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**Guide Dog Q&A**

# What is a guide dog?

A guide dog is a service animal that has been specially trained to assist a person who is blind or visually impaired in independent travel. Guide dogs lead their handlers around obstacles, indicate stairs and street curbs, target doorways and other useful landmarks, among countless other tasks. The handler holds a harness secured around the dog’s body with a handle that enables them to feel the dog’s movements and communication.

# Are service animals the same as emotional support animals (ESAs)?

As defined by Title II and III of the Americans with Disabilities Act (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. Emotional support animals, on the other hand, do not qualify as service animals because they do not have any formal training to assist those with disabilities, and instead are pets who 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.

# How long does it take to train a guide dog?

On average, it takes about 2 years to train a guide dog. For the first 16 months of their lives, the dogs are properly socialized, exposed to diverse environments, practice obedience and house manners, and form relationships with volunteer puppy raisers. Upon demonstrating strong foundational skills, the Dogs enter formal harness Training where they spend a minimum of 5 months learning behaviors and commands to become a successful guide Dog.

# What dog breed is most common for guide work?

The most common dog breed used for guide work is the Labrador Retriever.

# How is a guide dog matched with a person?

A guide dog is matched with their handler based on a specific set of criteria, including pace, environment, harness pull, and lifestyle. Just as the handler undergoes an intensive application process, each guide dog’s characteristics and strengths are also carefully assessed. A guide dog team living on a busy college campus or commuting to work in a large city has much different needs than someone who lives on a farm.

# Do all people who are blind use guide dogs?

Working with a guide dog is purely a personal preference. Some individuals who are blind or visually impaired would rather depend on the tactile feedback they observe on their own while using a white cane, and others appreciate the teamwork aspect of Traveling with a dog. As you can imagine, working with and caring for a guide dog is a huge commitment. Each handler has a physical, emotional, and financial responsibility for their dog; therefore, it is not right for everyone.

# What does a guide dog do when they are off harness?

Off-harness, a guide dog is just like any other dog. They love to play with people and other dogs, snuggle, sleep, and eat. While their time in and out of harness may vary, they are always given significant breaks. It is crucial for guide dogs to be able to release their energy and have fun, as the balance to their job.

# How much does it cost to raise, train, and care for a guide dog?

It can cost up to $50,000 annually to train and care for a guide dog throughout its working lifetime with a person who is blind. This includes items such as food, equipment, medical care, and other expenses. We provide all services to clients completely free of charge.

# Does a guide dog tell a person who is blind when it is safe to cross a street?

Guide dogs do not have the ability to read street signs, communicate the colors of traffic lights, or indicate walk signals. It is up to the blind handler to auditorily determine when it is safe to cross the street. People who are blind or visually impaired with the advanced travel skills necessary for a guide dog have been trained extensively in how to listen to traffic cycles and identify the shape of the intersection and how it is controlled.

# How does the team know where they are going?

A guide dog and handler work together to memorize routes and problem-solve. They take note of significant landmarks, turns, street crossings, changes in footing, and so on. A guide dog can be patterned to familiar routes, such as a handler’s favorite coffee shop. They are also trained to target specific doorways, escalators, locations on the train platform, or whatever locations are beneficial to the handler. The handler is always just as aware of their surroundings as their four-legged partner.

# What can I do to support Guiding Eyes?

Guiding Eyes has a large network of staff and volunteers to coordinate all the moving puzzle pieces of a guide dog’s journey. To learn more about ways to get involved, please visit guidingeyes.org.