

First-ever eye clinic applauded

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Three regional Indian tribes, two nonprofit groups and the Del Norte Unified School District recently pooled their resources to provide a first-ever week of free eye exams for limited-income children and adults.

The national Native American organization Walking Shield partnered with the international OneSight Program to provide all aspects of a visit to an optometrist's office at Elk Valley Rancheria's Sam Lopez Community Center, located just outside the Crescent City limits on Elk Valley Road.

"Both nonprofit groups have the same mission of improving the quality of life," said John Castillo, Walking Shield's executive director.

"Everyone should get an eye exam every year. But 49% of American Indian reservations are underfunded, with some 71% of young people and 98% to 99% of adults needing glasses," said Castillo.

Bessie Shorty, the Native Connections program manager for the Yurok Tribe, said she was excited to partner for the first time with OneSight, especially given that tribal children attending Margaret Keating Elementary School were participating.

Shorty said she had reached out to school district Superintendent Jeff Harris, who was happy to provide the students with transportation to attend the clinic.

The school district's director of curriculum and instruction, Leslee Machado, said it took considerable coordination among the tribes and the district to pull off the event.

"We were accepting registration forms from parents, passing them on to the Yurok Tribe, who was inputting them for OneSight, scanning them, then getting them back to us. We were getting them back in bunches, sometimes a hundred a day," Machado said.

She estimated that nearly 900 students and 300 adults signed up for the clinic.

Machado noted that the school district's nutritional services program prepared sack lunches for the students, and its transportation department shuttled the students back and forth during busy school schedules.

Shorty said it was gratifying to see students attend from families whose insurance doesn't cover eye exams. "I saw this one little guy put on his glasses and he turned to the guy helping him and said, 'Ah, I can see your face!'"

Walking Shield and OneSight have partnered for more than 20 years, providing more than 40,000 eye exams and eyeglass fittings to more than 30 American Indian reservations, Castillo said.

Steve Stockton, OneSight's program manager, has been running clinics for the organization for the past 12 years worldwide. He brought with him 47 international volunteers from as far away as Italy, the United Kingdom, Finland, Germany, Dubai and Egypt.

Stockton said the eye exams include color testing, depth perception, glaucoma, auto reflections and more, at a total of nine stations manned by volunteers. The Tolowa Dee-Ni' Tribe provided volunteers for the event as well.

"We enjoy working with the Native American tribes," said Stockton. "They're always top-notch."

After each student and adult is finished with the exam, Stockton said, they're fitted for a pair of glasses of their choosing, with prescription lenses produced onsite while they wait. The more-complicated prescriptions or glasses are mailed at a later date, he said.

Shelly Shaw, tribal services manager for the Rancheria Tribe, said, "It was fun watching the kids talk about getting glasses. Back in the day, you didn't want to have glasses. Now, they're more like a fashion accessory."