

¹**ad·vo·ca·cy** \[ad-və-kə-sē\ the act of pleading for, supporting or recommending

²**ad·vo·cate** \[ad-və-kət, -kāt\ 1: one that pleads the cause of another; 2: one that defends or maintains a cause or proposal; 3: one that supports or promotes the interests of another

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As defined above, advocacy is the active support of or arguing for a specific program, activity or issue. Advocacy includes educating the public, governments and corporations about the merit of a cause. It can include lobbying at all levels of government to gain political action favorable to the cause. Another form of advocacy is public education.

Lions' History of Advocacy

The Lions are recognized as the "Knights of the Blind" in the crusade against darkness based on the challenge issued to them by Helen Keller decades ago. This was a direct challenge to the Lions to become strong *advocates* of the blind and visually handicapped. Since then the Lions have utilized the tools of advocacy to varying degrees in responding to this challenge.

The Lions have played a role in at least two major policy decisions. In 1969, the Lions led a letter writing campaign on behalf of proposed law in the United States Congress to create a National Eye Institute. Over one hundred thousand letters were sent to members of Congress and knowledgeable observers credit the Lions campaign as a significant influence in the final vote to pass this historic bill. Lions also played a role in influencing the adoption of a resolution by the World Health Assembly to include prevention of blindness as a priority program of the World Health Organization.

In some countries, the Lions have successfully advocated for increased government support of critical eye care services. Lions in Brazil, India and Mexico, for example, have worked with other local eye care advocates to convince their governments to fund reimbursement programs for cataract operations or treatments for diabetic retinopathy. This support has lessened the need

¹ "advocacy." *Dictionary.com Unabridged (v 1.1)*. Random House, Inc. 13 Oct. 2008.
<Dictionary.com <http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/advocacy>>.

² "advocate." *Merriam-Webster Online*. 13 October 2008.
<<http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/advocate>>.

for SightFirst and Lions financial support and created sustainable eye care services in these countries.

Finally, the Lions have played a critical role in raising public awareness of the importance of eye health and prevention of vision loss through early detection and timely treatment of eye diseases. In the early 1990s, they initiated the Lions Eye Health Education Program (LEHP), a community-based eye health education program, which had country-wide programs in the United States, United Kingdom, Japan, Australia and Turkey. Similar activities have also been supported by Lions in local programs and initiatives including eye screening programs for glaucoma and refractive error in the western world, and cataract campaigns in Latin America, South and Southeast Asia, and Africa.

Future Advocacy Opportunities

In the future, SightFirst advocacy efforts could be significantly enhanced and strengthened with greater Lions involvement, leadership, and financial support. The SFLRP Working Group recommends that SightFirst focus its resources in the following areas:

1. Continue and/or expand Lions involvement with and support of international, national & local level coalitions aimed at improving eye care worldwide; i.e. VISION 2020, the U.S. National Eye Health Education Program (NEHEP)
2. Support training and provide resources to help Lions effectively lobby their local governments for 1) continued support of existing national eye care programs and; 2) funding for new programs, especially those that reimburse for critical eye care services
3. Encourage Lions to incorporate community-based eye health education activities into all SightFirst programming

Lions have an important knowledge of eye care which should be further developed and shared with policymakers and the public to help bring about improved eye care. By mobilizing their communities and lobbying governments and businesses, Lions have the opportunity to help create sustainable eye care services while, at the same time, strengthening the global purpose and reputation of Lionism.