

Selecting an Assistance Dog

Assistance dogs refers to any animal that performs assistance including service dogs, guide dogs, emotional support dogs, or therapy dogs. Each one of these categories has its own set of requirements and laws. If you are considering adopting a dog to be trained as an assistance dog you will need to assess the dog to determine if it is suitable for the job.

What to Look For

A good assistance dog will not be protective or overly active and will be eager to be with people and confident. An assistance dog must dog must not be aggressive or timid to people or other animals. The following are some of the test components used by several organizations to select dogs suitable for training.

Assessing a Potential Assistance Dog

1. Approach dog while it is inside its enclosure. The dog should willingly approach the front of the enclosure and solicit attention. If the dog does not approach the front or remains in the back this animal should not be considered as first selection.
2. The dog should be relaxed enough to eat. Offer the dog some food either from your hand, from a bowl, or on the ground. If the dog is not interested in the food, try a higher value food. If the dog refuses both types of food, this animal could be too stressed to eat and should not be considered as an assistance dog.
3. Remove the dog from the enclosure on leash. Take the dog to an area to relieve itself. The dog should want to go with you.
4. Physically examine the dog. Touch the dog all over including inside the ears, tail, under the tail, and each of the feet. If the dog stands still for the exam, continue but if the dog acts fearfully, tucks tail, shivers, shows wide eyes (with half-moon shaped whites showing), or pulls away stop the assessment and put the dog back.
5. Examine the mouth by lifting upper lips on both sides at the same time and holding for 3-5 seconds. Repeat 5 times. The dog should allow you to finish the exam. If the dog ducks his head away or any other behavior to avoid the exam such as pawing, mouthing, moving body away, end the assessment and put the dog back.
6. Test startle recovery by dropping something (clip board, bucket, food bowl) behind the dog when it is not looking. The dog can startle but must quickly calm down and ignore the object. Some dogs might approach the object and look it over but then must calm down. If the dog shows fear or is unable to recover and remain calm it is not suitable for assistance work outside of the home.
7. If possible, have someone the dog knows come into the area and visit with the dog briefly and then leave. The dog should remain friendly and interested in interacting with you. If the dog shows signs of distress such as whining or pulling to get to the other person it will not be suitable for assistance work.
8. The dog must not be aggressive to other dogs or people. Growling, raising hackles (hair on the back and neck), lunging towards or barking at other dogs is unacceptable.
9. The dog must not be aggressive over possessions including toys, food, bedding or people. It is not acceptable for the dog to be "protective" of people, property or objects.
10. More testing should be done in public areas if the dog is going to need public access of any kind.

Other Considerations

- Breed – certain breeds are more commonly used for certain types of jobs. For Service Dogs the desire to retrieve is useful so Labradors and Golden Retrievers are commonly used. When selecting a dog the breed characteristics should be considered. Dogs that are bred for protection or guarding are usually not suitable to be assistance dogs.
- Size – Service Dogs and Guide Dogs may need to support a person's partial weight or carry objects so they will need to be a larger breed. Hearing Dogs can be any size since their primary job is to alert their handlers to sounds.
- Health – current health and future health considerations need to be considered. If a breed is more prone to major health complications they should not be considered.
- Grooming – Dogs with long, curly, or double coats will have significant grooming needs. The handler's ability to provide adequate grooming will need to be considered.