



Do-Good Dogs Do Almost Anything

Service Animals Train to Help People in Need

by Sandra Murphy

Service dogs help an aging population live full lives in spite of limitations, no matter the size, age or breed of dog. Plus, hundreds of thousands of canines make living with disabilities both possible and more pleasant.

The Rules

“Service dogs don’t eat on duty, and should be on the floor, not put in a handbag or shopping cart,” advises Maggie Sims, project manager for the Rocky Mountain Americans with Disabilities Act Center, in Colorado Springs. “If the dog disrupts business, the person can be asked to remove the animal and then return. Emotional-support dogs are not provided for by the disabilities act, because the dog does not perform a specific task.

“We get calls from people concerned about fake service dogs when owners try to bring them into places where pets generally aren’t allowed. Usually, they’re the ones that behave badly,” Sims says. Service animals are not required to wear a special vest or have documentation.

Educating the Public

A motorcycle accident left Matthew Smith dependent on using a wheelchair or crutches. An administrator at Comcast Cable, in Baltimore, Maryland, Smith relies on his pit bull, Jericho, to fetch dropped items, open doors and help him maintain balance. “Gravity is my specialty,” he jokes. “If I fall, he braces me so I can get up. Moving about stresses my shoulders, so Jericho pulls the wheelchair on days when I’m in pain.”

Although working service dogs should not be petted or approached, Smith tells Jericho, “Go say ‘Hi,’” if someone asks to approach him. “Pit bulls have an undeserved bad reputation, so I’ll take a minute to let people meet him to change that perception. When Jericho is the subject of conversation, it also takes the spotlight off of me,” he says.

Jericho was trained by Apryl Lea, a certified assistance dog trainer for the Animal Farm Foundation’s Assistance Dog Program, in Kingston, New York. She explains, “The pit bulls I train are from shelters, and must be good with people and

other animals and be comfortable in social settings that match the person’s lifestyle.”

Overcoming Obstacles

“When a counter is too high, a service dog can pass money to the cashier. Dogs will pull a rope to open a heavy door. In the event of seizures or fainting, our dogs react based on location; at home, they find another family member, but in public, will stay with their person,” Lea says.

The muscles of a patient with Parkinson’s disease may freeze while walking. Dogs brace against a resulting fall or touch the person to help unfreeze the muscles. Tethered to an autistic child, the dog provides distraction from repetitive behaviors like flapping hands or crying, while keeping the child in a safe area. Some dogs are trained to track the child, as well, in case of escape. Likewise, dogs can give Alzheimer’s disease patients a bit of freedom without getting lost.

Sounding Alerts

Hearing dogs alert their hearing-impaired person to the sound of a doorbell or ringing phone. In the car, they’ll nudge the driver with a paw if they hear a siren.

Riley the Chihuahua’s job is caring for Jennifer Wise, an aromatherapist and owner of Enchanted Essence, in Toledo, Ohio. Wise has a neurological disease that affects her legs and makes her prone to falls. “Riley’s trained to bark for help if I am unable to get up,” she explains. “If barking fails, he’ll grab someone’s pant leg or shoelaces and pull in my direction. He’s small, but determined.”

Michelle Renard, a stay-at-home mom in Woodstock, Georgia, relies on Mossy, a goldendoodle trained by Canine Assistants, in nearby Alpharetta, to detect high- and low-blood sugar levels. “She’s never wrong,” says Renard.

Comfort and Joy

Linda Blick, president and co-founder of Tails of Hope Foundation, in Orange County, New York, observes, “A veteran with post-traumatic stress disorder may not show outward symptoms, but have anxiety. Dogs are trained to turn on the lights, lick their person’s face or apply reassuring pressure by lying across their person’s chest to

bring them out of night tremors.

“One of our veterans was so uncomfortable in public, it was difficult for him to even speak to the veterinarian about his dog’s torn knee ligament,” Blick explains. “For the sake of the dog, he managed to discuss care, a big step for him.”

As Sims states, “True service dogs literally give people with disabilities their lives back.”

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Service Dog Resources

TO CONTACT AMERICANS WITH DISABILITIES ACT CENTERS:

Ten centers serve the U.S. and calls are directed to the one closest to the caller. Call 800-949-4232 or visit adata.org.

TO SUPPORT THE TAILS OF HOPE FOUNDATION:

This nonprofit provides critical and life-saving help to veterans, first responders and search-and-rescue teams.

Operating on donations, it covers the cost of purchasing a trained dog, as well as lifetime veterinary care when necessary. TailsOfHope.org

LEARN ABOUT DOGS TRAINED FOR SPECIAL CONDITIONS:

Parkinson’s disease

Davis Phinney Foundation at Tinyurl.com/HelpingPawForParkinsons

Disabled children: 4PawsForAbility.org

Alzheimer’s disease/dementia

Rover.com/canine-caregivers-dementia-alzheimers

Sight-impaired: GuideDogs.org

SAMPLE SERVICE-DOG VIDEOS:

A pit bull-lab mix that saves a veteran having a seizure:

Tinyurl.com/DogSavesVeteran

A pug that helps a veteran with post-traumatic stress

Tinyurl.com/DogCalmsPTSD