

DO YOU REALLY WANT A SERVICE DOG? CONSIDERATIONS BEFORE APPLYING FOR *DOG TAGS*

(excerpted from East Coast Assistance Dogs : www.ecad1.org)

Working with an assistance dog very well could be one of the most rewarding and liberating experiences of your life. However, it can also be difficult and frustrating. The difference regarding benefit vs. burden lies within you. The purpose of this pre-application is to assist you in determining whether or not you really want an assistance dog as an intervention for your particular disability or illness.

It takes work....

You've probably heard stories of incredible feats performed by service dogs for their human partner. However the truth is that these stories were possible due to an enormous amount of hard work and dedication from the trainers AND the recipient BEFORE, DURING, AND AFTER the placement was made. Please read the pre-application information thoroughly and carefully. We will pose several questions and intend this to be thought provoking. For us to do our job well we need you to seriously consider the questions that follow.

It takes time....

It takes hundreds of hours to train the skills that these dog use as working dogs. As the recipient of an assistance dog it will become your responsibility to continue the training that started here. At this point you must ask yourself, "am I prepared to practice skills and reinforce behaviors with a dog EVERY DAY for the next 8 to 10 years"? If you have answered no to that that question you really need not read any further . . . an assistance dog is not the appropriate intervention for you.

Would you consider adopting a toddler?

For the first six to twelve months, having a new assistance dog can be much like having toddler. The dog requires input and supervision, and you are responsible for giving it. The first year with a new assistance dog is a critical period. It is best if you can give 100% of your time and attention to the new assistance dog. If you have just started college, recently moved or started a new job it may be best to wait.

Can you spend two weeks at the training center?

The period of time that you spend at a training center is referred to as "the placement period" or "team training". The two-week period at the training center is intense, stressful and exhausting. There are lectures, written and practical tests. Training time each day may last up to eight hours.

Living with family and friends

Who lives with you? Spouse, parents, children and roommates must be a consideration. How do they feel about sharing a residence with a dog? How do they feel about you gaining increased independence? How will this affect them and their role in your life? Will it mean less responsibility for them or more? Individuals who are not supportive of a dog will most likely prove to be problematic. Be sure to talk this over with all those who will be affected directly and indirectly.

Consider what type of housing and community you live in. Even if you have a fenced yard, you will have to find ways to provide enough exercise for a 60 to 75 pound dog.

What about employers, schools and places of public accommodation? Are you prepared to be a self-advocate for your public access rights? Are you prepared for the frustration of being denied access because of your assistance dog? You do have the legal right to be accompanied by an assistance dog, however some point in time it most likely will be challenged. Do you care to deal with that?

Hidden Disability? Not incognito any longer!

Anonymity is serious consideration for some clients whose disabilities cannot be easily seen. Once you have an assistance dog with you that stealth is gone. The general public has been educated and they know that if you have an assistance dog you must also have a disability. You will be stopped, questioned and watched.

Many Americans love dogs and many have dogs of their own. Be forewarned your assistance dog will draw the attention of every dog owner in the mall, on the street and in the workplace. They will stop to visit, to ask questions and to share stories of their dogs. If you are introverted this may prove to be quite annoying and in some cases even stressful. Think this through... your assistance dog will accompany you everywhere you go for the next 8 years or more.

Do you really love dogs? ... REALLY??

Dog hair, dog slobber and drool, feces and urine are all a part of dog ownership. This means daily grooming, picking up behind them and tolerating hair and saliva on you. Chances are that if you are meticulous in cleaning and being clean an assistance dog will drive you crazy. Through care, dogs can be kept relatively clean and tidy. But they are dogs and with that must come tolerance for a certain amount of filth.

Through the course of the working life of an assistance dog he will likely have a toileting accident indoors. He will become ill and vomit at some point in time as well. He may get a hold of your new dress shoes or a prized possession and use them as a chew toy. You will go through life with dog hair as a permanent accessory to your wardrobe. An assistance dog is an educated animal that has been conditioned to live in a human society. However he remains a dog... an animal.

High Hopes and Great Expectations

Please take a moment to contemplate and to answer this question. What task(s) or skill(s) will an assistance dog perform that will provide positive intervention for your disability? How will an assistance dog make your life better than it is now?

Often people call and inquire into services without having given this aspect much thought. A service dog does not change your physical abilities. We do not mean to offend. However we really want for you to consider what is real and what is factual. Much of what you may have seen in newspapers, magazines, and on television has been "fluffed" and glorified.

Benefit or burden?

It all boils down to this: do the projected benefits of an assistance dog outweigh the expected burdens? In part the answer is dependent on what you personally consider a benefit and what you define as a burden. An assistance dog picks up an out of reach item... benefit. An assistance dog requires \$50 or more in monthly expenses... burden. How do you view someone in the mall stopping you to ask you about your dog? Benefit or burden?