

GUIDE DOGS OF THE DESERT

Position Overview

Job Title Apprentice Instructor
Reports to Deputy Director of Canine Operations

As an apprentice, you will be supervised by a licensed instructor in the training of “class ready” dogs and the instruction of student/dog teams.

An apprenticeship is generally 3 years in length but is not completed until the apprentice has successfully trained 22 student/dog teams under the supervision of a licensed instructor.

During the first year, the apprentice undergoes a week in blindfold, with a guide dog, while participating in class as a student.

You will also be involved in student applicant selection, interviews, follow ups and speaking engagements.

During your apprenticeship, you will be required to read an assortment of books on eye diseases, dog behavior, mobility tools and other subjects related to blindness and dog training. You will then be tested every six months on a different subject by the Deputy Director of Canine Operations.

After the completion of the apprenticeship, the apprentice undergoes a three-part testing process (written, oral and practical) through the California State Guide Dog Board. Successful completion of these tests will lead to a California license allowing the apprentice to operate in California. Unsuccessful test results may mean employment termination.

Requirements

- Perform kennel duties.
- Overnight dormitory stays while class is in session, along with some weekend hours. Working day and night hours are required in this position.
- Both day and night hours
- At least 18 years of age
- Good driving record
- Must be able to pass Livescan finger printing
- Good character
- Ability to work with clients who have disabilities other than blindness
- Ability to 30-80 pound dogs
- Good public and interpersonal communication skills
- Other duties as assigned

So You Want To Be A Guide Dog Trainer? --taken from the *PuppyPlace.com*

Many people have asked us how they can become Guide Dog trainers. Teaching a dog to guide someone, then teaching that someone to trust and work with the dog can be a very rewarding career. It is, by no means easy though. Here are just a few of the requirements most established guide dog training providers have for their trainer/instructors.

Excellent Physical Health, Stamina, A Background in Animal Training, A College Degree, The Ability to Teach or Coach, Good Public and Interpersonal Communication Skills

These are just the basics. How do you stack up? Guide Dog instructors must be a unique combination of major league athletic coach, social worker, animal behavioralist, mobility specialist, public relations expert and much more. In discussions with trainers, instructors and directors of training from several guide dog schools, here are just some of the things you can expect if you want to pursue this career.

Definitions

You may have noticed that We've used the terms "trainer" and "instructor" throughout the text so far. There is a difference between the two and that difference varies between schools, so for this text the terms can be interchangeable. Just in case you want to know though, the following definitions are broad based.

Trainer: a person who can work with dogs in training at every phase of guide work, including work with students, but who must still be supervised by an instructor.

Instructor: a person who can work, unsupervised, and can supervise others, in all phases of Guide Dog training.

Many schools require apprentices to pass a written and field test before becoming trainers, then another written and field test to become Instructors. California licenses their instructors with a state certifying test.

Apprenticeship

All established service dog training providers require that people interested in becoming trainers/instructors, serve an apprenticeship. The time period for this apprenticeship varies from program to program. An average of 2.5 years is standard with up to 4 years of apprenticeship work required by some programs.

Your tasks as an apprentice may vary depending on the school where you have been hired. In some programs, apprentices spend the entire first year working with the dogs themselves. You may teach and reinforce basic obedience, teach basic guiding concepts or walk dogs trained by another instructor for evaluation.

In other programs, you will take a dog from the time it enters the school for training as a guide and work with it and other dogs through the student selection, matching and training process. Each time you go through such a cycle, you are given more and more responsibility for the training of both dog and student.

As with any "new kid on the block," a Guide Dog apprentice trainer is the low man/woman on the totem pole. Apprentices work *very hard*. Be prepared for the initiation that comes with any type of physical job. No matter how much you know about training dogs when you enter your apprenticeship, consider yourself a rank amateur. Though many training experiences can prepare you for teaching dogs and blind people to work together, this is a unique field and anyone involved learns best by observing and keeping an open mind.

Getting Past the Application

Service dog training programs are non-profit businesses, existing on donations and grants from the general public and foundations. This means two things that you should seriously consider when thinking about becoming a trainer. Salaries in this field are very low for the amount of time and work you put in.

THERE! We said it! No one can now say they haven't been warned!

Though the field can be extremely rewarding, the non-profit sector pays far below what most college educated people expect to earn. A Guide Dog instructor's job doesn't end at 5:00 Friday evening.

Schools receive literally hundreds of applications per year. Vacancies are rare at most programs, so opportunities to break in are few and far between. You stand a better chance to be hired if you already work with the school in some capacity, such as a puppy raiser, puppy group leader or kennel worker.

The Physical Side of the Job

Imagine a 90 pound, energetic, one year old male Yellow Lab. Now imagine that you will walk him down the street at a controlled pace, allowing him to be out in front of you but not drag you along. You will now attempt to teach this dog to sit on command. Sure, he's had basic obedience, but he has just come to a new setting and is enjoying the raucous din of kennel life, rough housing with his buddies. You, the apprentice, must get him ready for the world of work as a guide.

Now imagine yourself putting the Yellow back in his kennel and taking out a 49 pound female Golden Retriever who seems very timid and shy. She walks slowly and carefully, but half way down your first block she sees a cat and darts toward it. Do you give her a hard leash correction or gently work her back past the distraction with an obedience routine? Let's say your next dog is a 60 pound, wiry female German Shepherd who thinks obedience is a game you, not she, should play.

Our point? Guide Dog trainers must work with a variety of dogs within a given size range. A great deal of walking and upper body strength is required to mold hyper young dogs into responsible workers. In the beginning, when working with dogs alone, this may not seem bad, but soon the apprentice must team dog training with people training. You can't leash correct your blind student, or give him/her a dirty look and expect the undesired behavior or wrong actions to stop. You must verbally communicate while physically managing to keep up with the dog. Many blind people laughingly remember their instructors as shy, indecisive apprentices who grew into their jobs. Coming out of yourself to work with both dogs and people is a special skill and not one to be taken lightly. A little humility also goes a long way toward becoming a good instructor.

The Other Things You Need to Know

Guide Dog instructors often represent the school at public functions, travel to conventions or other gatherings of blind people to promote the school or take part in school fund raising activities. Trainers must deal with public ignorance about petting, feeding or harassing Guide Dogs both while in training and while working with their blind handlers. Trainers field graduate questions and give lectures on dog care and equipment during classes. This means you'll need a lot of good public speaking and diplomacy skills.

Guide Dog instructors are giving blind people mobility tools. There is a sense of magic in the whole process of guide dog training, and yes, history has surrounded it with its own mythology, but when it comes down to it, you are building on someone's foundation of travel skills. Blind people should come to Guide Dog training with some abilities to travel independently. Everyone has differing levels of skill in this regard though.

Many apprenticeship and in-service training programs are now including information about technical orientation and mobility as taught by certified specialists in that field. These specialists, called orientation and mobility O and M specialists, also learn about guide dog training and how to work with people who use guide dogs as their primary means of mobility. This emerging relationship between two similar professions is definitely benefiting both.

Lastly, take a good look at why you want to become a Guide Dog trainer. So you really like to work with dogs. So you want to help the blind. So you think you can make someone's life better. OK, get ready for a reality check.

So You Like To Work With Dogs?

Some dogs don't make it through the training program. Some have health or behavior problems. Some will go to homes where they may be abused or neglected, a rarity, but always a possibility and reality. Dogs will die, be hit by cars or completely fail as guides no matter what you as a trainer have done with them and their blind handlers. In order to keep the cycle moving so more people can train with dogs, you may not be able to take as much time as you like teaching or may have to use methods, such as leash corrections rather than positive conditioning. You may question training techniques and disagree with them, but the truth still is that you must train and match and train again, dog after dog, person after person.

So You Want To Help The Blind?

First off, "the blind" is something that hangs in your bathroom. You will be working with people. These people will come in all sizes, shapes and colors with all manner of backgrounds and experiences. Some will be easy to work with and some will be jerks. As in any teaching relationship, people will test your patience and strength. Trust me, as one of your potential students, I don't want to work with someone who is doing this because he/she wants to help me. I want a partner in obtaining my goal of traveling with a dog. Obscure? Maybe, but trust me, if you give the impression you're here to take care of us or "help" us, we'll either tell you to take that self righteous attitude somewhere very unpleasant, or milk you for all you're worth.

So You Think That You Can Makes Someone's Life Better?

Now, We're not going to beat up on you about this point. Just how does a Guide Dog instructor make someone's life better? Yes, providing a safe, sound, well matched and well trained Guide Dog is one way. Other ways include being a good listener, a good teacher and a friend. Good teachers, friends and trusted ears are always valuable.

We know we've made the job of a trainer sound rather bleak, but trust us, those people we spoke with wanted you to know just how hard it is. They said they try to discourage people because the profession is so limited and openings are few. The work can be wonderfully rewarding and a long term educational experience though. Good luck and maybe we'll meet over a cup of coffee in the trainers' room of a guide dog school some day!

Guide Dog instructors are giving blind people mobility tools. Like the white cane and ADA ramps, guide dogs are a means of assisting the blind with getting around in their day-to-day lives.