

Help in the UK

Vision Care for Homeless People is a registered charity (number 1118076) which was set up to provide eyecare services to homeless, and other vulnerable people. It began in 2003 and developed from the Crisis Christmas week-long initiative which last year gave eyecare to 242 homeless people over the festive period. There are about 60 volunteers doing regular shifts for the charity.

The charity grew originally through word of mouth and has four clinics, three in London and one in Birmingham. It reached the important milestone of seeing its 5,000th patient at the start of this year but aims to expand further. New centres are being considered in areas such as Brighton, Manchester, Newcastle and Bristol. This raised a lot of interest when the charity exhibited at Optrafair for the first time this year.

Optometrist Elaine Styles, who has worked at Moorfields and in private practice for nearly 20 years, is the charity's leader and started working with homeless people 12 years ago.

“We are a UK charity which helps people here at home,” she told OT. “I certainly think we bring the benefits of optics to a wider audience as we are helping to bring the benefits of optometry to some of the poorest people in our own community.

“Restoring somebody's vision is one of the most rewarding experiences you could have, from supplying a myopic correction to a person who would effectively be considered blind without their correction to issuing a simple reading prescription so that somebody can read an application form. Getting people back on their feet and into accommodation and jobs is very important.

“Some practitioners may not have the opportunity or the money to give up two weeks to go abroad and work in foreign clinics but we encourage people to give a few hours to volunteer in one of our clinics.

“It is a very rewarding experience helping fellow human beings when they are at one of the lowest points of their life. Their smile when they see clearly again is priceless.”

“Over a thousand hours a year of volunteering time is donated by optometrists and dispensing opticians to run our four clinics,” said Ms Styles.

“Homeless people may not know that when receiving financial benefits they are eligible for an NHS eye examination and spectacle voucher. Even if they do know, very few practices will make spectacles totally free of charge and even a small charge may be unmanageable but we provide a comprehensive, high quality service totally free.

“Homeless people come from all walks of life, as there are many causes. The most common ones are a relationship break up, redundancy, financial problems and ex-service people. They may have gone into the forces at the age of 16 and 30 years later when they come out might struggle with civilian life. If they have been on active service there may also be mental health issues. The charity works with a wider network of support, including other medical services.” explained Ms Styles.

“We have even known of a DO who was homeless and sleeping in his car after his relationship broke down. He hadn’t even told anyone at the practice. He simply couldn’t afford to pay for two properties, so you see it can hit anyone.”

“The homeless are very vulnerable people,” said Ms Styles. “Even if they are eligible for GOS vouchers, they can only access this every two years, so if their bag is stolen or spectacles broken they cannot afford to buy new ones.

“We are a very lean charity,” she added. “All our clinic spaces and offices are donated free of charge. We have amazing sponsors among the optical industry including Topcon, Essilor, Birmingham Optical, Kentoptic, Bondeye and Shamir. Fundraising is done via Ocuco practice software systems and the charity promotes E-cards at Christmas as a green, environmentally-friendly alternative to sending season’s greetings.”