Service Animal Trainer Encyclopedia Article

Service Animal Trainer

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The Americans with Disabilities Act describes a service animal as any dog or other animal individually trained to provide assistance to a disabled human. Service animals perform some of the functions and responsibilities of a human without disabilities. For example, seeing eye dogs lead the blind through their environment, and hearing dogs alert their hearing-impaired owners to relevant sounds. Other examples include dogs that direct wheel-chairs, fetch and carry items for mobility-impaired people, provide balance for unsteady people, monitor their owners for signs of a seizure, or provide therapeutic companionship.

Police dogs are service animals trained to recognize the scent of illegal substances such as drugs or gunpowder. They are also employed in locating missing persons, tracking down fugitives, and controlling jail riots. Search and rescue dogs are utilized on ski slopes, glacier parks, and mountains to seek out people who are injured or lost. They can be trained to rescue drowning people, pull a sled, deliver medications, or provide warmth for someone with hypothermia. Training teaches these dogs to be reliably calm and obedient in extreme situations.

Although not required, a background in animal behavior would benefit all animal trainers. Through a certification training program, or by apprenticing with a skilled trainer, anyone can acquire the qualifications necessary to train service dogs for impaired humans. The training program familiarizes students with concepts of classical conditioning, positive reinforcement, and operant conditioning, all of which involve reward, punishment, and emotional support for the animal.

Conversely, each state or country defines the requirements for becoming a police dog trainer. Most programs require a minimum amount of time as a police canine handler, completion of an instructor development program, written recommendation from other police canine trainers, additional coursework, and successful prior training of several service animals. Classes that offer certification the training of search and rescue dogs are open to anyone. The skill takes many years to master. In each of these cases, a strong relationship needs to form between the handler and the canine companion.

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