

**Advocacy Lecture**

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Guiding Eyes for the Blind

In this lecture, we will review common scenarios in which you will need to advocate for yourself, your dog, and your rights as a team. Advocacy skills develop with time and practice, and you will learn your preferences and strategies that work best for you. This lecture is intended to be a guide, but there is no one size fits all approach. It is helpful to understand the fundamentals of advocacy before diving into specific instances in which it will be warranted.

It may be helpful to think of the following acronym for advocate:

**A for awareness:** Take note of and understand situations in which advocacy could be beneficial.

**D for diligence or direction:** Know how to move forward and appropriately address a situation.

**V for variability:** Understand that any given scenario could demand a different approach or resolution than another. You may need to think on your feet at times.

**O for overcoming adversity:** Navigate challenges that arise and prepare the best you can, both mentally and physically. Do not be afraid to take a step back from a situation to evaluate how you should proceed.

**C for confidence:** When possible, utilize your strengths. Stay in control of the situation as best you can.

**A for adaptability:** Do you have to change your approach based on what the situation demands? What are the needs, attitudes, and behaviors of those involved?

**T for tenacity:** Remain polite as you educate but be firm and stand your ground. Some issues do not have an instantaneous solution, and it is important to be persistent.

**E for empowerment:** The bond you share with your dog will encourage you to find your voice. Use that voice to speak up for yourself and your rights as a guide dog team, and potentially pave the way for future advocates.

Due to the amount of misinformation spread about service animals, lack of education on applicable laws, such as the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), and insufficient awareness about those who are blind or visually impaired, you should familiarize yourself with a few key facts. A guide dog falls under the umbrella term of service animal. In the United States, as defined by title II and III of the ADA, a service animal is any dog that has been individually trained to do work or perform tasks for the benefit of an individual with a disability, including a physical, sensory, psychiatric, intellectual, or other disability. Emotional Support Animals (ESAs) are not service animals. While they may assist with companionship and easing depression and/or anxiety, they do not have formal training to perform tasks that assist people with disabilities. They are pets that provide instinctual comfort. Legitimate service dogs, by law, are permitted to accompany their handlers into any place the public is allowed, including restaurants, hotels, stores, healthcare facilities, and so on. ESA’s have not undergone specialized training, and therefore are not legally allowed into these spaces. Pets, ESAs, and fraudulent service dogs have been known to be disruptive, and even dangerous, to working guide dog teams in public. They also harm the reputation of legitimate service dogs and force us to advocate more frequently. Only two questions can be asked by a business to determine whether a dog is a service dog: Is the animal required because of a disability, and what work or task has the animal been trained to perform? You should not be approached if the dog’s job is obvious, for example, wearing our leather harness or Unifly, but you may run into individuals who have never seen a working guide dog team before. Keep in mind that you are not typically required by law to show documentation or identification that your dog is a guide dog, even though Guiding Eyes does issue an ID to every graduate. In Canada, guide dogs are not covered under a federal law, but rather, laws vary between provinces. Please contact Guiding Eyes or your local disability rights experts to learn more about your specific rights and protections.

Other than providing basic knowledge of the ADA or laws that pertain to your specific Canadian province, the most common need to advocate will arise when someone asks to pet your dog or begins to pet and/or speak to him or her without your permission. Some people are unintentionally Ignorant. We as guide dog handlers constantly educate others as we observe behavior that is inappropriate. Remember to remain calm, patient, and polite whenever possible. Leave a Good impression. If someone asks to pet your dog, you have the right to say no and politely decline. You might say something like, “thank you for asking, but my dog is working right now. He cannot be pet.” If the person is persistent, you may choose to explain your dog’s job as a guide dog, how he or she could become distracted which would put your safety and success as a team at risk. If you choose to give permission, make sure your dog is always under control and you are able to return their focus to you when it is time to resume work.

One of the most jarring instances of discrimination that you may face is being denied entry into a store or restaurant while you’re going about your day. This can happen anywhere, but is more likely to take place in smaller, locally owned restaurants and stores. Service dogs are allowed to accompany you everywhere the General public is allowed. If denied entry or service, start by politely explaining that your dog is a guide dog. It may be helpful to indicate your harness. Additionally, do not hesitate to reference the ADA or other applicable laws verbally or in writing if appropriate. You may choose to use the National Association of Guide Dog Users (NAGDU) app on your smartphone, which displays laws for all fifty states as well as Canadian provinces. If the situation escalates or an understanding cannot be reached, ask to speak with a manager or supervisor. If the denial continues, it is in your Rights to call the police or have the supervisor call the police. If the situation still has not been resolved, you should file an ADA complaint online with the Department of Justice at ada.gov or your local jurisdiction which handles such discrimination. be mindful that it will take time for your complaint to be processed and you will not be given an instantaneous resolution. For more immediate assistance, in the United States, reach out to your state’s Protection and Advocacy Agency, e.g., Disability Rights California, to pursue legal guidance. If you reside in Canada, reach out to your local disability law center. Additionally, don’t hesitate to contact your local media channels, such as TV station and newspaper, to share your story, or post a complaint on your social media Page or the business’s page. Most importantly, do not place you or your dog in emotional or physical harm’s way. Odds are that you have dealt with enough already. Guiding Eyes is here to support you if you are not sure how to proceed.

If you are denied entry into a hotel, the same general rules apply. Hotels cannot legally deny service dogs. They cannot place you in a pet-friendly room only or charge you a pet/cleaning fee. If you are denied or receive an unfair charge, ask to speak with management. If the situation is unresolved, file a complaint through the avenues mentioned above. Note that entities such as Airbnb now have strict policies prohibiting service dog discrimination and enforce penalties on hosts who do not comply with applicable federal and provincial laws.

In terms of housing, under laws such as the Fair Housing Act (FHA) for example, guide dogs qualify as housing accommodation. An apartment complex cannot charge you a pet fee. Even if they do not allow pets on the premises, they are required by law to allow your service dog to live with you. A housing accommodations letter is included in your take-home packet that can be provided to landlords/leasing offices. If your request for a service animal is denied, your local disability law center can assist. Sometimes simply informing the offending person that you are lodging a complaint will force them to seek education and/or legal advice and re-consider their denial of access.

One of the most common examples of transportation-related discrimination pertains to rideshare services, including companies such as Uber and Lyft. Excuses for denying a service animal vary from Allergies to religion and fear. Language or cultural differences/misunderstandings may also create additional barriers. Drivers cannot deny your dog under any circumstances, per the law and Lyft and Uber’s policies, but it is a common occurrence, nonetheless. Knowing that these issues persist, always build extra time into your schedule in case you are denied. When matched with a driver, copy down their name, type of car, and license plate into a note on your phone, take a screen shot of their information, or set up text notifications. While there are diverse opinions on this subject, you may find it beneficial to send your driver a message in advance letting them know you will be Traveling with a service animal. However, slip that knowledge into your message casually to downplay the significance for the driver. For example, you may write something like, “I am blind and cannot see your car, but I am standing to the left of the main entrance wearing a blue shirt and pink backpack, with my guide dog next to me.” First, try to calmly educate the driver about your dog and his or her job. If the conflict continues, or the driver becomes hostile, do not engage further, and put yourself or your dog at risk either emotionally or physically. Report the driver to their respective company and call the police if needed. While the drivers that deny and cancel on you will usually not show up in the rider history on your app, if you call Uber and Lyft to file a report, they have all that information at their disposal. If the issue is serious enough, you can always take a video of the incident. Tell your story on social media and advocate for equal access on local media channels.

Another instance in which forward thinking is invaluable is when preparing to fly with your dog. Fill out your Department of Transportation (DOT) Form before you fly and carry at least three physical copies with you in the airport at all times. The DOT form is required for all service animals and must be submitted and/or presented for every flight. Call your specific airline ahead of time to learn how you should submit the required information. Each airline has a slightly different process. Some ask you to attach the form to your online reservation at least 48 hours in advance of your flight, others ask you to present the form at the ticket counter, and others work in partnership with Open Doors Organization, an authentication service, to collect and save the information. If you would like an escort through the airport and TSA, you can call TSA Cares or submit a form online 48 hours in advance to arrange for a Passenger Support specialist to meet you at the airport and escort you through screening. Depending on the airport, they may also be able to meet you at the curb or other designated location. You should also Arrange a Meet and Assist with your specific airline for additional coverage. While in the airport, make sure your Guiding Eyes harness is visible and carry your Guiding Eyes ID with you as backup. At TSA, utilize your training from your Guide Dog Mobility Instructor (GDMI) to determine how best you should pass through the metal detector. Practice your dog’s obedience and recall before traveling to the airport. At no time are you required to be separated from your guide dog. Screeners should never take the leash out of your hand and should ask permission before touching your guide during the pat down process or any of their belongings/equipment. You must complete the screening process all over again if you leave the airport to relieve your dog. To avoid this inconvenience, ask if indoor relief areas are available. If faced with a problem at a TSA checkpoint, ask to speak with a supervisor or Passenger Support Specialist, available at all airports, by calling TSA Cares. For issues in other areas of the airport, such as the gate or plane, ask to speak to a Conflict Resolution Officer (CRO), available at most airports.

Advocacy comes in many forms. We will have to act on the spot, but we can also prepare the best we can for the unexpected. There are certain scenarios we hope to never find ourselves in, but in these critical moments, it is more imperative than ever to know what steps to take. One example of this is dog attacks. They are rare, but you should still know how to act. Be aware of potentially dangerous dogs in your Neighborhood. It may be helpful to call Animal Control and see if they have any history of aggressive dogs in your immediate area. Whenever you travel with your dog, be aware of your Surroundings, trust your instincts, always carry a cell phone, and get good directions so that you can walk confidently. If attacked, you must Give your dog the ability to defend itself and let Go of the harness. Do not try to break up a dog fight yourself, as you could get hurt or cause more damage. Make a lot of noise, yell, and attract attention. When able, call the police, not Animal Control, because an attack on your Guide dog is an attack on you and the team. Tell the police that a dog is attacking you, not your dog, or else they may not understand the scope of the situation and refer you to Animal Control anyway. Make sure the police file a report. Some states have addressed the problem by passing laws that assess fines and in some cases jail time for the owner of a loose dog that attacks a service dog. For more specific information on these laws, please reach out to us.

General emergency preparedness is also something you should consider when returning home with your dog, and always during your journey together. We never know when we will encounter emergencies or disasters in our lives that could alter our daily routines. Just as it is important to make an emergency plan for yourself, it is important to make one for your dog as well. Put together an emergency preparedness or survival kit that you can easily take with you if you are forced out of your home or must stay in a hospital unexpectedly (instructions included in take home packet). Eliminate extra stress. Check what emergency procedures are in place in your community. Let your local first-response agency know that you have a service dog. Some communities provide stickers that you can place near the entrance of your home to indicate that there is a service animal inside. Be sure to identify your emergency contacts.

You will find that having a guide dog makes you a much more confident advocate. Whenever possible, remain diligent and prepared. Utilize your Guiding Eyes community for information and support. We are here to provide a wide variety of resources, as well as a compassionate listening ear. Written materials are included in your take-home packet. Stay safe and well.

Additional Resources:

* Melissa Carney, Community Outreach and Graduate Support Manager: (845) 519-8419 or mcarney@guidingeyes.org
* ADA Information Hotline: (800) 514-0301
* Equal Employment Opportunity Commission: 800-669-4000
* Housing Discrimination Hotline: 800-669-9777
* Lyft Service Animal Hotline: 844-554-1297
* National Disability Rights Network: 202-408-9514
* Office of Aviation Consumer Protection: 202-366-2220
* TSA Cares: (855) 787-2227
* Uber Safety Incident Reporting Line: 833-715-8237

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