

What to Know if your Student is Applying for a Guide Dog

When working with the white cane, the emphasis of the skills is seeking physical contact with objects in the environment. With a guide dog, one will negotiate around and through obstacles without coming into contact with them. At Guide Dogs of the Desert we train our dogs to assist in:

- Walking in a straight line to prevent veering and guiding from point A to point B.
- Indicating elevation changes in the terrain while on a route.
- Finding and coming to a halt at up and down curbs.
- Locating the entrance and exit doors of buildings.
- Guiding around obstacles.
- Indicating the turns and doorways of known routes.
- Stabilizing and enhancing walking speed.

Most importantly though, a guide dog is *not* a pet or a guard dog. Both of those types of animal do not complement a person's existing set of technical skills. In order to maintain their high skill level, a guide dog must be worked consistently. A lot of work goes into the training of these dogs. Although they are highly skilled in what they are trained to do, they are only a complement to your student's foundational abilities in Orientation and Mobility. The dog guides them safely, but it is your student's own technical skills that directs the dog where they want to go and make certain the dog goes the way they are directing.

For prospective students to succeed in their journey of pursuing independent mobility with a guide dog from our school they must:

- Be 18 years of age, motivated and emotionally stable, to physically and mentally handle the stress of training with a guide dog.
- Have confident Orientation & Mobility skills (in practice for one year) that are implemented in environments outside the home on a routine basis for which a guide dog would be an enhancement.
- Have the physical stamina for walking at least one mile on a routine basis.
- Have the ability to judge traffic audibly in order to enhance a safe working relationship with a guide dog.
- Have a clean, settled living and working environment conducive to the safe and effective use and care of a guide dog.
- Have the capability of independently providing for the care and financial support of a guide dog in sickness and in health.
- Have the acceptance that a guide dog will draw interest and attention from the public, in a way that a white cane does not.

- Have a willingness to learn and apply techniques for the responsible handling and care of a guide dog.

Technically confident and independent Orientation and Mobility skills, in practice for at least one year, are an essential qualification for our school. Guide dog travel draws on many of the same tools one uses as a cane traveler, in particular, alignment skills, echolocation/auditory ability, time-distance estimation, determination of “all clear and safe to cross” response for street crossings, and general proprioception. A proficiency at remaining oriented over varying lengths of travel is also very important.

Effective communication with the guide dog requires the student to be attentive to the dog and their own actions. They are responsible to know the starting and end points as well as the landmarks along the way of their routes. The student must focus on what they are communicating to the dog to help ensure they receive the responses they want.

They will also need to possess the necessary strength to manage an appropriately matched guide dog with the necessary motor skills, range of motion, reflexes, flexibility and coordination to work with the dog. They must have the ability to maintain balance while negotiating curbs and steps, traveling over varied surfaces, managing the guide’s behavior and executing the body movements required when completing turns and following the guide dog.

We require applicants to provide at least three purposeful routes they currently use and will continue to use after training. These routes give us an idea of their level of independence and personal motivation. They also aid in the transition back home to provide sufficient work for a young guide dog.

Something to keep in mind is that your student will undergo rigorous training which will demand physical, emotional and mental stability. Furthermore, the days will be long as training begins at 6:00 am and will not end until 9:00 pm. The training lasts 28 days and the class will work in different types of terrain, weather, and challenging situations. Students must be reasonably independent and be able to walk for at least ½ hour twice daily. They will also experience a definable pull from the dog in harness on their left side during travel.

Your particular understanding, support and reportage (see Assessment of Current Mobility Functioning checklist) of your student’s abilities will help give insight to you and our team of Guide Dog Mobility Instructors and Orientation and Mobility Specialists. This in turn helps the Admissions

Department determine whether the student is eligible for a guide dog and able to handle the multiple skills and demands involved in being an active member of a guide dog team.

Having a guide dog can be a most rewarding and transformative experience in your student's life. To appreciate this, we strongly encourage your student to read, *A Handbook for the Prospective Guide Dog Handler: 4th edition*. This book was written and produced by Guide Dog Users Incorporated and is available on NLS-Bard, the GDUI Website, Amazon, and the American Council of the Blind. You may also get information from the National Federation of the Blind, National Guide Dog Users, www.nfb-nagdu.org.

The link below contains an informative article about Guide Dogs schools, their application process and other information, written from the perspective of an alumnus.

[Here's How to Get a Guide Dog, by Forbes Contributor, Peter Slatin](#)

We are keen to support your student's success in applying for a guide dog. If you should have questions or concerns regarding the information discussed here, please feel free to visit our website www.gddca.org or contact the Admissions Team at **760-329-2375**.