
Survey Finds High Satisfaction with Service Dogs

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Introduction

Service dogs assist their partners, usually individuals with disabilities that impair their mobility or their use of one or more limbs, with daily tasks such as retrieving specific items, including, items that have been dropped by the dog's partner, and opening doors. Although my research found that this type of practical assistance is often a primary reason that an individual with a disability initially decides to get a service dog, once a service dog team begins working together, I learned, the relationship often becomes as important as that assistance. Service dogs usually provide much more than task assistance; they provide companionship and emotional support to their human partners that enriches both their lives and their teamwork.

The Survey

As part of a larger project looking at the service dog partnership from a variety of angles, I conducted a survey of service dog partners whose dogs had been trained by one of three organizations: NEADS, in Princeton, Massachusetts; Susquehanna Service Dogs in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania; and Assistance Dog Institute in Santa Rosa, California. NEADS is a national organization, although its location means that a majority of its clients reside in New England. Similarly, Assistance Dog Institute is a national organization but a majority of its clients live in California. Susquehanna Service Dogs serves clients mainly in Pennsylvania and surrounding states. These organizations were selected because each has a different approach to training and placing service dogs; because they are strong organizations that have been placing assistance dogs for many years; and because together, their client base covers most of the United States and includes individuals with a wide range of disabilities. I believe that a survey of this population constitutes a representational sample of individuals working with organization-trained service dogs in the United States.

The survey was sent only to service dog partners who had been working with their present service dog for at least a year. The group was composed of 75 Assistance Dog Institute clients, 100 NEADS clients, and about 50 Susquehanna Service Dog clients. The survey was not sent to individuals who trained their own service dogs.

The survey was conducted via e-mail and regular mail where an e-mail address was unavailable. All Assistance Dog Institute service dog partners received paper surveys by mail; all Susquehanna Service Dog service dog partners received the survey via an e-mail sent by the organization; NEADS service dog partners received the survey by e-mail if an address was available (75), otherwise they received a paper survey by mail (25). Seven surveys that were mailed were returned as undeliverable, and several e-mail addresses were no longer operational. It is not possible to determine how many other mailed and e-mailed surveys did not reach the addressee.

Of the 225 surveys sent out, a total of 88 service dog partners responded, a very high response rate of just under 40 percent. Of these, 81 (92 percent of respondents) have active, working service dogs. The others had dogs who have retired, had service dogs who passed away, or responded for a family member who had passed away. Service dog partners whose dogs had died or stopped working were asked to respond to questions about the dog's skill level when the dog was actually working as a service dog.

Survey responses were collected anonymously and responses were sent to me, not to the organizations that placed the dogs. I identified myself as a graduate student at Assistance Dog Institute, and assured respondents that their answers would be confidential. However, even with these safeguards, it is impossible to know whether the responses represent typical attitudes of service dog partners or are a self-selected group of people who are satisfied with their dogs.

The survey, which is included as Appendix A, asks about the respondents' relationship with their dogs, their satisfaction, their expectations, and how they deal with problems that arise. Several questions attempt to assess the dogs' responsiveness and skill level. It is not possible to determine what training methods were used with an individual dog, both because the responses were anonymous and because, even within organizations, training methods change over time and different trainers within an organization might use different approaches. Therefore, the survey and this paper do not address differences in training methodology. This paper looks at a subset of the responses dealing with the respondents' characterization of their relationship with their dogs

and the dogs' skill level and responsiveness.

Presentation of the Data

Survey respondents overwhelmingly reported very close and affectionate relationships with their service dogs, with 80 respondents (91 percent) stating they would describe their relationship with the dog as affectionate and 8 (9 percent) declining to answer this question. Asked to characterize their relationship with their dogs, 58 (66 percent) called the dog their "best friend or soul mate." (Note that respondents could choose more than one response to this question.)

The dogs do provide practical assistance in a meaningful way, as well as companionship—85 respondents (97 percent) reported that their dogs' skills meet their needs. Although 16 respondents (19 percent) said they initially expected the dog primarily to provide assistance with daily tasks, no respondents reported that to be the case—12 respondents (14 percent) say their dogs provide primarily companionship, while 73 respondents (84 percent) say their dogs provide *both* companionship and assistance in equal measure. An overwhelming majority, 72 respondents (82 percent), said they would get another dog if their dog stopped working. Of the respondents who would not, some mentioned progression in their disability pushing them toward moving into a nursing facility, and others were not service dog partners themselves but were responding for a service dog partner who had passed away.

Respondents who indicated that they would get a successor dog were then asked whether they would seek a dog from the same organization; apply to a different organization; train their own dog; or hire a professional trainer. Of the 72 who would seek successor dogs, only two would look for a different organization, one would train his or her own dog, and three would seek a professional trainer—66 would apply for a successor dog from the same organization!

Respondents were asked for free-text comments about anything to do with their service dog partnership, and several used this space to sing their dogs' praises. "He makes having a disability—fun! I never thought I could feel this close to an animal," one wrote. "My dog, Verne, fulfills my life and meets my needs," commented another. "Banner is one of the best things that has happened to me. He has been a great big help with my walking. I am able to get out more," stated a third.

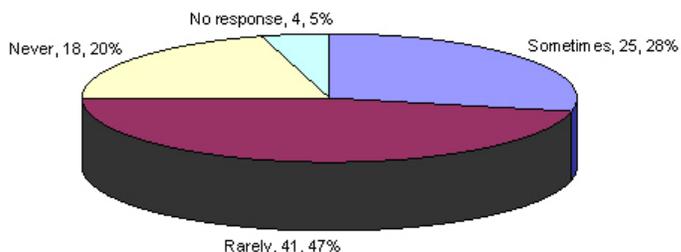
The survey also found that service dog partners do not want to be without their dogs. Sixty-one respondents (69 percent) said the dog always accompanies them in public, with an additional 15 respondents (17 percent) reporting that the dog frequently goes with them out in public. "The most valuable aspect of having a service dog is how he

changes strangers' public experience of me. I feel like a leper without him," wrote one service dog partner.

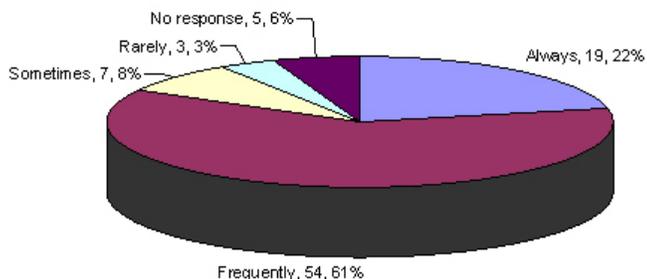
Approaching the question from a different angle, the survey asked respondents how often they leave their dogs at home and why. Fifty-six respondents (63 percent) said they rarely or never leave their dogs at home. An additional 14 percent (12 respondents) leave their dogs at home less than once a week. One service dog partner who responded that the dog never goes out in public also indicated never leaving the dog at home—this individual wrote in a comment, "I am always at home and so is he [the dog]." By far the most common reason partners cited for leaving their dogs at home, on the rare occasions that they do so, was doctor's office visits and undergoing medical procedures. Other reasons mentioned included visiting friends with allergies, family gatherings, and three respondents said they leave their dogs at home when they go to school or work. Some service dog partners commented that family or friends regard the dog as a pet and view taking the dog along everywhere as "inconvenient"; others described encounters with curious or unfriendly members of the public when out with their dogs.

In addition to asking respondents about their overall relationships with their service dogs, several survey questions addressed the dogs' responsiveness to verbal commands and to their partners versus other people (family members or attendants) who give the dogs commands. Here, too, the survey found that close relationships paid off. For example, 70 respondents (nearly 80 percent) said that their service dogs always or frequently respond to requests the first time the command is given and 59 respondents (67 percent) said that they never or rarely had difficulty getting the dog's attention. A substantial 73 respondents (83 percent) said the dog always or frequently responds to verbal commands without physical correction. The dogs are responsive to other familiar individuals as well, but less than with their partners: 30 dogs (34 percent) frequently respond the first time a family member or care attendant gives commands and 28 (32 percent) sometimes do.

Is it difficult for you to get your dog's attention?

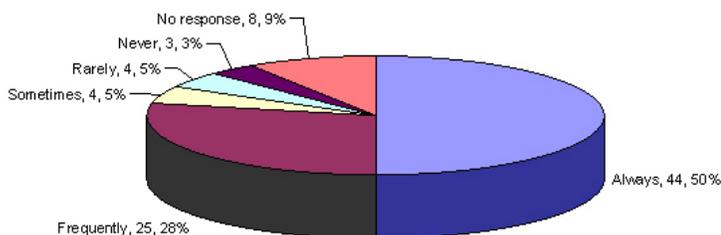


Does your dog respond to voice commands without physical correction?

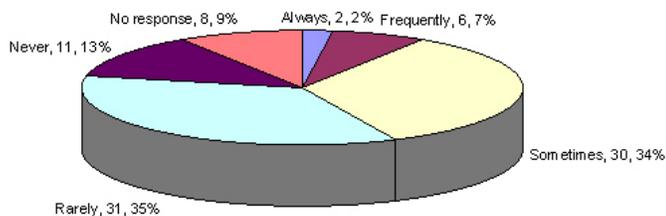


Retrieving is an essential skill for most service dog teams, so the survey singled out retrieve performance for special examination. Sixty-nine respondents (78 percent) said their dogs always or frequently retrieve requested items immediately and 42 respondents (48 percent) said their dogs rarely or never drop items or require several attempts to retrieve them. An additional 30 respondents (34 percent) said the dogs sometimes do. The survey did not distinguish between retrieves of dropped items or specifically requested items. All three participating service dog organizations routinely train service dogs in both types of retrieve, and will even train a dog to retrieve a specific item, such as a cane, a lunch box from the refrigerator, or a cell phone, if the service dog applicant requests this skill.

Does your dog retrieve requested items immediately?



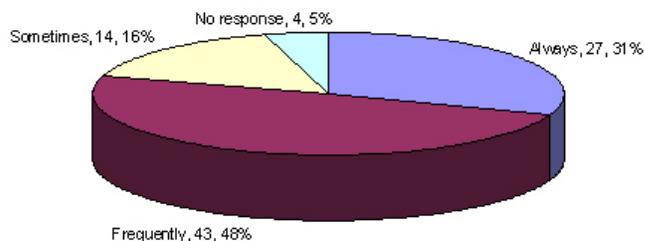
Does the dog drop items or require several attempts to retrieve an item?



The close relationships between service dog partners and their dogs pay off in an additional, unexpected way: Most service dogs are doing more than merely responding to commands; they are figuring out what their partners need without being asked. The survey found that 79 percent of the dogs always or frequently anticipate their partners' needs and 16 percent sometimes do that.

While they are working, service dogs can sometimes be distracted. The dogs in the survey, however, were rarely distracted by noise, people, or other animals.

Does your service dog indicate an interest in or anticipate your needs?

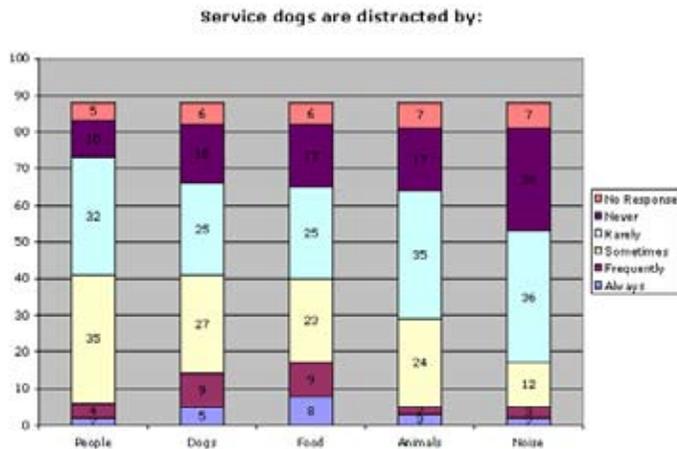


By far the most troublesome distraction is food, followed by other dogs. Eight dogs were reported to be "always" and 9 "frequently" distracted by food, a total of 19 percent; 5 are "always" and 9 "frequently" distracted by other dogs, a total of 15 percent. On the other hand, 17 dogs were "never" and 25 were only "rarely" tempted by food (a total of 47 percent); while 16 "never" and 25 "rarely" paid attention to other dogs.

In a free-text comment area, a few respondents mentioned fearful or distracted responses when their dogs encountered waving banners or flags, and several mentioned fear responses to thunderstorms. The good news, though, is that only a very small number of dogs are "always" or "frequently" distracted by even these tough challenges. Partners of these dogs, however, find the dogs' distractibility troubling. One respondent whose dog is "always" distracted wrote that "the distraction problem can be a nuisance." Another wrote that her dog's behavior in restaurants is so problematic that she avoids any but the most casual eating establishments while working to resolve the issue.

Service dog partners tend to use the training equipment that the training organization issues at the time they receive their dogs, or they simply use a flat collar and leash. Two respondents said they use spray collars for barking problems and one uses a shock collar but did not specify why. Thirty-five teams use a Gentle Leader or other head collar; nine use a martingale or "limited slip" collar; and eight use a training or "choke" collar. Conversations with trainers at the various organizations indicate a strong correlation between results and the equipment issued by the organization. However some organizations vary the equipment they issue according to the needs of the team or have changed their training approach and no longer issue items, such as a choke chain, that were once used. Therefore, it is impossible to know exactly which teams have begun using equipment

that was not issued to them at the time of placement.



are forming good relationships with their clients, while also pointing to the importance of making follow-up training available and maintaining contact with graduates. Of course, the possibility that only “satisfied” service dog partner responded must be considered, but the very high response rate shows a large proportion of satisfied partners.

When they do have problems with the dogs, more than half (45 respondents) train or problem-solve on their own; and most of the rest (32 respondents, or 37 percent) return to the organization that trained the dog for assistance. Only three respondents said they had consulted a professional trainer in their area for additional training or problem-solving assistance.

Summary and Conclusions

For more than 30 years, service dogs have offered people with mobility-limiting disabilities the possibility of greater independence and freedom from reliance on other people for some daily tasks. However, the overwhelmingly positive responses indicate that service dog partners are gaining more than a competent, responsive practical assistant. The close bond provides them with a companion, in many cases a best friend and soul mate. Respondents’ positive assessments of their relationships with their dogs and their dogs’ performance were consistent across the survey, which is good news for all three participating organizations.

Public access is critical for these service dog teams because, as the results show, the teams go everywhere together. Service dog organizations could see this, along with several comments about access problems or ignorance of laws enacted as a result of the Americans with Disabilities Act, as an indication that educational efforts aimed at both clients and the community at large about access rights and responsibilities should be a priority.

Few respondents mentioned any strong negatives to having a service dog, though one commented, “It is work. It is much like having a child and every day you must put forth effort. However, the result is worth it, if you’re willing to put in the effort.”

The positive responses and strong inclination to seek problem-solving help—and successor dogs—from the same organization shows that these organizations

Appendix A: Service Dog–Client Partnership Survey

Thank you for participating in this confidential survey on service dog–client partnerships. Your responses will assist service dog trainers and organizations in improving their training and placement methods to better serve the needs of future service dog clients. Your answers are confidential, and I will not receive personal or identifying information with your responses unless you choose to include it.

The survey will take about 30 minutes to complete. If you would like more room to answer any question, please attach additional sheets of paper.

Do you currently have a working service dog? Yes / No

How was your service dog trained?

I trained my own dog

Privately, with professional trainer

Service dog organization: (Please specify _____)

If you currently have a working service dog, please skip to question # 6.

When did your service dog stop working (month and year)? _____

Why did your dog stop working?

Dog was ill (or dog passed away)

Dog retired because of his/her age

I was unable to continue working with the dog (please explain below)

Why did you decide not to get a successor service dog?

Respondents who do not currently have a working service dog, please skip to question # 12.

When did you get your service dog (month and year) ? _____

Is he/she your first service dog? Yes / No

If your dog retires due to age or illness, will you get another service dog? Yes / No

If Yes, would you prefer to:

Train your own service dog

Hire a professional trainer

Get another dog from the same organization

Get a dog from a different organization

If No, why not?

Which statement most accurately describes your relationship with your dog:

Constantly working to improve it or struggling for control

- The dog works effectively for me
 Best friends or soul mates

Would you characterize your relationship with your dog as affectionate? Yes / No

Since placement, has your relationship with your dog:

- Become problematic or shown a decline in dog's skills or in team performance
 Remained the same since placement
 Steadily improved over time
 We were instant soul mates and that continues to be the case

When you got your service dog did you expect primarily:

- Assistance with daily tasks
 Companionship / emotional support
 Both in equal measure

Does your dog primarily provide:

- Assistance with daily tasks
 Companionship / emotional support
 Both in equal measure

How much time per day does the dog spend:

- Working for you ___hrs/day
 Exercising and playing ___hrs/day
 Other interactions with you ___hrs/day
 Sleeping ___hrs/day

Is it difficult for you to get your dog's attention?

- Always Frequently Sometimes Rarely Never

Does your service dog indicate an interest in or anticipate your needs?

- Always Frequently Sometimes Rarely Never

When you give a command, does the dog respond to your first request?

- Always Frequently Sometimes Rarely Never

When an attendant, family member, or facilitator gives a command, does the dog respond to the first request?

- Always Frequently Sometimes Rarely Never

When your dog is working does he/she:

Make eye contact with you

- Always Frequently Sometimes Rarely Never

Pull on the leash

Always Frequently Sometimes Rarely Never

Approach people without permission

Always Frequently Sometimes Rarely Never

Respond to voice commands without physical correction

Always Frequently Sometimes Rarely Never

Retrieve requested items immediately

Always Frequently Sometimes Rarely Never

Play with or chew retrieve items

Always Frequently Sometimes Rarely Never

Drop items or require several attempts to retrieve an item

Always Frequently Sometimes Rarely Never

Is your dog distracted by:

People Always Frequently Sometimes Rarely Never

Dogs Always Frequently Sometimes Rarely Never

Food Always Frequently Sometimes Rarely Never

Other animals Always Frequently Sometimes Rarely Never

Noise Always Frequently Sometimes Rarely Never

Does your dog ever show fear or nervousness? Yes / No

If Yes, in what situations?

Does your dog ever refuse to perform a command? Yes / No

If Yes in what situations?

What do you do if your dog refuses a command?

Does the dog have the skills you require in a service dog? Yes / No

What additional skills would you like your service dog to learn?

Are there any behaviors occurring which are or might become problematic?

How do you obtain additional training or resolve problems?

Train or problem-solve on my own

Get assistance from the organization where the dog was trained

- Hire a private trainer or go to training classes
- I don't do any additional training or problem-solving
- I don't know where to obtain assistance
- Other – Please explain below:

Do you feel that you have comfortable control of your dog? Yes / No

If No please explain:

Does the dog go out in public with you?

- Always Frequently Sometimes Rarely Never

Do you leave the dog home:

- Part of each day
- 1-3 times a week
- Less than once a week
- Rarely or never

Why do you leave the dog at home (check all that apply):

- Going to school or work
- Having medical procedures
- Exercise / gym visit
- Errands
- Dining out
- Other (specify _____)

What training devices do you use besides a leash and flat collar (check all that apply):

- Martingale collar
- Training collar (choke chain)
- Pinch collar
- Head collar such as Gentle leader or Haltie
- Chest-fastening harness such as Sense-ation or Premier Easy-walk
- Electronic (shock) collar
- Other (specify _____)

How have these devices helped you?

Is there anything else you would like to share about your experience working with a service dog?

Would you be willing to participate in an in-depth telephone interview or email conversation about your service dog partnership? If so, please enter your contact information and indicate when you prefer to be contacted:

Thank you for participating in this survey. Your responses will be helpful in improving the ability of service dog trainers to meet your needs and the needs of other service dog partners. Unless you have entered your own contact information, your responses will be completely anonymous. If you have any concerns or questions, please contact me at pam.hogle@gmail.com or at Pam Hogle, P.O. Box 31, West Boylston, MA 01583.