

How to Pick an Adult Service Dog Prospect

by Tracey Martin

For an adult service dog prospect I would want to take the dog out of its normal environment, to someplace like a noisy, crowded outdoor mall or an art fair to observe behavior and to do all of the tests. Service dogs have to be comfortable in new places and crowded conditions so this should give you a very good look at how the dog would act as a service dog.

Ride in the car with the dog if you can. You want the dog to be happy. Lip-licking could indicate that the dog is feeling carsick. Also, a dog that vomits in the car can be a problem that may be a difficult problem to fix. You don't want a service dog that vomits every time you take it out.

Pet the dog all over its body. You should be able to touch it anywhere and have it accept being hugged by you in a strange new place. Make sure to handle the dog's face. Service dogs need to be comfortable about being touched by strangers. You never know when a child or weird person might run up to your service dog and pull its tail or face fur, or give it a hug. The dog must tolerate this without any signs of resentment. Don't assume that because the dog is a show dog that it won't be aggressive or resent being handled.

Sit down in a busy area and offer the dog a treat. The ideal dog should eat the treat and look to you for more. A food motivated dog is easier to train. Taking food is a pretty good indicator that the dog is not too stressed out in the new environment.

If the dog has passed the second test, try to teach a simple trick with treats that can be taught in one session (you can use a clicker), such as shaking hands, sitting (if the dog has never been taught to sit), or looking at your face. The ideal candidate should be willing to try something new in a strange place. This is important. You need a dog that is willing to engage in being trained and is comfortable being trained in strange places. Much of the training that you do with your service dog will be done out in public.

Drop a can with coins in it on the pavement a few feet behind the dog. It's ok if the dog startles a little, but it should recover quickly and look at the can with a little interest. You don't want a dog that acts as if it hasn't noticed the can at all or one that freaks out. There should be some response from the dog even if it briefly glances behind it.

Take an umbrella, face the dog and open it quickly. Set the umbrella on the ground. The ideal dog can startle a little but should calm quickly and perhaps sniff the umbrella. You don't want a dog that acts as if nothing has happened at all or freaks out. There should be some response even if the dog just glances at the umbrella. A dog that is shutting down may not respond much at all.

Have a few different people pet the dog and give him a treat. Good people to pick are a man with a hat, a child, and anyone that looks unusual. The dog should be willing to engage the people for petting and take the treat, but should not show any signs of aggression or avoidance. A little boisterous behavior is okay, but the dog should be easily calmed. Keep an eye out for any signs of nervousness, such as excessive lip-licking. You want a very steady, very brave, unflappable dog for a service dog.

You might also try going to a pet store. It's okay for the dog to get a little excited and check things out. Watch for a tendency to want to mark with urine or potty in the store. This may be a tough habit to break and you won't be able to do any public access work until it is totally fixed. Don't assume that because the dog is intact that neutering will fix the problem. This should give you an idea of how the dog handles a store environment.

Also check the dog out in its home environment. You need to know how the dog acts in its own home. Is it housebroken? If there has been difficulty housebreaking the adult dog, it may not be cut out for service dog work. Your service dog must be reliably housebroken without any marking issues. While you are there, see if you can easily take toys and food from the dog. Take a high-value item and then give it back to the dog. This should weed out the dogs with resource guarding issues.

It is nice if the dog likes to play fetch though this is not a deal breaker. If the dog likes treats and is willing to be trained you can easily train a retrieve.

If a dog can pass these tests, then it is probably a good service dog prospect with a steady, trainable disposition.