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Steps to Become a Service Dog User

by Veronica Morris, PhD

Step 1: Talk with your doctor, verify your disability, and discuss what work or tasks a dog could do to assist you. Talk with other service dog owners about the pros and cons of living with a service dog, reading [PSDP's answers to common questions](#) for more information.

Step 2: Find a trainer and have your dog temperament-tested to make sure they are likely to make it as a service dog—any sign of aggression in a dog's past (towards humans or other animals) is unacceptable in a service dog prospect. Talk with the trainer and/or a vet to be sure your dog can safely do the work/tasks needed to assist you. Also have your dog examined by a vet to make sure they are healthy enough to work. If you don't have a dog, or your dog is not suitable for service work, read [PSDP's information for help deciding on a breed and where to get the dog](#), and hire a professional trainer to help you pick a dog.

Step 3: Master basic obedience at home, in local parks, in pet stores, and in other dog-friendly stores—some hardware stores and bookstores will allow pets; call and ask. It is very important during this time to also work on socialization and other exposures, making sure your dog is used to people of every color, shape, and size, and other animals, etc. Make sure to start keeping a training log of what you are doing, how your dog is doing with obedience, public access, and assistance behaviors that mitigate your disability.

Step 4: Once your dog is pretty much able to pass the Canine Good Citizen test (in other words could do it with the use of a few treats, or could do it all except for the leaving the dog alone bit) purchase a vest and “in training” patches, and visit the places in step 3 with the vest on. If you haven't already started training tasks/work, start that now, too.

Step 5: Research your state laws (using [the Animal Law Resource Center's search tool](#)) to determine your public access rights with a service dog in training. Gradually visit more and more difficult environments—saving places with lots of crowds, food, etc. for later. Train to the [public access standard](#) on the PSDP website.

Step 6: If you live in a state with service dog in training protection, spend another few months in training just to make sure you're both really comfortable with whatever comes up. Really, it's not a race!

Step 7: Once you've mastered public access and disability-mitigating work or tasks, take a [public access test](#) and have someone videotape it if possible. If you don't have a trainer who can give the test, have a friend do it. The idea is that your dog should be able to perform, and if you ever have a court case, video proof of this may be helpful, or at least a letter from a trainer saying that you did the public access test.

Psychiatric Service Dogs Partners' purpose is to promote the mental health of people using service dogs for psychiatric disabilities by educating, advocating, providing expertise, facilitating peer support, and promoting responsible service dog training and handling.

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