

Questions to Ask When Considering an Assistance Dog

There has been an increase in the demand for Assistance Dogs as it has been found that dogs have tremendous capabilities to assist their human companions in a variety of ways.

This has increased the demand for knowledgeable and competent trainers, but unfortunately, has also resulted in some individuals entering the industry with little experience, though their promotional materials may claim otherwise. Accordingly, you should thoroughly investigate any organization or trainer before entering an agreement.

The decision to acquire an Assistance Dog is a major life commitment. The initial and recurring costs can be substantial and there are risks associated with the dog's socialization, obedience and the unique skills that it has been trained to provide that need to be evaluated before finalizing a decision. Another consideration is your aptitude to working with the Assistance dog and the major change that it will make in your life.

The following information should be considered as you move forward in your search.

1. Check out the organization and trainers providing the Assistance Dogs:
 - a. Verify the organization is appropriately incorporated and registered with the Secretary of State.
 - b. Check out their standing in the industry, and whether they are accredited by an organization such as Assistance Dogs International (ADI).
 - c. Check for complaints through the various local and state agencies, such as the Better Business Bureau and the state attorney general.
 - d. Check and verify references, acknowledging that the entity would not provide names of references except positive ones.
 - e. Check the local press for articles of all types, positive and negative.
 - f. Determine how long they have been in business and how they measure their successes.
 - g. Read all their literature and check out the background information regarding the program, and experience of their trainers.
 - h. Compare your research with information gathered about competitive Assistance Dog providers.
2. Check into the background of the Assistance Dogs being trained:
 - a. What is the source of dogs, are they bred and raised specifically as service animals, or are they acquired from other sources, such as shelters?
 - b. How old are the dogs and what are their backgrounds as far as socialization since born, obedience training and service skill training?
 - c. What is the health history of the dogs, including screening for genetic diseases such as hip dysplasia, heart and eye problems? Have they been vaccinated, parasite-free, spayed or neutered? Are their veterinarian records available?
 - d. How are the dogs housed and socialized during training, in kennels or foster homes?
3. What is the relationship between the organization, the client and the dog?
 - a. Is it a simple sales transaction, with a contract that can be reviewed for the various clauses, including any warranties, return policies or refund provisions?

- b. How does the organization screen applicants for their dogs? Is it based on client needs and handling skills, the dog's characteristics, and other factors that might impact the team?
 - c. What type of training and long-term follow up is provided to the client to assure success after a placement is made?
 - d. What happens if a placement is not successful?
4. What is your background and experience with dogs and do you understand the commitment that you will be making in acquiring an Assistance Dog?
- a. Have you had dogs previously in your life and do you have any issues that may impact your having a dog with you at home, work or school as well as in all public venues?
 - b. Do you understand that dogs can be trained to perform many tasks, but that skill will only be sustained as the handler develops a bond with the animal and provides consistent and positive reinforcement?
 - c. Are you willing and able to provide the long-term care and support for a new member of your family that will be by your side 24/7?

Evaluating all these issues will help you in your decision to pursue the acquisition of an Assistance Dog and be comfortable with the results. Investing the time and effort to understand the organization and the commitment that you are making will prove valuable over the long term.