



Service Dogs: Who Are They, What Do They Do, and Handler Lived Experience

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Social worker and service dog handler

Lincoln, mobility service dog

Disclaimer

- I am not a service dog professional or legal professional. This is my perspective and understanding of the regulations, laws, and norms as a service dog handler. Please meet with a legal and/or service dog professional for any legal guidance.
- Everything discussed today will only relate to the United States laws and regulations. Other countries may differ.

Working Dogs

- Service animal
 - This includes miniature horses per the law, but this is fairly uncommon.
- Therapy dog
- Facility dog
- Emotional support animal



Laws

- **“Under the ADA, State and local governments, businesses, and nonprofit organizations that serve the public generally must allow service animals to accompany people with disabilities in all areas of the facility where the public is allowed to go.** For example, in a hospital it usually would be inappropriate to exclude a service animal from areas such as patient rooms, clinics, cafeterias, or examination rooms. However, it may be appropriate to exclude a service animal from operating rooms or burn units where the animal’s presence may compromise a sterile environment.”

Public Spaces

- For public access: "“When it is not obvious what service an animal provides, only limited inquiries are allowed. Staff may ask two questions: (1) is the dog a service animal required because of a disability, and (2) what work or task has the dog been trained to perform.”"
- If the dog is not housebroken or is out of control and the handler does not take effective action to control it, you CAN ask a handler to remove the dog.
- A business CANNOT request medical documentation.
 - This does NOT apply situations like flying, if you are getting accommodations for your dog to come to work/school, or housing.





- Mobility
- Medical alert
 - Diabetic
 - Migraine
 - Seizure
 - Etc.
- Psychiatric
- Guide
- Hearing
- Medical response

Types of service dogs
A non-exhaustive list

(Some) Tasks Service Dogs Perform

- Mobility:
 - Picking up dropped items
 - Providing stability when walking*
 - Wheelchair pulling
 - Opening and closing doors
- Hearing
 - Alerting handler to alarm going off
 - Alerting handler to ringing doorbell
- Medical Alert
 - Alerting handler to changes in blood sugar or upcoming medical episode
 - Alerting facilitated handler if applicable
- Medical response:
 - Getting a person in the home if there is a medical episode.*
 - Performing a task related to that disability (i.e. fetching snacks for someone with low blood sugar)



Psychiatric Service Dog Tasks*

- Creating space
- Behavioral interruption (sometimes called an alert)
- Deep pressure therapy
- Fetching water/medications
- Waking up from nightmares

*a non-exhaustive list

**Some examples of tasks
From Lincoln and his
trainer!**

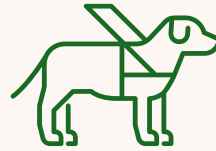


How to Get a Service Dog



Program

Many programs provide fully trained dogs- some allow you to participate in the training and/or work with a dog that you already have, if the dog is a good fit for work.



Owner Training

While owner training is legal, there are still challenges and often the cost is still very high.



Private Trainer

Receiving a fully-trained service dog from a private trainer is an option but generally the most expensive one.

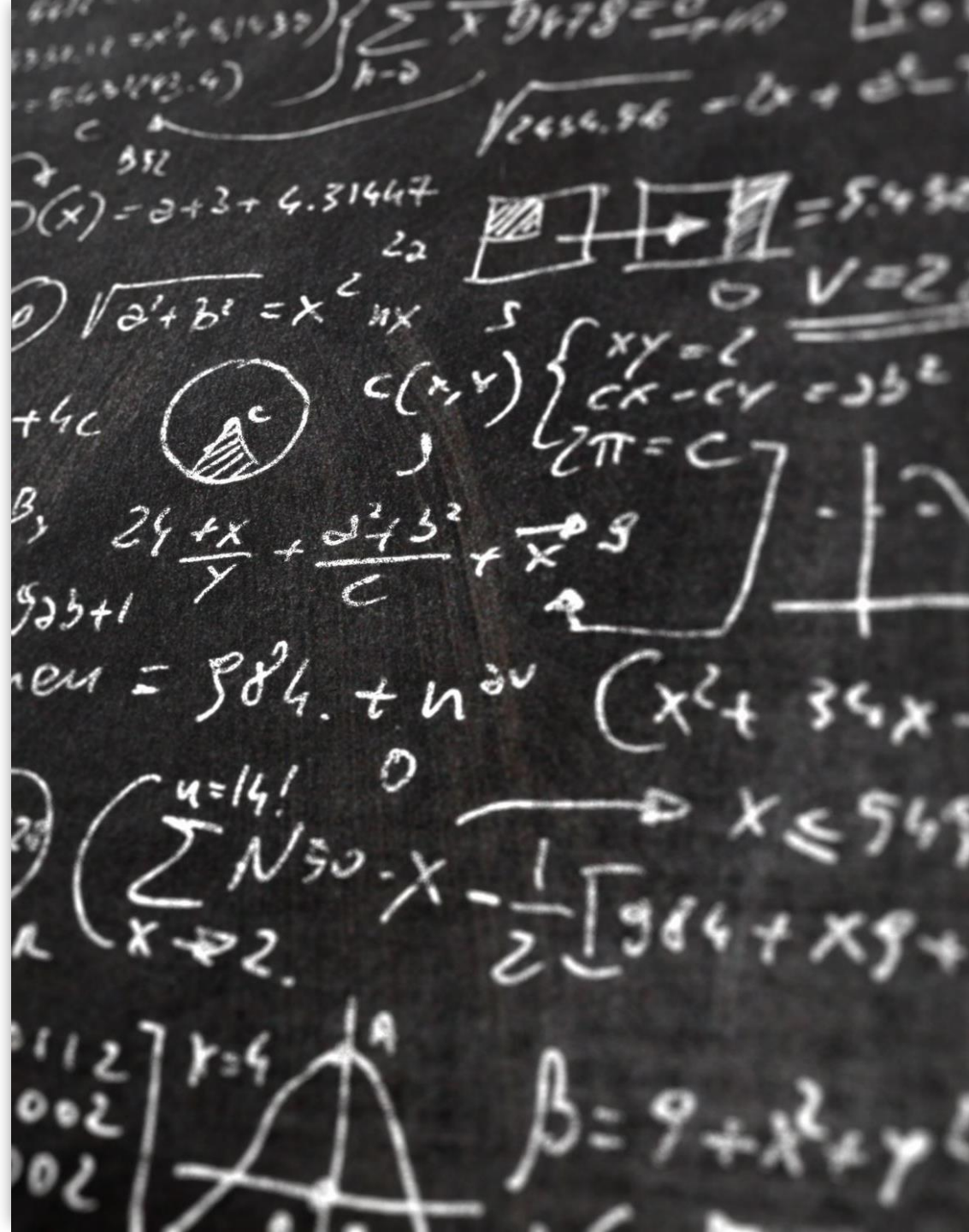
Additional context...

- Service dogs cost up to \$50,000 to train
- Typically around 2 years to fully train
- Many service dogs in training "wash out" (from programs as well as owner trainers/private trainers).
- Others have to retire early for a variety of reasons
 - Unforeseen medical issues
 - No longer enjoying work
 - Dog attacks



A note on the research...

Per a systematic lit review by Rodriguez, et al. "it is of note that several methodological weaknesses of the studies make it difficult to draw any definitive conclusions, including inadequate reporting and a failure to account for moderating or confounding variables."



What does the research say?

In a lit review completed by Rodriguez, et al, found: “Despite the purpose of these assistance dogs specifically for physical tasks, positive outcomes were noted in psychological, social, quality of life, and vitality domains. However, results suggested that for most outcomes, having an assistance dog had no effect on psychosocial health and wellbeing.”

In another study by Rodriguez, et al, they found: “Results indicated that compared to those on the waitlist, individuals with a service dog exhibited significantly better psychosocial health including higher social, emotional, and work/school functioning. There was no significant effect of having a service dog on anger, companionship, or sleep disturbance.”

My Lived Experience

- Owner trained my first dog for 1 year.
- Handler of a program dog for 3.5 years
 - 2.5 of that working in a medical setting



Quotes from others...

NOT research,
but potentially
helpful
anecdotes

Varied in some
ways, similar in
others.

Handler One

- Best Parts:

- I have a best friend with me almost all the time
- His diabetic alert skills save me from severe episodes quite often
- I've made a few great friends with SDs
- Even though his main purpose isn't for anxiety I've noticed a big difference in my social anxiety because he's a conversation starter

- Challenges:

- He's a small SD so that comes with a lot of access issues even with our ID (We live in Canada, Alberta where it's needed)
- That's honestly the biggest challenge. We've been denied busses and trains even before I get the chance to show our card*

*There are different laws in Canada, this does not apply in the US.

Handler Two

Best Parts:

- The best part is having someone at my side I can rely on to help me with the things I previously had to rely on other humans for, which in turn allows me to be more reliable in my personal and professional lives. On days I previously would've had to cancel, call out, or leave early, my service dog helps me stick it out. His trained tasks have been invaluable in supporting my independence and helping me build a life for myself as a young professional. It helps to see his eager, smiling face every time I look down instead of asking someone at what may be an inconvenient time when I unexpectedly need assistance.

Challenges:

- The hardest part has been dealing with a program that on the surface checked all the boxes, but once my dog came home left us on our own and broke promise after promise. Now I am having to process the early medical retirement of my service dog and have to rely on other coping skills to deal with his absence and try to maintain what I have built with his help. I am so grateful for what he gave me and now I find myself grieving for it sooner than I ever thought I would have to. I am hesitant to trust a program again but also unable to train my own dog from scratch given my current lifestyle and limitations. The lack of oversight and ethics in this industry is a major issue.

Handler Three

Best Parts:

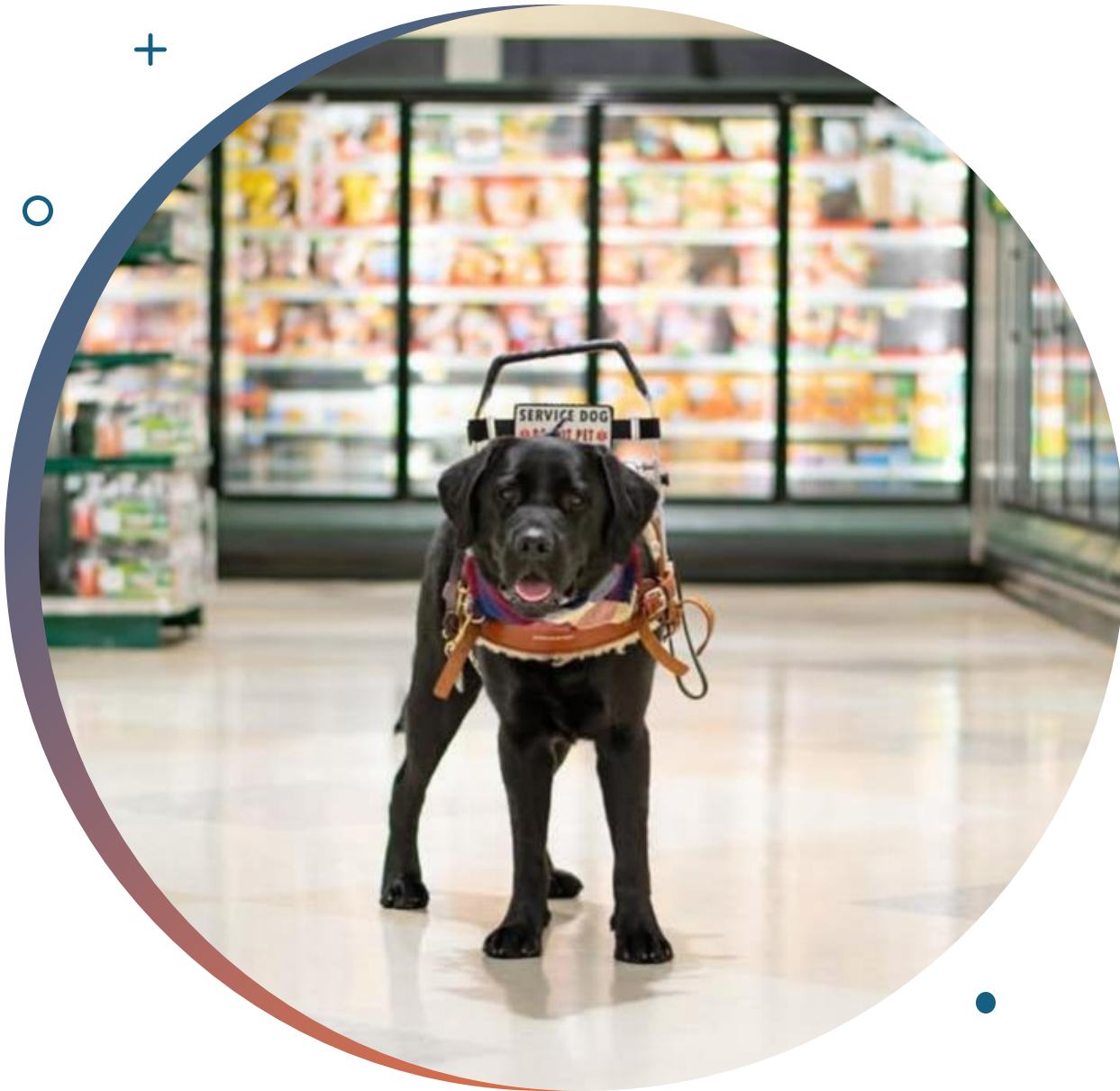
- The bond that comes with having a service dog
- Independence and decreased fear
- Motivation to get up and out of the house
- Facilitates kind conversations with strangers

Challenges:

- Retiring a dog early due to a dog attack
- People that are mean/critical “you don’t look disabled”, “why do you need that dog?”
- People trying to distract dog on a hard day
- SO many pets in places they aren’t legally permitted

References

- Rodriguez KE, Greer J, Yacilla JK, Beck AM, O'Haire ME. The effects of assistance dogs on psychosocial health and wellbeing: A systematic literature review. PLoS One. 2020 Dec 2;15(12):e0243302. doi: 10.1371/journal.pone.0243302. Erratum in: PLoS One. 2021 Aug 9;16(8):e0256071. doi: 10.1371/journal.pone.0256071. PMID: 33264370; PMCID: PMC7710121.
- Rodriguez KE, Greer J, Yacilla JK, Beck AM, O'Haire ME (2021) Correction: The effects of assistance dogs on psychosocial health and wellbeing: A systematic literature review. PLOS ONE 16(8): e0256071.
- Rodriguez, K. E., Bibbo, J., & O'Haire, M. E. (2020). The effects of service dogs on psychosocial health and wellbeing for individuals with physical disabilities or chronic conditions. *Disability and rehabilitation*, 42(10), 1350–1358. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09638288.2018.1524520>
- <https://www.hud.gov/helping-americans/assistance-animals>



Resources

- Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) FAQs: <https://www.ada.gov/resources/service-animals-faqs/>
- Assistance Dogs International: <https://assistancedogsinternational.org/>
- Canine Companions: <https://canine.org/>
- Canines for Disabled Kids (fundraising for kids, resources and education for all): <https://caninesforkids.org/>