A person and dog with leashes

Description automatically generated**Chapter 25: Naturally Occurring Barriers**

A guide dog is patterned to clear around obstacles by moving laterally within its environment while still moving ahead on a generally straight trajectory. Dogs are conditioned to clear both to the right and the left when able and to locate and follow the open pathway. However, there will be times when the pathway is completely obstructed. In these cases, the guide dog team will have to change direction in order to maneuver around the obstacle before they can resume their original line of travel. There are three main types of barriers that guide dog teams will commonly encounter.

* **Left- or right-side barriers, partial obstruction with an open pathway**
* **Full barriers, total obstruction of the line of travel**
* **Overhead barriers, obstructions that are above the dog's visual field but pose a problem for the handler**

The three types of barriers are handled slightly different but with the same goal in mind.

**Left- and right-side barriers** commonly include trash cans, flowerpots, parking meters, signs or any object that blocks part of the sidewalk or path. In these situations, the handler merely has to follow their dog closely, not crowding or pulling, as the dog moves laterally to locate the most available pathway. In most cases, you will be unaware of what obstacles your dog is moving around as you travel down the sidewalk. If you feel your dog moving off to one side, then back toward the center, you should assume they have made a good clearance and offer verbal praise. Keep in mind that you should not move more than 3-4 steps laterally with your dog. Any more than that is likely due to distraction and you should stop and redirect your dog back toward the desired direction of travel. You may also find that your dog will slow or stop to indicate a narrow clearance where the open pathway is just slightly too narrow to walk through without brushing the side. When this happens, use your right hand to check the space in front of you, praise and reward your dog for indicating, then cue Forward and be ready to squeeze through the narrow space.

**Full barriers** present a bit more of a challenge and can be very confusing to a team that is traveling along a familiar route. Common full barriers may be a parked vehicle, temporary construction fences, or downed tree limb. In many cases the dog will begin to slow down or hesitate when approaching a full barrier that is not typically present. Using a systematic approach to navigate this type of barrier will be key to success.

1. When your dog stops, extend your left foot and sweep your right arm downward in front of you to check for an obstacle. Ask your dog to move up (Hup Up, Show Me) until you can physically identify the obstacle. Reinforce your dog with praise and food reward for indicating the obstacle.
2. Move back into following position, give the Forward command, and allow your dog to turn left or right to find a way around the obstacle. If the way around involves stepping off the sidewalk into the street, your dog should stop at the curb edge. Praise and reward here as well.

\*\***Use extreme caution and listen for traffic if you need to enter the street**\*\*

1. Give the Forward command again to step off the curb, then immediately follow up with directional cues similar to a suggested turn. This will encourage your dog to look for the earliest opportunity to come back onto the sidewalk or pick up the original line of travel. Praise and reward your dog again at the up curb or when they bring you back onto the original path.

If this type of barrier is a regular occurrence on your route, you may be able to maneuver around it more smoothly over time. However, when encountering an unexpected barrier, it is best if the handler can physically locate it. For full barriers on city sidewalks, it is generally safest to turn toward the street once you have identified the barrier. This will avoid wandering into a small space or getting lost down an alley. It will be especially important to keep track of orientation when navigating a full barrier. Your dog may need to make a dramatic move to get around the barrier but keeping yourself oriented to the desired direction of travel will help him get back on track as soon as possible.

**Overhead barriers** are the most difficult type of barrier for dogs to recognize on a consistent basis. Dogs do have a large peripheral field of vision (approximately 240 degrees), however guide dogs do not naturally look up as they are working and can easily miss objects that are well above their heads. The problem here is that humans are generally much taller than their canine partners and obstacles such as low hanging branches, café umbrellas, air conditioners and signs can be dangerous. Dogs learn about overhead obstacles best through patterning. When working on known routes, you should take time to landmark these over heads to the dog early on, teaching your dog to either navigate around or stop to indicate so that you can duck under. If you do make contact with an overhead obstacle, you should treat it as a working error. Be sure to take time to rework the clearance, using landmarking and back chaining techniques until the dog can successfully avoid the overhead obstacle.

Dogs that work with particularly tall handlers will begin to generalize and take notice of more overhead barriers since these handlers will make contact more often. On the other hand, there have been instances in the field where a dog had worked around a low hanging tree limb for years. One day the town cuts the limb down, but the dog still consistently worked around the location for its handler. Why? The dog had patterned strongly to the route but did not understand that the tree limb was the problem all along.

*Updated September 2020*