How Guide Dogs Are Trained

Drs. Foster & Smith Educational Staff

Service dogs are trained to help their owner with their particular disability, but they also do much more. They provide the person with more independence and can help initiate social interaction between the disabled person and others. Guide dogs help blind and visually impaired people increase their mobility and independence. They help lead people around obstacles, help them cross the street, help them to go through doors, and to use elevators and escalators. Their training starts when they are young puppies.

One excellent organization is the Guide Dog Foundation, founded in 1946. This nationwide organization trains and places Golden Retrievers and Labs when the puppies are about seven weeks of age. The puppy is placed with a family and lives with them for about a year. The family fosters the puppy, which includes housetraining, socializing to different environments, teaching the puppy good house manners, and giving him or her all the attention and affection a healthy puppy needs. The puppy is then given back to the Guide Dog Foundation for further training and placement.

According to the Guide Dog Foundation, these "dogs undergo a comprehensive training program, and only the best of the best complete the training and become working guides."

The dogs who are placed go through a training program with their new owner. It costs about $25,000 to train a guide dog, but training and dogs are provided free of charge. This organization is supported by contributions from individuals, foundations and corporations.

For further information on the Guide Dog Foundation, click onto www.guidedog.org.

Ulrike Cline, an eight-year employee of Drs. Foster & Smith, has trained service dogs for over seven years, working with the Leader Dog School for the Blind in Rochester Hills, Michigan. She is currently training her sixth dog, Shadow.

While in training, Shadow is never off leash unless in a fenced area. He spends the majority of his time with Ulrike, even accompanying her on trips to the grocery store and any other place a service dog would need to go with his owner.

What to do if you see a service dog

If you see a service dog in training, there are some rules to remember. Always ask the trainer's permission before petting the dog, which needs to first sit before receiving attention. And please don't offer food – they do receive occasional appropriate treats, but never table food. If you are interested in training service dogs, check the yellow pages for local organizations or contacts, but be prepared to put your name on a waiting list.

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