

# Making the Transition from Pet Dog Training to Service Dog Training

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A client hopes you will help them train their own pet dog as a service dog. You have trained pet dogs for many years; maybe you have even trained dogs for competition obedience, agility or other working jobs such as search and rescue. Maybe you have a disability and you have trained a service dog for yourself, or perhaps you were a puppy raiser and helped raise puppies for a service dog program. Even if you have all this experience, helping someone train a service dog from start to finish is a different kind of challenge that requires careful planning.

## Myths and Facts about Service Dogs and Service Dog Training

**Myth:** The hardest part of training a service dog is training the dog to perform complex tasks such as opening a door, or turning lights on and off.

**Fact:** Training a service dog to perform complex tasks is typically the *easiest* part of service dog training. The hardest part is selecting a dog with the right temperament, and training this dog to remain calm and behave appropriately for many hours at a time while working in places pets are not allowed.

**Myth:** Service dogs have to be certified through a government organization.

**Fact:** There is no federal government organization that certifies service dogs. State laws and local laws vary, with some states providing a venue for certification.

**Myth:** Anyone can use a service dog because of the ADA (Americans with Disabilities Act).

**Fact:** Under the ADA only people with disabilities (as the law defines this term) may use a service dog in places of public accommodation. “The ADA defines a service animal as any guide dog, signal dog, or other animal individually trained to provide assistance to an individual with a disability” (Department of Justice, Commonly Asked Questions about Service Animals in Places of Business, [www.usdoj.gov/crt/ada/animal.htm](http://www.usdoj.gov/crt/ada/animal.htm)).

Because state laws vary, they may use different legal definitions and terminology.

**Myth:** The ADA’s definition of disability is very vague and broad, so people with any condition, even a mild one, may use a service dog.

**Fact:** The ADA's definition of disability is very specific and has undergone changes within the past decade that have resulted in a narrower definition. Determining whether someone fits the legal definition of disability under the ADA is complex. Refer to this EEOC document to learn about the legal definition of disability:  
[www.eeoc.gov/policy/docs/902cm.html](http://www.eeoc.gov/policy/docs/902cm.html)

**Myth:** Only people who have obvious disabilities, such as people who use wheelchairs, can benefit from service dogs.

**Fact:** Not all disabilities are visually obvious. Service dogs have been trained to assist many people with "invisible" disabilities such as people with autoimmune conditions, seizure disorders or psychiatric illness.

**Myth:** It is ok to train a service dog to show aggression to protect its handler.

**Fact:** Business owners have the legal right to ask that service dogs that behave aggressively be removed. Refer to the Department of Justice, Commonly Asked Questions about Service Animals in Places of Business, [www.usdoj.gov/crt/ada/animal.htm](http://www.usdoj.gov/crt/ada/animal.htm)

**Myth:** If a dog is in training for service work it can go anywhere.

**Fact:** Federal law has no provisions for dogs in training for service work to have access to public accommodations. State and local laws vary and some states permit service dogs in training access to places of public accommodation.

**Myth:** A service dog and a therapy dog are the same thing.

**Fact:** A *service dog* works for a person with a disability and is trained to mitigate its handler's disability. A *therapy dog* on the other hand, typically is trained by its owner to help other people (who may or may not have disabilities). Nursing homes, schools, or hospitals are typical settings where therapy dogs may work. The Delta Society website has the following explanation: "Federal laws have no provisions for people to be accompanied by therapy animals in places of public accommodation that have "no pets" policies. Therapy animals usually **are not service animals**." Go online here to learn more: [www.deltasociety.org/TextOnly/ServiceInformationBasic.htm#difference](http://www.deltasociety.org/TextOnly/ServiceInformationBasic.htm#difference)

**Myth:** If you work hard and commit a lot of training time, any dog can be trained to work as a service dog.

**Fact:** Having to remain calm and under control for long periods of time in places pets are not allowed can be very stressful even for a dog with a wonderful temperament. Many service dog programs that breed dogs specifically for service work and have years of experience training service dogs have very high wash out rates.

# Preparing to Help Clients Train their Own Dog for Service Work

You have decided to take the leap from pet dog training to helping someone train a service dog to work in places of public accommodation and to perform tasks that mitigate their disability. It may not seem that different initially as in both cases you are teaching people how to train their dogs. However, there is a significant distinction in focus between pet dog training and service dog training. **The primary focus in pet dog training is on the dog's behavior, while the primary focus in service dog training is on the human's needs.**

Helping someone train a service dog is much more time intensive, has a high likelihood that in spite of everyone's best efforts the dog may not be able to work in places of public accommodation, and the process can be very stressful for the client. People with disabilities who owner-train a service dog are often extremely emotionally involved in the training process, and this requires a trainer who is sensitive to this fact. The trainer needs to be informed not only about the animal's needs, but about relevant service animal laws, and be prepared to support the client to address access challenges, questions and concerns from the general public, while at the same time ensuring the dog's needs are met. Additionally, as the client has a disability, accommodations in training techniques, flexibility for health fluctuations, and in some cases changes in instructional techniques may be needed.

For these reasons, whether working with just one or two owner-trainers or many, trainers who transition to training service dogs from start to finish need to plan carefully and prepare themselves for this challenge.

**IMPORTANT:** You do not need to create a distinct set of classes, applications, and forms for clients with disabilities with pets or service dogs simply because they are enrolling in your pet dog training classes. In fact, creating special requirements for clients with disabilities to attend your regular pet dog training classes is discriminatory and is against the law. However, if a client approaches you because they would like you to help them train their dog for service work from start to finish, including public access training, and possibly even requesting documentation of training or certification, you need plan and prepare carefully for this unique challenge.

## Research and Learn

1. Make sure you learn all relevant Federal, State and local laws. Some states impose legal penalties for people who fraudulently use service dogs, or have specific requirements for trainers of service dogs.
2. Gain experience working with people with disabilities and learn about disability culture. Volunteer at an independent living center, research online, and take courses on rehabilitation, psychology, social work, nursing and health care.
3. Learn and read everything you can about service dogs. Read all the material the Delta Society has on service dogs. Join email lists on service dog training;

- become familiar with all the needs of different kinds of service dogs. Attend seminars, invest in books on service dog training, and subscribe to *A Pawsitive Canine Experience* newsletter on assistance and service dogs (subscription information at [www.pawsup.net](http://www.pawsup.net)). Join organizations focused on service dogs such as the International Association of Assistance Dog Partners.
4. Take advantage of hands-on opportunities to learn. Apprentice with an assistance dog trainer. Volunteer to raise a puppy for a reputable assistance dog program near you that uses reward-based training methods.<sup>1</sup>
  5. Maintain current liability insurance and be aware of what is and what is not covered by your policy.

## Carefully Plan Your Program

1. Decide what kinds of service dogs you will train. Training guide dogs, hearing dogs, seizure-alert dogs, psychiatric service dogs, and mobility assistance dogs require different skills and areas of expertise. You need to be prepared to address the unique needs of the handler's disability and modify training techniques and instructional techniques accordingly. It is wise to choose one or two types of service dogs to begin with.
2. What kind of information and documentation will you ask from your clients? Many service dog trainers ask for some medical documentation of disability and need of the service dog in their application for clients, for instance, a letter from a doctor or a prescription.
3. Develop a plan for temperament testing the service dog candidate. Have specific criteria, and put them in writing. Also consider what health screening you will require for dog. The Delta Society has a document entitled "Minimum Standards for Service Dogs" that can be helpful.
4. Be prepared to set limits, remember that a working service dog will get more publicity than a pet dog because of exposure in public places. This publicity can reflect well or badly on you as the trainer depending on the team. Be ready to say "no" if you need to.
5. What is involved in your program? Private lessons? Group lessons? Both? How will you supervise public access training experiences?
6. Develop a written contract that spells out exactly what services you will provide and the costs so there is no confusion about expectations. You may have a qualified attorney help you draw up a liability waiver as well.
7. Plan how you will prepare the client for the high possibility that their dog may turn out to be unsuitable for working in places of public accommodation even if the dog passes initial temperament evaluations.

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<sup>1</sup> As of the writing of this article, there were few reward-based service dog training programs so investigate programs and trainers carefully.

8. Develop detailed plans for evaluating the service dog candidate during various phases of training. For instance, when will the dog be ready to begin training to work in places pets are not allowed? What behaviors and skills will you work towards?
9. Plan for how the client will obtain follow-up. Service dogs are never “finished” training and situations may arise down the road.
10. Decide what tasks or behaviors you will and will not train a dog to do and how you will teach the client to minimize the dog’s stress and meet the dog’s needs.
11. Be up front with the client about how long training may take, what is involved, and your rates. It often takes up to two years to train a dog from start to finish (beginning with a pup).
12. Plan for retirement of service dogs. How will you support clients’ in making the decision of retiring their service dogs? You should have a plan and be discussing retiring a dog early in the dog’s career so the client is prepared for this eventuality.
13. Be prepared to address unexpected situations. For instance, what if the client’s disability changes suddenly and you feel you are no longer able to meet the client’s needs? What if the client wants to train the dog a behavior you feel would be unsafe for the dog or the client?
14. Be ready to refer the client to his/her healthcare provider. Remember you are not qualified to make healthcare decisions and the line may seem blurry at times. Your client should discuss specific task training with his or her healthcare provider. For example, a client with Multiple Sclerosis should consult with a physical therapist or a neurologist before training the dog to help them rise from a fall to ensure they proceed safely. A client with Obsessive Compulsive Disorder training a psychiatric service dog should consult with a mental health professional before training the dog to interrupt their compulsive behaviors. Know your limitations!

After you have educated yourself and carefully planned your program to help people with disabilities train their own dog as a service animal, congratulations! You are about to begin one of the most challenging and potentially most rewarding journeys a dog trainer can take!

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