

Our Dogs' Jobs: Companion Dogs, Therapy Dogs, Service Dogs, Emotional Support Animals

GAC trains all of our dogs with the primary and fundamental goal of being good canine citizens. This is more than a matter of successfully teaching a set of commands. It also involves teaching a wide range of behaviors, familiarizing the dog as much as possible to its target environment, establishing the sense of a firm human bond, and developing attentiveness in general and the recognition of "work time".

Dogs have a special relationship to humans; indeed, dogs would not exist without past human intervention. So it is easy to imagine that a dog has an innate interest in doing useful things for its human partner(s) -- essentially a job or jobs. We believe, and observe, that dogs enjoy working and doing their jobs successfully -- it is, quite literally, their reason for being. (It is also, literally, why animal rights activists have no argument in relation to dogs -- dogs are, again literally, in their "natural" element in the company and service of humans).

Companion Dogs

Also known as 'pets', companion dogs will thrive with emotional bonds to its adopting family, responsibilities as a good family member, and with at least some small jobs. As noted above, we teach dozens of behaviors, including all the basic obedience commands. We provide basic materials for adopters to learn how to invoke and reinforce those commands, but do not perform any specific training of adopters. We encourage adopters to attend and pay careful attention to the dogs' performances, and to speak with their inmate trainer about both training and any idiosyncrasies of their newly-adopted family member.

Greyhounds make wonderful companion dogs because of both their nature and their training. They can adapt themselves to virtually any family environment, and are safe, clean, and responsive. Greyhounds are as a rule gentle and quiet. They seldom initiate destructive behaviors, and as close to humans as they like to be, will seldom overreact to an emotional outbreak by even its closest human. They require little care, little exercise, and are quite forgiving. We can confidently place most greyhound graduates with healthy seniors, and/or with people living in penthouse apartments.

A large majority of our graduates could pass the AKA Canine Good Citizenship test, if they were to take it with one of our inmate trainers. We encourage adopters to learn as much as possible, and to take and pass that test with their dog if possible. We can often help arrange training, and the test itself if you request it. If you aspire to do therapy dog work, you will likely need to pass the equivalent of this test in some form.

We always encourage our graduates' families to take them out on all occasions where it is reasonable. Dogs love to be with their family, and it is a chance to build a stronger bond. But the dogs also love to work, and being in public is a cue to them that they are 'working'. So it is a chance to strengthen and extend their commands, behaviors and general citizenship. It is a natural way to build a dog that is comfortable with itself in all situations, and one in which you are comfortable. Overall, the relationship builds to a very special level.

Therapy Dogs

Think of therapy dogs as extending their jobs and usefulness beyond their immediate adoptive family (pack, if you will). Therapy dogs serve a variety of audiences, the most common of which are assisted living, nursing home, and hospital venues. But greyhounds also excel as 'reading dogs', to whom budding and/or learning disabled children can read aloud with interest but without judgment.

GAC has placed many dogs that have gone on to become therapy dogs of one form or another. Many are involved in programs like the above. In addition, some work at veterinarian or psychologist offices. We have graduated a tripawd (three-legged) therapy dog who spends each school day at a school for disabled children.

There are several organizations that provide memberships for therapy dogs that include insurance and scheduled appointments for visiting facilities, etc. Most of them require testing of a dog/trainer pair to qualify. For the most part, the testing has two parts: the first is roughly equivalent to the AKA Canine Good Citizenship test; and the second is controlled access to a facility where additional tests, such as making sure the dog can calmly and quietly pass other therapy animals and medical equipment in a narrow hallway passage, etc.

We at GAC like nothing better than to see our graduates out working as therapy dogs, and as far as we know, a significant percentage of graduates do. We know then that they are happy doing their jobs, and are getting exposure to a much more interesting life. And we know that it means they are exercising their citizenship skills on a regular basis. It means a happy dog, and happy family, and brings happy moments to others.

Institutional Therapy Dogs

Greyhounds are the perfect institutional dogs. That is one reason they are so well suited to the prison training program. But because of their good manners, cleanliness, quietness (most bark only while asleep if at all), and low maintenance requirements, we think they

make great institutional therapy dogs as well. It is a goal that we plan to pursue in the future.

We have placed one institutional therapy dog at a home for those suffering MS and similar conditions. We think that (trained) greyhounds would make ideal therapy dogs in nursing homes and memory units. Their maintenance is low enough for such institutions to handle. How wonderful might it be to have the hound(s) around for support 24/7 when people need them, rather than a bunch of dogs scheduled for a few hours a week or month?

Service Dogs

This section is required reading for those potential adopters looking for a service dog. It describes GAC's capabilities and limitations in helping to prepare a service dog. It also describes the remainder of the commitment that will be required by the adopter.

It is GAC's opinion that a service dog cannot be entirely prepared in prison. We have no difficulty in teaching all required commands, including commands specialized to various personal conditions and disabilities. But all service dogs need public access training, and all service dogs must be transitioned from their professional trainer to their adopter. GAC cannot complete all aspects of public access training in prison, and we cannot provide the critical transition training with the person in whose service the dog will be. Nor can we consistently provide the post-placement support that is often necessary. We have partnered with organizations and individual trainers to do that in the past, and we will do that again. But in many cases, the adopter will need to arrange for such further training themselves. We may or may not be able to help in arranging such training.

GAC service training builds upon the same set of fundamental citizenship behaviors that we teach for companion and therapy dogs. However, these behaviors must be consolidated and be reliable a high percentage of the time.

Then we must extend the dog's training. By their nature, adult greyhounds are quiet. With simple training, the majority will not react to other animals when in human company in public. We can easily train dogs to adapt themselves to public places, such as lying under a table to keep aisles and walkways clear. We will automatically teach a set of such commands to any dog endeavoring to become a service dog. As an example, almost all service dogs will need to learn variations of the "touch" command, whether that be to point, to nudge a person, to turn a switch, etc.

By law a service dog must provide one special service, or command, that aids its human with an activity that the person is not able to perform. We encourage teaching more than one. In any case, we will work out a customized set of goals before the dog starts specialized training.

This will mean 'pre-work' before the dog arrives. In round one, we will ask what behaviors are required. We and the institution's trainers will review for two purposes: to determine if we can meet the requirements (given a suitable dog); and if so, to formulate at least one more round of questions aimed at strictly defining the stimulus and the required response. The stimulus might be a command or cue, or it might be a condition in its environment which the dog is expected to detect, such as a person demonstrating signs of a nightmare, or a specific smell or sound. It is critical that we have these tasks well defined as soon as possible in relation to training, as planning is required, especially when training is in a prison environment.

You will see below that we have significant limitations in both stimuli and response. For example, we cannot bring in any object considered contraband, so electronics, sharp objects, biological samples, many medicines, and anything requiring temperature control cannot be used. In some cases, we can suggest substitutions which are suitable. In other cases, we can suggest substitutions which will teach a dog a type of stimulus and a response. This leaves followup training with a professional trainer much shorter and easier as long as we properly document the techniques used so that they can be repeated with the actual stimulus required.

Further on, you will find a short list of specialty dogs; in each case we know a set of useful commands to use as a starting point for specific training for that job.

While we can perform some limited public access training, we cannot do it reliably, nor can we gain access to many environments and facilities. For example, we can emulate public walkways, and perhaps stage people with (limited) snacks, but we cannot emulate a city street, outdoor cafe, food vendors or a farmer's market. We might occasionally get access to the mess hall, but we cannot emulate many, if any, restaurant settings. We might (but not reliably) access kitchen facilities, but cannot emulate grocery stores, or any stores for that matter. We can provide access to low stairs and a ramp, but we cannot provide access to escalators, elevators, or large indoor environments like airports or malls. We cannot prepare a dog for its first trip into a supermarket, etc. We believe that approximately half of public access training needs to happen primarily (soon) after leaving prison, and is best overlapped with transition training.

We cannot provide transition training in our current facilities simply because we cannot provide enough access for even our volunteers to spend enough time inside the prison, never mind an

untrained visitor. And if we could, it would violate security, since it involves a visitor spending way too much time with an inmate.

This is not to say that we cannot help, and that the prison and the inmate trainers do not want to help. In fact, such efforts have been made successfully in the past. And it is important for several reasons. First, preparing a service dog today typically costs tens of thousands of dollars, and after that, cannot guarantee success in all cases. We can substantially, even dramatically, reduce that cost. In addition, we have at any one time, multiple dogs that are capable of going on to become excellent service dogs -- they have both the temperament and the aptitude. It also provides the opportunity for advanced training techniques for our inmate trainers -- more experience and valuable skills for life in free society. It provides a sense of accomplishment and "giving back" that becomes a part of the trainer's life.

So particularly for people who are dealing with conditions for which greyhounds have the perfect temperament, our program can be a financial enabler. We have, and are willing to, keep a dog as much as a full second session to consolidate training and add new, custom commands, if necessary.

Ultimately, preparing a service dog is a long and complex undertaking, and in the prison setting, we can only provide part of that solution. It is a substantial part, and it lays the foundation, but the adopter must be prepared to work with an experienced professional trainer, local to them, to finish public access and transition training. In some cases, we may be able to help the adopter find and/or qualify a trainer for this purpose. GAC also prefers that there be a local greyhound adoption organization local to the adopter, though this has been waived in some cases. Please note that this follow-up work is a large commitment of time and money; it will cost many times what GAC's adoption partners will charge for the dog. In the end, though, the total cost of obtaining a truly qualified service dog will typically be significantly lower than by any other means of which we are aware. Also please note that GAC needs to see proof of that commitment to avoid "wasting" our most confident and highly educable dogs. This is an open-ended requirement, and we need to discuss each case individually.

In the future, we hope to expand our program to other institutions such as halfway houses, at which point we may be able to provide much, but probably not all, of the additional training for our prison graduates. This will provide similar benefits to all involved, and again significantly reduce the cost of a truly qualified dog.

Below is a short description of some of the specialties to which greyhounds are well-suited in service. Please note that many of these specialties fall into the category of Psychiatric Service

Dog, which the disabilities laws tend to discuss separately from the type of Service Dog that helps with physical (sight, hearing and mobility) disabilities. While greyhounds are not limited to such specialties, there are certain disabilities to which they are not suited: sight dogs, because of the starting age of their training; mobility services that involve bracing, because of their build and conformation; etc.

PTSD Dogs: These dogs must be very versatile, and have great confidence and emotional stability. They may be called upon to perform such varying services as scout ahead, turn on lights, nudge a sleeper having nightmares, provide a visible block to surrounding people if the partner requires, etc. They must be emotionally secure to handle situations in which the partner may lock himself or herself away temporarily. And they must remain independent enough to stay stable and focused when their (bonded) partner is not.

Autism / Asperger's Dogs: These dogs also have a broad but smaller set of potential duties, including helping socialize, to alerting of events that need attention. Also acts as therapy dog.

Hearing Dogs: We can perform the basics of detecting and alerting to specific sounds, but will be limited in those sounds as well as in some cases, the form of alert. For example, the highest form of contraband in many prisons is a phone, so we cannot use that sound. But teaching the concept of alerting to a sound will vastly reduce the further specific training needed, thereby shortening the total time and greatly reducing the cost. In addition, the dog will have learned superior citizenship skills as well, increasing the arena in which they can perform the role.

Scent Dogs, including blood sugar: In a similar way, we cannot train a dog to scent many specific items, such as low or high sugar; but we can teach a dog to alert to some scent that is permitted in prison. This will substantially shorten the training to the specific scent required after prison. And again, your dog will learn much more than *just* scent training.

There are many publications dealing with the definition and qualification of Service Dogs. We recommend starting with government websites and publications, as in our opinion, some of the other sources are in the business of making money by essentially misleading disabled individuals, while at the same time overwhelming the public with unqualified service animals, which inevitably leads to hurting legitimate ones.

Emotional Support Animals

An Emotional Support Animal is essentially a (lesser) alternative to a Psychiatric Service Dog. Covered by different laws, the primary original thrust of ESA laws was to assure that persons with “mental” or psychiatric conditions could maintain animals that provide comfort in their home -- even if that home was in a form of housing that would otherwise ban that animal. Today, the laws provide for commercial air travel as well.

There are, of course, differences between a PSD and an ESA under the law. The ESA is not required to perform any services or commands. In fact, the ESA is not required to be trained, or have public access training. It needs only demonstrate “reasonable” behavior in public. Unlike a PSD or SD, the ESA owner must have a note from a licensed psychiatrist indicating that the person has a disability and that the ESA provides some relief from that disability. That note may be demanded by a landlord, HOA, or airline before they need to comply.

As you might imagine, there are many gray areas surrounding ESAs, and even more controversy than surrounds PSDs. If anything, even more people have taken advantage of ESA laws to bring obviously unqualified animals on planes than have PSDs. This is causing justified controversy not just with landlords, HOAs and airlines, but with residents and passengers.

Nonetheless, if an ESA makes sense for you, and you can demonstrate that you are qualified, we will work with you to provide a solid performing dog for such use. We will focus on citizenship skills and those parts of public access training that we have the environment to support. Of course, we will also be sure to teach ‘lap’ and ‘give kiss’ as well! But we will encourage you to hire a trainer to complete, at some reasonable level, public access training that will cover the likely destinations and environments that your dog will need to navigate, especially those required to get to and through an airport if you anticipate that requirement.

Dogs today happily serve humans in many different jobs. They still perform in traditional roles such as hunting. But they also work in search and rescue, law enforcement, security, health care, and in a broad range of service to individuals. This makes for happy dogs and better people. We are proud to be part of that extended tradition, and we have the same goals -- happy dogs and better people, including the inmate trainers. This document is not intended to discourage the reader. It is intended to educate the reader to the reality of the required preparation, and to provide an honest picture and assessment of the time, money, and work that goes into preparing a dog for each type of job. It is time, money and work that is well spent; and the journey in this case is part of the reward. But it cannot be ignored or bypassed with success.