



# Great Lakes Life



## THE SIGHT CENTER OF NORTHWEST PA MAKES A MOVE

72-YEAR-OLD ERIE INSTITUTION MOVES BEYOND BEING “THAT PLACE ON CHERRY STREET” TO IMPROVE AND EXPAND SERVICES.

The Sight Center of Northwest PA has made a move to help better serve the growing number of blind and visually impaired residents of northwestern Pennsylvania. For the first time in 50 years, the Sight Center has left their location on Cherry Street (which earned them the nickname “that place on Cherry Street”) and is operating in a new, expanded facility, located at 26th Street and Crescent Drive in downtown Erie.

This new location presents a myriad of advantages over the Sight Center’s previous facility, including a cost saving of \$325,000 over renovations to the existing building; a purpose-built low-vision design, maximizing mobility within the building and matching the facilities with the Sight Center’s services and programs; a location on a major bus line, making it easily accessible to those without private transportation; enough parking for clients, client family members and friends, staff, and volunteers; an energy efficient design that will maintain operational costs; and more customized space and a specialized apartment for life-skills training.

Founded in 1938 under the mission to prevent blindness and assist those with functional vision loss in overcoming the obstacles imposed by their disability, the Sight Center has made great strides in its seven decades of existence working with age-related sight loss – the two most common cases attributed by macular degeneration and diabetic retinopathy – and early childhood

vision screening. The Sight Center is a nonprofit organization in Northwest Pennsylvania that offers the range of vision services needed by higher-risk populations, including low-income individuals, older adults, and preschool children. Prevention of blindness, rehabilitation, and support for those without vision form the core of the agency’s services, build upon the work done by ophthalmologists and optometrists by offering expertise in low vision rehabilitation and training that eye private professionals are not able to offer.

The Sight Center of Northwest PA serves seven counties in Pennsylvania, including Erie, Warren, McKean, Jefferson, Cameron, Elk, and Crawford. Services include preschool vision screening to more than 6,000 children yearly to identify and address early vision problems; reduced-cost eye exams and eye glasses for low income adults and children; vision rehabilitation, including evaluation, magnification, and follow-up; support programs including reading services, “door-through-door” transportation, assistance with grocery shopping and bill paying, and support groups; and community education on prevention and identification of vision problems.

For more information on the Sight Center of Northwest PA, visit [www.sightcenternwpa.org](http://www.sightcenternwpa.org).

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### THE GROWING THREAT TO OUR REGION’S EYE SIGHT

Although one seldom sees a person using a white cane or guide dog, vision loss and blindness are fast becoming problems for our region. National Eye Institute statistics indicate that the number of severely visually impaired people in the United States will **double by the year 2020**. And this problem is hitting home harder than you think.

Age and diabetes are the most common causes of deteriorating eye sight, resulting in macular degeneration, diabetic eye disease, and glaucoma. Erie County has one of the highest incidences of blindness and visual impairment in the country – approximately 100,000 people in the county have severe vision problems. The aging population of Erie County is 25% higher than the national average, while its rate of diabetes is 40% higher than the national average.

Unfortunately these numbers are only expected to continue

to rise. With the overall life expectancy increasing and the Baby Boomer population aging, the number of individuals aged 65 and older are expected to increase six-fold between 1990 and 2025. And for those aged 65 and older, 21% have severe visual impairment, even when wearing glasses.

The Sight Center’s mission works. Our goal is to help people with vision loss live safely and independently as long as possible. Our clients receive evaluations, recommendations for magnification and lighting, and follow-up with our rehabilitation therapist. And our support programs, including “door-through-door transportation,” trips to the doctor, bill-paying, mail-reading, grocery shopping, blindness skills training, and assistive technology for adults can make the difference between independence or dependence.

