

An Eye for Assistance

Service animals need to see well to do their jobs, and that's where free eye exams at Cummings Veterinary Medical Center come in



“We are looking for issues like cataracts, dry eye, glaucoma, and other common conditions that can impair dogs’ vision,” said Stephanie Pumphrey, a veterinary ophthalmologist. Photo: Anna Miller

By Genevieve Rajewski

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They can't tell the veterinarian which way the “E” is facing or if they can read the bottom line of an eye chart, but animals still benefit from eye exams—particularly guide dogs, military and search-and-rescue dogs, and others with a job to do.

“Sight is important to all dogs, though certainly many dogs lose their vision and still enjoy good quality of life,” said Stephanie Pumphrey, a veterinary ophthalmologist at the Henry and Lois Foster Hospital for Small Animals (<http://vetmed.tufts.edu/foster-hospital-small-animals/>) in North Grafton. “But for service dogs, being able to see and navigate their world properly is critical to them being able to perform at their best while supporting their humans.”

That's why Cummings Veterinary Medical Center in May joined the American College of Veterinary Ophthalmologists for the ACVO/StokesRx National Service Animal Eye Exam (<https://www.acvoeyexam.org/>). Through the program, now in its eleventh year, Tufts board-certified veterinary ophthalmologists offer free sight-saving exams for qualified service animals at the Foster Hospital and Tufts Veterinary Emergency Treatment & Specialties (<http://tuftsvets.org/>) in Walpole.



Janet
Martin of
Rochdale,

Stephanie Pumphrey examines Della with an assist from senior veterinary technician Denise Sheldon. Photo: Anna Miller

Massachusetts, took advantage of the program to have her hearing dog (<https://needs.org/service-dog-programs/hearing-dogs-deaf-and-hearing-loss>), Della, screened at the Foster Hospital. Since 2013, the 6-year-old black Labrador retriever has helped Martin navigate her daily routine, nudging her awake when the alarm clock goes off in the morning, telling her when the microwave is done heating lunch, and alerting her to the doorbell ringing or someone calling her name—not to mention being Martin's ears in case of emergency situations such as a nighttime fire alarm.

Eye problems (<http://now.tufts.edu/articles/spotting-eye-problems-pets>) are common in pets, but they tend to be different from the issues seen in humans. "Most people with glasses have what's called refractive errors, meaning they can't see sharply because light isn't focusing correctly on the back of the eye. We don't see a lot of that in animals, though we can test for it if appears to be an issue, say in agility dogs or performance horses that need to be able to jump," said Pumphrey, who is also an assistant professor at Cummings School. "Today, we are looking instead for issues like cataracts, dry eye, glaucoma, and other common conditions that can impair dogs' and cats' vision."

While senior veterinary technician Denise Sheldon cradled Della's head, Pumphrey peered into the dog's eyes using a slit lamp and a binocular indirect headset. "Her eyes look a little dry," Pumphrey told Martin. To test Della's tear production, Pumphrey tucked a tiny strip of paper inside each eyelid.

“Moisture wicks along the paper and tells us how much tears the eyes are making,” she explained. (Della, ever the very good girl, patiently sat motionless.) The verdict: Della’s eyes were indeed mildly dry, but the condition can be treated with over-the-counter lubricating drops to avoid the development of corneal ulcers and corneal scarring.



“Having Della has made all the difference in the world,” said the 81-year-old Martin, who began

Janet Martin and her hearing dog Della in the waiting room. “When you can’t hear, you are sort of on pins and needles all the time, said Martin. “But with Della, I feel safe and secure.” Photo: Anna Miller

experiencing progressive hearing loss in both ears at age 7. Della is Martin’s second hearing dog, following in the pawprints of Monte, a springer spaniel mix who aided Martin for twelve years.

“He was fabulous. I never thought I’d get another dog as good, but Della is even better,” Martin said. Originally bred by the Guiding Eyes for the Blind in California, Della ultimately did not train as a seeing-eye dog because she did not test well for that skill set.

She was sent to the National Education Assistant Dog Service, now known as NEADS/Dogs for Deaf and Disabled Americans (<https://neads.org/>), in Princeton, Massachusetts, where she began her training as an assistant dog in its Prison PUP program (<https://neads.org/training-placement/prison-pup-program>) before undergoing professional training on the specific skills needed for a hearing dog. (As each service dog costs more than \$30,000 to train, Martin was asked to fundraise \$9,500 toward Della’s placement with her.)

Martin said her life was revolutionized last year, when a cochlear implant restored some hearing to her right ear, which has been completely deaf since 1984. “I wondered at first if I still needed a service dog, but I realized that I still rely on Della at night in bed when my hearing aids are off, as well as when they go out, which happens from time to time,” Martin said. “When you can’t hear, you are sort of on pins and needles all the time. But with Della, I feel safe and secure.”

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