

Mercedes Smith, OD  
94 Front Street Springfield, VT 05156  
(210) 709-5349

Shortly after graduating from the Pennsylvania College of Optometry in Philadelphia in 2020, I moved with my family to Vermont. It wasn't long before we fell in love with the state. My husband and I are from big cities, so the tranquil landscape, and the kind, community-focused people were a welcome change. Our dream was to open an optometry practice together. I would provide the patient care, and he would be the manager. The next year, we bought a small practice from a retiring optometrist in Springfield.

Since settling in Vermont, I've become acutely aware of the challenges of practicing in a rural state. When a patient's ocular disease progresses to a stage that requires an advanced procedure, I am tasked with presenting the painfully limited options for specialist referral locations.

In southern Vermont, the options available are usually out of state, in New Hampshire and Massachusetts, sometimes hours away. Most of my patients are retirement age and often low-income, making the distance a barrier to care.

In a recent example, a dear patient of mine needed such a procedure, He developed glaucoma that is not controlled well by therapeutic eye drops. I recommended a minor laser procedure called selective laser trabeculoplasty (SLT) to help manage his condition. I referred him for a consultation to my office's nearest glaucoma specialist that will accept new patients, over an hour away western Massachusetts.

My patient dutifully attended his appointment with the specialist and returned to me disappointed and frustrated with the experience. He reported his questions were dismissed, and did not feel his condition, risks, or options were explained. He did not trust them to perform the procedure and would not be returning to their office. As a result, I was tasked to find another specialist and wait for an opening in their schedule, all while the clock is ticking on his uncontrolled glaucoma.

This waste of patient time and resources could have been avoided if Vermont allowed me, his optometrist, to practice at the extent of my training.

As a relatively new graduate, it is of the utmost importance to me to provide my patients using the skills I learned. The skills at which I have excelled, and which I have shown I am able to do to earn my degree and ability to practice. While studying to become an optometrist, I learned to perform several minor laser procedures, including SLT. Thousands of other optometrists in numerous states are already performing these procedures with an excellent safety record. With the passing of Vermont's scope update, I be able to provide Vermonters with access to medical eye care in a local and trusted location, with the compassion, consideration, and expertise they deserve.