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Understanding the evolution of service dogs and how people are doing their part today

By: Kennedy Aikey and Hailey Trimpey

Introduction:

While dogs have been referred to as “man’s best friend” for millenia, they have become a lifeline for humans throughout the world. Our four-legged friends have the ability to provide humans with much more than companionship. As the skills and trainability of dogs evolve over time, the use of service dogs is becoming more common. This concept allows for many individuals with disabilities to maintain a level of independence.

Question #1: How did service dogs come to be?

The first use of dogs as aides can be dated as far back as the first century A.D. However, the 1750s can be credited for the first systematic instruction of guide dogs which took place in a hospital for the blind in Paris. While, at first, service dogs were intended only to aid the blind, World War I expanded the definition of a service dog’s duties.

Over two centuries later in 1990, the Americans with Disabilities Act was passed in which service dogs were legally recognized in the United States. This act defined the practice of service dogs being used to help with conditions other than blindness or deafness. Dogs can now be trained to assist children and adults with autism, people with diabetes, support veterans, and many others. The service dog industry has continued to grow and we can see the development of organizations across the world to support this demand.

Question #2: What programs exist today?

Today’s training programs can be found in various cities across the country and include both in person and online options. All programs are slightly different and may have a different purpose in mind while training the dogs. Some programs train dogs for specific responsibilities such as to aid veterans. Others may train dogs for several different cases depending on the dog’s strengths and personality. All programs ensure the dog is adequately trained and certified as a service dog.

One specific program is 4 Paws for Ability out of Xenia, Ohio. 4 Paws was founded in 1998 by Karen Shirk after having her own difficulties obtaining a service dog. 4 Paws has many volunteer trainers, but they also partner with the Warren Correctional Institute which provides an inmate-led prison training program. 4 Paws trains dogs for all sorts of responsibilities and is known for working with families that have unique needs. So far, they have placed over 1500 service dogs in their forever homes.

Question #3: How is Ohio Northern playing a part?

Ohio Northern University, along with many universities in the surrounding states, partner with 4 Paws for Ability. Students can apply to be primary handlers in which they would care for, train, and socialize the dog in their home. These trainers are paired with and work with one dog. Applying to be a secondary handler is also an option. This allows for students to work with several dogs on their campus.

ONU's club, Polar Paws currently has 42 volunteer trainers as well as ten dogs on campus. This partnership allows for college students to work hands-on to teach the service dog in training (SDiT) basic commands. The university program allows for the dogs to gain socialization skills, which is the most important goal to achieve through the program. The dogs eventually leave this program to begin advanced training in hopes to be paired with their forever family.

Conclusion:

Since the first reported use of dogs to aid the disabled, many aspects of this idea have evolved. More and more people now have the ability to reap the benefits of having a service dog. They are also becoming more widely available as organizations continue to develop. Both volunteer and paid members of the community contribute by training these dogs with the intention of placing them with their forever families. Ohio Northern University is just one example of the hard work being put into the training of service dogs. ICAPP has their very own SDiT named Sport Grey. To keep up with this golden doodle puppy make sure to check out ICAPP's new podcast "un-CAPP it!"