

# Assistance & Service Dogs

*Drs. Foster & Smith Educational Staff*

Dogs have, for years, played an extremely important role in helping people with disabilities lead more independent and fuller lives. Guide dogs for the blind are perhaps the most familiar assistance dogs. In addition, there are service dogs who assist physically handicapped people, and hearing ear dogs for the deaf. There are also seizure alert dogs and cats, dogs who have been trained to assist people with Parkinson's disease, and emotional support dogs and cats. There are also animals who alert their owners to episodes of hypoglycemia (low blood sugar), which allows the owner to correct the level before serious symptoms develop.

Assistance dogs help the individual with their 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.

By law, service and assistance dogs are not required to wear any special equipment or tags, although many of them do. Neither must they be 'certified,' and 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.

## Guide dogs

Dogs for the blind are probably the most commonly recognized assistance dogs. They help lead people around obstacles, cross the street, go thru doors, and use elevators and escalators. [Training Assistance Dogs](#) starts when the puppies are 6-8 weeks old.

## Hearing ear dogs

Dogs have been trained to assist people who are deaf or otherwise hearing impaired. These dogs alert their owners to a variety of sounds including the telephone, smoke alarms, baby's crying, door bells and knocks at the door, sirens, timers, and unusual noises, such as mice in a cabinet.

## Service, or mobility dogs



Service dogs assist people who have problems with mobility including 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 wheel chairs, 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.

## Seizure alert dogs and cats

Some people who have periodic seizures have reported that their dogs and cats can sense the onset of a seizure before they can. Now it has been found that dogs and cats can be specially trained to recognize some type of change prior to a seizure, and signal the owner that a seizure is imminent. This gives the owner sufficient time to prepare, such as moving away from a hot stove. These cats and dogs are called 'seizure-alert' or 'seizure-response' animals, and can be trained to signal their owners from 15 to 45 minutes prior to a seizure.

## Parkinson's helper dogs

In addition to the tremors and stiffness that Parkinson's patients experience, they also face a problem called 'freezing.' Their feet freeze in place, while the rest of their body keeps moving, causing the person to fall. As a result, some people with Parkinson's may tend to become sedentary, reluctant to move, and reclusive.

Parkinson's helper dogs have been trained to identify when a person with Parkinson's is 'freezing.' If the dog touches the person's foot, it breaks the freeze and the person can continue walking. Medical experts really do not know why this works. In addition to breaking the 'freeze,' the dogs are taught to prevent their partners from falling by counterbalancing and helping them regain their footing. If the person would fall, the dog can help the person up.



## Emotional support animals

Dogs and cats can assist people with mental or emotional disorders reduce symptom-inducing stress by providing a consistent interactive focus.

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

Additional information about service and assistance animals is available from the Delta Society at [www.deltasociety.org](http://www.deltasociety.org)