Since the first guide dog was placed in 1929, the scope and number of assistance dogs has increased dramatically – particularly, in recent years. In addition to assisting those who have visual impairments, dogs are being used to help with hearing and mobility difficulties, seizures, diabetes, allergies, autism, PTSD, and a number of other medical and psychiatric conditions. A review of the impact of these dogs will indicate that a thorough assessment of the ethical considerations surrounding their treatment is merited and that the implementation of best practices is a responsibility shared by us all.

**The Impact of Assistance Dogs**

Anecdotal reports (see Table 1) indicate that assistance dogs have a significant impact on the physical functionality, emotional health, social function, health, and economic status of their human partners. There is increasing empirical evidence to support these anecdotal reports, including that presented in a review by Natalie Sachs-Ericsson and Nancy Kay Merbitz in the August, 2002 issue of Rehabilitation Psychology.

Assistance dogs also appear to provide benefits to the families and colleagues of their human partners. The preliminary results of a recent study by Dr. Marguerite O’Haire, Kerri Rodriguez, and Dr. Jessica Bibbo from the Center for the Human-Animal Bond at Purdue University indicate an overall increase in quality of life reported by the family of those individuals with whom service dogs have been placed.

**Review of the Current Terminology**

**Assistance Dogs** is the term used to refer to any dog who mitigates the effect(s) of a disability or medical condition.

**Guide Dogs** assist people who are visually impaired.

**Hearing or Signal Dogs** assist people who are hearing impaired.

**Service Dogs** assist people who have disabilities, other than visual or hearing impairment, which inhibit their ability to perform routine activity of daily living. Service dogs include:

- Mobility Assistance Dogs
- Seizure Response Dogs
- Diabetic Alert Dogs
- Allergen Detection Dogs
- Medical Alert Dogs
- Autism Support Dogs
- PTSD and other Psychiatric Service Dogs

**Facility Dogs** are fully trained assistance dogs who work in hospitals, rehabilitation centers, schools, courthouses, police departments, and other places where animal assisted interventions are beneficial.

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The anecdotal and empirical evidence is clear. Assistance dogs improve the lives of their human partners as well as their partners’ families and colleagues. Based on the functional and economic impact of assistance dogs to individuals one can reasonably conclude that assistance dogs are of benefit to us all.

**TABLE 1**

OVERVIEW OF COMMONLY CITED ASSISTANCE DOG BENEFITS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Guide Dogs</th>
<th>Hearing Dogs</th>
<th>Service Dogs - Mobility</th>
<th>Service Dogs - Medical</th>
<th>Service Dogs - Psychiatric</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Physical Function Benefits</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>▶ Obstacle avoidance</td>
<td>▶ Alert to sounds</td>
<td>▶ Retrieve medication</td>
<td>▶ Alert to change in condition</td>
<td>▶ Alert to change in condition</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>▶ Elevation changes</td>
<td>▶ Report location of sounds</td>
<td>▶ Open doors</td>
<td></td>
<td>▶ Retrieve medication</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>▶ Object location</td>
<td></td>
<td>▶ Flip switches</td>
<td></td>
<td>▶ Go for help</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>▶ Object retrieval</td>
<td></td>
<td>▶ Push buttons</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>▶ Go for help</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Social Benefits</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>▶ Increase interactions with others</td>
<td>▶ Increase interactions with others</td>
<td>▶ Increase interactions with others</td>
<td>▶ Increase interactions with others</td>
<td>▶ Increase interactions with others</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>▶ Reduce feelings of awkwardness</td>
<td>▶ Reduce feelings of awkwardness</td>
<td>▶ Reduce feelings of awkwardness</td>
<td>▶ Reduce feelings of awkwardness</td>
<td>▶ Reduce feelings of awkwardness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Emotional Benefits</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>▶ Increase security</td>
<td>▶ Increase security</td>
<td>▶ Increase security</td>
<td>▶ Increase security</td>
<td>▶ Increase security</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>▶ Increase confidence</td>
<td>▶ Increase confidence</td>
<td>▶ Increase confidence</td>
<td>▶ Increase confidence</td>
<td>▶ Increase confidence</td>
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<tr>
<td>▶ Increase wellbeing</td>
<td>▶ Increase wellbeing</td>
<td>▶ Increase wellbeing</td>
<td>▶ Increase wellbeing</td>
<td>▶ Increase wellbeing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>▶ Decrease loneliness</td>
<td>▶ Decrease loneliness</td>
<td>▶ Decrease loneliness</td>
<td>▶ Decrease loneliness</td>
<td>▶ Decrease loneliness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Medical Benefits</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>▶ Increase safety</td>
<td>▶ Increase safety</td>
<td>▶ Increase safety</td>
<td>▶ Increase safety</td>
<td>▶ Increase safety</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>▶ Better overall health</td>
<td>▶ Better overall health</td>
<td>▶ Better overall health</td>
<td>▶ Reduce number of problematic episodes</td>
<td>▶ Reduce number of problematic episodes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Financial Benefits</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>▶ Increase productivity</td>
<td>▶ Increase productivity</td>
<td>▶ Increase productivity</td>
<td>▶ Increased productivity</td>
<td>▶ Increase productivity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>▶ Reduce need for human assistance</td>
<td>▶ Reduce need for human assistance</td>
<td>▶ Reduce need for human assistance</td>
<td>▶ Reduce medical costs</td>
<td>▶ Reduce medical costs</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Ethical Considerations
The ethical obligations involved in educating and placing service dogs are three-fold.

1. To ensure the safety of the public in the presence of the dog.
2. To ensure the dog has the skills and characteristics necessary to mitigate the effects of his partner’s disability.
3. To ensure that the dog is and remains healthy and happy.

Public Safety
Certified Applied Animal Behaviorist Karen London explains “Being afraid is at the root of more canine aggression than any other factor." According to the AVMA, dogs bite in reaction to something often stressful, startling, scary, or painful in nature. Lack of socialization and habituation, lack of handler awareness of body language, and restraint/lack of control can lead to aggression in dogs and, thereby, endangering public safety. Therefore, it is vital that socialization to people and other animals and habituation to a variety of environments is a primary focus of educational protocols for assistance dogs. Handlers need to learn to recognize, evaluate, and appropriately respond to canine body language while dogs need to be known they can affect their own circumstances in order to avoid feelings of entrapment.

Efficacy of Assistance
In order for dogs to effectively render service, they must have the knowledge, skills, and willingness to do so. The ability to retain knowledge and master skills is widely accepted to be closely tied to feelings of security and wellbeing. Willingness to perform tasks is also influenced by a dog’s wellbeing in addition to his desire to avoid negative consequences and reap benefits. Appropriate education in the presence of effective motivation is therefore a necessary part of placing a capable assistance dog.

Well Being of Dogs
The well being of assistance dogs is critical for multiple reasons. Dogs need to be healthy in order to function well. In addition, they need to feel safe and confident in order to learn, retain, and utilize the skills needed to help their human partners. From an ethical standpoint, dogs that are asked to work for the betterment of man deserve the very best we have to give.

Ethical considerations thus highlight the importance of security, confidence, and well being in assistance dogs.

What We’ve Seen at Canine Assistants
Canine Assistants is a service dog school, founded in 1991, that has placed over 2,000 dogs with children and adults who have physical disabilities, type I diabetes, epilepsy, or other particular needs. When we first began, our training and handling methodology was I-said-sit obedience. Over the course of time, we shifted to a positive reinforcement-based methodology. While the people felt much happier with the positive reinforcement approach, the dogs actually showed signs of increased anxiety. This lead us to conduct a thorough review of the available information regarding canine cognition and behavior published in peer-reviewed journals since 2001 in an effort to determine how best to help our dogs feel secure.

Our review led us to believe that social learning based on a secure attachment between dog and person made more sense than training our dogs to perform behaviors when cued or commanded to do so. As we shifted to a more social, less directives-based approach, we had some dogs who were used to being given cues or commands and other who were not. This gave us a unique opportunity to assess the impact of directives on the stress level of thirty-eight of our Golden mixes ranging in age from 12-22 months. Though we believed we’d see some positive correlation between the need to obey the directives of an unfamiliar person and stress behaviors, we were stunned to see how dramatic that correlation actually was (see Chart 1). In this case, given the absence of any other variable shared only by the dogs who did not stay when so commanded, we feel that correlation does provide evidence of causation. Given our small sample size and the potential impact of such a finding, further research is needed and ongoing.

The philosophy we’ve developed in response to our research is called the Bond-Based Approach® and the educational methodology we now utilize is known as Bond-Based Choice Teaching®. Since adopting this philosophy and methodology, our dogs show a greater initial bond with their partners, far less anxiety, and increased success in their working lives. We know; however, ours is not the only way. There are other methods of educating and handling assistance dogs that will result in confident, successful dogs. But we do believe strongly that in order to place and maintain assistance dogs in an ethical manner, a focus on their security and well being is imperative.
Length of time in seconds dog remained in place when directed to ‘stay’ by an unfamiliar person.

**COMMON STRESS BEHAVIORS RECORDED:**

- Squinting/furrowing brow
- Burying head
- Licking lips or nose
- Yawning
- Panting
- Shaking off/drooling/freezing
- Sniffing/trembling
- Slicking back ears
- Unusual changes in tail carriage
- Chewing/scratching at self
- Spinning/circling
- Digging/escape behaviors
- Sweaty/moist paw prints on floor
- Goosing, shoving or poking handler
- Leaning into or hiding behind handler
- Other attention-seeking behaviors
Conclusion
Assistance dogs are increasing in scope and numbers. Anecdotal and empirical evidence indicate that these dogs are of value to their individual partners, families, and society as a whole. Assistance dogs with their legal access to public venues can also pose a danger to public safety. When the benefits and risks of assistance dogs are shared by us all then so too are the responsibilities. Assistance dogs, like all domestic dogs, are made vulnerable by their dependence on the people. Ensuring their vulnerabilities are equally matched by our benevolence is an obligation shared by us all.

References