
Vision loss - training guide dogs

Summary

- Guide dogs help people who are blind or vision impaired to achieve freedom and independence.
 - It costs on average around \$30,000 and takes up to two years to specially breed, raise and train a working guide dog.
 - By law, guide dogs are permitted to travel on public transport, including taxis, and are allowed inside all public places such as restaurants and hotels.
 - Do not distract a working guide dog in harness.
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Guide dogs enable people who are blind or vision impaired to achieve independence and mobility. Guide dogs are specially bred and trained to work with their handler as a team, safely guiding them where they need to go. Guide dogs may also be referred to as seeing eye dogs or dog guides.

The Labrador is the preferred breed for a guide dog throughout the world. Labradors are responsive, intelligent and placid dogs that learn quickly. It costs on average around \$30,000 and takes up to two years to breed, raise and train a working guide dog.

Guide dogs are provided free of charge to all Victorians who are blind or vision impaired. Referrals can be made by health practitioners or directly by the person who is experiencing vision loss. In Victoria, there are two stand-alone organisations that provide this service: Guide Dogs Victoria and Seeing Eye Dogs Australia.

Guide dog mobility

Guide dog mobility enables the vision-impaired handler to walk freely and feel confident. Independent mobility is essential to make sure a person with vision impairment is able to enjoy the same rights, responsibilities and freedoms as anyone else in their community.

A guide dog is trained to work in a range of situations and a variety of settings including residential, city and rural areas. The handler can be confident that their guide dog will:

- recognise obstacles in their path and guide the handler safely around them
- have good traffic awareness and safety
- understand and respond to commands such as 'forward', 'straight to the curb', 'find the door' and 'find the counter'
- be intelligently disobedient, if necessary – for example, ignore an unsafe command
- ignore distractions and not react to other dogs, even if attacked
- guide the person to safely use public transport.

A legal right to access

A person with vision impairment using a guide dog has a legal right to travel on all forms of public transport and enter all public places with their dog. This includes taxis, planes, food shops and restaurants. In this way, the guide dog handler enjoys the same rights as a person with full vision.

People with partial vision can also benefit

In Victoria, guide dogs are available to anyone who experiences difficulty with mobility as a result of vision loss. A person does not have to be totally blind to be eligible for a guide dog. In fact, only a small percentage of guide dog handlers are totally blind. The majority have some degree of residual (partial) vision.

Guide dog handlers

Prospective guide dog handlers may be:

- school age or university students
- parents with young families
- people who are employed full time, part time or are not in the workforce
- seniors
- people from non-English speaking (NES) backgrounds.

However, handlers need to be sufficiently mature to provide the guide dog with the necessary leadership and be physically able to manage and care for the dog.

A successful working partnership

The working life of a guide dog is, on average, around eight to ten years. A guide dog provides constant support and companionship throughout its working life. It is vital that a close relationship is formed between the dog and its handler.

Time and care is taken to profile the behavioural traits of each dog in training to ensure that every guide dog match has the best chance to form a strong and successful mobility partnership. The guide dog must also complement the handler's personal characteristics and suit their individual mobility needs.

How guide dogs are trained

Guide dogs are trained through leadership and positive reinforcement. They are praised when they show the desired behaviour. The dog learns many commands, including disobeying a command if its handler (the person who is vision impaired) has not heard approaching traffic. Each dog is trained to recognise the height and width of its handler so as to guide them to avoid obstacles such as overhanging trees.

In Victoria, guide dog training includes the following steps:

- Guide dog assessment – each guide dog must pass a rigorous physical and temperamental assessment at around 12 months of age.
- Intensive guide dog training – the guide dog undergoes five months of intensive training at a special training centre.
- Intensive handler training – the guide dog handler attends the training centre for one month of intensive training with their guide dog. A combination of practical and educational sessions help them to learn how to care for their dog, gain the dog's respect and develop the skills and confidence they need to work successfully with their guide dog.
- Supported orientation to their local environment – the guide dog team is supported to settle into their own home and an instructor will ensure they become familiar with their local environment. They will learn how to safely negotiate their most often-used travel and transport routes for work, shopping and personal needs.

Follow up and support is provided throughout the working life of each guide dog. Guide Dog Mobility Instructors are also available to help the guide dog team address other mobility challenges such as a change of environment in a new home or job.

Meeting a person with a guide dog

Guide dogs are responsible for making sure that their vision-impaired handler travels safely around the community. They need to be quiet, well-behaved, non-aggressive and clean at all times. Despite the challenges they face every day, guide dogs enjoy their work and the rewards of love and company they receive from their vision-impaired companion.

A guide dog isn't always 'on duty'. When its body harness is removed, the dog understands that it can relax and play like any family pet. However, for the safety of the handler, you should never distract a guide dog while it is working.

General cautions include:

- Don't pat a guide dog while in harness, even if they are sitting or lying down.
- Talk to the handler, not the guide dog.
- Don't whistle to a guide dog or intentionally distract it from work.
- Don't offer food.
- Keep your own dog on a leash, away from the guide dog and under effective control.

Where to get help

- Your doctor
- Your optometrist or ophthalmologist
- Guide Dogs Victoria Tel. (03) 9854 4444
- The Guide Dogs Association in your state or territory Tel. 1800 804 805
- Seeing Eye Dogs Australia Tel. (03) 9381 6400

Things to remember

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Guide Dogs Victoria

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