



SOUTH AFRICAN GUIDE-DOGS
association for the blind

APPLYING FOR A SOCIAL DOG

Social Dogs provide the loving, non-judgmental interaction known as pet-facilitated therapy. Social dogs help break the barriers of isolation for people with development disabilities. Some are placed in institutions to work with those who are lonely or emotionally troubled. Giving unconditional love and support is the Social Dog's daily task. Social Dogs are trained in a variety of surroundings and circumstances in order to enhance the quality of life for people with disabilities. This dog can help break the barriers of isolation for senior citizens, the ill, those with development disabilities or even an autistic child. A social Dog provides the unconditional love and friendship that sometimes humans can't.

Our training procedures are highly specialized. The dogs are trained in a variety of environments, including shopping malls, restaurants and other public places to prepare them for working in all types of situations.

Coming from carefully selected pedigreed stock, as puppies they are placed in volunteer homes with "Puppy Walkers" as we call them, to begin their first stages of training. After 12-14 months with the Puppy Walkers, the pup returns to the training centre to start with approximately six months advanced training. The skills and personalities of the dogs are thoroughly evaluated by the training staff, and each dog is matched and very carefully assessed before being placed..

Who qualifies to receive a Social Dog?

A person is eligible if he or she has limitations that can be overcome with the help of such a dog, and is capable of providing a secure and loving home. If this person, after application and an interview is successful, they must attend a two week training course at our training centre in Sandton, Johannesburg.

Any person who is socially challenged can apply for a Social Dog if he/she 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

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 1-2 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 that would normally be discussed at the interview with the instructor.

Most Social Dogs are reared from breeding stock owned by the Guide Dog Association. As puppies, they are brought up in families known as Puppy Walkers, who ensure that they are thoroughly domesticated and given some very basic training. The young dogs return to the training centre when they are about a year old and for the next six to nine months are taught how to assist people. By the time they are ready to be allocated to someone, 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 2-3 students on each course and their residential training at the centre starts by learning about the responsibilities of dog ownership and the needs of a working dog. 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. Confidence is gained from the Instructors and other students.

At the end of the training course an Instructor returns home with the newly qualified Social Dog Owner. The Instructor helps the Social Dog and it's master to settle down to their new life together and provides assistance and advice.

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

Over the years, much will depend on the Social Dog Owner ensuring that the dog's work remains at a high standard. Every well-trained animal looks to its master for a lead, and unless a Social Dog receives clear instructions, firm control and lots of praise when it is working well, the quality of it's work will soon deteriorate.

HOW THE ASSOCIATION HELPS

The Association aims to provide Social Dogs for as many people as can use them safely, and will supply a fully trained Social Dog to any suitable person who completes the training programme successfully.

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

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