

January 2021

Seeing Eye Dogs

Service dogs can be trained to perform a multitude of tasks – from alerting owners to a ringing doorbell to forewarning epileptics of an oncoming seizure. As January is the birth month of the oldest seeing eye dog school in the world, we'll focus on some of the different tasks that seeing eye dogs can perform!

History of Guide Dogs

The first school for seeing eye dogs in the US (and the oldest current guide dog school in the world) was founded in Nashville, Tennessee on January 29, 1929. "The Seeing Eye" was created to train dogs to help those who are visually impaired. It was founded by Morris Frank, who was frustrated by how little independence he had as a blind man. In 1927, he read an article about dogs being trained to help blind WWI veterans in Switzerland. He contacted Dorothy Eustis, the author of the article, and went to Switzerland to learn her techniques. He returned to the US in 1928 with his own service dog, Buddy, and created "The Seeing Eye" to help train future guide dogs. Eventually, the ideas from his school influenced other guide dog programs around the world!

A Guide Dog's Journey

The dogs in these programs start their training as puppies, spending roughly the first year and a half of their lives learning basic skills (standard training lessons that eventually lead to these dogs getting their service dog jackets). After they complete the first leg of their training, these service dogs are then paired with individual trainers, who teach them a specific skill set for a certain person in need of a guide dog. This second leg of their training usually takes about 3-6 months, although these dogs return to their training facility off and on the rest of their lives to keep their skills in top shape. Seeing eye dogs are chosen and paired up with their handlers depending on the handler's preferences, their activity levels, etc.

A guide dog's purpose is to help keep their handler out of harm's way, whether it is a busy crosswalk, if there are obstacles overhead, or whatever the situation may be! The dogs take cues from their handler on what direction they are heading (across the street, into a particular house, etc.) For the most part, it is up to the handler to determine if it is safe to proceed - for example, when crossing a street, the handler listens for cars passing by to determine whether it is safe to cross, as the guide dog is not able to read traffic signals! But it is the dog's responsibility to determine if it is actually safe to move forward, and if there is traffic in the way of the crosswalk, the

dog has to be able to know when to disobey their handler's commands to keep themselves and their handler safe!

These dogs are extremely smart, and work hard every day to keep their handlers safe. While you may want to reward these dogs by petting them or giving them treats, it is important to remember that if you see a guide dog with a vest or harness on in public, they should not be bothered. These dogs have very important jobs keeping their handler out of harm's way, and any distractions such as petting or calling to the dogs can distract them, potentially putting them and their handler's lives in danger!



Best regards,
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