

VOSH Northwest Provides Much Needed Care in Whitehouse, Jamaica  
By Steven Stern, PMP

For four days in September 2009, a team of 22 state side volunteers and several Jamaican volunteers worked in the Whitehouse community of Jamaica's south coast performing 1850 eye exams and distributing over 2300 pair of glasses. Our team included four optometrists, one ophthalmologist, and seven opticians. Our library consisted of over 6200 pair of glasses. On our busiest day alone we serviced 624 patients.

This effort (iCare 2009) was a pilot project for a planned annual program that will grow in size next year. It teams VOSH Northwest (Seattle, WA) with Great Shape Inc., an NGO founded in 1988 and dedicated to humanitarian work in Jamaica. We also received support from LERC Northwest, Sandals Foundation, and the Jamaican Ministry of Health.

Whitehouse is a small, rural fishing village in the southeast portion of Westmoreland Parish. Its population is fewer than 5,000 – but patients came from several local communities including Bluefields, Savanna La Mar, Belmont, Farm, and Cave. Our clinic was located in a church dormitory on a bluff overlooking the coast. We lodged in Negril, which afforded us a scenic one-hour commute each morning and evening.

There are no public health optometrists in this part of Jamaica, and a pair of glasses costs the average Jamaican over one month's income. Thus eye care is a luxury that most are forced to do without.

Additionally, we referred 125 people for treatment at the local public hospital, Cornwall Regional. In this referred population the incidence of glaucoma was 37%, 19% for cataracts, and 5% for pterygiums. Eye surgery is provided by the public health system although the wait can easily be more than a year. Working with the head ophthalmologist we were able to expedite surgeries for critical cases, potentially saving the sight of many. In the future we plan to work with local hospitals to provide surgical procedures.

The team had a rewarding experience, learning that it is impossible to give more than you receive. The people of Jamaica steal your heart and make you long to return. Anyone interested in volunteering for this mission next year may contact Steven Stern at [ss@beitso.com](mailto:ss@beitso.com).