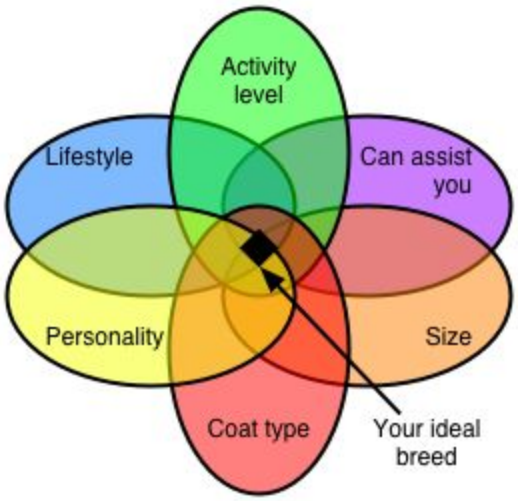
PSYCHIATRIC SERVICE DOG PARTNERS

PO BOX 19
LOMPOC CA 93438
(510) 367-4267
veronica.m.psdp@gmail.com
www.psychdogpartners.org

Choosing the Right Dog
by Veronica Morris, PhD

After deciding to use a service dog to mitigate your disability, the next question most people ask is “how do I choose the proper dog?”. The most important thing to remember when choosing a dog is that no matter how cute and fluffy they are, you are choosing a service dog, a dog that will assist with your disability while being “bomb-proof” in public, and not a pet. If you were choosing a wheelchair, would you go with the prettiest model or the most reliable model? It is the same when picking a service dog. It is important to accept that your favorite breed may or may not end up being the best service dog for you, and you need to pick the dog that will mitigate your disability the best—not the dog that you always wanted as a child or the dog that you think looks the best.

It is important to remember that many of the dogs that enter service training do not make it to full service dog status. Some dogs may wash out due to health concerns such as joint problems or environmental allergies. Other dogs wash out because they do not have the right temperament, or personality, for service work. Sometimes the human partner is unable to keep up with the training, or unable to get the outside help they need to train the dog. Your focus when choosing a service dog candidate should be on picking the dog that is most likely to make it to full service dog status. You want to stack the odds in your favor that the time and money you invest in a dog will pay off with a well-adjusted service dog as the end product.



Picking a dog can be divided into three parts: choosing the breed(s) that can best assist you, deciding where to get a dog, and picking the dog.

What breed is best for me?

Technically, a dog of any breed can be a service dog, though some breeds are more suited for service work than others. There is no one best breed for everyone. Different breeds may be

better suited for individuals depending on what they need the dog to do, their personalities, where they live, and so on.

First you must figure out what breed is best able to assist you with your disability. When trying to select a breed, make a list of the things you want your service dog to do for you. Think about the ways your disability affects your everyday life, and how a dog could be trained to mitigate your disability. One way to do this is to list your most disabling symptoms, and ask yourself a series of questions about each symptom. Do you want your dog to react to what you react to? Do you want your dog to be non-reactive? Do you wish you were not engaging in a behavior? If so, do you want your dog to stop you from doing the behavior, or to redirect you to alternative behaviors? Does the impairment have any physical manifestations that a dog could recognize? Do you want interaction with your dog to evoke a change in your physiology? Is there any other way a dog might assist with the symptom? Also, talk with your doctor, partner, family or close friends about how your disability affects your life, and how they think a dog might assist you. Talk with other service dog users about what they have trained their service dogs to do, and create a list of the things your dog will need to be able to do.

Your list of assistance work may naturally lead you to the consideration of size. If you need a dog to assist with balance, for example, you will need a larger breed of dog—at least 50 lbs for an average-sized person wanting minimal stability work. If you are larger, or need the dog to provide more support, a bigger dog is better. Large breeds are traditionally used by service dog schools, so these dogs may have fewer public access challenges. However, smaller dogs take up less room, are less expensive to feed, live longer, and can work just as well as their larger cousins for work such as alerting and tactile stimulation.

Next consider your personality, as it is important to get a dog you enjoy working with. Hounds and terriers, bred to chase game or vermin, are independent. Dogs bred to retrieve game tend to enjoy working for people. Dogs bred for guard work require confident handling and are generally not recommended for psychiatric service work. Toy breed dogs bred for companionship are very focused on their humans. The book “Why We Love the Dogs We Do: How to Find the Dog That Matches Your Personality” by Stanley Coren contains a personality quiz and discusses what types of dogs match with different personalities. There are free quizzes online that, given your personality and other preferences, match you with breeds. Among my favorites is http://dogtime.com/matchup. Also, talk to a professional trainer. Trainers are invaluable sources of information and advice. Keep in mind that while it is ideal that your trainer has some service dog experience, trainers that have not trained service dogs before, but do advanced training like competition obedience, dog sports, search and rescue, or who are evaluators for the Canine Good Citizen test can also be of great help. Good trainers have had experience with many breeds and can give you insight on how you would interact with dogs of different types. Additionally, other people who have trained their

own service dogs can advise you on what breeds might work for you on various internet forums or listservs like Psychiatric Service Dog Partners'.

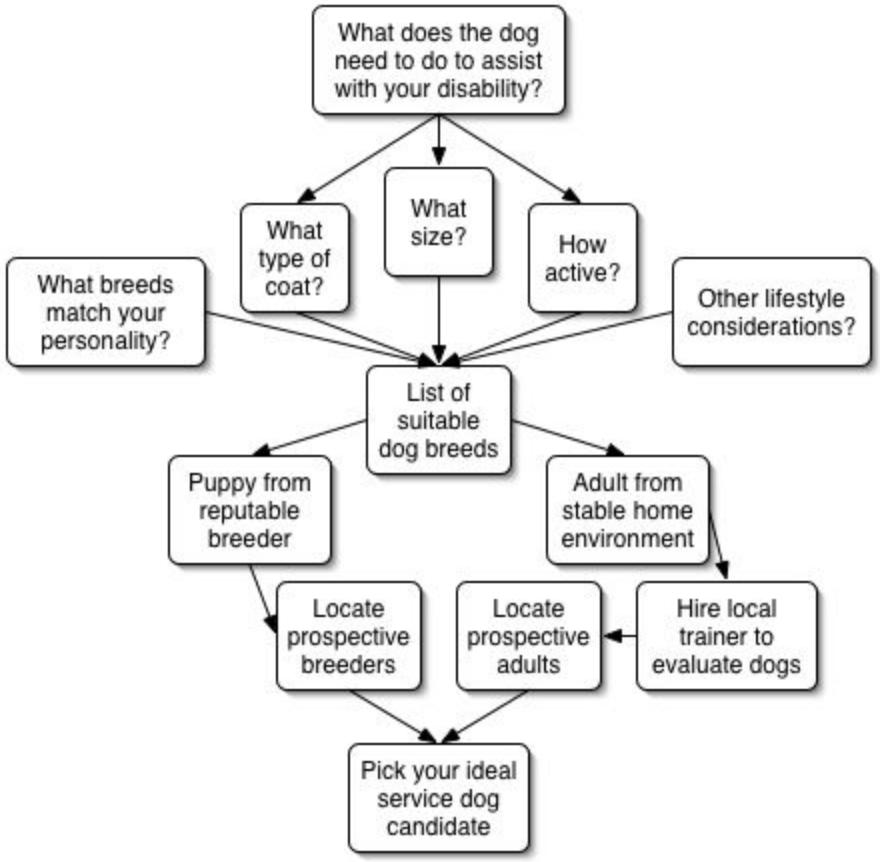
Your activity level is also key in finding a good match. All dogs need at least one good walk a day, a walk where they can sniff and be a dog. It is critical to remember that your service dog has needs you cannot ignore. If you are unable to exercise your dog, you will need to ask a friend or family member, or hire someone to do it. If one walk a day is your preference, low-energy dogs like Shih Tzus are your best bet. Medium energy dogs like Labrador Retrievers will need an hour or more of exercise a day. If you choose a high energy breed like the Boxer or Border Collie, you will need to run your dog for 1–2 hours a day, participate regularly in dog sports, or otherwise keep your dog busy. Make sure that you do not overestimate your ability to exercise your dog. It is always better to get a dog with less energy and over-exercise it than getting a dog with too much energy.

Many people enjoy participating in dog sports like agility, rally, flyball, and freestyle dancing, and may even include this in their treatment plan. These sports provide excellent physical and mental stimulation for both the dog and their human partner, and require regular trips outside the home. Dogs of any breed and humans of any almost physical ability can participate. Since the sport is focused on the dogs, not human interaction, it can be a good opportunity for those with social anxiety to practice being around other people. Many events take place outside or in open environments, which are easy to step back from for those getting used to the outside world. With the exception of flyball (a team sport), you are competing against yourself. An alternative for those who cannot handle the competitions is to take classes in these sports so that you and your dog can enjoy them, but skip the competitions and official ribbons. Participation in dog sports may allow you to choose a breed with a higher energy level, or if you want to include competitions for these sports in your treatment plan, you may wish to pick a breed that traditionally enjoys these events.

A dog's coat type is another important consideration. Grooming a dog may be therapeutic for some people. It is an acceptable repetitive behavior a person can engage in as part of their treatment for Obsessive Compulsive Disorder. People with lethargy from a depressive disorder, or with certain physical impairments, may be unable to brush a dog regularly. Some individuals with anxiety disorders like OCD may find the thought of dog hair around the house overwhelming. You need to decide what type of coat would be best for you, keeping in mind that two people with the same diagnosis might differ in their grooming capabilities and needs. Some dogs, like Greyhounds and Boxers, have short, smooth coats that don't shed much and require very little grooming. Dogs like Labrador Retrievers, German Shepherds, and Golden Retrievers have short or medium coats that shed and need to be brushed 2–3 times a week. Long-coated dogs like the Lhasa Apso and Bearded Collie shed, need to be brushed and combed every 1–2 days, and need regular haircuts. Some breeds like the Poodle, Bichon Frise, and Schnauzer do not shed, and so are considered better for allergy sufferers, but they do require brushing and

combing every 1–2 days and regular haircuts. Mixed breed dogs are unpredictable in terms of their shedding and how frequently they will need haircuts.

Finally, take account of work and home-life considerations. For example, if you know a family member or friend is allergic to dogs, you may want to consider dogs that are known to produce fewer allergens. No dog is completely hypoallergenic, but allergy sufferers tend to do better with dogs that don't shed. If you live in an area where it is very cold in the winter or hot in summer, you need to be sure your dog will be able to tolerate these conditions. If your work environment or places you frequent are quiet, you might not want a dog that snorts or snores. If it is inconvenient for you to carry a towel at all times, you won't want a dog that slobbers. If you travel on airplanes frequently, or live in a city, giant breed dogs that take up a lot of space may be impractical. Add all of these things to your list, and you will now have a good idea of what you need to look for in your service dog.



Once you have narrowed it down to a handful of breeds, you should start researching each breed in depth. Read everything you can on the breeds. Look carefully at all the pros and cons of each breed. Make sure to consider health concerns and the lifespan of the breeds. Read the breed information pages from the AKC or other kennel clubs that register the breed. Go to a dog show or two (some good shows might be conformation, agility, rally, or obedience—look on www.infodog.com for shows in your area) and meet as many representatives of the breed as you can. While you're there, talk with the breeders of the dogs (make sure to find them after they've been in the ring, when they are less stressed!). Ask them about the pros and cons of the breed. Describe what you want in a dog and ask the breeder if it seems the breed matches your description.

Finally, it is important to remember that every dog breed has drawbacks. It is possible that there is not one best dog breed for you, or that no breed that has everything you want and nothing you don't want. There may be a few breeds, all of which match most but not all of your criteria. In these situations you will have to make some compromises. This happened in my case. I had narrowed it down to an Australian Shepherd or a Standard Poodle, but I did not like the coat of either dog. I wanted a dog with a very short, boxer-like coat. In the end I decided that I would rather spend time clipping a dog's coat regularly than having to clean up hair the dog had shed.

Where should I get my dog?

Once you have decided what breed(s) you are interested in, the next step is to start looking for a dog. Do you want a puppy or an adult? From a breeder or rescue situation? It is possible to find a good service dog from any of these places. However, it is important to remember that you want to stack the odds in your favor of the dog succeeding at service work.

If you get a puppy, you will have the advantage of controlling almost every experience in your dog's life. There will be no hidden surprises, no added baggage in your dog's history of which you are unaware. However, you must have the energy (emotional and physical) for raising a puppy properly. You will have to housetrain the puppy and socialize it intensely for the first few months of its life. You will also have to deal with puppy energy, puppy chewing, and all the other mischief that puppies get into.

An adult dog's personality is quite stable. Most adult dogs will be done with their chewing phase, and many will have been housetrained. They may even have some basic obedience training, and a retired show dog may already be used to crowds and distracting environments. However, an adult dog may have had experiences in its life that are difficult to overcome. You may not be aware of these at first, and they can prove difficult to train out. For example, you may not know whether your adult dog was traumatized by a small child when it was a puppy. Even though the dog may be fine with well-behaved toddlers, what if one comes up behind you while you are in a store and hits your dog (this is not uncommon!)? A dog with negative past experiences may bite the child. Additionally, if the dog had negative experiences with men wearing cowboy hats in the past, it may never learn to be comfortable around them. It can be difficult to find a suitable adult dog. Due to lifespan considerations, it is generally best to start with a dog no older than two years old.

Breeders can provide you with a pedigree of your dog. This history is important both for the genetic and personality information it can provide. By looking at the relatives of your dog, you can tell if there are any genetic problems that might affect your dog. This can give you some assurance that your dog will not develop genetic diseases that are not in its pedigree. Personality can be inherited as well, so if there are many service or therapy dogs in your dog's pedigree, this means there is a higher likelihood that your dog might have the right personality to become a service dog. If you will be using your dog for any type of balance or stability, you will want to be certain that your dog is not prone to joint problems. Genetic testing and knowledge of the pedigree is extremely important for dogs that will be used in this manner. However, dogs from breeders are usually more expensive up front (though they may be cheaper in the long run than a double hip replacement for a dog that inherited bad hips), and it may be difficult to find adult dogs from breeders.

A rescued dog is often eternally grateful for your intervention in his life. They often form very intense bonds with their new owners—though you must be cautious that this is a healthy bond and not separation anxiety, which is very common in rescue dogs. Rescues can be the least expensive way to get a dog. Most come already fixed and with basic vet needs taken care of. However, their genetic and behavioral histories are usually completely unknown, so you are taking a larger risk with emotional baggage that might never be overcome.

In trying to make the decisions of puppy vs. adult, breeder vs. rescue, I came across four facts that are supported by a number of scientific papers. Many of the researchers used temperament tests to evaluate dogs. These are like personality tests, and are often used to predict whether a dog will be able to become a service dog. A good example of a temperament test you may wish to use on your service dog candidate is the Volhard temperament test.

Fact 1: An adult dog's temperament is stable for dogs living in a stable home environment (Svartberg et al. 2005).

Fact 2: Adult shelter dogs' temperament tests do not reliably predict if they will succeed in service work, probably due to the stress of the shelter situation (Weiss and Greenberg 1997).

Fact 3: One puppy temperament test at 8 weeks will not reliably predict temperament for service work, except for fear/confidence in new situations (Goodard and Beilharz 1986).

Fact 4: The highest predictor for a puppy succeeding at service work is the temperament of their mom—in other words, if the mom has a service dog temperament, this gives the highest chance that a puppy will have those traits as an adult (Wilsson and Sundgren 1998, 1997).

Given those pieces of information, I feel that your best bets are to either choose a puppy whose mother has the temperament for service work or choose an adult dog from a stable home environment that already has the right temperament.

The easiest way to find a puppy whose mother has the right temperament for service work is through a breeder. Additionally, a breeder will be able to provide you with an extensive family history so that you can rule out possibilities of genetic diseases. Remember that the mother doesn't have to be a service dog to have a good temperament for service work. Dogs that are therapy dogs, dogs that are extremely laid-back, from competition obedience lines, etc. all would be good to look at. Many show dog breeders have started to breed for temperament as well.

If you would prefer an adult, look for a retired show dog, a dog that was returned to a breeder, or a rescue dog if it has been in a foster home long enough to relax and its true temperament to show through. You want an adult dog that has lived in a stable home environment for some period of time. Getting a retired show dog or a dog that was returned to a breeder will give you more of the genetic assurances than a rescue would provide—as breeders will be able to show you the pedigree. Additionally, retired show dogs have generally been well-socialized and trained by an experienced dog handler.

As you are deciding on puppy or adult, breeder or rescue, keep in mind that the purchase cost of your dog is insignificant once you average it out over your dog's lifetime. Additionally, the cost of getting an unsuitable dog and having to wash it out of service training or provide extensive vet care for inherited diseases is quite high. A pricey puppy might cost $2,000, but surgery to treat hip dysplaysia costs that much or more. Ten to twenty private lessons with a trainer to work on emotional baggage will cost $1,000–2,000. As an example, let's examine the costs involved in obtaining and training each of my two dogs. The dogs are different ages, as Dog B is the successor to retired Dog A, so I am only including costs up to obtainment of full service dog status.

Dog A, rescued adult from animal shelter, 2 years training time:

$100 purchase price
$2,000 vet bills (inherited dental issues caused increased costs)
$2,000 training expenses (emotional baggage caused increased costs)

$100 service gear
$1,000 food/treats/toys
$5,200 total

Dog B, purchased puppy from service dog breeder, 2 years training time:

$2,250 purchase price
$750 vet bills
$1,100 training expenses
$100 service gear
$1,000 food/treats/toys
$5,200 total

My experience has been that the purchase price of Dog B is offset by Dog A's increased medical and training costs due to her being a rescue with some emotional baggage and inherited medical issues. In the end, it cost me about the same to obtain and train a dog from an expensive breeder as it did to train a shelter dog. Dog A went on to require $3,000 in vet bills for joint and other medical issues that may have some genetic basis.

Remember that above all you are trying to find a dog that will succeed in being trained as your service dog. Save money for a few more months or fundraise to get the dog that is right for you instead of settling for a dog that is not your first choice. Make your decision based on what will be best for you, which type of dog will be most likely to succeed with your abilities and lifestyle.

How do I pick my dog?

How you pick your dog will depend on where you get your dog. If you get a puppy from a breeder, your choice will be more about which breeder than which individual dog. If you get an adult from a rescue, the individual dog's temperament will be more important.

Most good breeders will match you with the appropriate puppy. Good breeders have been breeding dogs for a long time, and by observing the puppy throughout its first few weeks of life, they will be able to match the puppy up with the best possible owner. A good breeder might give you a choice between a couple of suitable dogs that would all work out well for you, or they might give you only one option—they will not place a dog with you that they think would not be able to be trained for what you want. Therefore, picking a dog if you are getting a

dog from a breeder is more about picking the breeder.

If you are getting a dog from a breeder, you want to ensure that you are choosing a reputable breeder, and not getting a dog from a backyard breeder or a puppy mill.

Puppy mills often keep their parent dogs in dirty conditions, they do not screen for genetic diseases, and usually breed many more dogs than they can reasonably take good care of. They are in it for the money, and to make as much money as possible they over-breed their dogs and do not take them to the vet or do proper genetic testing. Puppy mills usually have a glut of puppies and will often breed for “rare” colors or sizes like “teacup” or “royal” dogs. They also often breed designer dogs—purposefully mixing two dogs and giving them names like puggles (pug x beagle), cockerpoo (cocker spaniel x poodle), or doxiwawa (daschund x chihuahua). Signs of puppy mills are: advertising in the classified ads of the newspaper or internet classified websites like craigslist, not letting you tour their entire facility, not letting you meet the parents, being overly anxious to sell you a dog, offering to ship a puppy to you immediately, having big banners on their website saying they accept PayPal and will ship anywhere, etc. Almost all dogs sold in pet stores are from puppy mills.

Backyard breeders are people who breed dogs without paying close attention to inheritance. They often love their dogs but do not understand the breed or how best to pick parents. They often are breeding dogs that have genetic or temperament defects, they usually do not do genetic testing, and they usually are not breeding for a purpose (other than because they think their dog is nice). Their puppies often have inferior pre-natal veterinary care and nutrition, and professional involvement from vets and trainers is minimal. Backyard breeders often advertise on craigslist or other classified advertising to get rid of their puppies quickly, while a reputable breeder would not do so.

A good, reputable breeder is breeding for a purpose. They have a goal in mind, and are breeding towards it. They may be breeding dogs for the show ring, for agility, for working ability, for service work, etc. When asked why they are breeding, they are able to tell you their goal—they want to improve the breed for a certain purpose and carefully select parents for that end. They should also be able to demonstrate that they have made progress towards that end. In other words, they should be able to produce records of their dogs winning competitions or being successfully trained for the job they are intended. Good breeders will allow you to visit their facilities and meet the parents at any time (though sometimes males may be in other states—having sent their sperm by mail for artificial insemination). Each female has only 2–3 litters in her entire lifetime, and no female is bred before 2 years of age. Good breeders are selective about their prospective buyers, and will often have many questions for you—possibly even requiring multiple interviews by phone or in person before selling you a puppy. They would rather not sell a dog than put a dog in a home that they don’t think is ideal. They perform all the genetic tests that are recommended for the breed, and are happy to provide you with

the results and allow you to look at pedigrees. These breeders are not in it for money—in fact most will barely break even. Their puppies are expensive because they put a lot of money into making sure they are producing the healthiest puppies.

Remember that a good breeder doesn't necessarily have a fancy webpage or even advertise their puppies. Indeed they might not have a webpage at all! Look for good breeders by going to dog shows, talking to fanciers of the breed, joining breed listservs and asking for recommendations, and contacting the breed club listed on www.akc.org and asking for breeder referrals. Then call up the breeders you have found and ask them about their breeding practices. Be wary of any breeder that offers to ship you a puppy the next day. Many good breeders have waiting lists, and you may have to wait a few months for the next litter to be born to get your puppy. For more information on good and bad breeders, visit http://www.woodhavenlabs.com/breeding.html.

Once you've picked your breeder, they will assist you in picking the right puppy. The breeder has watched the puppies closely during their first few weeks of life, so they can give you a more accurate picture of a puppy's personality. Ask that the puppies be temperament tested by a professional trainer (for example using the Volhard test), and use these results as well as the breeder's opinions of the puppies to pick a dog that seems suitable for service work. If possible, meet the puppies several times before you take one home so that you can see their personalities for yourself—and so that the breeder can tell more about you and be better able to match you with the right dog.

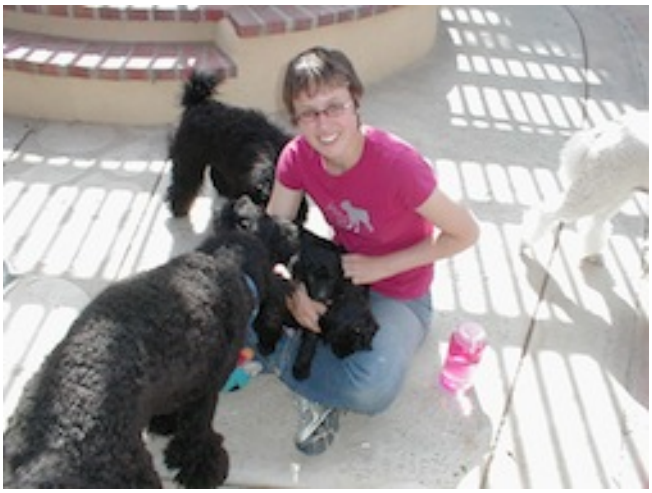
If you decide to get an adult dog, a temperament test is even more important—even for a dog that you already own and are considering using as your service dog. In order to stack the odds in your favor as much as possible with an adult dog, you should hire a professional dog trainer to temperament test all the candidates you are considering. Keep in mind that it is possible that none of the dogs currently available will be suitable for your needs. Take your time, meet many dogs, and make your decision carefully. Do not take home any dog until you've met several dogs, and you and your trainer agree on your choice.

When looking for personality traits, you want to get a dog that is confidant in new situations, but still looks to you for guidance. You want a dog that is friendly to other dogs, but not so friendly that they cannot focus on humans when there is another dog around. The dog should be OK with people of all shapes, sizes and colors. You want a dog that responds well to training, and that is motivated by food, praise, or a toy—but not so motivated that if they see a different toy or smell food that they lose all focus on you. A good general rule is that a middle-of-the-road, easy-going dog will do well in service work. Trust your trainer, and do not settle for a dog that does not meet your criteria. Remember you will be spending the next 10+ years of your life with this animal, and waiting a few months for the right dog will be worth it.

Summary

Picking a service dog candidate can be very nerve-wracking and time consuming. But it is not something that should be rushed. This decision will affect you and hopefully benefit you for years to come, so it is important to make an informed and reasoned choice. You need to pick the dog that will be able to become your service dog. This might mean passing up a sweet rescue dog that really needs a home but doesn't have the right temperament, or it might mean waiting another 6 months for a litter to be born if no pups in the first litter are suitable. The time and money spent in your quest for a service dog will average out to a negligible amount over your dog's lifetime, so take your time and do it right for your sake, and for the dog's sake. Remember the following points from this article when picking your breed and dog:

- Many dogs entering service training do not make it, so you should stack the odds in your favor by picking the breed and dog that will be most likely to work.
- Pick a breed that will best be able to mitigate your disability and work with you, regardless of your favorite breeds.
- Either choose a puppy whose mother has the temperament for service work, or choose an adult dog from a stable home environment that already has the right temperament.



- If you get a dog from a breeder, be sure it is a reputable breeder.
- Take advantage of as many resources as possible when picking a dog—use professional temperament tests, breeder insight, and information from people who have interacted with the dog.
- Take your time and make sure you are making the right decisions, as the dog will be with you for the rest of its life.

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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.