

Guide Dogs

Guide dogs were introduced in America in 1927 by Morris Frank who founded The Seeing Eye, the first guide dog school in the country. Inspired by a story about a Swiss program that was training German shepherd dogs to guide blind WWI veterans, Morris Frank, a blind 19-year-old, went to Switzerland to undertake the training and thereby gain independence. Upon his return to America with his dog, Buddy, he demonstrated, in numerous press and goodwill tours, his ability to navigate about town with no help from anyone but his dog guide. The Seeing Eye was incorporated in 1929 and has placed over 16,000 dogs (The Seeing Eye, 2015b). Today there are many schools and organizations (both for- and non-profit) that train guide dogs, only one of which is located in Texas – Guide Dogs of Texas – which is in San Antonio (Guide Dog Users Inc., 2015).

In the 2013 American Community Survey, 6.7 million individuals reported having a visual disability. In Texas, 605,550 individuals reported a vision disability in the same year (U.S. Census Bureau, 2015). The actual number of visually impaired individuals currently using guide dogs is unknown but the estimated number is 10,000 or about 2% of the blind/visually impaired population (Guiding Eyes for the Blind, 2015).

In a study conducted to determine why more people with visual impairments do not apply for or use guide dogs (Whitmarsh, n.d.), benefits of using guide dogs included:

- Increased mobility and independence
- Reduced risk of depression
- Decreased anxiety
- Decreased loneliness

- Increased social integration
- Increased self-esteem

The same study also described some drawbacks to having a guide dog including:

- Financial cost
- Housing choice/space
- Time and energy required for care
- Unwanted attention from people
- Grief or loss when the dog retires, gets ill, or dies

(Whitmarsh, n.d.)

Guide dog training has three basic stages:

1. *Puppy raising.* Dogs are given to volunteers to raise and socialize. During this time the puppy is introduced to social settings that a visually impaired person would encounter in their daily life and taught basic obedience (Guide Dogs of Texas, 2012b)
2. *Formal training.* The guide dog is trained to “guide his client in a straight line unless told otherwise, avoiding obstacles on the ground, to both sides and above. He will stop at curbs, stairs, and locate doorways to regularly visited destinations” (Guide Dogs of Texas, 2012a).
3. *Working Team training.* The matched dog/person team spends about two to four weeks (usually on-site at the training facility) learning to work together in various environments to “master all of the techniques they need to be successful—from finding the checkout counter at a store, to maneuvering through a crowded train station, to passing through a revolving door. The team can travel confidently and independently on suburban routes or city streets, during the day or at

night, alone or in rush hour” (Guide Dog Foundation for the Blind [GDF], 2015b).

The cost for training a guide dog from birth to going home with a partner averages about \$50,000 (GDF, 2015a). Some training facilities charge nominal fees to users: The Seeing Eye (2015a) requires \$150 for the first dog and \$50 for each successive dog; Guide Dogs of Texas (2012a) asks \$1 for each dog. Others, like the Guide Dog Foundation for the Blind (2015a), provide all dogs free of charge.

Many guide dog training facilities breed their own animals. The most popular dog breeds include:

- Labrador Retriever
- Golden Retriever
- German Shepherd
- Lab/golden Mixes
- Standard Poodles

(Guide Dogs of America, 2014; GDF, 2015a)

Service Dogs

Service dogs are specially trained to assist individuals with physical disabilities. Among the many skills that can be trained are “opening doors and refrigerators, fetching out of reach wheelchairs, retrieving dropped items, turning lights on and off, getting help and moving paralyzed limbs. They also perform customized tasks such as assistance with clothing and specialized equipment” (Service Dogs, Inc., 2015). Most service dogs are Golden Retrievers or Labrador Retrievers as those breeds have a high retrieve instinct and a good disposition. Many organizations adopt retriever mixes from local animal shelters to use in their training programs (Assistance Dogs International [ADI], 2015a). While there are no legal standards for training service dogs, ADI (2015b) recommends certain minimum standards for all its member organizations including (the service dog must):

- Respond to commands 90% of the time on the first ask at home and in public
- Be trained to perform at least three specific tasks to mitigate the owner’s disability

Additionally, ADI (2015b) specifies that the client must demonstrate:

- Knowledge of acceptable training techniques
- Knowledge of canine care and health
- Ability to maintain and/or continue training with their service dog

Hearing Dogs

Hearing dogs are trained to alert their deaf owners to certain sounds. When it hears a knock at the door, telephone ring, smoke alarm, or even a baby’s cry, the dog will lead the partner by touch to the sound. They are trained to respond to both voice and sign language commands (Service Dogs, Inc., 2015). The ADI specifies that a hearing dog must be trained to alert to a minimum of three sounds. Hearing dogs are generally small to medium size mixed breed dogs adopted from local shelters (ADI, 2015b).

Autism Dogs

A fairly recent addition to the service dog genre, autism service dogs:

- Increase Safety Levels: For those children who tend to run and lack fear of danger, the dogs can be trained to anchor the child down, effectively stopping them from running any further.
- Improve Socialization: “Having the safety and security of a Certified Service Dog allows families to get out of the house and participate in new experiences on a more regular basis.”
- Suppress Behavioral Outbursts: “Individuals with autism have a difficult time transitioning to new environments and often experience sensory overload. Their Certified Service Dog remains a constant in their life and allows them to focus on their dog as opposed to their environment which often assists with suppressing behavioural issues. The dog also acts as a tactile distraction to redirect the child to a more positive behaviour.”

(National Service Dogs, 2012)

Assistance Dogs for Autism (2015) cites increased social interaction, redirecting repetitive behaviors, improved independence, increased vocabulary, improved quality of sleep, and overall calming among the advantages of pairing a dog with an autistic child. Training of autism service dogs most

often occurs in the child's home and includes the child, parents, other family members, educators and health care professionals (All Purpose Canines, n.d.).

Medical Alert Dogs

There are three primary types of medical alert dogs currently being trained:

- *Diabetes* alert dogs are trained to physically alert their partners to an impending hypo/hyperglycemic event. The dogs can smell subtle changes in the body related to blood sugar levels and alert their partner up to one hour before changes will show up on a personal glucose meter. While not replacing personal blood sugar testing, the dogs can serve as an additional monitor and alert the partner (or in the case of a child, another family member) to take action (Pawsibilities Unleashed, n.d.).
- *Seizure* alert dogs are dogs that can somehow sense when an epileptic partner is going to have a seizure. This ability is not present in all dogs nor is it something a dog can be trained to do. Once discovered, this natural ability is reinforced through training and the dog is taught to alert in a variety of manners according to each dog's inclination. Once alerted, the partner can stop whatever they are doing and take appropriate action (Canine Partners for Life, 2015).
- *Psychiatric* service dogs can alert to many things, including but not limited to, aggressive driving, anxiety, catatonic behavior, flashbacks or distress, and suicidal ideation (Psychiatric Service Dog Partners, 2015).

Other Assistance Animals

Dogs are not the only animals recognized for their ability to assist people in their daily lives. In recent years two other species have proven their worth in helping individuals with disabilities live fuller, more independent lives:

- **Guide Horses** provide a viable option for blind people who choose not to have a dog for reasons such as allergies or dog phobia. Miniature horses have been trained as guide animals since 1999. Horses have several

advantages over dogs for performing in this capacity, including:

- 350 degree field of vision allows detection of obstacles even before sighted trainers
- Excellent night vision – can see clearly in almost total darkness
- Long lifespan – can live up to 50 years where dog's working life is 8-10
- Calm nature – horses traditionally trained to remain calm in chaotic situations
- Great Memory – does not require constant reinforcement training
- Naturally safety conscious
- Not easily distracted -- not addicted to human attention and normally do not get excited when petted or groomed

(Guide Horse Foundation, n.d.)

- **Capuchin Monkeys** have been trained as assistance animals for quadriplegic individuals since 1979 in the Helping Hands program. The monkeys are trained to serve as live-in companions who are much more capable service companions than any other animal due to their dexterity. Monkeys are capable of helping in many tasks including:

- Turning pages
- Scratching itches
- Retrieving dropped objects
- Inserting straws into bottles
- Turning on buttons/switches for remotes, phones, computers, etc.
- Repositioning limbs on a wheelchair (Helping Hands, n.d.a)

Most basic tasks are learned within 18-24 months and additional individual, at-home training is provided after a monkey is matched with a person. The cost of training a monkey helper is approximately \$40,000 from birth to placement but the monkeys are provided free of charge by Helping Hands (Helping Hands, n.d.b).

Assistance Animals in Public

A service animal is "any guide dog, signal dog, or other animal individually trained to provide assistance to an individual with a disability" (Americans with Disabilities Act [ADA], 2008).

Service (assistance) animals are usually identified by special insignia. A guide dog wears a special harness while working. Service dogs generally wear vests that identify them as working dogs. Hearing dogs may wear an orange vest or collar and leash. It is important to note that it is not required by law that working dogs wear special identification. No national legal requirement exists stating that service animals must have identification, be formally trained, or be documented. In Texas, the only requirement for identification is that the dog is “properly harnessed or leashed.” Texas law does, however, define an assistance animal as “a canine that is specially trained or equipped to help a person with a disability and that is used by a person with a disability” (Texas Constitution and Statutes, 2013).

Service animals are allowed anywhere with public access and no extra fee can be levied due to the animals’ presence. Additionally, any animal acquired for the purpose of training is protected under the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), even before the training is completed or ever begins. Businesses that serve the public may:

- Ask if an animal is a service animal
- Remove a service animal only if:
 - The animal is out of control and the owner cannot (or does not) respond appropriately
 - The animal is a threat to the health or safety of others
- MAY NOT ask what a person’s disability is (ADA, 2008)

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