

THE ROLE OF GUIDE DOGS IN 2022 AND BEYOND

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The Role of Guide Dogs in 2022 and Beyond: Findings from a GDB-AFB Research Partnership

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INTRODUCTION

Over the past century, the guide dog has become recognized as a time-honored travel support for people who are blind or have low vision. For those who choose to use them, guide dogs can offer a blend of independence and companionship. Guide dogs can intelligently detect and avoid obstacles, assist with fluid mobility, and offer well-documented emotional benefits to their handlers.

In 2020, Guide Dogs for the Blind (GDB) and the American Foundation for the Blind (AFB) began a two-year research collaboration to generate a better understanding of the current guide dog use landscape in the United States and Canada. The research addressed four major questions:

1. What benefits do guide dogs offer their handlers?
2. What recent trends impact guide dog travel in the United States and Canada?
3. Why do some people choose not to use a guide dog for all or part of their adult lives?
4. How can guide dog schools improve outreach to prospective guide dog users?

AFB completed three major research activities to investigate the questions above:

1. A review of both the historical and current scholarly literature surrounding guide dog use;
2. A survey assessing the attitudes about guide dogs of 533 adults who are blind or have low vision, including both guide dog users and nonusers; and
3. Interviews and focus groups with a total of 75 individuals, including current and former guide dog users; guide dog school staff, orientation and mobility (O&M) instructors, cane users, and individuals with low vision who do not use mobility aids. Table 1 lists the number of participants from each group.

TABLE 1:

**Participation Description
(n=75)**

GDB graduates	16
GDB staff	9
Staff from other GD schools	5
Diverse GD users across U.S. & Canada	29
Cane users	8
O&M instructors	6
LV using no mobility aid	2

Overall, the findings reveal that guide dogs continue to be an invaluable travel tool for some individuals who are blind or who have low vision. Many factors determine an individual's choice and ability to use a guide dog, which can differ across an individual's adult life. Some of these factors are changing as the overall landscape of travel, and the demographics of the blind and low-vision population, change over time. Recent patterns such as the increase in telework, rideshare usage, and attempts to curtail fake service animals have impacted the contemporary landscape of guide dog usage. The findings lead to important recommendations for guide dog schools, O&M instructors, and policymakers to implement in order to optimize independent travel options for all blind and low-vision individuals.



BENEFITS OF GUIDE DOGS

“Having a guide dog, it is so worth it. It has given me more and exceeded my expectations more than I ever thought. If someone thinks they’re not the right person for a guide dog, or they have concerns, there’s a whole community out there who believes in them. Number one, it will change their life, and number two, there’s a whole world out there who’s rooting for them and will back them up.”

It is clear that guide dogs remain a valuable travel tool. Of the 533 individuals who participated in our survey, 284 (53%) reported currently using a guide dog. Of these participants, 128 (45%) reported using a guide dog for 20 years or longer. The guide dog users who provided qualitative data expressed enthusiasm for the guide dog lifestyle. The benefits of guide dog travel, described by both survey and interview participants, generally fell into three categories: travel efficiency, emotional support, and social benefits.

TRAVEL EFFICIENCY

Guide dog users described several practical advantages of traveling with a guide dog. These included the ability to walk faster, to avoid or move around obstacles, to move more smoothly through crowds, and to maintain a straight line of travel. Participants used words such as freedom, independence, and confidence often when describing their experiences with guide dog travel. A participant explained:

“It’s hard to explain. It’s so different walking with a cane than it is walking with a guide dog. A guide dog is just kind of like you move; in my experience, I get around a lot faster. I feel a little bit more confident walking with a guide dog, so that’s how it really feels.”

Another added:

“From the mobility side, I would say just the freedom...I think the freedom of not stressing about obstacles has been really amazing”.

EMOTIONAL SUPPORT

Guide dog users described the emotional benefits that were at least as significant as the practical benefits of guide dog travel. These included companionship, confidence, perceived safety, and a sense of not being alone during stressful or uncertain travel experiences. In the words of one participant:

“They’re a very useful tool, and yet they’re a very comforting friend to have by you also.”

Another added,

“ I grew up with dogs, always enjoyed having them. They add a level of comfort and joy to my life that you can’t really replace.”

SOCIAL BENEFITS

Finally, some guide dog users stated that they believed having a guide dog helps facilitate social interactions and conveys a positive image of blindness or low vision to members of the public. According to one participant,

“It’s a different attitude that society has, I think, looking at you with a cane as opposed to a dog. They think you’re more independent, they think you’re more capable [with a dog].”

Importantly, though, the social impact of using a guide dog can be a double-edged sword, as other participants described sometimes getting unwanted public attention or struggling with individuals interacting with their working dog without permission. Thus, using a guide dog can present both advantages and challenges in social situations.

TRENDS THAT IMPACT TRAVEL

Data were gathered in the survey and interviews to explore recent trends impacting the way people who are blind or have low vision get around in their communities. These trends may impact people's decisions to use or not to use a guide dog and may also impact the experiences of active guide dog users. The most commonly identified trends are described below.

TRAVEL TECHNOLOGY

In our survey, about three-fourths of the guide dog users reported that they also use a smartphone to aid them during travel. Similarly, most interview and focus group participants stated they use a smartphone at least occasionally for travel-related tasks. The guide dog users described using two major categories of smartphone apps: wayfinding apps—both mainstream (Google Maps) and blindness-specific (e.g., Soundscapes)—and visual interpreting apps such as AIRA or Be My Eyes. The participants generally reported using wayfinding apps to help plan routes before traveling. Sometimes, they also used wayfinding apps during travel to check their location or to receive turn-by-turn directions. The participants who used visual interpreting services did not typically use them regularly but used them on occasions when they were disoriented to troubleshoot or to assist with finding specific destinations (e.g., a specific sign in an office building). For example, one participant explained,

“I use one app to track the buses...And then I use Google Maps to find places and get to places. And then I use AIRA if the route gets a little bit difficult and I'm not sure where I'm going.”

TELEWORKING AND WALKING LESS

Interview and focus group participants frequently described walking and using public transit less often, or for shorter distances, than they have in the past. Some of this change was attributed to the pandemic and shifts from in-person to remote work or schooling. One participant said:

“My first guide defaulted into a suddenly retired state, just because there wasn't anywhere to go. And when I was able to work in person...It wasn't even Uber, I was just getting rides from my clients, parents, friends, to cut down exposure to other people.”

Another factor was the increased availability of door-to-door rideshare services over the last eight years which offer more convenience than using public transit. Participants who often used rideshare services like Uber and Lyft to travel between destinations reported having to walk less than they would if they used public transit for travel.

These changes are significant for guide dog use because guide dogs need consistent work to maintain their skills. Consequently, guide dog schools generally require applicants to demonstrate that they engage in regular foot travel, commonly three regularly traveled routes, to be matched with a guide dog. In fact, representatives from two different guide dog schools in the United States reported that the most common reason applicants are currently denied admission is because they have not demonstrated “sufficient travel” or a “purposeful need” for a guide dog.

As in-person activity resumes after the pandemic, foot travel and public transit use may resume to an extent, but trends like the availability of rideshare and continuing telework may lead to longer-term decreases in walking and public transit use for people who are blind or have low vision. Future research will be instrumental in determining the potential impacts on guide dog usage. While some individuals may choose not to start or continue using a guide dog due to reduced opportunities to walk, others may benefit from using a guide dog trained to accommodate a less active lifestyle. As one participant expressed,

“I still like having a dog, but I guess I just need a different kind of dog. I need a dog that’s a lot calmer, a lot more laid back that can handle not working a whole lot.”

AGE AND MULTIPLE DISABILITIES

Survey respondents included not only a large proportion of longtime guide dog users, but also older adults who are guide dog users. In our sample of 284 current guide dog users surveyed, about half were over the age of 55. With the general aging of the population and increasing prevalence of age-related vision loss, the average age of guide dog users is likely to increase.

Additionally, among the guide dog users surveyed, over one-fourth (27.8%) reported that they have a chronic health condition, about 14% reported having a hearing impairment, about 10% reported having a physical disability, and about 9% reported having a mental health disability. We also conducted three focus groups specifically with guide dog users who self-identified as people with multiple disabilities. It is clear that having these disabilities does not preclude a person from using a guide dog

effectively. In fact, some individuals reported that their guide dog offered support to help compensate for a hearing or physical disability in addition to guiding. One participant explained:

“When I walk, I tend to veer quite a bit because my left leg was injured bad[ly] in the accident...While working with a guide dog, it’s just so much smoother and easier.”

Other benefits of guide dogs specific to multiple disabilities included assistance with balance while walking, as well as increased safety in street crossing for those with a hearing disability.

While people with multiple disabilities can experience great benefit from using a guide dog, it is important to provide reasonable accommodations and supports during and after training to ensure a positive experience. Guide dog school staff described a variety of successful accommodations. Some commonly noted accommodations included training a guide dog to walk on a user’s right side instead of their left if they had limited use of their left hand; using an FM bone conduction headset to communicate with a client with a hearing disability during travel; or developing mnemonic strategies to aid a client with a cognitive disability in remembering routes or instructions.

Guide dog users, too, appreciated instructors who took the time to provide needed accommodations and supports. This sentiment was especially strong among guide dog users with mental health disabilities. Focus group participants with anxiety disorders, for example, emphasized the importance of having a trainer who was patient and gentle and who would preview routes and expectations with them ahead of time. More generally, intersections between mental health disabilities and the guide dog lifestyle are an area that participants felt should receive greater attention from guide dog schools. One participant explained:

“The biggest thing to me that I noticed that guide dog schools avoid like the plague is [to address] mental health throughout training. Some schools have a transition lecture at the very beginning where they talk about retirement of the guide and things like that. But being a guide dog handler, mental health is this constant thing that comes up...whatever it is, mental health is just such a big component of being a guide dog handler. And I’ve never really felt supported by the schools in that journey.”

ACCESS DENIALS AND THE PROLIFERATION OF FAKE SERVICE ANIMALS

From our study, it is apparent that being denied access to facilities and concerns about fake service dogs play a repeated, devastating role in the daily lives of guide dog users throughout the United States and Canada. In the interviews and focus groups, participants frequently described being denied access to rideshare and to businesses (particularly restaurants). Additionally, measures to block access for fake service dogs have resulted in inconvenience and threats of discrimination for legitimate guide dog users especially in air travel. The fear of access denials sometimes makes guide dog users hesitant to bring their dog with them while traveling, especially if they are in a hurry and need to use a rideshare quickly. Additionally, the publicity around guide dog access barriers contributes to some people's reluctance to become guide dog users.

Representative quotes from participants on these issues include the following:

“You could hear a car pull up and the app would tell you your driver is there, and then all of a sudden, the car would pull away real fast and the app would say, “Assigning you to another driver.” And you can't help but think that the dog is the reason. And so, while it's very convenient to travel with a dog, if having the dog makes travel a less convenient thing because of rideshare denials, or whatever it might be, then I don't know if I want a dog anymore.”

“I am hearing from other dog users about the red tape you have to go through because of people who had to have an emotional support or companion animal. It used to be we could say we had a guide dog and there was no problem. Now you have to fill out forms. You have to get a vet certification and it really seems like a big hassle. I don't think it is fair to us. I think we should be able to show IDs from the school we attended and that should suffice for the dog to travel with us.”

“It would worry me, too, [because] the main way I travel is rideshare. And if that's tricky with a guide dog, as we know it can be, that would be a big downside from my perspective. I already get enough weirdness from people in the public, and the dog would just add one more layer to that.”

These data point to a need for greater public awareness and advocacy to defend guide dog users' rights to access all facilities open to the public with their dogs. Some participants also expressed interest in receiving training and resources to aid them in self-advocating when they face access denials. One participant suggested:

“Maybe it would’ve been nice to help us or direct us to a place where we can find our local, not emergency, ...resources that we can reach out to just in case if a business is trying to discriminate or things like that.”

SHORTAGE OF O&M SERVICES

Before obtaining a guide dog, individuals must demonstrate mastery of critical O&M skills including spatial orientation, the ability to learn and navigate routes, and the fundamentals of using a white cane for travel. Availability of O&M services, especially for adults, can be limited as noted by Franck, Haneline, and Farrugia (2011) who stated that there appears to be *“a deterioration in the independent travel skills and readiness for dog guide training of applicants to our respective dog guide schools.”* (p. 741). This problem may be especially acute for individuals who are not receiving vocational rehabilitation (VR) services, like older adults and adults not looking for work.

In line with the above observation, multiple study participants emphasized the widespread deficiency of O&M services, particularly in the United States, leading to a pool of individuals who could benefit from a guide dog but who have not yet acquired the prerequisite O&M skills. For example, one participant shared,

“My O&M training with [agency] was probably 20 minutes on a high traffic street, and the instructor watched what I was doing with my cane and my walking and my sense of where things were and said, “Oh, you’re doing great. We’re done.” And that was it. And I did not think that was what I call training, that was observation by a trainer, but that trainer didn’t teach me anything.”

A guide dog school staff member added:

“I think there’s just huge swaths of the country where it seems like O&M services, rehab services, just aren’t that available and so that is certainly a barrier that seems like it’s not going away anytime soon.”

As a consequence of limited O&M services, there is a substantial subset of potential guide dog users who have not yet acquired the prerequisite O&M skills needed to qualify for a guide dog. Staff from two guide dog schools shared that the second most common reason for applicants to be denied within the last five years, after “insufficient travel,” was “insufficient O&M skills” based upon a pre-admission assessment. Initiatives to increase the availability of O&M services, particularly for adults, will likely expand the pool of qualified guide dog applicants. Some guide dog schools have developed specialized O&M training programs to meet this need. GDB’s O&M Immersion Program (OMI), for example, provides a weeklong intensive O&M training experience for both guide dog users and nonusers. While originally created to specifically meet the needs of guide dog applicants who require additional O&M training before receiving a guide dog, the OMI program has expanded to offer O&M services to individuals who already have a guide dog or who are not necessarily interested in a guide dog but who desire focused O&M instruction. The OMI program was evaluated positively by graduates who participated in the study and appears to hold promise in beginning to counteract the shortage of O&M instruction.



WHY SOME PEOPLE CHOOSE NOT TO USE A GUIDE DOG

While the guide dog users in this study shared a number of reasons for choosing to use a guide dog, others shared an equally broad number of reasons for not using one. Our research study included a combination of current guide dog users, former guide dog users, and guide dog nonusers, enabling us to gather information about the reasons shaping people's choices not to use a guide dog either temporarily or permanently.

RESPONSIBILITIES AND FINANCIAL BURDENS WITH USING A GUIDE DOG

In our survey, individuals who did not use a guide dog were asked why they did not use one. Among the 236 respondents, the top reason for not using a guide dog, according to 74 respondents (31%), was “not wanting the responsibility of caring for a dog.” Another 53 respondents (22%) stated that they did not have the financial resources to afford a guide dog.

Focus group participants who did not use guide dogs echoed these sentiments, often adding that they were simply not “an animal person” or they did not want the commitment and responsibility of ongoing dog care. Some individuals cited competing life demands that made guide dog usage less viable. For example, a parent of young children explained:

“I just can't imagine fitting a fur child into my life, now or maybe ever.”

Notably, some guide dog schools pay for veterinary expenses, which can mitigate the financial obligations of having a guide dog. Some focus group participants utilized and appreciated this financial assistance. However, others preferred to attend a school that gave them full ownership of their guide dog, even though those schools typically do not provide as much financial support.



LIMITED WALKING OPPORTUNITIES

As discussed earlier, individuals who have limited opportunities to walk may simply not need a guide dog nor be able to provide the daily work that a guide dog requires. A variety of lifestyle factors may influence an individual's activity level, including the location where they live, their employment status and the type of job held if employed, and the extent to which they engage in longer-distance travel. Even individuals who would otherwise be strong candidates for a guide dog may simply be unable to use a guide dog if they do not live in a walkable neighborhood. As one participant explained:

“When I got [my former guide dog], I lived in a house with a yard, just wonderful neighborhood for walking...and then, my situation...was going to change...and the only place that I can afford here is in a building downtown. I'm not comfortable getting another dog where I'm living...I would absolutely get another dog...if I lived in a [walkable] neighborhood.”

Among the guide dog nonusers surveyed, 23% stated they did not use a guide dog because their walking and travel activities were limited.

CONCERNS ABOUT USABLE VISION

Guide dog schools in the United States and Canada typically have eligibility criteria related to level of usable vision, such as a requirement that applicants must be legally blind. While some individuals who apply for a guide dog are turned away because they do not meet these criteria, others may mistakenly believe that they have too much usable vision to benefit from a guide dog. Our interview participants with low vision sometimes expressed a belief that they could be “*taking a dog from someone who needs it*” by applying. One participant said:

“[People with low vision] could benefit. It's always been a misconception that you had to have some level of acuity...so I never really entertained the idea of applying for one. I saw it as taking it from someone who really needed it... I probably wouldn't [get a guide dog] now. But if my vision kept declining, or if I ever felt like it was a safety thing for me, [I might].”

Another participant, who has low vision and uses a guide dog, added:

“I think, so often O&M people say to someone with low vision, “Well, you have too much vision for a dog.” My O&M teacher told me that ... years ago, and it took a long time for someone to convince me that he was wrong.”

In some cases, individuals with low vision may qualify and benefit from partnering with a guide dog, but they may erroneously believe that they would not benefit or that they should not apply. Education and outreach toward people with low vision may enable more individuals to receive the benefits of a guide dog or, if they do not qualify, to connect with other O&M resources that could help maximize their independence.

CHALLENGES OF TRANSITIONING FROM ONE GUIDE DOG TO THE NEXT

When a partnership is ended with a guide dog, whether it is through death or retirement of the dog, some challenges often occur. In past studies, guide dog users have typically reported having good experiences with their first dog and, as a result, often feel sad, resigned, or guilty with their second dog which impacts bonding (Ward & Peirce, 2010). Guide dog users also reported that the second dog often seems to require more concentration and greater physical demands. This may occur because guide dog users may need to refresh their own O&M skills and then develop new habits and routines with a new dog. Changes in usable vision can also complicate retraining (Ward & Peirce, 2010). Participants in our study echoed these experiences, and several shared that they decided to take a break between guide dogs for these reasons. Some individuals may also decide not to get a subsequent guide dog at all after a particularly challenging guide dog loss. Generally, it is thought that more care and focus need to be placed on the emotional consequences of guide dog partnerships and retraining (Nicholson, Kemp-Wheeler, & Griffiths, 1995).



OUTREACH TO PROSPECTIVE CLIENTS

Study participants, especially in the interviews and focus groups, provided valuable feedback on strategies for successful outreach to prospective clients. Key issues to consider include the following: family and cultural factors, factors influencing school choice, collaboration with O&M instructors, and attention to messaging used by guide dog schools.

FAMILY AND CULTURAL FACTORS

Focus group and interview participants emphasized the role of family members, friends, and other close loved ones in shaping the decision to get a guide dog and, sometimes, the subsequent relationship with the dog. In the best cases, family members provide support and guidance. However, there are times when family members' preferences regarding guide dogs do not align with the preferences of the individual who is blind or has low vision. As described in our study, families can sometimes either pressure an individual into getting a guide dog, or they may oppose the decision to bring a guide dog into the home or misunderstand the guide dog's role. Family reluctance may make it difficult for some individuals to go through with receiving a guide dog even when they are very motivated to do so. Furthermore, even when families accept the guide dog, misunderstanding of the guide dog's role can cause challenges if family members unintentionally interfere with the guide dog's work. One participant noted the struggles of dealing with family members' misunderstanding or interference, saying,

“I have two rules for my family: You better keep up with my 36-inch legs. And don't ask me silly questions.”

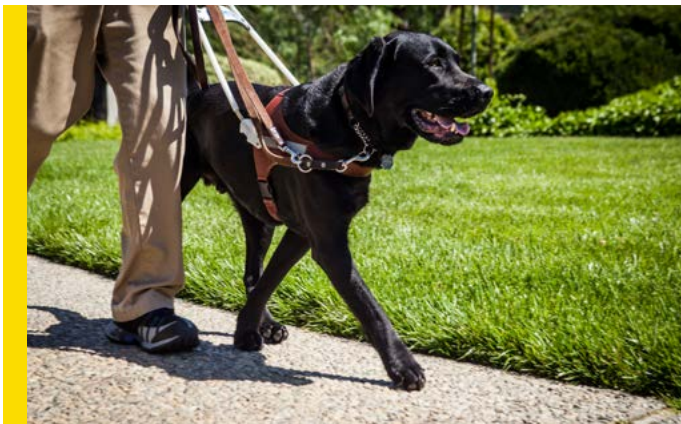


Cultural factors can also impact attitudes toward guide dogs. Some of our focus group and interview participants noted that certain cultural groups may have beliefs about dogs or about family and personal roles that may conflict with the guide dog lifestyle. For example, some Latino/a or Hispanic participants described their culture as focused on self-reliance and family interdependence. These participants felt that their family members did not always understand or appreciate the purpose of a guide dog in assisting them. Furthermore, the presence of a dog in one’s home or in public spaces is incompatible with some cultural or religious traditions. This can create challenges for members of some cultural groups who wish to get guide dogs. One participant commented:

“I’m Latina and some people who only speak Spanish don’t understand the purpose of a guide dog. I’ve never seen an ad for guide dogs in Spanish. Even with my own family, I had to educate them. The understanding is not there. It’s not that they don’t like them, it’s just that they don’t know.”

Guide dog schools can improve outreach to cultural minority groups by cultivating and highlighting a culturally diverse staff and student body. Additionally, some participants suggested that it would be beneficial for guide dog schools to provide clients with materials they can share with family or friends about their guide dog. One participant explained:

“It would be good to have, almost like a packet of information for those people in your circle about how a guide dog works. Because especially if you’re a first-time handler, and you’re just really concentrating on reading your dog’s signals, figuring out what their body movement is doing, making sure you’re staying up on your training, you may not be fully explaining verbally to a family member or a friend.”



FACTORS INFLUENCING SCHOOL CHOICE

During the interviews and focus groups, guide dog users were asked how they chose the schools from which they received their guide dogs. Several factors emerged that shaped the school choices of the participants, several of whom attended more than one school throughout their time as guide dog users. The most frequently described factors included:

- **Familiarity:** Some participants chose a school nearest to their home or one that was familiar to them.
- **Word of mouth:** Participants often followed recommendations from people they trusted when choosing a school, such as friends, members of blindness consumer organizations, or O&M instructors.
- **Specific characteristics:** Some participants chose a school because it was known to have specific characteristics that fit the participant's needs or preferences. This was especially true for participants with multiple disabilities who tended to choose schools based on their positive reputation for working well with clients who had multiple disabilities or a specific disability (e.g., deafblindness). For example, one participant said:

“I chose [my school] because of their treatment of people with multiple disabilities. I had attended a previous school, where I was treated badly because of my other disabilities, and it was very traumatic. And training at that particular school was brutal on the psyche. So, I realized the second time around, that I needed a school that got it, when working with people with other disabilities.”

Other school-specific factors included the level of financial support offered and the school's training philosophy.

- **Online or telephone research:** Several participants shared that they browsed one or more schools' websites before making a decision. O&M instructors, too, felt it is important for prospective clients to review and compare schools before choosing one. One O&M instructor, for example, shared that she assists clients in developing a list of questions to ask guide dog schools, and then encourages clients to call each school and compare their answers to the predefined questions.

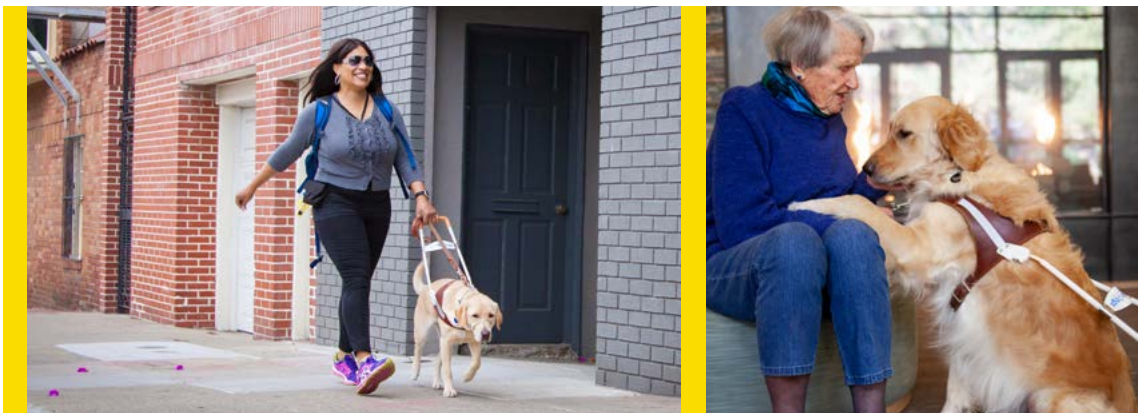
COLLABORATION WITH O&M INSTRUCTORS

The six O&M instructors in our study commented on their level of exposure to guide dogs and their handlers during their professional preparation. While all had some exposure, it was generally limited. One O&M instructor shared:

“[As part of my O&M certification] we went to The Seeing Eye. When asked if they had any questions, a classmate said, ‘I don’t think we know enough to have any questions yet.’ They tried so hard to educate us, but until we worked with real people, I didn’t know anything. One of my instructors was a guide dog user. Perhaps they could have exposed us to a wider variety of guide dog users to talk about their personal experiences, connect us with GDMIs [guide dog mobility instructors], talk about real-life experiences or history.”

As a result of their limited exposure, O&M instructors may have biased opinions of the guide dog lifestyle based on the specific examples of guide dog teams they have personally met or observed. The two blind O&M instructors in our study, for example, both articulated that their exposure to guide dog travel was heavily influenced by their participation in consumer organizations. Encounters with less-skilled guide dog users or poorly functioning teams may disincline O&M instructors from recommending guide dogs to their clients.

Both guide dog school staff and O&M instructors in our study stressed the benefits of increased collaboration between these two related professions. When an O&M client is seeking a guide dog, collaboration is essential throughout the process, from the client’s initial evaluation for guide dog readiness to the client’s return from guide dog training. O&M immersion programs like those mentioned earlier can assist with building collaborations between GDMIs and O&M instructors. Building relationships with guide dog schools and successful guide dog users may help O&M instructors to give their clients clear, balanced guidance as they evaluate whether or not a guide dog is right for them.



ATTENTION TO MESSAGING

Some focus group participants voiced a desire to ensure that guide dog schools use blindness-positive messaging. Specifically, they emphasized the importance of not overstating the role of the guide dog or diminishing the value of the white cane as a travel tool. An O&M instructor explained:

“A lot of the schools have promotional material that acts like blindness is a tragedy without the presence of a guide dog. The dog will suddenly give independence the person never had and never could have without a dog.”

Another O&M instructor added:

“Guide dogs don’t restore your independence; they are an avenue to independence. Whether you drive a white cane or a guide dog, you can still be independent. That’s what the schools should be selling, not that guide dog travel is better, but that there are some significant differences people might like.”

Similarly, a participant who chooses to use a cane echoed this sentiment, saying:

“I wish [guide dog schools] would have some more positive messaging about canes in general...A cane is still respectable, and a cane can still be a symbol of freedom, the same way a dog can be like that, for some people. There are different ways. The ultimate goal is to be able to travel where you want to go.”



FINAL THOUGHTS

“[Having a guide dog] is kind of like driving a Ferrari, you know you’ve got this powerful intelligent machine, totally obeying you whisking you through the environment. But if you don’t know how to drive it, you’re going to be in trouble.”

In 2022, the guide dog remains an indispensable tool in the toolbox of individuals who choose to use it. Guide dogs offer practical and social-emotional benefits that have been documented extensively in the literature and were confirmed by the guide dog users in this study, many of whom have happily worked with guide dogs for much of their adult lives into middle age and beyond.

As the above quote illustrates, though, guide dog users need the foundational O&M skills to effectively partner with a guide dog. A shortage of O&M services may reduce the number of individuals who can become qualified guide dog users. Additionally, extending the Ferrari analogy, guide dog users must have regular access to a track—that is, regular opportunities to travel and walk with their dog—in order to optimize the quality of the dog’s work and bond. Recent trends such as increasing telework and rideshare usage may impact the number of individuals who have a purposeful need for a guide dog. Future research will be useful in determining how post-pandemic return to work may or may not impact these trends.

Furthermore, the research findings point to a number of areas in which guide dog schools, O&M professionals, and people who are blind or have low vision can collaborate to maximize opportunities for independent, safe, and efficient travel. These include efforts to improve access to O&M services; practices that increase diversity and inclusion in guide dog training programs; and collective advocacy to defend guide dog users’ rights to access public spaces. Regardless of the choice to use a guide dog, a cane, or other tools, blind and low-vision individuals value their right to travel freely and independently using the tools that work best for them.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The recommendations in this report are limited to the areas investigated in this study and researchers' understanding of participant responses. Most of the recommendations reflect well-established and widely accepted practices that, nonetheless, have not been fully and broadly implemented, as demonstrated in this report.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR GUIDE DOG SCHOOLS

Guide dog schools should develop public educational resources on the following topics, which may be integrated into training classes, shared via public webinars, or provided as written handouts and web resources:

- Integration of technology (i.e., smartphone apps) with guide dog travel.
- Information on self-advocacy and legal rights to access.
- Written materials that clients can share with family and friends about their guide dog and how to interact appropriately.
- Information on mental health impacts of the guide dog lifestyle and basic mental health training for staff.
- Guidance on what to expect when first returning home with a guide dog and ways to access peer support from other guide dog users.
- Guidance on parenting young children with a guide dog.

Guide dog schools should consider the following outreach activities:

- Expand targeted outreach to schools for the blind, vocational rehabilitation agencies, blindness consumer groups, and O&M professionals.
- Feature diverse images and videos on their websites and social media, representing guide dog users from a wide range of cultural groups, ages, and lifestyles.
- Highlight stories from alumni with multiple disabilities about the customized services and supports they received in training.
- Involve alumni in outreach, both in person and on social media.
- Ensure all digital content is fully compliant with current web accessibility guidelines.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR ADVOCACY AND OUTREACH

- Rideshare companies should develop better procedures for driver education, monitoring, and enforcement of policies protecting the rights of guide dog users to access rideshare services.
- Airlines should ensure that policies governing traveling with a guide dog are reasonable and robustly support individuals' ability to travel with a guide dog regardless of size and breed.
- Guide dog schools should collaborate with consumer organizations and other stakeholder groups to advocate for regulation and enforcement to protect the access rights of service animal users and to track instances of discrimination.
- Guide dog schools should coordinate with legal organizations to ensure individual guide dog users have access to legal advice and recourse when discrimination occurs.
- Federal, state, and local governments should ensure that accessibility regulations and guidance reflect that people with disabilities can use service dogs regardless of size or breed without onerous paperwork requirements while providing appropriate animal care, such as guide dog relief areas. Individuals should be able to file complaints and expect a reasonable degree of responsiveness and enforcement for violations of their rights.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR O&M PROFESSIONALS AND PERSONNEL PREPARATION STAFF

- O&M professionals should familiarize themselves with the benefits and drawbacks of the guide dog lifestyle and the existing guide dog school options available to their clients in order to give their clients balanced information on all travel tools available to them, including guide dogs.
- O&M professionals should collaborate with guide dog mobility instructors (GDMI)s when serving clients who have received a guide dog.
- Personnel preparation program staff should include robust exposure to guide dog teams as an integral part of the curriculum for O&M professionals.

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