

The buddy system



Service dogs help with everyday tasks and offer companionship to people with MS.

by Mike Knight

In 1928, “Buddy,” a specially trained German Shepherd, stunned a group of reporters who had gathered to watch as he guided his blind owner, Morris Frank, across a busy New York City street, becoming the first “seeing eye” dog in the United States. Over time, the role of “service” dogs has expanded from guiding the blind to becoming active assistants capable of performing an array of tasks for people with disabilities—including people with multiple sclerosis.

Help with everyday tasks

Specially trained to support the special needs of people with MS, service dogs can assist with all kinds of everyday tasks, including:

- Helping people get in and out of chairs and beds by bracing them for balance
- Assisting people to/from the bathroom and shower
- Picking up items from the floor or ground
- Opening doors
- Pulling wheelchairs
- Pushing elevator buttons
- Seeking help when it is needed
- Helping people get dressed and undressed
- Turning lights on or off
- Providing support after a fall

- Fetching smaller items from other rooms
- Knowing when its owner is tiring, then nudging him or her toward a chair or a wall for support

First and foremost, service dogs are trained to assist and serve their owners. But in addition to the long list of tasks they help with, their unflagging companionship and love are often invaluable benefits.

Training a service dog

The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) defines service dogs as “dogs that are individually trained to do work or perform tasks for people with disabilities.” While there is no governing body regulating how service dogs are trained, Assistance Dogs International, Inc., (assistancedogsinternational.org), an international coalition with members representing assistance dog programs from around the world, offers accreditation to organizations that meet peer-reviewed operational standards of excellence.

MS service dogs may be trained by:

- The owner/trainer
- Professional trainers
- Service dog organizations

How to find a service dog

Trained service dogs are available from a number of organizations. Though costs to recipients vary, according to Paws With A Cause, a Michigan-based not-for-profit that breeds, trains and places service dogs, “The sponsorship to breed or rescue, raise, train, place an assistance dog and provide ongoing team support exceeds \$30,000.”

If you are interested in obtaining a service dog, expect to complete a needs assessment, and, because demand is high, expect a waiting period to qualify for and receive a trained service dog.

The following organizations are good places to start your search for a service dog:

- Assistance Dogs International, Inc. (assistancedogsinternational.org) provides a searchable directory of accredited trainers and training programs by state, region or country.
- My Assistance Dog, Inc., (myassistancedoginc.org), provides a list of service dog training resources.
- Not-for-profit organizations and foundations, including Paws With A Cause, (pawswithacause.org), National Education for Assistance Dog Services, (NEADS.org), Canine Partners for Life, (k94life.org), Pet Partners, (petpartners.org) and Assistance Dog United Campaign, (assistancedogunitedcampaign.org) offer resources.
- Private foundations, including the Bryan & Amanda Bickell Foundation

(bickellfoundation.org), and the Foundation for Service Dog Support, Inc. (servicedogsupport.org), are among the private foundations that provide specially trained MS service dogs.

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