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PET HEALTH: Register now for the national service animal eye exam

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Dr. Bianca Martins performs an eye examination on a dog.

SUBMITTED PHOTO

Every May since 2008, veterinary ophthalmologists across the country have volunteered their time to provide free eye examinations for service animals.

The annual event, which is organized by the American College of Veterinary Ophthalmologists and Stokes Pharmacy, has provided screening for about 60,000 animals.

Drs. Bianca Martins and Katie Fleming, board-certified ophthalmologists at the University of Illinois Veterinary Teaching Hospital in Urbana, encourage owners of service animals to register in April for the event.

“It is a wonderful event to give back to the animals that give so much to us,” says Martins.

Service and working animals that qualify for the program include animals working in law enforcement and military organizations; animals that assist people with disabilities; drug detection and search and rescue animals; and therapy animals. These animals depend on their eyesight to do their jobs, so it is vital that their eyesight is carefully monitored. The health of their eyes encompasses not only their vision, but also eye comfort.

“This exam is completely free to registered service and working animals,” Martins says.

She has typically examined service or working dogs, such as Labrador retrievers, German shepherds, and greyhounds, during the National Service Animal Eye Exam event. However, horses or any species of working animal could participate.

The owner must follow the instructions at the online registration site to ensure eligibility of their animals; once the registration is complete, the owner will receive a confirmation number that will be needed in order to secure an appointment for an exam at a participating animal hospital. Owners will also need to bring written proof of the

animal's formal training and current active status as a service or working animal on the day of the examination. There are a limited number of appointment slots available, so early registration is advised.

“At the appointment, we perform wellness eye examinations, looking for any abnormalities that would impact the animal's vision,” Dr. Martins explains. These abnormalities include cataracts, corneal damage, and retinal degeneration.

Slit-lamp biomicroscopy and indirect ophthalmoscopy are special tools used by veterinary ophthalmologists to perform wellness eye exams.

The slit-lamp biomicroscopy is a microscope and light source combination that allows veterinarians to evaluate structures in the eye, such as the size and thickness of tissues. This tool is especially important to determine the presence and size of cataracts.

Indirect ophthalmoscopy, consisting of a lighted head unit and a condensing lens, is used to examine the back half of the eye, which is not otherwise visible. This tool lets specialists see the retina and optic nerve, which conveys visual information to the brain, and helps detect retinal degeneration.

“We typically see younger animals that have healthy eyes in these exams,” Martins says. The annual exam increases the chances of catching any problems at an early stage. If the specialist finds a problem during the exam, the animal will return at a different time for further tests and more in-depth examination. If a service animal has seriously compromised eyesight or even eye discomfort, retirement is often recommended for that animal.

“Whether or not a pet is a service or working animal, it is always a good idea to make sure that their eyes are healthy,” Martins says.

EYE EXAM REGISTRATION

For your service or working animal to become eligible for the free exams at Illinois, which will be offered on May 22 and May 29, you must first register online through www.acvoeyeexam.org. For information on eye care for animals, you may call the Veterinary Teaching Hospital at (217) 333-5374.