

Eye health group to move to Decatur

International effort against disease affecting millions picks 'crossroads for global health' as home.

By [Christopher Quinn](#)
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A program that strives to end a disease that has blinded an estimated 6.2 million people and threatens tens of millions more is moving from New York to metro Atlanta.

Decatur's Task Force for Child Survival and Development will take over the 11-year-old International Trachoma Initiative's programs beginning April 1. Pfizer, the drug company, has promised to supply the Zithromax necessary to help end the disease by 2020.

The ITI had been looking for a new host site and chose metro Atlanta because of its strong infrastructure of organizations working in disease elimination, such as the Task Force, the Carter Center, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and CARE.

"Atlanta has become a crossroads for global health," said Dr. Mark Rosenberg, executive director of the Task Force. The switch to metro Atlanta has brought four jobs and may bring more, Rosenberg said.

Trachoma is spread by flies in some of the world's poorest regions. It causes inflammation of the eyelids, which results in the eyelashes turning inside the lids. As people blink, the cornea is scratched until blindness ensues. Taking Zithromax once a year prevents the disease.

"We think we can help it disappear for good faster," Rosenberg said.

The Carter Center has provided about 30 percent of the drugs so far.

"We think the move to the task force brings a lot of optimism that the goal will be reached by 2020," said Paul Emerson, director of the Carter Center's Trachoma control program.