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Free eye exams offered for service dogs this week

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Veterinarian Caroline Betbeze (right) checks the eyes of Jean Wilkinson's golden retriever, Bounder, Monday afternoon at the Veterinary Specialty Center of Tucson. Holding the dog is Danialle Cavanaugh, a certified vet technician.

Local veterinarian Caroline Betbeze wants to give back to the community by looking a service dog in the eye. In fact, the ophthalmology specialist wants to look all service dogs in the eye this week during free screenings. As part of National Service Dog Eye Exam Week, Betbeze, a full-time specialist at Veterinary Specialty Center of Tucson, has hooked up with American College of Veterinary Ophthalmologists to provide the Tucson version of this nationwide event.

The center is at 4909 N. La Cañada Drive, near West River Road, and exams will be given by appointment only. Expect to spend an hour for the visit, she said, as the dog's pupils will have to be dilated. Certification of the dog's service status must be provided.

Dogs will be able to return to work immediately after the exam, but may be sensitive to bright light for a few hours. Betbeze spent Monday morning screening 20 military working dogs at Davis-Monthan Air Force Base and has at least 40 more service dogs already registered this week at the center.

Eye exams can help catch corneal disease, cataracts, glaucoma and other potential vision impairments.

The retinal exam can detect evidence of high blood pressure, valley fever and even diabetes.

Betbeze is among roughly 140 specialists across the country who is offering eye screenings for service dogs at no cost this week.

"Considering there are only 250 to 300 ophthalmologists, more than half of us are doing this. This is a really good thing."

She said the usual cost of an appointment with her is \$90 just to walk in the door.

In addition to the eye screening, paperwork will be given to service dog owners that can be taken to their regular vets for free blood screening in June.

Offered by animal health products and services companies Pet Health Systems and Merial, the blood screenings can further help ensure your service dog remains healthy, Betbeze said.

Event organizers expect to provide eye exams and health screenings for as many as 10,000 dogs across the country. Betbeze said the free health checks are especially helpful because service dog owners are often on a limited or fixed income.

"Service dogs do so much for us," she said. "We just want to give back to the community."