**Public Transportation and Air Travel**

In this chapter, we will outline some specific procedures that may be helpful when utilizing various modes of transportation including buses, trains, car services, and airplanes. These guidelines will offer recommendations based on what has been effective for many handlers. However, every situation is different so always consider your dog’s safety and comfort when deciding where to position them in any vehicle.

**Buses** are one of the most utilized modes of public transportation, especially for guide dog handlers. Many small towns have a bus line even though they do not run as frequently as bus lines in large cities. Here are some basic guidelines about working and riding buses with guide dogs:

* Learn the bus lines and schedules for your neighborhood, this will help you avoid standing and waiting for extended periods for buses which may never come
* Learn what type of entry your buses typically have. Are there steps to get onto the bus? Is there a railing on either side? Is it a “kneeling” bus that lowers as the doors open?
* Your dog can work up to the bus, learning to target the open door. Take a moment to praise and reward at the door, ensuring that your dog understands this is the desired target.
* It is your choice whether to work or heel your dog onto the bus. Some buses have steep and/or narrow stairs that make working difficult, while others have wide flat entries. It is up to you to decide what works best.
* Try to locate seats closest to the exit door. You will also want to consider the seat arrangement before positioning your dog. Seats may be arranged in rows or along the sides of the bus facing the center aisle.
* For seats that face center, check if there is space under the seat. If so, place your dog in Close position with their rump under the seat. If there is no space under the seat, position your dog sitting sideways in front of you. Place one foot behind his rump, and his head should rest over your opposite knee.
* If the seats are positioned in rows, it is best to back your dog into the row before you take a seat yourself. This allows you to tuck your dog in completely out of the way.
* When the bus is crowded, it is best to keep your dog sitting up, so they do not inhabit too much space, and their paws are less vulnerable to being stepped on. If the bus is not crowded or you are riding for a long time between stops and your dog lies down, be conscious of where they are and stay alert. You may need to have them sit up out of the way as people walk by.
* You can also protect your dog’s tail by tucking it between your foot and the dog’s rump.
* Always be aware of what your dog’s head is doing, do not allow them to scavenge off the floor, visit other people, or investigate their belongings.

Once off the bus, immediately pick up the harness handle and work to the nearest curb. Bus drivers are known for not pulling up close to the curb line and often you will need to work in the street for several feet before reaching a curb. Working in-harness allows your dog to avoid potentially dangerous situations as you find your way up onto the sidewalk.

Be aware of local weather conditions. While waiting for the bus, seek shelter or shade, if possible, particularly in extremely hot or cold temperatures. You may find it necessary to use booties to protect your dog’s feet if you need to stand and wait for longer periods of time. Waiting for a bus in December in Buffalo, NY can be brutal, and waiting for a bus in Tucson, Arizona in July can be downright uncomfortable.

**Trains** are also a popular means of transportation, especially in larger cities. Trains vary from one city to another, however. Some have underground subways while others have elevated tracks that run overhead. Some train systems utilize raised platforms while others operate at ground level. Working with your guide dog on raised platforms presents unique challenges, so we will cover that in greater detail in a later chapter. Otherwise, riding a train with your dog is like riding a bus.

* Be sure to familiarize yourself with your city’s train system, routes, and schedules.
* Learn how the train cars are set up, and any hazards you may encounter such as a gap between the boarding platform and the train, a narrow aisle, or a small step that your dog must learn to locate.
* In most cases, your dog can work up to the door and may be able to work inside depending on the layout of the train car.
* Determine the best position for your dog based on the seating arrangement and available space. Remember to protect their paws and tail as much as possible and be aware of where their head is.

**Passenger vans**, such as those used by Guiding Eyes during residential class training, are managed a bit differently when getting in and out. This type of van often requires some climbing, bending, and maneuvering when entering and exiting. The steps tend to be narrow and uneven as well, which means that your dog will enter the van in one big jump rather than controlled steps. This combination can lead to injury if you are knocked off balance or if your dog jumps unexpectedly. So, it is preferable to have your dog Sit and Stay while you climb into the van. Release your dog with “Break” or “Let’s Go” when you are ready for them to jump in. The same process should be used for exiting the van as well. Be sure to give your dog plenty of leash length as you are climbing in so that you are not inadvertently pulling the collar before you are ready for the dog to jump. Typically, there is not much space while riding in these vans, so it is best to position your dog lying down close to you wherever there is space. Always be aware of where their head is and what they are doing.

**Car services** (taxis, Uber, Lyft) and **personal cars** driven by family and friends are also common ways for guide dog handlers to get from place to place. Of course, cars come in a wide variety of shapes, styles, and sizes. It is especially important to consider safety and comfort for yourself, your dog, and your driver when deciding where to position your dog. There are four potential options depending on the type of car:

* Front foot well: This position allows you to ride in the front passenger seat and keep your dog with you. Start by sitting sideways in the seat, then bring just your left leg into the car. Invite your dog to step up into the footwell and position him to sit facing you. Reach down and be sure that your dog’s tail is tucked in, not hanging out the door. Use your right foot to pin the tail safely against the dog’s rump, then close the door.
* Rear footwell: This is typically the preferred position when taking a taxi or other car service. You will sit on the back seat and your dog will sit or lie on the floorboard on the opposite side (there is not enough room for your dog to sit in front of you). This can be achieved by either getting in first and sliding all the way across as you bring your dog in, or by having your dog get it first and backing them to the opposite side as you get in yourself. This maneuver can be tricky to get the hang of, particularly in a smaller car.
* Rear seat: In some cases, there is simply not enough space for your dog to ride comfortably on the floorboard, so you may choose to position your dog on the seat itself. A sheet or large towel can be used to protect the car’s upholstery.
* Cargo area: This position is **not** recommended when using a car service as it requires you to be separated from your dog. However, if you are riding with a family member or friend, this may be a good option. Again, you can use a sheet or blanket to protect the car’s interior and give your dog something comfortable to lie on. Most dogs will settle in quickly and ride comfortably in this position.

\*NOTE: The cargo area option is only available in SUV or station wagon type vehicles. **Never** put your dog in a trunk or hatch that is closed off from the main cabin area of the car.

**Air travel** comes with its own unique challenges, though many of the same guidelines apply once you board the plane. Make sure you fill out the Department of Transportation (DOT) Form required for every service animal to travel by plane. You can download this form directly from the Department of Transportation website. Check with your airline or view Guiding Eyes for the Blind’s Guide to Airline Travel document to learn the process for submitting the form in advance. Within the airport, you should carry physical copies of the DOT form with you.

Airports tend to have wide open spaces with lots of people moving in different directions. This can be confusing for your guide dog, and they may have difficulty identifying a clear path. Keep in mind that if you are not well acquainted with a particular airport, you cannot expect your dog to know where to go without any direction from you. You may find it necessary to allow your dog to follow your traveling companions in this situation, or if you are traveling alone, seek assistance from the airline. This type of assistance may also speed up the security screening process.

When passing through the TSA checkpoint, you will find that not all TSA agents are adequately educated on or comfortable with procedures for screening service dogs. They cannot ask you to remove the dog’s leash, collar, or harness. By law, an agent also cannot separate you from your dog. If following proper protocol, the agent will ask you to pass through the standard metal detector (not the newer X-ray scanner). Place your dog in a Sit-Stay near the scanner. Step through the metal detector while holding your left hand with a long leash configuration behind you so that your hand comes through last. Once cleared by the TSA agent, call your dog through. Your dog’s equipment WILL set off the alarm. With your permission, the agent will pat down the dog, examine underneath the harness, and swab your hands. Once you are both cleared, you may proceed to your gate. Be aware that you may encounter agents who are afraid or uncomfortable touching your dog and will call in another agent to perform those tasks. The process can be time-consuming and sometimes frustrating. Try to be patient but know your rights. Ask to speak with a Passenger Support Specialist or supervisor if you encounter any problems.

After passing through the TSA checkpoint, you should have some time to wait before boarding. Inquire about the nearest indoor Service Animal Relief Area (SARA) and give your dog the chance to relieve. When arriving at your gate, check in with the gate agent if you would like to pre-board. If you have not arranged for bulkhead seating ahead of time, they can often change your seat to one that provides extra legroom. As you are waiting to board, be sure to keep your dog out of walkways. Tuck them under your seat if there is room, and always be aware of what they are doing. Airport floors are notorious for discarded items and food scraps.

When time to board, you can choose to work your dog down the jet bridge or use a human guide, but once you’re in the plane itself you’ll need to set the harness handle down and keep your dog behind you as you follow the narrow aisle between seats. Keep a short leash to prevent your dog from visiting other passengers as you pass. When you have reached your assigned row, remove your dog’s harness for space limitations and comfort, and place it on the floor within your seating area. For example, next to the wall/fuselage or the inside portion of the seat frame. Do not place the harness in the aisle, anywhere it could block egress, or become lost/dislodged during the flight. Do not place the harness in the overhead bin with your carry-on items, as you need efficient access after landing and in the case of an emergency evacuation. Ask your dog to back into the row before you slide in yourself. While bulkhead seating offers more room, economy seating can be a tight squeeze, but there is some space under the seat in front of you. Be patient as your dog figures out how to use this space but remember that others are boarding behind you. You may need to assist your dog in properly positioning their body. Sometimes you can use your feet to help contain them in the area in front of your seat. Most dogs will settle and ride quietly throughout the flight but may initially become startled or nervous, especially during takeoff and landing. If your dog seems anxious or sits up suddenly, reassure them with soft praise and slow petting.

When you reach your destination, remember to collect your harness and any other items, and bring your dog to a relief area as soon as possible, especially after a longer flight.

*Updated October 2024*