



Service Dogs: A Different Kind of Lifestyle

I remember what I felt when I first started reading and learning about service dogs. “You mean I can take my dog everywhere?” What a wondrous and perfect thing! Well, I was half-right. Life with a service dog is wondrous, full of doors not otherwise opened, and joys not otherwise experienced. It is however, not perfect. Beginning a partnership with a service dog is a rite of passage like no other. There are special challenges that occur during the first few weeks and months of the partnership that we, as service dog handlers, must all endure. The good news is that life with a service dog is more than worth it.



One issue that all service dog handlers must deal with, regardless of disability, is that of access. Unless you live in an area with many service dog handlers, most business owners and employees will not be knowledgeable about service dog access laws. Consequently, you will be responsible for educating most of the people you come into contact with.

Some businesses may not want to provide you access with your service dog. These experiences can be stressful and frustrating, especially to the new service dog handler. They are not however, insurmountable. With few exceptions (i.e., private clubs, religious organizations, private homes, sterile environments, heavy construction sites, laboratory environments, etc.), the law grants the service dog handler the right to be accompanied by their service dog in all places of public accommodation. If you have confidence in yourself and your knowledge of the law, other people will recognize it.

Get in the habit of carrying copies of service dog information with you. Or use the ID tag that we provide for you with the ADA information printed on one side. We also give you the latest information on any changes in the laws in your service dog folder. Plus many organizations, including the Department of Justice, have published “Frequently Asked Questions” about service dogs. You may also obtain relevant literature from your state attorney general’s office. If a business does not understand their rights and responsibilities, the provision of service dog literature can be very helpful. It also saves you from having a heated debate on civil rights in an already stressful situation. Remember to remain polite, and remind yourself that this may be the individual’s first experience with a service dog. Most people, after being educated, are more than happy to provide goods and services. Some may even begin to keep doggie treats behind the counter for your next visit.





Remember that you are trailblazing, and that, as time passes, and you gain more experience, access challenges will become less frequent and easier to deal with. Just as you will have to educate local business people, so too will you have to educate your friends and family. These are individuals who have seen you without a service dog and now, will see you with one. This means that they are the ones most likely to see the positive change in your life that a service dog will bring.

It is also possible family and friends will be resistant to the idea of a service dog. Some may be uncomfortable being seen in public with a service dog. Others may resent the dog's presence at special parties and get-togethers. Some may simply not understand why you are choosing to partner with a service dog, at all.

If possible, introduce your friends and family to the idea of a service dog before you actually get one. Provide them with as much information as they are willing to digest. You should discuss potential scenarios that are likely to come up, including family get-togethers and mundane trips to the store. Try to set boundaries that are appropriate both to your needs and those of others. Those who truly care for you will learn to accept your decision, but it may take them some time, so be patient.



Life with a service dog will most certainly change your daily routine. Besides the obvious additions of doggie potty breaks and play times, you will notice that those quick little errands are no longer so quick. You will encounter many people who want to ask you questions, or comment on your service dog. You will need to set appropriate boundaries and find your own comfort level for dealing with such people. While it may be uncomfortable at first, to be the center of attention, you should bear in mind that people are focused on the dog, not on you. This shift in focus is important. For example, your dog can provide you with a safe topic of conversation with strangers who might otherwise be intimidating. You will also have a convenient 'out' for uncomfortable situations; you can quickly make

your exit, by using the excuse that your dog has to potty.

Life with a service dog can be joyous and trying. As you gain more experience with this new lifestyle, many of the difficulties and inconveniences of these first few months will seem insignificant next to the quality of life improvement that your service dog provides. So good luck and remember to breathe, hug your dog, and enjoy the day. This is a new beginning; embrace it.