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Free eye, health exams offered for service dogs

By Carol Karm
Correspondent
Friday, May 9, 2008

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Man's best friend could get a free eye exam and health check-up next week.

All certified service dogs — including those assisting people with disabilities, police K-9 dogs and search-and-rescue and detection dogs — are eligible for free eye exams, blood tests and other diagnostic services as part of a new national observance, officials said.

After doing a successful pilot program in Tennessee, the American College of Veterinary Ophthalmologists is launching a National Service Dog Eye Exam Day — which actually will run daily during the week of May 12.

Keeping service dogs healthy and on the job is the primary purpose of the event, which is sponsored by Merial, a manufacturer of animal pharmaceuticals and vaccines.

"People need to understand how great these dogs are and how much they do for the community," said Dr. Ron



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Dalzell, who volunteers with the Inglis Police Dog Academy and the Police Dog Foundation in Ventura.

"Police dogs can search buildings efficiently and safely. They can track down a lost person or a criminal who has fled the scene of a crime, and they can find a discarded weapon — all this without endangering the life of an officer," Dalzell said. "Training a team (handler and dog) costs about \$20,000, so keeping these dogs healthy is in everyone's best interest."

Dr. Janette da Silva Curiel of the Animal Eye Care Clinics in Camarillo will perform the eye exams for the certified service dogs in the region.

One of the most common problems for dogs is cataracts, she said.

"Certainly we would not want a dog with cataracts guiding a vision-impaired owner," she said. "Many times owners don't bring their dogs in for specialized eye exams because of the cost, even though protecting the vision and health of these special dogs is vital for them in their service capacity."

The event is open to all certified service dogs. They will receive an eye exam by da Silva Curiel, a physical exam by Dalzell and an oral exam by Dr. Lee Jane Huffman, a Simi Valley-based veterinary dental specialist.

More than 140 board-certified veterinary ophthalmologists and 1,300 general veterinarians around the country will be donating their services during this event, according to a spokesman for the national organizers. Pet Health Systems, a company that provides veterinary health screening reports, will work with veterinarians to provide the blood and diagnostic screening work free of charge.

Service dogs eligible for the special exams are those that have been certified by a formal training program or organization or that are enrolled in a formal training program. The certifying organization can be national, regional or local.

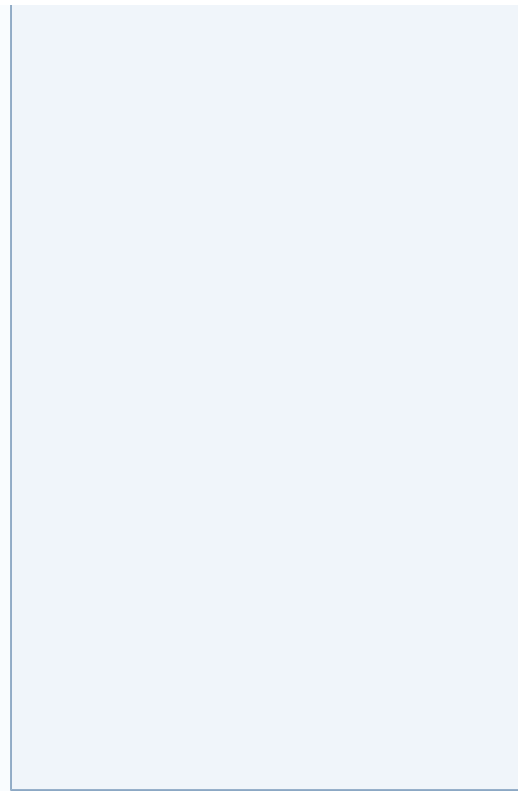
Owners must register at <http://www.ACVOeyeexam.org>, officials said.

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