

Pets ready to help out as blood donors

By Kimberly Matas

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Melanie Martinez draws blood from Big Boy, age 2, as the cat is held by Joclyn Avilez during the Best Friends for Life Pets and People Blood Drive.

Photo by Greg Bryan / Arizona Daily Star

Dogs, cats and humans were lined up Saturday at Tucson's first Best Friends for Life Pets and People Blood Drive.

Owners brought more than 50 animals for screening as potential blood donors from 9 a.m. to 1 p.m. at the Veterinary Specialty Center of Tucson, 4909 N. La Cañada Drive.

Of the 38 animals that had a universal blood type and met the weight, age, health and temperament criteria, two were cats. The rest were dogs.

"Just like a human hospital, we need blood," said Jan Woods, hospital administrator at the Specialty Center. "There's a severe shortage of blood across the country. Our goal was to get a blood donor program going."

With a donor program, prescreened donor pets are called in as needed. Having a local donor pool will lessen the need to buy products from blood banks, where dogs and cats are kept in kennels and bled on a regular basis to supply veterinary clinics. There are four such blood banks in the United States, said veterinarian Barbara Gores, a surgeon at the Specialty Center.

Pets that passed the initial screening will be called back in the next few weeks for more thorough blood tests to ensure that they are healthy.

Pets in the program are expected to donate blood four times a year. In exchange, they get a free vet exam and blood tests, vaccines, heartworm medicine, flea- and tick-prevention medication, and free blood transfusions if needed.

"We still buy blood from all the major banks, but there are crunch times when we have four or five cases that come in and run us dry," Gores said.

The clinic can get blood shipped overnight from a bank, but in an emergency a pet often can't wait that long.

"It's horrific to stand there and say, 'I'm going to lose this patient if I don't have blood,'" Gores said.

The clinic especially needs feline blood.

Nancy Willis, a breeder, brought her American bobtail cat, Jellybean, to the blood drive.

"I knew they had quite a few dogs but not so many cats, so I came out to see if we could help," Willis said.

Jellybean was a few ounces too light to meet the 10-pound minimum requirement for cats, but Willis said she has larger cats at home that she will have screened as donors.

Laurie and Donald White brought their greyhounds, Henry and Mr. Mills, to be screened.

"I think it's a really good thing," Laurie White said. "They're always doing blood drives for people, but I've never heard of one for dogs."

After meeting with a vet, the couple were told that Henry is a good candidate for blood donation, but at 9, Mr. Mills is too old.

Boxers Jackson and Maizie were brought in by their owners, Kelly and Craig Purtee. Though Maizie was too small to meet the 60-pound minimum weight requirement for dogs, bulkier Jackson can be a donor.

"Since he was a little bit bigger and has such an easygoing temperament, he'd be a good candidate," Kelly Purtee said.

"Seeing all the dogs that go through traumas, we thought it would be a good thing for other dogs," Craig Purtee said of their decision to make their dog a donor. The couple also donated blood to the Red Cross while they were at the event.

KGUN-9 news reporter Sal Quijada brought his black-and-white terrier mix, George Elvis, to the vet center Saturday for screening. Though the dog did not have a universal blood type, the veterinarians said he might be called into service if they need his specific type.

"I think George is very civic-minded, and I think he'd like to help out," Quijada said.

The American Red Cross Blood Services had 30 human donors give blood Saturday, too.

• *Contact reporter Kimberly Matas at 807-8431 or at kmatas@azstarnet.com.*

Where to call

• For more information about pet blood donation, call the Veterinary Specialty Center of Tucson at 795-9955