

Leading the Way



“It’s important for the veterinary profession to really get involved in any way it can. The work of The Seeing Eye makes our profession as a whole better—it’s the veterinary profession doing a really great thing for society.”

—ANTHONY J. DECARLO, VMD

AAHA-accredited Vincent A. Stabile Canine Health Center cares for Seeing Eye dogs

by Jen Reeder

Every day, veterinarians at AAHA-accredited animal hospitals make life better for pets and their owners. But one member of the AAHA family fundamentally changes lives: the Vincent A. Stabile Canine Health Center of The Seeing Eye, the world’s oldest existing guide dog school.

Trisha Ebel, a resident of Secaucus, N.J., applied for a Seeing Eye dog in 2007 after her vision began rapidly declining because of glaucoma. She and her husband were busy raising their two children, and she became afraid to leave the house on her own, even after training to use a cane.

“But on Sept. 1 of 2007, I walked through the front door of The Seeing Eye, and since then, my life has never been the same,” Ebel said. “It was by far the best experience of my life, besides adopting my children.”

Ebel was paired with Rainy, a golden retriever, and the two began training together for 27 days on The Seeing Eye campus in Morristown, N.J.—what Ebel likes to call “first-class boot camp.” She had a private room in the 30-room dormitory, meals in the dining hall, and lectures in the student lounge.

“They take good care of you—you’re really safe there, and you feel really safe.”

Part of the curriculum included walking with Rainy to the Vincent A. Stabile Canine Health Center, where the veterinary team discussed Rainy’s health history, how to examine him, whether she wanted him micro-chipped, and grooming and diet tips.

“The health clinic there is extremely clean—it’s neat, it’s nice, and each and every one of the staff and veterinarians that work there, they really and truly are amazing,” Ebel said.

After learning to trust Rainy’s guidance and graduating from The Seeing Eye, Ebel began working as the adjustment to vision loss coordinator for the state of New Jersey. Her job entails a lot of travel, which she’s done with Rainy and now with Astro, a black Labrador retriever from The Seeing Eye (most of the dogs work 7–8 years before retiring, often then continuing to live with the graduate).

“I’ve traveled on my own by train, by plane, by bus for work—the dog just keeps me so totally safe,” she said.

“The bottom line is The Seeing Eye gave me back my life with the dogs. They changed my life. I have more independence and confidence than I ever thought imaginable.”

Legacy of giving

Ebel is one of approximately 1,720 current Seeing Eye graduates; over 16,000 people have graduated since the nonprofit incorporated 86 years ago on Jan. 29, 1929. As the organization grew over the years, it needed a dedicated veterinary hospital on campus, so the Vincent A. Stabile

Canine Health Center opened in 1997 with a generous donation from the late Vincent A. Stabile, an engineer turned philanthropist.

Dolores Holle, VMD, director of Canine Medicine and Surgery, oversees management of the dogs from the birth of a puppy to placement of the dog with a blind person; she and her team of 11 (including 2 other veterinarians) also offer support services to graduates and their dogs’ veterinarians, even though the dogs are owned by handlers after graduation. The Seeing Eye breeds Labrador retrievers, golden retrievers, German shepherd dogs, and Labrador and golden retriever crosses (and sometimes standard poodles for people with allergies), with about 500 puppies born each year. The dogs live on site or at the breeding station until they are 7 weeks old and then are socialized and trained with volunteer puppy raisers in the region until they are 14–16 months old. They then return to campus, where they are assigned to an instructor for 4 months before being paired for 3 ½ weeks with a first-time student or for 2 ½ weeks with a returning student.

“At any point in time, we might have about 275 dogs on campus,” Holle said. “We want them to be able to have cool heads in a crisis, so we’re looking for calm, confident dogs.”

Of course, they’re also looking for healthy dogs because of the importance of the dogs’ work and to ensure a successful breeding colony (there is a 75 percent success rate for dogs that enter the training program; dogs that don’t make the breeding or training program are adopted or go on to work in law enforcement or search

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and rescue). When the puppies return to campus, they undergo extensive screening that includes an eye exam using indirect ophthalmoscopy and slit lamps.

“Although none of us are specialists, we all have an area of emphasis in ophthalmology because of the importance of that in the work that the dogs are doing,” Holle said. “We also have retinal and lens digital cameras to record any abnormalities and we work closely with renowned veterinary ophthalmologist Dr. Gus Aguirre at the University of Pennsylvania.”

The Seeing Eye information system follows the dogs from before conception until they either retire or the organization learns of their death, and the data gathered (including DNA) has helped create healthier dogs—if an issue is detected in a

dog, the entire litter can be examined.

“We’ve been able to not only help ourselves, but we’ve been able to help dogdom in general, and that’s a great position to be able to be in,” Holle said.

For example, by collaborating with outside experts such as the University of Pennsylvania’s Gail Smith, PhD, VMD, and using PennHIP technology, The Seeing Eye has been able to “reduce to insignificance” hip dysplasia in their German shepherd dogs, Holle said.

She said she is proud of the work of The Seeing Eye team “across the board” and that maintaining AAHA accreditation is a useful discipline to ensure high-quality care.

“It actually inspires you to be better than you might otherwise take the

time to be. We’re all so busy, and the time does fly,” Holle said.

That’s important to her because the team is so committed to its work.

“We are intensely proud of the mission, our dogs, and most decidedly our graduates and what they do in the world,” she said. “It’s a wonderful thing—I have worked here for 23 years—to be able to work someplace where the thought of what you do can still bring tears to your eyes.”

James A. Kutsch Jr., PhD, president and chief executive officer of The Seeing Eye, shares that pride in the work of The Seeing Eye. The former computer scientist in the telecommunications industry has a unique perspective as a graduate who has partnered with eight Seeing Eye dogs.

Tips for How to Best Serve a Blind Client and His or Her Seeing Eye Dog

In order to best serve a client with a Seeing Eye dog, Dolores Holle, VMD, director of canine medicine and surgery at The Seeing Eye, offers the following advice to veterinarians:

- Respect their “personhood” and listen to them. “It’s important to listen to them when they say the dog’s ‘just not acting right’ because, in my experience, nobody really knows their dogs better than Seeing Eye graduates know their dogs. There’s a lot of information transmitted along that harness handle.”
- Explain what you are doing during an exam. Holle said it could be describing the exam, such as “Now I’m looking in his ears,” or

“I’m going to be quiet now while writing my medical notes.” And if you need to take a dog out of the exam room, give a reason instead of just saying “We’ll be right back.”

- Avoid prescribing medications that cause drowsiness or affect the dog’s ability to think. Guide dogs need to know when to disobey a command with “intelligent disobedience,” such as if their handler suggests “forward” into traffic. “There’s nothing magic about treating these dogs; it’s just that they do have to think for a living.”
- Never pet a dog in a harness. “Reaching out and touching the

dog when he’s in his harness is always compared to grabbing the steering wheel from somebody when they’re driving a car. You just don’t do that.”

- When a graduate arrives, ask if they want to remove their dog’s harness and/or go sighted guide. “The animal hospital can be a very stressful working environment for the dog. So we say, ‘Shall I give you an elbow and we can go sighted guide into the exam room?’”
- Never give a treat without asking permission.
- Discuss these protocols at a staff meeting. “That would really go a long way,” Holle said.

"I'm very humbled and proud to have been selected in the history of the organization to be the first graduate of the program to sit in the president's role," Kutsch said.

He's part of a legacy that began in 1927 when Morris Frank, a man blinded in his youth, read a Saturday Evening Post article written by Dorothy Harris Eustis, an American dog trainer working in Switzerland, about a German program training dogs to guide blinded veterans of World War I. Frank wrote to Eustis for help and traveled to Switzerland, where she trained his dog, Buddy. Frank returned to the United States and wowed the press by navigating New York City with Buddy in 1928. The following year, Frank and Eustis founded The Seeing Eye.

"They created the first program essentially for civilians—for anyone," Kutsch said. "So in effect, Dorothy [Eustis] and Morris [Frank] not only created The Seeing Eye, but they created an industry that did not previously exist in the 1920s that has now grown to over 85 accredited schools worldwide."

Since then, The Seeing Eye's mission has remained essentially unchanged: to provide increased independence, dignity, and self-respect to people who are blind through the use of Seeing Eye dogs. The way that mission is accomplished has had to change over the years, as traffic lights now run on sensors instead of being timed like clockwork and catalytic converters made cars quieter in the 1980s. The Seeing Eye even

purchased a hybrid car in 2006 to understand how to help a blind person and a dog safely negotiate an environment with cars that are virtually silent in electric mode.

Remarkably, one thing that hasn't changed since the 1930s is the fee for students: \$150 for a first-time student, \$50 for a returning student, and \$1 for American or Canadian

military veterans. This includes the dog, instruction, transportation, room and board at The Seeing Eye, equipment, and follow-up, which actually costs around \$64,000.

"It's really more symbolic than financial in nature," Kutsch said. "We believe that anyone with a disability should have a stake in their own rehabilitation."

Because of the deep discount provided to students, The Seeing Eye depends on donations from individuals, foundations, and corporations and planned gifts such as bequests in order to operate. Veterinarians can also support the organization with in-kind donations such as free services for The Seeing Eye as well as for dogs being raised by volunteer puppy raisers or working with graduates.

Each year, graduates and puppy raisers can nominate their local veterinarian for The Seeing Eye Veterinarian Recognition Award, which honors outstanding service to Seeing Eye dogs. Kutsch said there is a special, close relationship between graduates and their dogs.

"When a veterinarian understands that relationship, and also understands that the person is depending on this dog, it's definitely worth recognition," he said.

Russ Petro, DVM and founder of AAHA-accredited Valley Cottage Animal Hospital in Valley Cottage, N.Y., said he was "pleasantly surprised" to be named the 2014 recipient of The Seeing Eye Veterinarian Recognition Award. He has offered free services to a



Russ Petro, DVM and founder of AAHA-accredited Valley Cottage Animal Hospital in Valley Cottage, N.Y.



The Seeing Eye staff

graduate named Milton and his dogs since the 1980s. He said there are a number of ways he works with his team to provide Milton with top-notch service. For example, there is a flag on the computer screen when Milton calls that alerts staff to answer right away (to avoid the inconvenience to Milton of having to answer a returned call) and to accommodate any time he needs for an appointment. When Milton arrives, the team offers him an exam room in which to wait, in case someone comes in with an aggressive dog.

“Even if he has to wait a few minutes in there, we know that he’s safe,” Petro said.

Because Petro never charges Milton, he spares no expense and treats the dog as he would his own. He uses long-acting injections and prescribes only one oral medication if possible (preferably one that needs to be administered just once a day). If multiple medications are needed, his staff will add tape on the bottom of one bottle to help Milton differentiate between medications. He demonstrates how to administer medications and, during exams, verbalizes everything he’s doing.

“You can’t communicate enough,” Petro said.

Petro tries to avoid keeping the dog overnight after an in-house procedure, since Milton depends on his dog, and also has to arrange rides to the practice. He said veterinarians should always thank the driver profusely for transporting a graduate and his or her dog. Finally, he always responds quickly to calls from The Seeing Eye.

“They do an absolutely wonderful job, and it’s a great group of people—they’re really devoted to what they do,” Petro said. “What they do is so very important for people that really need it.”

Anthony J. DeCarlo, VMD and CEO of AAHA-accredited Red Bank Veterinary Hospital (RBVH), a network of seven veterinary hospitals in New Jersey including the RBVH Hillsborough location near the Vincent A. Stabile Canine Health Center, has offered free services directly to The Seeing Eye since the 1980s and sees approximately 160 of their dogs each year for specialist services in areas such as cardiology and internal medicine (Holle described the

support as “phenomenal”). He lauded the passion, dedication, and knowledge of the team at the Vincent A. Stabile Canine Health Center, as well as the facility itself.

“It’s much larger than the average veterinary hospital—it’s extremely clean, it’s well-equipped... it looks brand new to this day,” DeCarlo said. “It’s very impressive.”

Because of the organization’s valuable work, he said he would like to see veterinarians take a more active role in supporting the work of The Seeing Eye with contributions.

“It’s important for the veterinary profession to really get involved in any way it can,” DeCarlo said. “The work of The Seeing Eye makes our profession as a whole better—it’s the veterinary profession doing a really great thing for society.” ✧

Links for More Information

- seeingeeye.org
- valleycottageanimalhospital.com
- rbvh.net



Freelance journalist Jen Reeder writes frequently about dogs from her home office in Durango, Colo., which she shares with her husband and their Labrador retriever mix, Rio. She is an award-winning member of the Dog Writers Association of America.