



American Optometric Association

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**Testimony of**  
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**Past President**  
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**February 24, 2004**

**House Committee on Government Reform**  
**Subcommittee on Civil Service and Agency Organization**  
**HR 3751, Dental/Vision Benefits for Federal Employees**

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**Introduction**

Chairwoman Davis and members of the Subcommittee, I am Howard J.

Braverman, O.D., Past President of the American Optometric Association

(AOA). Currently, I am Chairman of the AOA's Industry Relations

Committee, and I am proud today to represent the American Optometric

Association on the issue before you.

AOA is the national organization that represents more than 30,000 doctors

of optometry, educators and students. We are dedicated to improving the

visual health of the public and appreciate the opportunity to be here today to

discuss the important issue of vision care and the federal workforce.

AOA fully supports the intent of HR 3751 to require the Office of Personnel

Management to study the issue of vision and dental benefits and to

recommend to Congress how these benefits can best be offered to all federal

employees. This is not only an important benefit but also an important health

care issue, one that can enhance both employees' quality of life and their

efficiency and job performance in the workplace. We commend you for your

leadership on this issue.

In my remarks today, I will outline for you the need Americans, especially those of working age, have for routine vision care as well as the extent to which employees desire a vision care benefit.

### **Need for Routine Vision Care**

The U.S Department of Health and Human Services estimates that 64 percent of the workforce older than 17 needs some form of visual correction. But in addition to the workforce, we are talking about 160 million Americans who need eyeglasses or contact lenses. The sad truth is that fewer than 93 million get regular vision health care.

Today, vision care has become a valuable benefit not only to employees but also to their employers. There are a number of factors that are influencing that realization to both employer and employee.

1. Presbyopia and the aging workforce are the number one reason why employees are seeking a vision benefit that not only includes a comprehensive eye examination but glasses or contact lenses at a reasonable cost. By age 40, people start to experience a visual loss in the

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ability to read due to the aging process. People older than 40 not only need eye health examinations but also, in most cases, need eyeglasses or contact lenses to perform well in their job functions.

2. Computers in the work place have caused a new syndrome called “computer vision syndrome” (CVS). Workers who spend considerable time at computers are significantly at risk for this syndrome that causes headaches, dry eyes and other related problems. The ability to have regular eye health examinations and glasses at a reasonable cost can go a long way to combat this problem.
  
3. Employees have realized that eye health care is must for their families. Mothers and fathers have learned that if their children can't see, they can't learn. Today, the state of Kentucky requires children to have a comprehensive eye health examination (not just a screening) prior to a child's entering public school. Whether it is required or not, parents are realizing that it is most important to have their children's eyes examined prior to entering school. A voluntary vision benefit would be a great help

to employees to pay for their families' regular eye health care and glasses or contact lenses.

It is now recommended that children receive their first eye examination at six months of age. Using today's exam equipment, optometrists can check for symptoms of eye diseases like crossed-eye and lazy eye at this early age. They can also make certain that a baby's vision skills, such as eye-hand coordination, are developing properly. This first eye exam provides a baseline for the next comprehensive eye exam, which should be by age three.

4. Routine eye examinations provide an opportunity for early detection of potentially life-threatening health problems such as high blood pressure, arteriosclerosis and diabetes, diseases which, if they are not detected early, can result in major and expensive complications. There are many other serious conditions that can be identified through eye examinations, including glaucoma, cataracts, macular degeneration and diabetic retinopathy. Early treatment of these conditions is key to avoiding serious or total vision loss. Optometrists, in a routine exam, can diagnose an eye

disease even if the patient has not experienced any symptoms by examining the inside of the eye and using special equipment.

5. Senior citizens—retirees—have a great need for vision care but only 16 percent have vision benefits. Forty percent of America's senior citizens report that the cost of routine eye exams is prohibitive. Yet, the benefits of these eye exams are especially important to our senior citizens who are vulnerable to vision shifts, high blood pressure, cataracts and adult-onset diabetes.

### **Vision Care Benefits**

In spite of the fact that annual eye examinations are an integral part of health care, only one third of American corporate health plans cover an annual eye exam. Seven out of 10 employees, however, desire a vision plan in their benefits portfolio. In fact, one study found that two-thirds of employees would trade a day off for a vision plan.

A recent Families and Work Institute study also found vision care as one of the chief benefits employees seek. In this study, vision benefits ranked

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second among nearly 40 optional benefits as the program for which they were willing to trade an existing benefit. In response to this demand, vision care benefit plans are more and more becoming one of the tools employers use to compete for talented employees.

For these reasons and because people wear glasses and/or contacts for cosmetic reasons, a voluntary vision benefit for federal employees will help control costs of this health requirement. The cost of a vision plan is low, about three percent of the cost of a medical premium. On average, American employees and their families' pay between \$8 and \$10 per month for their vision benefit, the premium is not so high that workers do not find it an attractive addition to a benefits portfolio.

The American Optometric Association supports regular eye examinations for everyone and strongly endorses a voluntary benefit for federal employees.

We would be pleased to be of service in helping to point out the important considerations for selecting a vision plan. Improved access to eye care is an important component in any comprehensive health care strategy.

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Before closing I would like to urge the Subcommittee to favorably consider another piece of legislation, HR 3268, introduced by Congressman Cummings. HR 3268 would extend the same glaucoma screening coverage provided by Medicare to federal employees who are in high-risk populations. This is a simple yet important step in the early detection and treatment of this debilitating disease. Caught early enough, glaucoma can be managed, and serious damage, which can include blindness, can be prevented. The long-term savings, both to society and to individuals whose quality of life will be preserved as a result of these screenings, is well worth the modest investment to the program.

Thank you again for the opportunity to appear before the Subcommittee. I would be happy to answer any questions.