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Impact Alabama performs 100,000th vision check

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by Hannah Wolfson

When the nonprofit group Impact Alabama started screening children's eyes six years ago, its organizers were just looking for a way to make a difference.

On Wednesday, the day the group expected to perform its 100,000th vision check, University of Alabama quarterback Greg McElroy was on hand to help screen children at a Head Start day care in Tuscaloosa.

"It's a celebration of a completely nationally unique initiative," said Impact Alabama president Stephen Black, who is also director of UA's Center for Ethics and Social Responsibility.



University of Alabama quarterback Greg McElroy helps conduct vision screenings for children at the Tuscaloosa Head Start in Tuscaloosa, Ala., on Wednesday, Sept. 15, 2010. Impact Alabama's FocusFirst initiative screens children ages six months to five years in Head Starts and daycares. Since the service began in 2004, 100,000 children have been screened in the 67 counties throughout the state. Lindsey Thomas, of Impact Alabama, and Greg McElroy show 5-year-old Ta'buis Furr where to place his head for the screening. (The Birmingham News / Michelle Campbell)

Black came up with the idea for statewide vision screenings in 2004, when he was looking for a way college students could affect health in Alabama.

"It really was just good luck that I fell into this gap in coverage that every state suffers from, which is early childhood vision care," Black said. "There's not a state in the country that comprehensively provides vision screenings before public school."

But about one in 10 youngsters has some kind of vision problem, and many of those emerge in children as young as 2 -- well before they know or can tell someone something's wrong, he said.

In the first year, FocusFirst tested about 4,500 children at day cares around the state. Today, there's a team of 30 full-time employees, mostly recent college graduates, who oversee undergraduate and graduate students as they conduct screenings in Head Start and low-income day-care centers in every county in the state. Their goal is to screen 30,000 children this academic year.

They use a high-tech camera to take pictures of the children's eyes in a dark room; those pictures can then be analyzed for irregularities. The subjects, who range in age from 6 months to 5 years, don't need to be able to read an eye chart or have their eyes dilated.

About 11 percent have some kind of problem, including nearsightedness, farsightedness or lazy eye, and are referred for subsidized follow-up care. In the last two years, the team has found at least six children with cataracts, which can cause blindness if not caught early.

"It really has been remarkable," Black said.