Celebrating Service Dogs

Drs. Foster & Smith Educational Staff

Service Dogs provide a vital function in society. Their work with the disabled can mean the difference between being housebound and having independence.

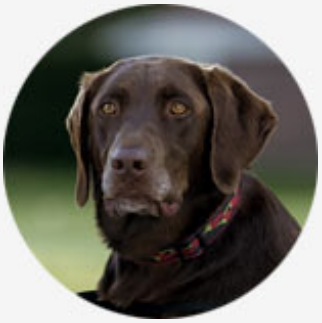
Service Dogs go through a variety of rigorous training methods, depending on the function they will be performing. The ADA (Americans with Disabilities Act) defines service dogs as "any guide dog, signal dog, or other animal individually trained to do work or perform tasks for the benefit of an individual with a disability..." Some organizations refer to these dogs as "Assistance Dogs."

Some well-known types of service dogs include Guide Dogs for the Blind, Hearing Ear Dogs, Seizure Alert Dogs, and Mobility Dogs. (The dog in the story, went through a program to become a Mobility Dog.)

By law, service and assistance dogs are neither required to wear any special equipment or tags, although many of them do. Nor must they be "certified." Places of public accommodation cannot require proof of an animal's training or proof of the person's disability in order to allow entrance or access to the facility.

People with disabilities, and society as a whole, benefit from these dogs. Their ability to provide task-specific benefits certainly aids their owners. However, the other psychological, physical, emotional, and social benefits are often just as, if not more, important. Their unflagging devotion to their owners, and the moral support they can provide are an inspiration to all of us.

Highlight: Mobility Dogs



Service dogs that assist people who have problems with mobility include those with paralysis, multiple sclerosis, muscular dystrophy, cerebral palsy, arthritis, or other conditions that may cause poor balance. These dogs are taught to turn on light switches, open doors, carry items in backpacks, bark to alert for help, pick up things that are dropped or out of reach, pull wheelchairs, and help a person rise from a sitting position. Some are even taught to open and close drawers, place and remove clothes from a washer or dryer, and assist with grocery shopping.

The Labrador Retriever above, Kelly, went through training at the Wisconsin Correctional Liberty Dog Program. Kelly was trained by a prison volunteer from when he was 8 weeks until he was just about a year old.

Kelly was "adopted" at that time by a special needs school, Syble Hopp School in De Pere, Wisconsin. He is now 3-1/2 years of age. Kelly lives with teacher Tom Cuene and has the run of the school. Kelly is not assigned to one particular person, as most mobility dogs are; he helps all students and among his duties are motivation, opening doors, picking up dropped items such as keys and placing them back on the students' trays, and redirecting the attention of autistic children in his school. About 6 months before Kelly graduated from the Liberty Dog Program,

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Syble Hopp School put in a request and Kelly was chosen to work with their group of children specifically because of his gentle temperament.

Kelly graduated in 2001 in a class of fourteen from the Liberty Dog Program at, Sanger B Powers Correctional facility in Oneida, Wisconsin. Most of the graduates at this time were placed with individual people who are wheelchair-bound. Programs like these offer an opportunity for select prison inmates, to give of themselves to others and the community. These trainers benefit by learning valuable skills, building self-esteem, making them feel as though they have a link to the outside world, and teaching them more about interpersonal relationships. The dogs they train give love unconditionally and do not have the capacity to be judgmental. Many of the trainers continue to train dogs after they are released. The community benefits because the costs of this training is estimated to be about $10,000 per animal. Animals in this program are generally recruited from animal rescue organizations.

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