UNMC opens the region’s only low vision center today

A grand opening ceremony for the first free standing low vision house on a university medical center campus in the country took place today at the University of Nebraska Medical Center in Omaha.

The $1.2 million Weigel Williamson Center for Visual Rehabilitation, at 38th Avenue and Jones Street, will provide comprehensive visual rehabilitation of adults and children with low vision. Optometrists, ophthalmologists, occupational therapists and nurses are members of the team of providers of low vision services at the facility.

“This center provides a means to assist people who have low vision to gain – or regain – their independence and quality of life,” UNMC Chancellor Harold M. Maurer, M.D., said. “The Weigel Williamson Center is a state-of-the-art facility in which our faculty, staff and other low-vision specialists have the necessary resources to provide outstanding services for people affected by low vision.”

Dr. Maurer lauded the donors who made the facility possible. The center’s lead gifts were made by Dr. Harry and Beth Weigel of Auburn, Calif., and Robert and Alice Williamson of Omaha to the University of Nebraska Foundation. Dr. Weigel (pronounced WHY-gull) is a 1958 graduate of the UNMC College of Medicine.

“I have always been proud and happy to be a native Nebraskan,” said Dr. Weigel. “Today with this superb facility with such unlimited potential to help disabled persons lead a happier, more independent and fuller life, it is truly a high point.”

Alice Williamson agreed with Dr. Weigel that this new facility offers great hope to those with low vision.
“After touring the facility with Dr. John Shepherd and listening to his knowledge and seeing the great machines and things available to those with lower vision, I hope this facility can ease the frustration and that we can send a strong message to those with low vision that help is available,” she said.

In addition to the Weigels and Williamsons, the principal benefactors for the center include: Ethel S. Abbott Charitable Foundation; Gerald Christensen, M.D., and Mary Haven; Dr. C. Rex and Janet Latta; The Lozier Foundation; Adah and Leon Millard Foundation; Straws Charitable Foundation; and Dakota and Fred Sturges.

Two designated areas in the Weigel Williamson Center are named for principal benefactors: the Adah & Leon Millard Foundation Technology Center and the Christensen Classroom.

The new building replaces the existing Low Vision Clinic, which was established in 1983 and provides annual services to more than 200 new clients each year. The services were provided in the UMA Eye Associates building in inadequate space shared with other ophthalmology department services. It also is expected to replace the need for many community eye care professionals to provide low vision services in their private offices.

"While there are currently no cures for the eye diseases that cause low vision, there is a different avenue of treatment that can equip individuals with low vision to function better with their remaining eyesight,” said John Shepherd, M.D., director of the new center. “At the Weigel Williamson Center for Visual Rehabilitation, we will help individuals maximize their residual vision by using devices, technology, training and counseling so they can regain their independence and lead active lives once more."

The 4,540 gross-square-foot, single story building with residential characteristics is modeled after the renowned Deicke Center for Visual Rehabilitation in Wheaton, Ill. That center annually helps more than 1,300 children and adults maximize use of their remaining sight and learn to cope with the challenges of living with vision loss.

The state-of-the-art center also includes offices and support facilities for staff, exam rooms, interview/counseling and testing/training rooms, a room equipped with assistive technology, and a low vision store where devices are available for clients to use before deciding whether to purchase them. Other spaces include a low vision adapted kitchen, bathroom, conference room, classroom and play area.

Nearly 14 million Americans -- about one out of every 20 people -- have impaired vision. According to Lighthouse, Inc., a leading non-profit organization dedicated to preserving vision and to providing vision rehabilitation services to people of all ages, the older visually impaired population is the third fastest growing group of people needing rehabilitation services in the United States, outpaced only by arthritis and heart disease.
The most common conditions causing visual impairment are macular degeneration, glaucoma, diabetic retinopathy, stroke and a variety of hereditary diseases such as retinitis pigmentosa.

Speaking at the ceremony were: Harold M. Maurer, M.D., UNMC Chancellor, Chuck Hassebrook, chairman, University of Nebraska Board of Regents; Clarence Castner, president, University of Nebraska Foundation; John Gollan, M.D., Ph.D., dean, UNMC College of Medicine; Carl Camras, M.D., chair, UNMC Department of Ophthalmology and Visual Sciences; Gerald Christensen, M.D., adjunct professor, UNMC Department of Ophthalmology and Visual Sciences; Richard Legge, M.D., Omaha area ophthalmologist; Frank Velinsky, a low vision patient of UNMC and CEO, Caretech, Inc.; with special remarks by Dr. Weigel.

UNMC is the only public health science center in the state. Its educational programs are responsible for training more health professionals practicing in Nebraska than any other institution. Through their commitment to education, research, patient care and outreach, UNMC and its hospital partner, The Nebraska Medical Center, have established themselves as one of the country's leading centers in cancer, transplantation biology, bioterrorism preparedness, neurodegenerative diseases, cardiovascular diseases, genetics, biomedical technology and ophthalmology. UNMC’s research funding from external sources now exceeds $80 million annually and has resulted in the creation of more than 2,400 highly skilled jobs in the state. UNMC’s physician practice group, UNMC Physicians, includes 513 physicians in 50 specialties and subspecialties who practice primarily in The Nebraska Medical Center. For more information, go to UNMC’s Web site at www.unmc.edu.

The University of Nebraska Foundation is an independent, non-profit organization that has been raising private gifts to support the University of Nebraska for more than 70 years. Last year almost $90 million was provided for students, faculty, academic programs, research and campus capital improvements. More information is available at www.nufoundation.org.