

Training a Psychiatric Service Dog

Using a Psychiatric Service Dog (PSD) to mitigate your disability is a choice. You alone must determine if using a PSD fits your lifestyle – and budget. Having a PSD is like having a small child: you are responsible to provide all of its needs, because it cannot take care of itself. It will significantly impact your daily routine. The benefits in using a PSD far outweigh any inconveniences you will experience along the way.

Give my background with Sweet Pea

The preliminaries:

- Two basic choices for acquiring a PSD: a dog from a formal program or obtaining a suitable candidate and owner-training the dog
- Programs often have waiting lists, can be expensive, breed choice can be limited
- Owner-trained PSD can be any breed, size or activity level that meets your needs
- Program dogs are usually adult dogs placed with you after task training is completed, may not be able to cue you to changes in physiology (developed during the bonding process)
- Most owner-trained PSD are acquired as a puppy or young dog, providing handler involvement from the earliest stages of training, thus facilitating the bond and trust necessary for a successful therapeutic partnership
- Your PSD, over time, learns your baseline behavior and can alert you when your behavior deviates from baseline, allowing you to choose how to mitigate your symptoms
- Obtain appropriate supportive documentation for using a PSD – critical in case of a legal problem in the future
- Discuss your interest in a PSD with your therapist or medical provider. Ask for a generic letter of disability and support to keep in your files
- See www.psychdog.org/faq.html#doctor for what the letter should and should NOT say
- Commit to bringing your PSD with you, everywhere you go, at least 90% of the time, preferably more
- Socialize your dog extensively with other dogs and humans
- Find a professional trainer and establish a business contract spelling out your work together – necessary for documenting your training process
- Work one-on-one with a professional trainer – he or she is training YOU how to train your dog – using a training method that works for you and your dog
- Learn basic obedience commands first;
- AKC Canine Good Citizen test
- Start training for public access skills at dog-friendly places (PetSmart, outdoor cafes, etc.) before going to places where pets are generally prohibited
- Service Dog in Training versus full-fledged Service Dog – don't rush the process

The nitty-gritty:

- What do I want – or need – my PSD to do for me?
- SD can do double duty – hearing dog and PSD, for example
- Natural alerts versus trained behaviors – the work/task debate
- Four types of work: engaging handler's cognitive behavioral skills, leveraging the dog's natural senses, prompting handler to engage mind/body regulatory approaches, and restoration of functioning by virtue of the dog's existence (controversial at this time – DOJ does not currently acknowledge in the ADA)
- Look for any natural alerting behaviors that you can shape and reinforce
- List your five most debilitating symptoms – you can add to or refine the list later
- Must be a valid symptom characteristic of your disorder (as listed in the DSM-IV-TR)
- Determine what tasks or work can mitigate each symptom (see below for where you can find some examples, and go from there)
- Work with your trainer in determining an effective way to teach tasks
- Describe, step-by-step, how you interact with your dog in a way that mitigates the symptom; do this for each item on your list
- Keep initial training sessions short – 10 to 15 minutes, two to three times a day, gradually increasing the length of each session as necessary
- Work on reinforcing ALL training – obedience, Public Access and work/tasks – on a daily basis to keep skills sharp and to train for new situations/symptoms as they occur
- Network with other PSD users for training tips and support
- Learn to think and act like a behaviorist to get the most from your PSD partnership

References/Resources:

Psychiatric Service Dog Society - www.psychdog.org (see FAQ and Training tabs, whole web site contains valuable information)

Notes for new PSD handlers - www.psychdog.org/caution.html

Volhard Temperament Test - www.volhard.com/pages/pat.php

Animal Behavior Society - <http://animalbehaviorsociety.org>

Trainable tasks for your PSD - www.psychdog.org/tasks.html and www.psychdog.org/veterans2.html (can apply to non-veterans as well)

Choosing the Right Dog (article) - www.psychdog.org/lifestyle_ChoosingDog.html

Help in selecting a dog breed - <http://dogtime.com/matchup/start>, www.dogbreedinfo.com, www.dogster.com/breeds and www.k9country.com/perl/dogBreed.pl.

The Bottomline: PSDS Owner-Training Standard

1. "Choosing the Right Dog," by Veronica Morris, PhD.
2. **Highest Probability of Success:** Start with an 8 week-old purebred puppy from a show breeder.
Lowest Probability of Success: If you plan on using a rescue dog, please seek professional guidance when selecting the dog. Otherwise, there is a high probability that the dog will not be able to complete the very demanding service dog training.
3. **Document** all of the training that you are doing with your dog. You will need this documentation in case of a serious legal challenge. Keep these documents in your personal legal files at home. You can document training either electronically or in a bound notebook.
4. Complete a minimum of four months of documented, 'professionally-supervised' **basic obedience instruction** to include:
 - extensive socialization w/people & dogs, sit, stay, down, come, heel, up, off, leave-it, back, human steps-over the dog, tail tuck (low distraction, high distraction, verbal commands, hand signals, on/off leash).
5. Complete the requirements for The American Kennel Club (AKC) **Canine Good Citizen** (see www.akc.org/events/cgc/)
6. Complete at least six months of **public access training** that incorporates the principles described in the PSDS Public Access Standard located here: www.psychdog.org/publicaccess.html
7. Pass the PSDS **Public Access Test, administered by a professional dog trainer**. On the same page as our Public Access Standard (see above) there is a PDF score sheet that converts our public access standard to a public access test. Any professional dog trainer can administer this test. It is strongly recommended that this test be documented on video for your legal files. Burn it to a DVD if possible.
8. Complete **disability-related assistance training**. This may take the form of:
 - overt physical **tasks** performed by the dog on command (i.e., picking up dropped items, lead handler to a safe place, help find keys or telephone);
 - **work** that engages the handler's cognitive behavioral skills (i.e., dog alerts to the onset of hypomania when handler has Bipolar Disorder)
 - **work** that leverages the dog's natural response to its immediate environment for the purpose of reality-testing (i.e., hallucination discernment when handler has Schizophrenia, assess environment for perceived physical threat)
 - **work** that prompts the handler to engage mind/body regulatory approaches (i.e., controlled deep breathing exercises with the dog when handler has Panic Disorder)
 - **work** and restoration of functioning by virtue of the dog's existence (controversial at this time – DOJ does not currently acknowledge in the ADA)
9. The process of training your service dog typically takes at least **one year**.

SERVICE DOGS AND THE LAW

THE BASICS:

- The law applies to the human, not the dog. A dog, without a handler is not a SD. When the dog is partnered with a handler, it becomes a SD partnership
- Service dogs are covered under several laws, depending upon where you are and what you are doing.
- Federal laws: Americans With Disabilities Act, Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, Federal Property Management Regulations Title 41, the Fair Housing Act, and the Airline Carrier Access Act
- Each state has its own laws regarding Service Dogs.

THE NITTY GRITTY:

1. The Americans With Disabilities Act (ADA) only covers full-fledged Service Dogs, not Service Dogs in Training.
 - a. The ADA now specifically includes Psychiatric Service Dogs. The ADA defines “service animal” as any dog that is individually trained to do work or perform tasks for the benefit of an individual with a disability, including a physical, sensory, psychiatric, intellectual, or other mental disability.
 - b. Title II addresses non-discrimination on the basis of disability in state and local government services.
 - c. Title III addresses non-discrimination on the basis of disability by public accommodations and in commercial facilities.
 - d. Nonprofit organizations, religious entities, and private clubs (where you have to pay a membership fee and the general public is not permitted) are specifically excluded from the ADA.
2. Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 is a national law that applies to employers and organizations that receive Federal funds. It protects qualified individuals from discrimination based on their disability. This includes schools, and universities, hospitals, mental health clinics and public (subsidized) housing. It also applies to the Post Office, some federal buildings and the VA. Implementation of Section 504 with regard to Service Animals is the same as the ADA.
3. Federal Property Management Regulations Title 41 applies to all federal property, which would include the Post Office, VA hospitals, and military installations. A handler with a Service Dog in Training has full access to federal property under this law.
4. The Fair Housing Act allows you to keep a service dog or emotional support animals (untrained pets) in “no pets” housing, whether that be in assisted living, HUD housing, or condominiums.
5. The Air Carrier Access Act applies to flying with a Service Dog. **NOTE:** If you fly with a Psychiatric Service Dog (PSD), you are treated differently under the ACAA than other

types of Service Dogs. Airlines have the right to request documentation from your mental health provider if you fly with a PSD. If you fly internationally with a Service Dog, prepare ahead of time, because many countries have specific requirements regarding immunizations and quarantine.

6. State laws and the ADA do not always agree. Since the ADA does not cover service dogs in training, check carefully with your state's laws to see if service dogs in training have the same access rights as full-fledged service dogs.

State Service Dog Laws: The good, the bad and the ugly...

Service Dog laws vary state to state. Some states will cover a service dog in training, others will not. States that cover a service dog in training will give a service dog training the same access rights as a full-fledged service dog. If the state does not give a service dog in training the same access rights as a full-fledged service dog, your training options in public places are limited. Some states require that a dog graduate from a formal program or be trained by an individual or organization from a state approved list. Some states further narrow the definition of service dog to those that assist with physical disabilities, such as a guide dog for the blind, or hearing dog for the deaf, and at least one state (Florida) gives public access rights to anyone with a service dog except an individual using a Psychiatric Service Dog.

If you travel to another state with a service dog in training, be sure to check that state's laws. Some states and cities, Denver for example, have what are called "bully breed bans." If your service dog is a Pit-bull, a Rottweiler, or another dog classified as a bully breed you may encounter difficulties in public access.

California and New York have some of the best state laws regarding service animals.

- Service dogs in training have the same access rights as full-fledged service dogs.
- Service dogs are licensed for free (some counties in California have begun charging, however)
- California law has stiff penalties for impersonating a service dog.
- Both states, as well as other states, also provide penalties for interfering with or harming a service dog. These penalties can include fines and jail time.
- Psychiatric Service Dogs are covered under CA and NY state laws.

States with poorly written service dog laws:

- Texas requires a service dog to graduate from a recognized training organization.
- Missouri specifically limits service dogs to people with physical disabilities, and the dog must be task trained.
- Alabama specifically limits service dogs to people who are blind or deaf.
- Florida specifically defines "Individual with a disability" to mean a person who is deaf, hard of hearing, blind, visually impaired, or otherwise physically disabled.

The bottom line: if you choose to use a Psychiatric Service Dog, know federal and state laws well, and know which law – state or federal – applies to your situation.