

## Service Animal Etiquette

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Although the use of guide dogs for the blind and visually impaired has been around for thousands of years, the term seeing-eye dog was coined in 1929 by the Seeing Eye, Inc. of Morristown, N.J., the first guide dog school in America. The term was taken from Proverbs 20:12 in the Bible: The seeing eye, the hearing ear; The Lord hath made them both. After World War I, a special school in Germany began training dogs as companions, protectors, and guides to help blinded veterans.

The German Shepard was the first breed used to assist blind and visually impaired people. The breed has the size, strength and intelligence to safely and surely guide their handlers almost anywhere they need to go.

Today the term service animal is more common as many species of animals now are trained to assist people with various types of disabilities. Monkeys, pot-bellied pigs, miniature horses and cats, as well as many breeds of dogs, now perform these specialized tasks. In addition to leading the blind and vision impaired, service animals also alert the deaf or hard of hearing and provide therapeutic companionship to the elderly and those with emotional and mental health disorders. They also detect the onset of seizures and diabetes attacks by alerting their handlers who can then safely respond or prepare, thereby avoiding injury.

Service animals perform a wide array of other services for the physically disabled. Monkeys and dogs, for instance, help their physically disabled handlers retrieve items, pull wheelchairs, open and close doors and drawers and operate light switches.

As more and more human service uses are found to strengthen the partnership between man and beast, it becomes more important to inform and educate the general public about proper etiquette and conduct when encountering someone with a service animal.

First, always keep in mind that a service animal is **not** a pet when “on duty.” Service animals are trained to ignore all kinds of distractions and always to be alert for possible dangers. This requires a considerable amount of concentration, coordination and communication between the individual and the service animal. Depending on the owner’s preference and/or the animal’s temperament, a service animal may be treated as a pet once at home, out of its uniform (harness or service vest) and officially “off duty.”

Another often-broken rule is to always speak to the individual and not the animal. It’s important to remember that the working animal is a tool, not a pet, and to respect that role. It is best initially to ignore a service animal so it can focus on its companion. Never speak to or touch the service animal without first asking permission and don’t be offended if you are asked not to pet the animal. Don’t call to or make sounds to attract the attention of a working service animal. These and other types of distractions can, over time, interfere with training retention and cause obedience problems.

Never feed or offer food to a service animal. Although trained to resist such temptations, even the best-trained animal when tempted frequently or persistently enough can yield to that temptation. While distracted in this way, a service animal can potentially put its handler at risk. In addition, animals, like people, can have sensitivities to certain foods and become ill if fed without permission.

It is becoming more and more common to encounter service animals at work as we go about our daily routines. By learning how to react and conduct ourselves around these special animals and their companions, we can both appreciate and support the independence these animals bring to so many people.