

THINKING OUTSIDE THE BOX: SERVICE DOGS



The tools to help people with disabilities live independently don't just come in the form of other people or services. Over the last 20 years, a growing number of people with disabilities have come to rely on animals, such as dogs, monkeys, and ponies, for assistance. Since space is limited, the discussion here will focus on dogs. But before considering whether a dog might help you be more independent, it's important to make the distinction between assistance dogs and service dogs.

Service Dog: A dog that works for individuals with disabilities other than blindness or deafness. They are trained to perform a wide variety of tasks including but not limited to: pulling a wheelchair, bracing, retrieving, alerting to a medical crisis, and providing assistance in a medical crisis (as defined by Assistance Dogs International).

Assistance Dog: A generic term for a guide, hearing, or service dog specifically trained to do more than one task to mitigate the effects of an individual's disability. The presence of a dog for protection, personal defense, or comfort does not qualify that dog as an assistance dog (as defined by Assistance Dogs International).

Maybe the idea of having a dog help you pick up things or pull off your socks appeals to you. If you're an animal lover, the thought of being able to take a dog nearly everywhere might seem too good to be true. But, there is a difference between the idea of a service dog and the actual responsibility of a live animal. Service dogs are specially trained, but they are still dogs. They are not machines, and they cannot be put on the shelf. Responsible dog ownership takes time and energy. A service dog increases independence, but also requires sacrifices and adjustments.

While it is perfectly okay to have assistance in caring for a service dog, the human partner should take an active and primary role in making sure the dog's needs are met. For the bonding of a team to take place, the human partner

needs to be the most important person in the dog's life. This means making time to exercise, groom, and even play with the dog. It's important to take an active role in the day-to-day activities, so when you're alone the dog will recognize your leadership and respond.

BEING REALISTIC IN YOUR EXPECTATIONS

If you are exploring getting a service dog, there are some questions you need to be able to answer for yourself.

Would you consider yourself a "dog person"?

It's highly likely that a service dog would spend more time with you than any personal assistant or family member. Given the dog's responsibilities, this means the dog will likely sleep next to you, pick up things with its mouth, and need to be walked regularly. It also means that your clothes and your living space will regularly be covered in dog hair. So, if dog slobber and animal fur are anywhere on your list of pet peeves, you may want to rethink the idea of getting a service dog.

What types of things would a service dog do for you?

Make sure that your expectations are realistic. For example, perhaps you're considering having a service dog to help you get around campus in your manual wheelchair. It's important to know these dogs cannot pull a wheelchair entirely on their own. In order for the dog to perform the skill, the individual must be able to move the chair somewhat.

While the general public may consider getting a dog for protection, keep in mind service dogs are not trained to be protective. In addition, while many organizations teach service dogs basic and specialized commands, working effectively as a team requires hours of ongoing training that help the dog learn new skills and review those previously learned.

Do you have the financial resources to provide for basic needs of the dog (i.e., food, veterinary bills, and grooming costs)?

Many organizations that train service dogs will extensively screen applicants to ensure they have the need for a dog, the resources to care for the animal, and the time necessary to maintain the animal's skills and well-being. These organizations often recognize that individuals with disabilities may receive financial assistance from other sources. This factor alone will not preclude an individual from being eligible for a service dog. Whether you receive assistance or not, it's important to seriously consider the cost involved in caring for an animal.

Do you have someone who could serve as a training assistant?

Some agencies require that you bring a training assistant with you when you get the dog. If not, it's still important to consider having someone who could help if you run into problems teaching the dog new skills and strengthening existing commands. The organization may provide support to recipients, but sometimes an informal assistant can also be helpful—especially if you find that you need basic assistance on a regular basis.

Are you prepared to be completely responsible for the life, health, safety, care, and needs of a living being?

This animal will be your responsibility 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, 365 days a year.

CHOOSING A PROGRAM

Not all assistance dog programs are created equally. Programs vary widely in terms of training philosophies, structure of the training process, the source of potential service dogs, and cost for potential recipients. It's in your best interest to do as much research as possible to see what works best for you and your situation. The first step to getting a service

dog is finding a reputable program with skilled trainers and a proven track record. Programs vary in terms of their structure and cost to recipients. Potential recipients typically must complete an application and screening process before being placed on a waiting list for a service dog. The waiting time for a service dog can be as long as two to four years, depending on the organization, their training methods, and the types of dogs selected for training.

If the dog is trained through a specific program or organization, it is likely that some basic training will occur before you train with the dog. Depending on the structure of the program, basic training can last anywhere from six months to a year and a half. Following basic training, recipients are usually invited to a training class—usually several weeks in length—to learn the commands and handling skills needed for working with a service dog.

SHELTER DOGS VERSUS SPECIALLY-BRED DOGS

Some people believe it's more beneficial to train dogs selected from the local shelters. Although there are practices in place for evaluating these animals' potential for service work, it is impossible to know for certain whether something in the animal's background may lead to irrational or inappropriate behavior later (i.e., biting someone who approaches them too quickly or being overly frightened by noises or activity such as a car backfiring).

Programs that breed and train their own dogs spend months, even years, evaluating the animal's temperament, physical health, and overall work ethic. Oftentimes, if an animal is not suited for service work, this is determined well before a potential recipient enters the picture. Be wary of an agency that promises too much too soon. Also, take time to ask questions about the program's certification. Assistance Dogs International (ADI) is a nonprofit organization that helps develop standards for various types of working animals, such as therapy dogs, companion animals, guide dogs, and service animals. Organizations and programs accredited by ADI have met certain standards.

According to ADI, the number of shelter dogs that are viable as hearing and service dogs is exaggerated by some organizations. The organization explains that selection of a dog is critical and much more involved than it first may seem.

ADI's *Realistic Answers to Frequently Asked Questions* provides further guidance: "A Service Dog candidate should be between 18 months to 2 years old. A younger dog will not show its adult temperament and will not have adult bone structure for hip/shoulder/elbow x-rays. Older than two reduces the amount of time the dog will be able to work.... This will eliminate 60 to 80 percent of the dogs in the shelter. Dog size and inappropriate breeds will eliminate another 10 to 20 percent. Temperament tests will eliminate many more. In general, during a visit to the shelter only 1 to 5 percent of the dogs might qualify. Fifty percent of the dogs selected will have...health problems that will then disqualify them."

CONSIDERING COSTS

Most organizations will charge a minimal fee or no fee at all for the dog, despite the fact that it may cost up to

\$50,000 to raise and train a prospective service dog. Other organizations and private trainers will expect potential recipients to cover some costs. If you apply to and are accepted by a provider organization that belongs to Assistance Dogs United Campaign, you can apply to receive a voucher that pays the cost of your dog.

While there may be no fee for the dog, you may be required to pay an application fee. In addition, you may be asked to cover your travel and lodging expenses while in training. Some organizations have facilities for potential recipients to stay in, while others may have arrangements with hotels and restaurants in their area. Keep in mind there will also be long-term costs of maintaining your dog's health, such as annual shots, food, and potential grooming costs (e.g., trimming your dog's nails).

More information about service dogs is available from ADI's *Realistic Answers to Frequently Asked Questions* available at www.assistancedogsinternational.org/FAQ.php. To download the *Making the Move to Managing Your Own Personal Assistance Services (PAS) Toolkit for Youth with Disabilities Transitioning to Adulthood* or for more information on PAS, visit www.ncwd-youth.info.