

## Did You Know This About Service Dogs?

Learn about the hidden skills and surprising capabilities of service dogs, as well as the essential etiquette needed when encountering them.

### STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- While you may be tempted to greet every dog you see when you're out and about, resist the urge to pet a service dog — especially without asking
- Touching a service dog could distract him from his job; and depending on the owner's disability, the distraction could end up being life-threatening
- Even talking to the dog without the handler's permission can be dangerous; if you must strike up a conversation, address the handler — not the dog
- Always keep your own pets and children away from the service dog
- The exception is if a service dog comes up to you without its owner present and tries to get your attention; this could be the dog's way of alerting you that their owner needs help

There are an estimated 500,000 service dogs in the U.S. While this sounds like a lot, there are about 86 million Americans living with a disability, which means less than 1% of people with disabilities have a service dog.<sup>1</sup>

Still, you're likely to come across one occasionally — and knowing proper etiquette is important not only for the dog but also for its owner.

### Where Can Service Dogs Go?

People with disabilities are allowed to bring their service animals to all public facilities and private businesses. But while they may look and act like any other dog, they're tasked with very important work.

Even if it doesn't appear that a service dog is on the job, you should assume that he's on the lookout for signs of a problem at all times. Service dogs can assist with physical or mental difficulties, performing the following tasks:<sup>2</sup>

- Assisting individuals who are blind or have low vision with navigation and other tasks
- Alerting individuals who are deaf or hard of hearing to the presence of people or sounds
- Providing non-violent protection or rescue work
- Pulling a wheelchair
- Assisting an individual during a seizure
- Alerting individuals to the presence of allergens
- Retrieving items such as medicine or the telephone

- Providing physical support and assistance with balance and stability to individuals with mobility disabilities
- Helping persons with psychiatric and neurological disabilities by preventing or interrupting impulsive or destructive behaviors

With important tasks such as these, it's essential that service dogs are allowed to focus on their job — not be distracted by an interested passerby. While the Americans With Disabilities Act (ADA) does not require service animals to wear any specific harnesses or patches for identification,<sup>3</sup> many service animals wear vests that help them stand out.

## Service Dog Etiquette 101

While you may be tempted to greet every dog you see when you're out and about, resist the urge to pet a service dog — especially without asking. Touching a service dog could distract him from his job. And depending on the owner's disability, the distraction could end up being life-threatening.

Not only should you avoid trying to gain the service dog's attention in any way, but be sure children and other pets carefully respect the dog's space. "If you can identify that a service dog is walking toward you, either scoop your pup up in your arms, cross the road or keep your dog on a short leash so that you do not provide a distraction," Guide Dogs of America explains.<sup>4</sup>

Further, do not offer a service dog food, including treats, which are another distraction. Instead, keep your distance from the service dog and allow him to carry out his duties uninterrupted. Do not interfere or take part, even if it looks like they're sleeping or taking a break. Wyatt Regner, a certified service dog coach, told Blue Trunk Foundation:<sup>5</sup>

*"Some behaviors that may look like cute behaviors, or the dog's just seeking attention can actually be tasks that are mitigating a person's disability. For example, deep pressure therapy ... looks like a person sitting on the ground, and the dog is laying in their lap. It's really cute.*

*But that might be somebody who's having low blood pressure, or an anxiety attack, or is recovering from low blood sugar ... Everybody's tasks are going to be different. The big thing is just to ignore the dog, because you don't know if the dog is working or not."*

## Address the Handler, Not the Dog

It's generally best to let a service dog and their owner go about their business without interfering. "While service dogs are fascinating, the owner doesn't want to talk to everyone about her dog or condition," Guide Dogs of America points out. "Imagine every time you want to run a quick errand and 10 people stop you on the way to ask you questions. That would get old fast."<sup>6</sup>

But if you must strike up a conversation, address the handler — not the dog. You should always ask the handler before touching or interacting with the dog. But take no offense if the handler asks you not to — doing so could distract him from his important role, which is to look out for the health and safety of his owner. Even talking to the dog without the handler's permission can be dangerous.

"Most of the time [talking] just makes the dog excited. But for the handler that presents an issue in which they need to advocate for their dog. And that can be really stressful for some handlers, because it can feel like a situation of confrontation," Regner said.<sup>7</sup>

A good rule of thumb to follow, he says, is simply, “Don't look at the dog, don't touch the dog, and don't talk to the dog.”<sup>8</sup> And while you may ask about what types of tasks the dog can perform or how they help the handler, do not inquire about the person’s disability.

## What to Do if a Service Dog Approaches You

If a service dog approaches you, it’s OK to let the handler know, as this may be a behavior that needs to be corrected. But remember, Guide Dogs of America says, “Even though the dog is demanding your attention, ignore it and talk directly to the owner instead.”<sup>9</sup>

The exception is if a service dog comes up to you without its owner present and tries to get your attention. This could be the dog’s way of alerting you that their owner needs help. “In this instance, follow the dog. It will lead you to its owner,” Guide Dogs of America explains. “Identify the situation, and if necessary, call 911 immediately.”<sup>10</sup>

## Sources and References

<sup>1</sup> [Caplin News March 24, 2023](#)

<sup>2</sup> [ADA, Service Animals](#)

<sup>3</sup> [ADA, Frequently Asked Questions about Service Animals and the ADA](#)

<sup>4,6,9,10</sup> [Guide Dogs of America, Best Practices When Around a Service Dog](#)

<sup>5,7,8</sup> [Blue Trunk Foundation July 11, 2022](#)

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