avoidable blindness, especially pertaining to seniors.

### **Background:**

In 2012, the Canadian Survey on Disability found that 750,000 Canadians identified as experiencing a sight disability. Fourteen percent of those experiencing a sight disability were 65 and older. Over 4.25 million Canadians, almost one out of every eight, are living with some form of age-related macular degeneration (AMD), diabetic retinopathy, glaucoma or cataracts. If left untreated, most of these people are at risk of blindness or partial sight<sup>1</sup>.

This numbers will grow as the population ages, as one in four Canadians over the age of 75 will develop AMD, the leading cause of sight loss among seniors. The number of blind and partially sighted Canadians is projected to double between 2006 and 2031<sup>2</sup>.

### **Social Determinants of Health:**

In 2005, CNIB's Unmet Needs study found that the most frequently reported impact of sight loss was a reduced capacity to accomplish daily living activities independently and feelings of isolation. As a result of limitations to daily life functioning, visual impairment creates considerable challenges that tend to negatively impact overall well-being, creates high levels of emotional distress, and increases the incidence of social isolation. In order to combat these adverse social and psychological effects of vision loss and promote a healthy quality of life, it is crucial that people who are visually impaired have access to social networking programs, educational resources, and peer support groups.

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<sup>1</sup> Harris/Decima Awareness Survey conducted on behalf of CNIB from October 11–15, 2007.

<sup>2</sup> Cost of Blindness symposium. Clear Vision document. 2004. Page 1.

## **CNIB Community Programs:**

Seniors with sight loss depend on organizations like CNIB to help reintegrate into daily life. Programs such as CNIB's Senior's Peer Support Program do just that. Research indicates that peer support, talking and sharing experiences with other people reduces the isolation and depression so often felt by people with sight loss. By having interactions with others, people gain self-confidence and improve their quality of life.

CNIB's Vision Mate volunteers help people who are blind or partially sighted to be independent by providing one-on-one sighted assistance with four types of activities: reading/organizing, errands, walks and social visits. Anecdotal evidence tells us that CNIB's Vision Mate Program provides an essential service for CNIB clients, both in terms of sighted assistance and for the social/companionship component. This program is evaluated by the Vision Core Measure, a quality of life tool for people with visual impairments. Clients in the Vision Mate program experience a significant, positive increase in their quality of life scores over time.

## **Recommendations:**

### **Public Education**

Three quarters of sight loss is avoidable through prevention or treatment. By elevating vision health as a public health issue, on the same level as smoking cessation or diabetes, Canadians could become much better informed about sight loss and take significant steps to reduce their risk.

CNIB recommends that the federal government, through the Public Health Agency of Canada (PHAC), integrate vision health messaging into public health messaging, similar to the public education around smoking, diabetes and mental health. In addition, the federal government should increase the level of research funds for biomedical and clinical research in vision health.

### **Community Programs**

CNIB recommends that the federal government continue and increase funding from the New Horizons for Seniors grant, in order to improve upon community based projects, like CNIB's Senior's Peer Support and Vision Mate programs.