



Dogs can be an integral part of our lives, they are faithful companions, help alleviate stress and improve our overall quality of life. A Psychiatric Service Dog (PSD) can do all that and more with training and performance of specific tasks directly related to a person's disability. As service dogs become more commonplace, so too have problems because of lack of understanding about PSD training and the impact of a service dog in your life. A service dog is a working animal and not considered a pet. ***A trained Psychiatric Service Dog is a tool and is not intended to substitute or replace current therapeutic or medication treatment plans.***

Before training and partnering with Maine Paws for Veterans, there are several important points to consider. While many individuals with post-traumatic stress benefit greatly from partnering with a service dog, it's not the solution for everyone. If you are considering a PSD partnership, please review the following questions.

The questions are designed to help you think and are not meant to be answered with a simple "yes" or "no." Every person's needs, desires, abilities, and situations are unique.

1) Am I financially able to take on the costs of caring for a dog?

The PSD Training Program with Maine Paws for Veterans, whether you opt to adopt a dog or use your own dog, is offered at no cost. You will be responsible for costs outside of the program. You accept full financial responsibility for your canine for the rest of their life. Annual dog supplies such as food and veterinary services that can average \$1,000-\$2,000 a year.

2) Are you prepared to care for a service dog every day?

Carefully consider how a service dog will fit into your lifestyle and family. Service dogs, like all canines have unique personalities, needs, requirements and constant care. Even if it is difficult, hard, stressful, or inconvenient every day they need outside time (no matter the weather), nutritious food, mental and physical exercise/stimulation, and grooming.

Additionally, you must have plans in place in case of an emergency. What happens if you're sick? You're unexpectedly hospitalized? You need to have back-ups in place to ensure your canine partner always receives the necessary care.

3) Are you prepared to be the center of attention?

Working with and partnering with a service dog places you in the public eye. When partnered with a service dog, you will never be invisible. People will stop and engage you in conversations, ask questions, many of which will be personal, tell you stories about how their dog would be just perfect for this kind of work, or how their uncle has a dog just like yours. Expect that you will have to educate more people than you ever thought and should do so in a friendly manner.

4) Are you willing and able to accept the training and socialization obligations accompanying a service dog?

Training and partnering with a service dog is not a "one and done" deal. You must be willing to provide the practice time, structure, guidelines, and training to ensure your service dog won't backslide in his training, public access, or level of socialization. The more your service dog knows

or must know to work for you and mitigate your symptoms, the more vital it is that you work on maintaining and enhancing their skills. Maine Paws for Veterans offers Refresher Classes and request our program graduates to return yearly to be tested on Advanced, Special Tasks, and Public Access.

5) Are you prepared to deal with anxiety and conflict?

Maine Paws for Veterans offers a unique 26-week PSD Training Program. The untrained veteran/canine teams begin with learning the basics. At the conclusion, the veteran and the dog may graduate as a Service Dog team. It has been noted by many of our veteran graduates that the first months of training can be challenging. Your anxiety will be high and having an untrained dog in your home can be stressful for all involved. Your first instinct might be it is not worth it and leave the program and at times for some individuals that might be the best option. Knowing your potential stress points, can help you through the challenging portions.

While many people understand there will be challenges while training, working, and partnering with a service dog, many individuals are not prepared for the other areas of conflict they will encounter. Not everyone in your personal life will be able to understand why you need or want a service dog and some relationships may suffer. Before you begin the program it is important to identify potential issues that might arise. This list should include your family, friends, employment, school, and landlord, if applicable.

It is important to designate at least two people to be part of your Support Network. The individuals you choose can be vital in providing you an outlet for your feelings, both positive and negative. Your network is your sounding board, in addition to your therapist, and can help ensure successful outcomes. Maine Paws for Veterans does offer your Support Network, which includes anyone in your circle of family and friends, an opportunity to receive information and conversation that is of value to them and ultimately a benefit for your relationships.

Partnering with a Service Dog: Final Considerations

When it comes right down to it, no one can foresee all the right questions. You and you alone know whether or not a service dog is right for you and your lifestyle. Service dogs can bring peace, independence, security, and access. It is ok if this is not the right fit now. Maybe in the future, your circumstances will change or a companion dog is all you need. Whatever your choice, Maine Paws for Veterans is available to answer any questions about our program and help you make the right decision.

Adapted from the Association of Service Dog Providers for Military Veterans and the American Kennel Club.