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Free vision screening offered for service dogs

By Valerie Vinyard
arizona daily star

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For appointments
Service dog owners must register their pet at www.acvoeyexam.org. They can then call Veterinary Specialty Center of Tucson at 795-9955 and make an appointment.

They won't actually have to read an eye chart, but starting Monday, service dogs in Tucson will receive free vision screenings until May 16. In honor of the National Service Dog Eye Exam Week's first year, Dr. Caroline Betbeze, board-certified ophthalmologist for the Veterinary Specialty Center of Tucson, will conduct the screenings. Betbeze, 30, will look for inherited

ocular disease, which tends to occur in purebred dogs. She checks for such things as cataracts and glaucoma.

"We're really testing for functional vision," Betbeze said. "We set up an obstacle course for them to navigate around; we do tracking with them. It's a combination of a lot of different things."

Cataracts are probably the most common problem Betbeze finds, noting that dogs can be as young as 1 year old if the disease is inherited.

"A lot of (diseases) are treatable," she said. "But some inherited things are not treatable — if they're born with a retinal detachment, for example."

"When we look at the retina, oftentimes we can see other diseases that other animals have, like high blood pressure, diabetes or valley fever."

The offer is extended to all service dogs, such as guide dogs, handicapped-assistance dogs, detection dogs and search-and-rescue dogs. To qualify, dogs must be "working dogs" certified through a formal training program or organization.

Forty service dogs in Tucson already are scheduled for screenings, but there's room for many more. Dog owners should allow an hour for the exam, because the dog's eyes will be dilated, too.

Owners of non-service dogs also can make an appointment, but most of Betbeze's clients are from referrals from family veterinarians. A regular eye exam costs \$90.

Signs that dog owners can watch for that might indicate an eye problem in their dogs: a cloudy eye, a red eye, holding the eye closed, squinting.

In addition to the eye exam, participants will receive a Pet Wellness Report (preventive health diagnosis) and can get a blood panel through their primary-care veterinarian in June, sponsored by Pet Health Systems.

The Veterinary Specialty Center of Tucson is at 4909 N. La Cañada Drive. For more information, call 795-9955 or go to www.vscot.com.

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• Contact reporter Valerie Vinyard at 573-4136 or vvinyard@azstarnet.com.



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