

Before You Get a Service Dog, Read This

We get a LOT of calls about service dogs.

A LOT. As in, upwards of twenty a day.

So, why aren't we full up to the brim with people, and a waiting list ten miles long?

Because 99% of the people inquiring about service dogs don't know what it takes to produce one, maintain one, and own one.

1) Commitment.

This is the heavy hitter. It's not readily apparent, but a service dog is life-changing. Some of those changes are extremely positive, as the dog does its tasks, and lifesaving in some instances. Some are just *changes*, that can be uncomfortable – public attention when you're travelling anywhere with your service dog, having to house and feed a dog. Having to maintain its training – which includes sometimes radical reassessments of life philosophy as well as some pretty significant lifestyle changes. If you don't commit to these things, then you end up with a very expensive pet.

There's also a huge commitment on the part of the service dog organization – when you contact us about a service dog and say that you are going to commit to one, immediately we begin networking to find the right dog for you, juggling logistics to figure out which trainer can take the dog, fosters for the dog, a training plan for the dog, how to raise immediate funds to secure this dog for you, working with rescues, individuals, shelters out of state, trainers out of state, establishing alliances with breeders and professionals across thousands of miles to get you your dog – basically there is a massive upheaval of effort initially to work towards your dog, *even before you ever see it*. This process requires thousands of man-hours and quite a bit of money to even begin.

2) Time

Speaking of which, there is a huge time commitment. Not only do our trainers field thousands of hours of inquiry calls, plus the time to find, vet, obtain, and place in a foster a dog, there's the time of training. A reputable trainer working full time as a trainer (and our SD trainers work part-time out of financial necessity) takes about *three weeks per task* to establish that task in the dog's learning repertoire, and then another month or two proofing that task in all environments (though proofing usually cycles through all tasks).

This is somewhat variable – for example, a hearing dog alerting on a weather radio, cell phone, and home phone will take three weeks for the first, two weeks for the second, and a week for the last because those tasks are very similar – but they are still *separate tasks*. When you're talking about very difficult tasks that a dog doesn't have a lot of innate skill in – force fetch for example – it can take a month to truly establish that skill on the dog in any meaningful and useful way. Some dogs also pick things up faster than others, or slower, depending on their personality and background.

In addition to that is proofing the dog's temperament and obedience, which must be absolutely stellar. It can take up to a year on a young untrained dog to have their obedience truly rock-solid and their public access smooth. Our organization manages to expedite this by preferentially choosing dogs that are mature (or close to it) so that we don't have to start them as puppies (another year if we start with a puppy), but that also means we must fix any minimal hang-ups that they come with.

3) Training

Training doesn't stop after the service dog comes home. This is the part that's very difficult for some – a service dog is a working dog. They aren't a pet – which means they don't get to do whatever they want, dig holes in the yard, pee on the side of the couch, and play fetch with abandon – they have a job to do. This means they must be treated differently than a pet – as

in no affection from strangers or even people outside of the service dog's person, strict discipline in terms of completing tasks (the dog cannot decide it doesn't want to work one day), which can include [corrections](#), something that a lot of people cannot stand to do to any dog. A service dog cannot be allowed to mess up, people's lives and livelihoods ride on those dogs. In fact, a bad service dog is in a lot of ways more than just a very expensive pet, they're a direct threat and liability to their service dog candidate – and sometimes they are downright **dangerous**.

It is guaranteed that if training and discipline is not maintained on a service dog, they will eventually quit working for you at best, and become a liability to you at worst. The training isn't difficult to maintain, but it is challenging because you have to take an active, strong position with your service dog, and learn to handle dogs very well. Just like any professional animal handler like a military working dog handler or police dog handler, you rely on your dog to work well and must learn and enforce that training throughout the dog's lifetime. *You must become a professional service dog **handler**.*

4) Money

It takes resources to be able to afford to turn out service dogs. Whether those resources are from donations or from service dog candidates, to be able to continue doing this, it does cost. None of the service dog trainers I know are independently wealthy enough to be able to train these dogs and give them out for free – trust me, we would if we could. Often, to be able to serve more people, service dog trainers try to work full time at this or are able to work part time only, thus putting all of their resources into dog training. Those (like me) that work full time often put all funds received back into training more dogs. That being said, there are a lot of predatory organizations out there who will take a lot of money from you, and not offer you the time, training, and commitment that a reputable organization will. All of these things covary together – the more time, the more training, the more commitment, the more money. If there's an imbalance in that equation, WATCH OUT. And it costs just as much, if not more, to self-train a service dog, though many people choose to do that. The turnaround rate on a self-trained dog is a lot longer simply because self-trainers are by and large not as experienced. There are a lot of bumps in the road that you may have to go back and find professional help to deal with, and if the training of a service dog is incomplete or insufficient, they again become an expensive pet or a direct liability.

So. Before you decide that a service dog is for you, understand that these are the things you will have to be onboard with, heart and soul. It's a journey that you will never forget, and the dog that you produce will be there working with you, living for you, and always be an asset and a friend. But it doesn't happen through magic, and service dog organizations rely on your commitment and effort to make this work.

For a really good memoir about a young man's experience with his guide dog, please read "[Through Gilly's Eyes](#)". It's honest, fair, and open about the growth and journey of first having a service dog obtained through a traditional guide dog program.