

Utah service dogs get free 'vital' eye care

By **McKenna Park**

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SALT LAKE CITY — Whether they're guiding a visually impaired person across a street or searching in the snow for an avalanche victim, it's vital service dogs have healthy eyesight to get their job done, according to search and rescue dog trainer Marie Ginman.

"Being out in the searches, they do get poked with branches," said Ginman, noting search and rescue dogs are susceptible to trauma-induced cataracts. "They're out they're running around so fast, they don't see branches, and that doesn't stop them."

That's why the American College of Veterinary Ophthalmologists is offering free eye exams to all service animals through May out of gratitude for their selfless work.

"I feel incredibly honored to help these people who may not have this ability to get into a specialist and be able to help them make sure their dogs, which are often their lifeline, are healthy," said veterinarian Nicole MacLaren, who is a specialist in ophthalmology.

MacLaren, who works at Eye Care for Animals in Salt Lake City, donates her time every workday in May to give eye exams to service animals, ranging from search and rescue dogs to guide dogs for visually impaired people to service dogs who help people with mental disabilities.

"It's just a little of us giving back to these dogs that work so hard in what they do," she said.

MacLaren examined three animals from Rocky Mountain Search and Rescue Dogs Wednesday: a Labrador retriever-hound mix named Batman, a golden retriever named Scout and a flat-coated retriever named Smoke.

Ginman, who is Batman's trainer and owner, said she and some of the rescue group's dogs were involved in the search for Annie Schmidt, the daughter of Piano Guy's Jon Schmidt, whose remains were found off a hiking trail in Oregon.

"It's important to know that their eyes are healthy," she said. "We appreciate the service they are doing for us."



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Ginman, who volunteers full time as a search and rescue dog trainer, said the group has brought most of its dogs into the clinic for a free eye exam every year for the past 10 years in addition to regular veterinarian visits.

MacLaren said she and her colleagues look for problems that the general veterinarian may not have picked up on.

"We are looking for abnormalities in vision or comfort level that the owners may not have noticed," she said. "The owners may not be aware that their dogs are having issues. They may think, in fact, that they are not listening to commands when it's visual problems in the dog."

Jan Holley, owner of Smoke and Scout, said Scout, who is 11, has been having some trouble during nighttime missions because of eye-related problems. MacLaren found cataracts in both eyes during Scout's examination and was able to prescribe her with the right treatment to get back into shape.

"In dogs, you have to catch cataracts early if they are to have success," MacLaren said. "That's the purpose of doing these, to catch it really early."

The annual eye exam event is in its 11th year and is sponsored by American College of Veterinary Ophthalmologists and Stokes Pharmacy. Those with registered service dogs can set up a free eye examination through the rest of the month at the following locations:

- BluePearl Veterinary Partners, 308 W. 7200 South, Midvale
- Eye Care for Animals, 1021 E. 3300 South, Salt Lake City
- Eye Care for Animals, 2465 N. Main, Sunset