

## **Assistance Dogs – Your Questions Answered**

Hi! My name is Abigail and I'm an assistance dog trainer. I work with disabled people to support them in training their own dogs to become assistance dogs. I've asked my group for their burning questions and answered them!

### **What is an assistance dog?**

An assistance dog is a dog that has been specifically trained to behave appropriately and mitigate their handler's disability.

### **How can assistance dogs actually help?**

Depending on the person's disability, there are different things that the dog can do.

- Guide dogs help people navigate the world by avoiding obstacles.
- Hearing dogs alert to sounds the handler may not hear, such as their name being called.
- Mobility dogs can help steady people who are unsteady on their feet.
- Medical alert dogs give prior warning of oncoming medical changes such as seizures, often through scent work.
- Medical response dogs help relieve symptoms of medical episodes, such as pressing a canine phone button for help.
- Psychiatric dogs help to manage mental health conditions, such as helping their handler leave a stressful situation.
- Autism dogs can help both children and adults to regulate and manage their environment such as through grounding.
- Allergen detection dogs alert to the presence of an allergen.
- PTSD dogs help prevent a handler being triggered and support them through events such as flashbacks.
- Retrieval dogs pick up items for the handler and can also pass the item to other people.
- And more!!!

### **How are assistance dogs trained?**

There are three main ways that assistance dogs can be trained:

- Pretrained by a charity/organisation
- Trainer/organisation assisted owner training
- Independent owner training

It usually takes around 2 years to fully train an assistance dog, but dogs are not robots so it can take longer.

Training is split into two areas:

- Behaving in public locations (e.g. shops).
- Disability mitigation tasks.

Foundation training (just as you'd do with a pet dog) usually lasts between 8 weeks and 12 months. Then assistance dog specific training starts and they'll usually complete their training between 18 months and 2 years of age.

### **What other training is involved?**

It's not just the dog that needs training, the handler also needs to know what to do in different situations and how to reinforce the dogs training throughout their lifetime.

Trust is a vital skill for the dog-human partnership as often the handler is trusting their assistance dog with their life and wellbeing. Sometimes hard when off duty the dog walks into doors!

### **Are assistance dogs a special type of dog?**

No, they're normal dogs. While organisations often have their own breeding programs of select breeds, owner trained assistance dogs come in a wide range of breeds. When choosing a prospect, it's important to ensure that the breeder has good early raising practices to ensure they are set up for success.

### **How can I identify an assistance dog?**

Many assistance dogs will wear a vest or harness to signal that they are an assistance dog, but this isn't a legal requirement. Where a dog has been trained with an organisation, they may wear their uniform.

### **Where can assistance dogs go?**

A disabled person has the right to take an auxiliary aid (assistance dog) with them as a reasonable adjustment. Common places include shops, restaurants, cinemas, and doctors. It may not be reasonable in places like sterile wards or open animal pens for safety reasons.

### **How long is an assistance dogs working life?**

Depending on the breed, dogs often work until they are 8-12 years old. Larger dogs may retire earlier while smaller dogs may retire later. Retirement is usually a gradual process so they can become accustomed to the change of circumstances and is a very individual decision. When they retire, some dogs stay with the owner, sometimes they'll go to a family member or friend, and sometimes they'll be rehomed/returned to the training organisation.

### **Why might an assistance dog retire early?**

Illness and injury are common reasons for early retirement, the dog's welfare must always come first. Dog attacks causing fear is also another common reason.

Early retirement is devastating for handlers as they can very suddenly lose their independence.

### **Do assistance dogs like playing?**

YES! Assistance dogs are just like normal dogs when off duty, they love to play, eat, sleep and be cheeky too.

**What does a typical day look like for an assistance dog?**

It entirely depends on what the handler has in the diary! Often they'll start the day with breakfast and a morning walk, then spend the day at work with the handler with regular breaks to relax and toilet, then the evening is relaxed with more food, playing, walks and then bedtime.