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**Charting a New Course:  
A Capital Campaign to Help Colorado Children with Visual Impairments  
“See Life Differently”**

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*“I am so lucky. I can see things with my cane that other kids can’t see.”*

--Maddie Stallman, age 3, Anchor Center preschooler

### **Situation**

For 23 years, Anchor Center for Blind Children (Anchor Center) has lived a vision: teaching life skills to young children with visual impairments, preparing them for life as independent, successful adults.

Today, Anchor Center has a new vision: a unique teaching facility designed from the ground up for children with vision loss; a facility with sensory elements, such as a garden and playground acoustics, to make learning intuitive even for children who are totally blind; a facility that will allow children to “see” the world with all the senses available to them; a facility that will be so attuned to the needs of our students that it will become a national model for the way in which blind children learn.

Based on the urgency of this objective, and the commitment shared by Anchor Center’s 19-member Board of Directors, its Executive Director, Co-Founding Vision Teacher, community of donors, and families of children with visual impairments, individuals and foundations have already pledged \$6.2 million for a capital campaign budgeted at \$7.5 million. The initial fundraising effort includes financial commitments from 100 percent of the Anchor Center’s Board of Directors and staff members.

### **Accredited Program Needs New Home**

Anchor Center was founded in 1982 by a dedicated teacher of the visually impaired and Denver-area alumnae of the Delta Gamma Sorority. The first preschool class with 6 children was housed in a church basement. As Anchor Center grew, it moved into larger rented rooms. For the past 15 years, Anchor Center has occupied a former boys’ dormitory on the Clayton Campus for Youth, of the former Clayton College at the intersection of Colorado Blvd. and Martin Luther King Blvd.

Thanks to The Clayton Trust, which over the years provided Anchor Center affordable leasing terms, and the generosity of a small, but loyal donor base, Anchor Center cultivated its program to a level of quality that has received accreditation from the

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National Association for the Education of Young Children since 1996—a distinction only 15 percent of preschools attain nationwide.

### **Current Facility Limitations**

Three-year-old Maddie Stallman, the little girl who feels lucky to see the world with her cane, is one of more than 300 children who will receive services from Anchor Center in 2005-06. She and her peers will learn how to develop their existing senses, feed themselves and care for their bodies, read either large print or Braille, make friends and explore their environment. At Anchor Center, they will learn how to experience all the joys life has to offer, and their families will discover how they can help their beloved child succeed and thrive in a sighted world.

They will learn these valuable lessons in spite of the shortcomings of the current facility, built in 1960. Chief among these are lack of air conditioning and poor heating and ventilation, as well as aging electrical and plumbing systems. While these structural problems serve to make the building physically uncomfortable and difficult to maintain, other problems directly hinder teaching children with vision loss.

For example, many visually impaired children—even those who are totally blind—see some forms of light, a physical phenomenon that Anchor Center teachers use to engage learning. Yet lighting is poor to non-existent in the current facility, and a specially constructed “light room” used for teaching purposes is too small to hold more than two or three children at one time.

Acoustics are also poor in the current building. For children with vision loss, sound is second only to touch in their ability to know the world. Bad acoustics create noise and confusion and impede learning for a child with poor vision. Moreover, the current building is not touch-friendly. Its maze-like design and numerous small rooms, doors and other obstacles make it difficult for students to learn mobility skills.

Finally, the current building is not large enough to accommodate the depth and breadth of Anchor Center services. Preschoolers learn literacy skills in a cramped section of the program coordinator’s office, which also serves as the library. Vision evaluations on new students are now performed in the light room and must be scheduled after program hours.

Students who are both blind and deaf, and thus require their own curriculum, have no dedicated space suited to their needs. And there is insufficient meeting space for parent support groups and for collaborating with other early interventionists, such as service coordinators and public school teachers.

Renovating the current building to alleviate these problems is not an option. In addition, other properties currently available in the metro Denver area are unsuitable for a variety of reasons—either because of cost, multi-story layouts, noise issues or lack of playground space.

The solution is a wholly owned, centrally located teaching facility created from the ground up for the unique learning style of children with vision loss.

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### **Design Concept: The Building as a Teaching Tool**

Anchor Center’s design concept will embrace all the senses—sight, sound, touch, smell and taste—so that the building itself will be a teaching tool.

The design will exploit the fullest potential for multi-sensory learning. Imagine a 15,000 square foot facility that features:

- Textures and lighting on the floor, walls and doors so that children can easily navigate the facility while learning mobility skills.
- Classrooms to serve different age groups without having to rearrange every time a different group attends.
- A light room large enough to accommodate more children and parents and a “transition” classroom for toddlers.
- Quiet rooms where children can re-group in a safe place when the pace is too hectic.
- Observation/one-way mirrors where professionals and parents can observe the children without interrupting their important play and learning.
- Outside play areas with wind sculptures and sufficient shade for sunlight-sensitive children.
- A sensory garden and sensory integration gym where children are able to develop their non-visual senses to move and play.
- A room appropriate for teaching eating skills—including good manners and social skills.
- A total learning environment dedicated to children who are both blind and deaf.

Anchor Center will use this teaching facility to collaborate with other programs, such as a Low Vision Clinic for adults and to help public school teachers better understand their students with visual impairments.

It will also help us serve the ever-growing numbers of Colorado children affected by vision loss. Because of increasing referrals from medical and educational professionals, the number of children receiving Anchor Center services has grown significantly over the past two years.

### **A New Site for Anchor Center’s New Home**

After months of searching for a site that met all of its criteria for convenience, visibility and community, the Anchor Center Board of Directors’ Building Committee has purchased land at the new Stapleton neighborhood. Like our current building, the new site is centrally located at the intersection of 26<sup>th</sup> Avenue and Roselyn Street, just moments away from I-70 with quick access from the south and east via I-225 and the north via I-270.

The Stapleton site gives Anchor Center a higher visibility than it currently has on the Clayton Campus. Stapleton allows Anchor Center to be a greater part of the community, which means that children and families who need our services will know who we are and where to find us. It also means the children can be active participants in their neighborhood—utilizing the swimming pool and navigating their way to the local ice cream and flower shops for taste and smell sensations!