



This Dog's for You: Benefits of Assistance Dogs

The physical, emotional and medical support dogs can provide patients can be a lifeline, but due diligence is necessary to ensure the safety of the dogs, too.

By Amy Scanlin, MS

WITH THE TUG of a leash, a little girl and her dog are on their way, beginning a new life together — one her parents hope, as they anxiously watch their first tentative steps, will open a new world of possibilities. A man, confusion mounting, feels the nudge of his dog, alerting him to an oncoming seizure. A medical alert button is pressed and minutes later, lifesaving help arrives at his door. While such benefits of a loving companion animal have long been known, assistance dogs also play crucial roles in many people's quality of life. From the earliest evidence of a dog leading the blind discovered in a Pompeii frieze to the 1920s when a seeing eye dog and his handler inspired Morris Frank and Dorothy Harrison Eustis to co-found The Seeing Eye that provides dogs to the visually impaired, dogs have had

roles well beyond loving companion animals.

Today, assistance dogs are largely trained by hundreds of volunteer organizations that place the best of the best with individuals who benefit from their support. These dogs assist with everyday tasks that are difficult, if not impossible, for their partners to perform. For instance, they provide physical support such as opening doors, turning on light switches and carrying items. They provide balance and mobility assistance to help their partners maintain independence. They can raise the alarm for the onset of a diabetic, epileptic or cardiac event and summon help or offer stimulation. They can lower stress levels,¹ provide deep pressure support for those with tremors, offer companionship, and help to improve verbal and nonverbal communication.

The Nose Knows

A dog's olfactory senses are 100,000 times more precise than a human's. According to Parkinson's Alert Dogs, their sense of smell is so acute (they have 300 million scent receptors in their noses, 295,000 more than humans) that they can detect a teaspoon of sugar in millions of gallons of water. Forty percent of a canine brain is dedicated to analyzing smells, enabling dogs to isolate specific odors from scents. So where humans can smell a loaf of bread baking, dogs can tell whether the flour used was bleached and how. With noses that can inhale and exhale simultaneously, they are able to sniff and breathe at the same time.

These amazing detection capabilities can make dogs incredibly advantageous in medical settings. Whether it is Cliff the beagle's 97 percent accuracy for screening a ward of patients for the bacteria *Clostridium difficile* via stool samples (compared to 92.7 percent reported accuracy for real-time PCR diagnostic methods)² or Stewie, the Australian shepherd and part of the In Situ Foundation (which created the first medical protocol for the selection, training and handling of a medical scent detection dog), detecting early stage lung, ovarian and breast cancer,³ studies are looking at how a dog's nose may benefit the medical community.

Assistance dogs are so adept with scent detection that the University of Pennsylvania's School of Veterinary Medicine's Working Dog Center, according to postdoctoral research fellow Jennifer Essler, PhD, hasn't yet been able to identify a threshold that their trained dogs can't meet, and they've been trying! "These dogs are incredible," she says of their cadre.

Using a Universal Detector Calibrant with varying strengths, the center's dogs, which are used exclusively in research and have long genetic histories of being super smellers, are trained to identify whatever the laboratory is researching, from cancer to COVID-19. Their noses are so precise that, even as smaller and smaller test sizes are used, the dogs are able to seek and find the scent before them. The laboratory's goal is in part to create an electronic nose, like a blood test, so they continue to ask: Can dogs do this and, if so, how?

Service, Work and Support

Dogs can have measurable and immeasurable positive impacts on those with both emotional and physical needs.

In fact, a Purdue University College of Veterinary Medicine study found not only did people who had received a service dog have better emotional and social health than those who were on a wait list,⁴ a study at the University of California, Los Angeles, showed a 12-minute visit with a dog can lead to improved heart and lung function among hospitalized heart failure patients, with benefits exceeding those from a visit by a human or from being left alone.⁵ Dogs are known to improve their partners' independence, social relationships, self-esteem and life satisfaction. They also help to decrease stress and loneliness, benefits voiced by owners of assistance animals.

Dogs come in all shapes and sizes and can assist with all kinds of mobility and medical alerts. The nomenclature "service dogs" is often confused with "therapy dogs," "emotional support dogs" and other terms. The U.S. Department of Justice uses "service dogs" or "service animals" as the inclusive term, but internationally the term "assistance dogs" is often heard.⁶

There are three types of assistance dogs providing service: guide dogs for the visually impaired, hearing dogs for the hearing impaired and service dogs for those requiring assistance other than sight and sound. There is no federal

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system in the U.S. that oversees registration, qualification or training of assistance dogs; however, the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) does mandate that dogs that provide assistance or service have full public access rights, enabling them to be brought into restaurants, stores, libraries and other public spaces and to be exempted from pet fees for travel with their partners. Per the ADA, disability is defined as a "physical, sensory, psychiatric, intellectual or other mental disability," and the work of one's assistance dog must be directly related to his or her needs. On the other hand, emotional support dogs are not considered assistance or service dogs under the ADA because they are not trained to specifically assist their partners.⁷



In contrast, working dogs include those with a particularly keen sense of smell that detect diseases such as cancer, the presence of allergens or onset of medical events. Military, police and search and rescue dogs also fall into the working dog category. Regarding a dog's diagnostic capabilities, questions remain about the feasibility of widescale use in part due to reproducibility issues, both with the same dog and with other breeds, and regulatory uncertainty. However, as exploration of this line of study widens, it is conceivable dogs could become a cost-effective, sustainable alternative to conventional diagnostic testing with significantly less medical waste produced from test kits.⁸

Therapy dogs work side by side with their owners providing comfort in hospital and hospice settings, nursing homes, school reading programs, etc. Like assistance dogs, there are no uniform state or national regulations or certifications for therapy dogs, although there are organizations that offer training and certifications, many of which follow guidelines set forth by the American Kennel Club's Canine Good Citizen program.

For a dog to be considered an emotional support dog, a patient must have a prescription from a mental health professional for a diagnosed psychological or emotional disorder. This letter does not allow for unlimited access to public spaces that is offered to assistance dogs. In fact, after more than a year of lobbying by U.S. airlines, emotional support animals (ESA) may be departing the passenger cabin. The U.S. Department of Transportation announced it is revising the Air Carrier Access Act on the transportation of service animals by air "to ensure a safe and accessible air transportation system."

Trained service animals like guide dogs for the blind will be permitted; ESA animals will not. Instead, they will be treated as pets, and their owners will need to pay pet travel fees.

This Dog's for Me

Assistance dogs open doors for people, figuratively and literally. They can help to interrupt self-harming behaviors and ease integration of their partner into the community. Studies demonstrate people are more likely to engage with those who have special needs when they have a service dog. For that reason, it is important these dogs be emotionally sturdy, easy to train and considered by the public to be friendly.

Saint Francis Service Dogs of Roanoke, Va., primarily trains Labrador and golden retrievers. "A lot of people need a dog that will pick up and carry things or bring things you need," says Cabell Youell, executive director of Saint Francis Service Dogs. "Retrievers are a good size: strong so they can pull on a door handle or hold open a commercial door, and tall enough to turn on a light switch." Other commonly seen service dogs are German shepherds and poodles.

Some ask why assistance animals are dogs and not other animals. As Dr. Essler explains, service or working animals are needed to do what we need, and they need to be motivated to interact with us for long periods of time. "Bears, mice and elephants also have a great sense of smell," she jokes, "but they wouldn't make great working animals." Dogs have the right mix of sense of smell, are eager to interact and easy to train.

The first step in partnering with an assistance dog is speaking to a healthcare provider or social worker. Another option is to contact the not-for-profit coalition Assistance Dogs International (ADI). Being accredited and recognized by ADI is "kind of like a Good Housekeeping stamp of approval," says Youell. Some may also choose to train their own dog or hire a trainer, which is legal under the ADA.

The process of partnering with an assistance dog is fairly universal: a comprehensive application, interviews with the applicant and his or her healthcare provider, and an in-person or remote home visit to ensure the home is a safe environment for the dog. Some organizations have fence requirements, and others limit how many other dogs can live in the home. It is important, says Youell, "to do your research and find a fit for what you need. These dogs are folding into the most intimate parts of your life. They'll be a part of your daily routine and help you with things you struggle with. The organization needs to understand your needs and how a dog will fit into your life."

It is also important to assess how the dog's needs will be met such as getting sufficient exercise, an outlet for their

energy, bathroom breaks, vet visits and high-quality food. “These dogs are solid workers and they need opportunities to be healthy,” explains Youell. It is important they are well cared for so they can take good care of their partners.

During COVID-19, Saint Francis Service Dogs has made many of its protocols virtual. “It’s had a pretty significant impact because we serve a vulnerable population, and we must be respectful of that,” says Youell. “Our mission is to help people.” Consequently, the organization is doing as much as possible through Zoom meetings, more outside training and prerecorded videos. It also believes some of these newly developed protocols will be permanent even after the pandemic ends.

Going to the Dogs

Assistance dogs offer a lifeline and can bring immeasurable benefit to people’s lives. From the care, concern and physical support of service dogs to the keenly attuned sense of working dogs, there are nearly no limits to the possibilities. Just like people, though, these animals require much care and

feeding. Before individuals decide to embark on the journey of bringing an assistance dog into their lives, they must assess not only the benefits the dog will bring to them but the logistics of ensuring they can properly provide for the dog’s safety and security. 

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