

APPLYING FOR A GUIDE DOG



SOUTH AFRICAN GUIDE-DOGS
association for the blind

THE TRAINEE'S RESPONSIBILITIES

Physical fitness is important because training is strenuous, especially for the older trainees. Applicants who have been accepted should exercise daily. Walking is particularly valuable.

A positive mental attitude is essential. During training, difficulties are sure to arise, and afterwards real commitment is called for if the partnership is to survive and prosper. Time and effort must be invested to obtain the benefits which are there to be taken.

Students are taught not only how to work their dogs and maintain the work of the unit at a safe level, but how to groom, feed and care for them. This remains their responsibility every day throughout their ownership of the dog.

Once training is completed, the staff of the centre are available to help and advise and Guide Dog Owners are encouraged to maintain close reporting contacts as early attention to a minor problem can often prevent it becoming more serious.

It is important to be aware that a Guide Dog does not necessarily meet the needs of everybody's expectations. It is a partnership with both dog and owner playing their part. The purpose for the owner to travel independently with a Guide Dog is to develop a relationship or bond with the dog, ensuring that its previous training is maintained and utilized to the advantage of the trainees independent mobility.

Once at home the first few months can be difficult and requires a great deal of motivation on the part of the new owner and to develop the dog to its full potential.

The Guide Dog is best utilized in environments where there are positive orientation clues for the owner, e.g. pavements, robots, curbs at street crossings and audible clues in the environment, e.g. traffic etc. The owner must have a safe area for the dog to relieve itself, preferably a fenced garden.

The cost of feeding and veterinary care of a Guide Dog is on average R250.00 per month. This is the responsibility of the owner. The dog must sleep inside the owner's home at night and an area in the home must be designated for this purpose.

Not all people like dogs. This is important to remember when living in accommodation that is not only utilized by the immediate family.

CONDITIONS OF ACCEPTANCE

The Association must be satisfied that they are physically and mentally fit to undergo the training involved and will use the dog for the purpose for which it is intended. That they will care for the dog and ensure its welfare at all times, that they are willing to undergo a course of training to qualify as a Guide Dog Owner and whilst at the Training Centre they will comply with the rules there and that when they have qualified they will sign a contract binding them to the proper use and care of the dog.

Many people with a degree of residual vision can use a Guide Dog successfully.

The Association reserves the right to reject any application for a Guide Dog without giving reasons for its decision.

HOW TO APPLY FOR A GUIDE DOG

Apply to the Training Manager. This can be done either by the blind person, social worker, the local welfare organization or anyone acting on the blind person's behalf. The address is, P.O. Box 67585, Bryanston, 2021.

When the form is received it must be completed, signed by the applicant or his mark witnessed, and then returned to the Training Centre.

A medical form is completed by the applicant's doctor and also returned to the Training Centre.

When the completed forms are received, and if there is no obvious reason why the applicant cannot be trained, the application is placed on file and arrangements made for an informal interview. Upon acceptance, the applicant will then be called as soon as possible for training.

APPLYING FOR A GUIDE DOG

Any person over the age of 16 who is blind, physically fit and free from other major disabilities can apply for a Guide Dog if he is prepared to undertake the necessary training. He will become the dog's owner on the successful completion of the course and a payment of a purely nominal sum of R5.00

Guide Dogs have brought untold freedom, mobility and companionship to their owners since the first dogs were trained in South Africa in 1953 and the number of working guide dogs in the country today, is climbing steadily towards 300. Many Guide Dog Owners lead full lives at work and in the community thanks to the seeing eyes provided by their faithful companions.

A Guide Dog is not the answer to every blind person's requirements. Those who have a serious loss of hearing or suffer from some major physical disability cannot normally be accepted for training with a dog. But many others can and for them a new life begins.

TRAINING

Training is as important for the prospective owner as it is for the dog, as the training of the dog will quickly break down if it is not handled and managed properly. Training for the owner usually consists of a stay at the Training Centre for three weeks, although as the Association continues to strengthen and obtain additional facilities, more opportunities for whole or part training from the applicant's home will be made available. Each system has pros and cons for the individual and is something which would normally be discussed at the interview with the instructor.

Most Guide Dogs are reared from breeding stock owned by the Association. As puppies, they are brought up in families known as Puppy Raisers, who ensure that they are thoroughly socialised and given some very basic obedience training. The young dogs return to the training centre when they are about a year old and for the next nine months are taught how to lead a blind person safely. By the time they are ready to be allocated to a blind person the trainer knows just about everything there is to know about the character and attributes of each of the dogs under his control. Applicants will also have been interviewed and assessed so that the centre is able to select the most suitable dog for them. This process is most important to the success of the working partnership and great care is taken to make the best possible match.

There are usually 4 to 6 students on each course and their 3 week residential training at the centre starts by learning about the responsibilities of dog ownership and the needs of a working dog. “Dummy runs” are carried out with an Instructor taking the part of the dog in order to get the new owner to practice handling and following without subjecting the dog to unnecessary stress. A day or two after arriving at the centre, students are introduced to their dogs, who from then on stay with their new owners, sleeping in their rooms, learning how to be friends and partners for the rest of the course and for many years to come. Inevitably, new owners are apprehensive about working with a dog. However, a feeling of freedom and independence rapidly materializes while the blind person is still under training at the centre. Confidence is gained from the instructors and other students, several of whom will be training with new dogs following the retirement of their old dogs.

At the end of the three weeks training, an Instructor returns home with the newly qualified Guide Dog Owner. Instructors do not stay in the home of the Guide Dog Owner, but at accommodation nearby. The Instructor helps the guide dog and its master to settle down to their new life together and provides assistance and advice on routes.

The Training Centre keeps in touch with Guide Dog Owners and regular visits will be made throughout the dogs working life to help maintain safe and competent standards. Instructors are always on call to help in an emergency or if unforeseen problems arise.

As the weeks pass, and more experience is gained, the Guide Dog Owner’s mobility will gradually increase. How far this goes will depend upon the individuals abilities and desire to get out into the world. Guide Dog Owners are encouraged to use their new found freedom to the full.

Over the years, much will depend on the Guide Dog Owner ensuring that the dog’s work remains at a high standard. Every well-trained animal looks to its master for instructions, and unless a guide dog receives clear commands, firm control and lots of praise when it is working well, the quality of its work will soon deteriorate. At times when something does go wrong, the dog will also have to be appropriately corrected.

HOW THE ASSOCIATION HELPS

The Association exists to provide a guide dog for as many blind people as can use them safely and will supply a fully trained Guide Dog to any suitable person (See Conditions of Acceptance), who completes the training programme successfully.

To ensure that no-one is deterred from having a Guide Dog on financial grounds, the Guide Dog Owner is asked to pay only **R5.00** for the dog.

Veterinary Surgeons do not normally charge for the four monthly examinations which the Association requires.

A Guide Dog does not need a licence.

Students are expected to pay their own fares to and from the Training Centre and contribute **R100.00** towards the cost of their board and lodging whilst undergoing training. However, sympathetic consideration is given to anyone likely to face financial difficulties through this requirement.