**Client Town Hall, March 2021**

**Webinar Transcript**

[VOICEOVER/DESCRIPTIVE AUDIO INTRO]

Guide Dogs for the Blind Client Town Hall, March 2021. Guest speakers each appear in front of photo backgrounds depicting different areas of GDB's California campus, or in front of the GDB logo.

[CHRIS BENNINGER]

HI everyone, I'm just noticing the number of people who are all coming into the meeting. I'm Chris Benninger, and I am going to just kind of chat for a little bit until we make certain that everybody who wants to get into the town hall today has the opportunity to do so. So, um - exciting! We're up to 157, 158 folks. Just so you know, everyone on the panelist list here has made bets about how many people are going to be participating today. [LAUGHTER]

So, I want to see those numbers get higher.

Alright. We're just going to give it another minute to make certain that everyone can get logged on and get settled. But we're so excited to be here with you. So excited. Alright. Still got a few people coming in.

Great. [unintelligible] keeps going off the screen.

Alright. You know, I'm going to kick things off - looks like we're stabilizing here. Again, welcome! It is just wonderful to be able to be here in front of you. I am Chris Benninger, I'm the CEO at Guide Dogs for the Blind, and as I said, we're so excited to be here today to tell you sort of where we've come from over the last year, and where we're going going forward. But let me start by introducing our illustrious group of panelists. I'm going to ask each of our panels just to say a quick hello so you can get used to hearing their voice. So let me start with Vanessa Lyons, our director of training in California.

[VANESSA LYONS]

Hi everyone! Great to be here with you today.

[CHRIS BENNINGER]

And then Cheryl Vincent, our director training in Oregon.

[CHERYL VINCENT]

Hello everyone! I'm excited to share some information with you.

[CHRIS BENNINGER]

Theresa Stern, our vice president of outreach, admissions, and alumni.

[THERESA STERN]

Hello GDB! Glad to see you guys all coming in today.

[CHRIS BENNINGER]

Lauren Kenney, our director of client services.

[LAUREN KENNEY]

Hello everyone, it's Lauren and our numbers keep going up. This is very exciting!

[CHRIS BENNINGER]

And Susan Armstrong, our vice president of client training and veterinary operations in Oregon.

[SUSAN ARMSTRONG]

Hello everyone! So excited to be with all of you today.

[CHRIS BENNINGER]

Well I am excited to be able to give you an overview of where we've been as an organization over this last year. It's hard to believe that we have - it's hard to believe, and then it seems like it's been forever - that we have been dealing with COVID now for year. It has been quite the year - quite the year - but, you know there's been a lot of silver linings to the year as well. So, just kind of as a quick overview, Guide Dogs for the Blind sort of started with COVID back basically about March 1, of 2020, and at that period of time, what happened was that our communities - both in California and Oregon - had lockdown mandates. So that meant that we at Guide Dogs for the Blind had to go into lockdown as well. And given the fact that we all didn't know very much about COVID, either within Guide Dogs or, you know, outside of Guide Dogs, it was a bit of a scary time, I have to say that. You know, the other thing I look back on and I say, you know, we were all just trying to deal with the unknown. There was no book that we could go to on Amazon, called, you know, “Pandemics for Dummies,” which sort of tells us what to do in these kinds of situations, so we had to essentially recreate Guide Dogs for the Blind with the overlay of the pandemic all from scratch.

We entered into that with basically two key focuses. One is ensuring that we could keep all of you as clients, all of our staff, and our volunteers safe. And that we made the decision early on to really focus on what we can do, versus being paralyzed by what we couldn't do. So it was very much sort of a "can do" attitude going forward. What it did mean for us though, is that we did go into lockdown for three months so that we could retool our procedures and our processes given those two key focuses in mind. We did stop breeding during that period of time, and again we stopped breeding because there were so many unknowns to us. We didn't know how long it was going to be before we would be able to start recalling dogs again; we knew that our puppy homes were full and we did not want to start putting, uh, trying to figure out homes for puppies during the pandemic when we really didn't have any additional puppy raisers out there to send our dogs to. So we did stop breeding for about three months.

But, during that three months time, we were able to get our processes in place and starting in July we slowly started bringing our mission back. And starting in July, we started doing in-home training; starting in October we started bringing clients back on to campus and having on campus classes, albeit those classes were at half full, so that we could maintain social distancing and safety for our clients. I want to also say that you know if you throw in there in September, that we actually had to evacuate the Oregon campus for two weeks because of fires. So I sort of felt like, what more could this world throw at us, you know? We had a pandemic, we had a fire, we just kind of, the only other thing we needed was locusts. And I hesitate to say that because - I don't know - we're not quite out of this yet. But through all of that I have to say I am so proud of our staff. I am so proud of our volunteers, and I'm so proud of all of you, because you've all stuck with us as we've had to sort of work our way through all of these things.

Starting now in January, we're actually bringing our, our mission back to life, basically in a way that nears what we were doing prior to the pandemic, or at a rate I should say, prior to the pandemic. Things do look quite a bit different. But our goal now really is going forward is that we will be training at a pace that nears what the pace that we were able to train at pre-pandemic. And our panelists are actually going to be talking in much more detail about all of those things. So, they'll do a better job of it than I, so I will let them carry forward with that.

But I did think it might be helpful if I also, in addition to sort of explain where we've been, and kind of where we're going, is also talk about our strategic goals going forward. Because now as we're starting to return back to some semblance of normalcy, we are now also starting to focus on our longer-term strategic objectives. And there's three critical objectives I just wanted to go through with you here.

One is that we're very committed to broadening our service offerings so that we can serve not only more clients, but also serve our clients for a longer period throughout their life. So this really entails expanding our youth programs; broadening our orientation and mobility immersion program to reach more people to help qualify folks for, you know, the guide dog program; and to support our clients when a guide dog is no longer the best option. So, it's exciting. We're very excited about broadening our service offerings.

Secondly, we're looking to, you know, develop ways to continue to run more efficiently. I will say that this has been one of the silver linings that we've experienced during COVID is, we've had to do things in a different way and we've actually learned to do a lot of things in a different way, but also in a way that's more efficient and more effective. And so a lot of the things that we've learned during COVID we will be continuing going forward. But in addition to that, we're also looking at ways that we can increase the success rate of our dogs so that we can serve more clients without having to breed more dogs in order to do that.

And then the third key strategic goal, is really better advocating for our community - for all of you with regards to access and accessibility, and partnering with other service dog counterparts so that we have a stronger voice, together, in that advocacy. So that's a very, very quick overview about where we've been, and where we're going. And on that note, I'm going to start turning things over to our panelists who can give you much more detail about where we are right now, and what things are going to look like in the next 6 to 12 months. So on that note, I'm going to be turning things over to miss Vanessa.

[VANESSA LYONS]

Thank you Chris. Hello everyone again. I am going to be talking about the status of our dog training program, both on our California and Oregon campuses. The short version of this update - or the main headline here - is that we are up and running. The dogs are being trained as normal; they are learning, developing, and being prepped to be the awesome guide dogs. So something to celebrate for sure, but that's the short version - I have a lot more detail to share. A number of questions came through in advance of today's Town Hall, and I want to share a sampling of those. These are the questions that relate to our dogs, or dog training. How are the dogs doing? Some of you are curious. Is dog training happening normally? For those dogs that were in formal training before the pandemic, how are they doing now? How are they responding? And lastly, are dogs graduating an older age as a result of the pandemic? So in my update today I'll be touching on those.

As Chris mentioned, when the pandemic began, and the shelter-in-place orders were issued, all the dogs that were in training at that time were moved off campus, and they either returned to their puppy raising home - or if that wasn't possible - they may have gone to another puppy raiser in a local club, or to a foster care provider home. And that group of people that responded in such an amazing way to unprecedented - an unprecedented situation - we kind of gave them a temporary name, if you will, and called them "shelter-in-place volunteers," or SIP volunteers. During that time, you may be interested to know that our instructors maintained weekly contact with those SIP volunteers, and they really formed a relationship around the dog that was in the home. This happened through phone calls or video calls, and the goal was to ensure everyone was doing well, and hopefully thriving, even with all of the wildness of the pandemic. It turned out that that created some bright spots for everyone - that relationship building was a real positive. That regular contact turned out to be a highlight for both the volunteers and for instructor staff. And we also heard from more than one SIP volunteer that the companionship of that dog in their home, and being part of the GDB community, during such a difficult time was a real comfort. Some bright spots.

Like Chris mentioned, beginning last summer we began bringing those dogs back to our campuses, and it happened over a period of time. The last group arriving in California in December. Now they were all at different stages of training before the pandemic, so same was true after. Some of those dogs have moved on, and they've moved through the program and have been -they've graduated with a client. Others are at a different stage in the process but they're actively moving through our training program. There was at least one question that came through before today about how those dogs have fared - how are they doing? And you know, it's it's - I think it's just confirmed how amazing our dogs are and how amazing the programs that support them are. Turns out what makes a great guide dog - our quality breeding program, our top-notch raising program - all the great qualities our dogs have - has also prepared them pretty well for living through a pandemic.

Overall the dogs have been - they've done well at adapting to the changes that the pandemic presented. And of course now, returning to training and guidework. Of course they've received a lot of support from the SIP volunteers and staff in various departments. So - they are doing well. Moving on to kind of where we are now.

In addition to bringing those dogs that were in training before the pandemic back and moving them through our program, we've also resumed our regular cadence of recalling new docs to formal training. That began at the end of 2020 and has continued monthly, as normal, in the new year. Now in normal times, you know our normal system of dog training and client training allows us to have a group of dogs that we call "class ready dogs" - dogs that are, they have completed every step. We have - we deem them ready to be matched with a client and go to class, or an in-home training. And again our normal system allows us to maintain a group of those dogs so that we always have a variety of dogs to select from as we are looking at each individual client and trying to make the best match. When we stopped our normal system during shelter-in-place, unfortunately restarting it isn't as simple as flipping a switch, but rather it requires that an incremental kind of steady build. And that involved considerations for the dogs, for instructors and other staff; how our different departments work together; plus all of our new precautions related to COVID.

But there's more good news in here - and that is that we've been, we've been doing the work, we've been building, and we are expecting to reach the point of having a typically-sized group of class-ready dogs starting in the months of April and May. So we've been working and building, and we see that point coming very shortly. Let me touch on dog age next. Of course the dogs didn't stop aging during the pandemic, just like the rest of us. Pre-COVID, the typical age for a new guide at graduation was about 1-1/2 years of age or somewhere in the range of 1-1/2 to 2. Now, and for a period of time, that age range is going to be about 2 to 2 1/2 years for a new guide at graduation. It's worth noting that this age range is familiar territory for GDB. The training program we had in place historically and for many, many years resulted in guides graduating in that same age range. So it's familiar territory and some of you may even feel that working with a somewhat more mature dog is a bonus. So that will be the state of things for a period of time, but now that our programs are up and running, we're forecasting - this is going to shift back to the age, that more typical age range of 1 1/2 to 2 years of age at graduation - towards the end of 2021 or early 2022.

And then lastly, before I pass things to our next speaker, I just want to circle back to what I said at the beginning, and restate that dog training is going well. Resuming this work was not without its challenges, and instructors office is very much in the public, it is our community, and we, as we were preparing, we had a lot of questions prior to resuming dog training. You know, what was it going to be like to train dogs in the community? Would we be welcomed in the same way? If we were working in buildings and stores, would they welcome us given all the COVID protocols? Would we have the same access to a variety of training environments to prepare the dogs in the same way? What's it going to be like to train a dog and wear a mask? And the ever-popular, when I'm out in public training dogs, where will I find a restroom?

Again, good news. We have a great team of instructors and supervisors - our training departments are resourceful, as well as client services, and we've been able to work through those questions - problem-solve, get creative where needed, and most importantly, maintain consistency with our training standards. We've been able to find that consistency with our training goals, requirements, and standards. So that's the last bit of good news I will leave you with before I pass things. We are training those awesome guide dogs and moving things - moving our mission forward. So from here I will pass things to my counterpart in Oregon, Cheryl Vincent.

[CHERYL VINCENT]

Great - thank you Vanessa. Hello everyone again. It's so great to have this opportunity to talk with y'all and let you know what we're doing. I'm going to be talking about client training and got a lot of information to share with you. And for my part of the presentation really I'm going to be talking about what we're doing as of today. As things start to open up across the country, with different state and city and federal guidelines changing, you know, we're taking a look at all of that information, and we're adjusting as appropriate. So, things can change very rapidly as you may be aware - you know, looking at all the CDC guidelines and things like that.

So, again, I'll let you know what we're doing today, and then later in this presentation somebody else, Susan Armstrong, is going to be speaking more about kind of what's next and how did things such as vaccines affect us and what we may do. So I'll save that piece for her and I'll just talk about class.

So the great news, as Vanessa said, that we have been resuming client training, and on both of our campuses, and also we resumed in-home training. And a lot of the questions that had to do with client training had to do with processes, and who's being trained, and how's it going, and what does class look like, and things like that. So I'm just going to give an overview of the whole thing here. So, like I said, we are training clients again, and since we've been back, we have trained over 50 clients - so five zero - so that's exciting for us to be able to training people. And as Chris mentioned, we're aiming to get back to training the same number of people as as is normal, and increase the number of teams. And is she also mentioned, our class sizes currently are smaller, so we're looking to continue to train people with in-home trainings to increase those numbers as well. And, you know, we're hoping to be able to train as many people as we can.

As you can imagine, we've had to figure out how we're going to serve clients during this time of COVID and what precautions are needed. So we really took a look at all the CDC guidelines that are out there and with that we had to come up with new protocols for our own campuses and apartments in our organization here. So as we mentioned the class size is currently or smaller. We are serving up to four clients in class. And some things a little different than before is our ratio in class - instructor to client is now a one-to-one ratio. So those clients can be all four guide dog clients, or they might be a mix of guide dog clients and orientation mobility immersion clients. And Teresa's going to talk a little bit more about our OMI program right after I am, so stay tuned for that. We have had people that have been in class and said that they love the one-on-one instruction, and can we continue that. And it is great, and we really have to balance our current adaptations that we've had to put in place during the COVID time, and the need to minimize the wait time, cause we realize a lot of you are out there waiting for your dogs as well. So at some point we're going to go back to normal operations - you know, with full classes and such. It's a little hard to predict exactly when. Vanessa mentioned the rollout of looking up the dogs coming in in the more consistent manner, and up to capacity looking April-ish, and we're hoping to have more regular dog supply for May and June, and so our goal is to train as many people as we can, and in as many different ways as we can. As you all know, it really depends on the course of the pandemic, and we're constantly watching and evaluating and seeing how things evolve.

As far as who's coming into class, our current program, as of today, is we're currently serving clients that live within a day's drive to either of our campuses, or a day's drive to a field service manager's house. And we're asking those clients to get a ride to and from campus. And the reason for that, is if somebody does get sick with COVID-19, that they can have someone come and pick them up and drive them home right away. That way they're out of the building, and they can go home and work with her own health care provider. As you can imagine, airlines do not want COVID-positive people on their airplanes. So that's the tricky part right there and that's why we're asking - that's why we're staying within a day's drive. We are exploring a few other options as far as different ways to train clients, and we've got a lot of good ideas, and our goal is to serve as many people as we can. And so we're working through some of those different ideas as we continue with both the in-homes, or maybe a different way to do an in-home, or whatnot. So, we are definitely taking a look at that as well. And then we also have to look at not only who can come into class, but as Vanessa was attesting, to which dogs we have available. Because just because we have clients ready for class, we we need to make sure we have the appropriate dog for the client as well. And just because we have a particular dog, the client might not be available for class. So, it's really a matter of taking a look at all of those factors, and deciding who can come in for which dog. We're building our dog numbers from, again, we're hoping to get back to a more regular flow of having class-ready dogs available.

Now prior to a client entering training, we go over with them are all brand new safety-related COVID protocols and information, and review things such as what's happening within our facilities. An example of that is we continue to maintain all the OSHA standards and cleaning on a daily basis. We have adopted all CDC recommendations for enhanced disinfecting protocols in all buildings and campuses. And we have improved air filtration and circulation within the residence buildings. And then also just basic general practices while on campus. We go over with clients some of the same things that we've gone over with staff, and we expect all of our staff, clients, and volunteers to adhere to certain protocols, such as increased hand washing, and we have hand sanitizers all over the place as well. Daily temperature checks, wearing face masks throughout the buildings and on routes as well. Of course if the client, if you're in your own room, you don't have to wear your face mask. But once you leave your room, we have the face masks. And again, that's on routes as well. We ask people maintain a physical distancing of six feet. And realizing that during the course of instruction, there are times when an instructor may need to move in closer than 6 feet for safety or spotting purposes, and that's just all the more reason for people to be wearing a face mask during routes. And then also we have GDB staff on campus and in the field undergo routine COVID-19 testing. And also during class we have some optional tools that we've adapted for instructors and clients to use. And really, you know, each team is different, so it's going to depend on what works best for each team. So we have things such as new Juno tools that can allow for further distancing between the client and instructor. We've upgraded our our "wheelers" - those are those fake dogs on wheels that we have - so we kind of upgraded them a bit they can be taken outside if necessary as well. We have, and we have had before as well, as an FM system that a client and instructor wear so there can be more physical distance between the two. And something new that we have that's pretty cool is we have these new bone-conducting headphones that are hooked up to Bluetooth. So basically, the instructor and the client both use their cell phones and the client wears the headphones and the benefit of this is that there's two-way communication between the instructor and client.

Clients are given a zoom link to use throughout class to be used for things such as video conferencing, meetings, guest lectures, like for example, when our client services department comes over and gives a presentation, we'll do a Zoom virtual meeting. And sometimes clients will also use this link to set up some virtual socials with each other during class as well. And let's see -we also have lectures that can be done by either Zoom calls with everyone in the class, or we can spread out where everyone's physically distanced and everyone's masked in one of our larger rooms on either campus. But really we talk with everyone cause we realize not everyone might be comfortable with Zoom meetings, or maybe you're just tired if you're doing a lot of them. So it's a conversation between the team of instructors and the clients as far as what's going to work best for everybody. And really that's a key to all of this, is good communication. What does - what do we need to do as far as our COVID protocols, and what does everyone feel comfortable with, and how we can work through that.

As far as transportation, going to and from town, again there's a one-to-one client/student ratio, so there is one vehicle for clients and instructor. Currently, as you may be aware, we're not doing graduations because of the restrictions on number of people gathering, but we are hosting a Zoom meeting for the client and the puppy raiser, and someone from the instructor staff there as well, and those have been going really well and the thing that's really neat about that, is that in the past we haven't done as much for someone in an in-home training because they haven't been able to come to graduation. There may have been a phone call, but with these virtual meetings, there could potentially be the whole family of the puppy raisers, or even the clients as well, and so it's a way to meet each other, even if it's an in-home training. So really, these are a few of our protocols, and what we're doing regarding client training, and so far the great news is everyone is adapting well and being very patient, and considerate, and things are really going as smoothly as possible. It's so nice to be able to, you know, see people on campuses again, or even, you know, serve people in in-homes, and just get things going. And everyone is just being wonderful as far as being patient with us, and we appreciate that, you know, it's kind of an unprecedented time. So, thank you everyone. It's been my pleasure speaking with you all this afternoon, and now I'm going to hand it over to Theresa Stern, our vice president of outreach, admissions, and alumni.

[RTHERESA STERN]

Thank you Cheryl, and hello everyone. I just wanted to take one quick moment for an audio description. All of the panelists you know when they're not talking, we've been turning off our cameras and some people have pictures, and I saw this one picture, and I was like, "Who is that?" and I looked closer and looked closer because I have to look really, really close, and Chris Benninger's picture is this adorable picture of her Basset Hound, Hank, and it looks like he's wearing a blanket or something so we'll have to ask her when she comes back to give you an even better audio description but I just thought that should be shared.

So I'm just here to talk a little bit - there was a couple questions that came in about our Orientation and Mobility Immersion Program. Both Angela Smith and Marc Gillard are right now doing a training up at our Oregon campus with two OMI students, and so I - you're stuck with me. So we are serving people basically in the same way that we're serving our guide dog clients, so people that can come to campus, or live within a radius that we can go pick them up and if they got sick, we could take them home, we're doing those trainings on campus. We're also doing in-home trainings with folks, and it's been working out well. We're looking to expand that even further as some of these restrictions start to lift.

And then a question came in about the OMI program in terms of if it's a requirement for getting a guide dog, and it's not a requirement for getting a guide dog. If your orientation and mobility skills are working for you, then that's great. But if you need a little help - some people need a little extra help to qualify because maybe they haven't gotten the O&M and their home community, or maybe they've lost a little more vision, and they need a little sprucing up, then the O&M program is something that we offer and recommend and very proud to be able to offer to folks - both people who are our graduates, so those of you who are out there now who might feel like you need a little tune up - as well as for people that are considering a guide dog. And in the OMI program just as with our clients - guide dog client training - our OMI client training basically mirrors the same protocols that Cheryl just explained - social distancing and masks and adjusted tools and harnesses and things like that that make it safe for everyone. So that's my little update for the OMI program and now I would like to pop it over to Lauren Kenney, who is our director of client services, and she is going to talk about Canada.

[LAUREN KENNEY]

Woo-hoo! Yes, Canada! Hello everybody, it's Lauren from client services, so good to be here with you all. My virtual background here on Zoom is the client residence on the California campus and my office happens to be in that building, and while we're sharing descriptions, my office overlooks the back of the client residence where there are exercise yards with the dogs, and a we do have a couple folks training here on campus and I just saw somebody with their new guide, working their guide out with an instructor, distance - masks - looking good, and it feels so great to look out my window and see that and then click the computer screen and know I'm with all of you, so thank you for joining us this afternoon.

We do want to talk a little bit specifically about how we are, where we are, and what we're planning in terms of all of you who are in Canada. And wait we know there are some really unique challenges in terms of the border closure for folks that are in Canada and we have been monitoring that; we have been thinking through what can we do to try to work with that unique situation, and I do want to thank our field managers to cover the Canadian provinces, Charles Nathan Loren Ross, and Chuck Farrugia, for keeping us informed of what's going on. And so I can tell you what we are aware of.

Our most recent update that has been available on February 4th, our understanding is that Canada did implement a process or a protocol where you have mandatory PCR testing - PCR COVID testing - for people who are returning to Canada following travel, as well as pre-departure test requirements that were implemented earlier in the year. So our understanding is that those things are still in place - those requirements are still in place. And so in addition to that, all international passengers, whether that's commercial, private, or charter flights, are from the United States are being channeled into Vancouver, Toronto, Calgary, and Montreal Airport specifically and only. And then post arrival, people are needing to have a three-day quarantine as well as a COVID test at that time. So there'd be a test upon arrival and you have to quarantine for those three days in a government-approved hotel. The cost of those things is being expected be covered by the traveler, and then there's you know the duration of the whole quarantine post arrival is 14 days.

So it's understandably, a lot, in terms of the desire to be really careful around people coming in and out of the country and COVID spread. Understand that the cost of the testing and then the quarantine that travelers are being asked to cover is somewhere close to $2,000 - I'm not sure if that's a Canadian or US dollars - or quite honestly, but it's a significant amount of money. So that certainly is a barrier in in the logistics, and the cost associated with trying to do that.

So Canada and the US are still in talks in terms of the land border measures that are going on to our understanding, and that these restrictions could be extended until April 30th, potentially. We haven't had any new updates to say within the last month to say that that is looking any different, and so with all the restrictions, the fluid border restrictions, that are affecting both air and land travel between the United States and Canada, the quarantines, the cost those kinds of things, it's really difficult at this time for us to predict anything like a lot of certainty around when we might be able to predict the timeline under which GDB staff can travel in to do in-home training in Canada, or folks in Canada being able to come here to the US to train, and I know that that's hard to hear in somewhat potentially frustrating at times because a lot of what we're saying around COVID is that it's hard to predict, right?

What I can tell you is that we are looking at this really closely and as you know if it's very possible that the availability of vaccines will change some of this and that some of the restrictions that are in place right now may be altered, and it may be more possible for us to travel more freely either into Canada or folks to travel out to us in order to get training and then return home with your dog. So that - you know all of the vaccine information is still developing, it's new, so we're going to be tracking down information very closely to see what becomes possible.

And we do want to train folks that are Canadian clients in the same way we train folks that are United States-based clients in terms of any distance to campus - people who are at further distance from campus being able at the same times to be able to begin training again, as long as the border restrictions are eased around COVID and vaccination. So we don't want to have folks in Canada treated any differently than our folks in the US and we are committed to. And we appreciate the patience that you all have shown.

We did have some questions you know - well what if the border restrictions aren't used in 2021, 2022, 2023? What are we going to do - are we just going to have to wait? I don't think any of us are comfortable with a wait-and-watch that far out into the future, so in the next couple months as we look at what's happening with border restrictions and vaccine roll outs, if we start to see that this is continuing beyond a time that feels reasonable - I don't have an exact timeline for that - but we will need to go ahead and take a look and see you know what reassessments determine where we may need to shift gears. Where we may need to work together in some problem solving, and what I mean work together, us at GDB and you all in Canada who have been so, so very ready to jump in and assist and advocate for us and for yourselves, and so it is important that we stay connected. It's important that we have the opportunity if need be to work together on perhaps looking at other advocacy options if things don't improve in the not-too-distant future.

And so it was a question we received too of, are we potentially going to do another Town Hall that is specific to Canadian clients? And the answer is yes we would like to do that. We'd like to wait just a little bit more to see if we do have something new to tell you because we don't have anything real new from the last time that we talked, but we do want to have another opportunity to sit down together with folks in Canada to talk specifically about updates as they as they arise. So do you look for more information from that as soon as we are able to get something put together and to be able to actually provide you with new details. So, I hope that's helpful.

Thank you all for again for your patience for sticking with us. We appreciate it. And I just talked a little bit about what the availability of vaccinations might change and so it's kind of a good segue for me to bring in Susan Armstrong, our VP of client services, training, and veterinary services to talk a little bit about testing and vaccinations: where we are, where we might go, and what we're still figuring out. So thank you Susan.

[SUSAN ARMSTRONG]

Thank you Lauren. When the last time I turned on the news or the radio and didn't hear something about testing and vaccination? It's been a while. As far as Zoom backgrounds, I also have the client residence in my background, in and amongst the trees so I have a little bit more greenery.

We did get a lot of questions about testing and vaccinations and so I'm going to do my best to answer those questions. I did want to start by talking about that our priority since the beginning of this pandemic has always been the safety of clients and staff. And so one of the things that Chris said there is no book on how to how to navigate COVID, but one of the choices that we made the beginning was a philosophy of leading with care. And that just means that we consider how our actions affect others. And so I just wanted to say that, because all of the things that you've heard from Cheryl and from Vanessa and Theresa about the care that we've taken along the way is all for keeping safety at the top priority for everybody, and we've done that quite successfully.

With regard to testing and vaccinations, as we all know we all have kind of lived, the last year that the guidance on testing and vaccinations: it changes. It also varies between countries, between states, between individual counties. So I say that because making the decisions around how to apply guidance, are complex and they have a lot of layers to consider when when you look at that our campuses are in two different locations. We have staff that lives throughout the country, all of you live throughout North America, so the choices that we make here have a lot of layers to think about.

So I'll start with testing. So COVID testing, just to update, I think touched on it a little bit, but all of our staff are being tested regularly, and that includes all campus staff and all of our field staff. The other thing is that we will be asking clients to get tested prior to coming into training, and that's both in-home and in-residence training. And as I say that, I can, I can, um, picture that maybe some of you are nervous about that because again, the availability of testing in your own states and in your own counties can be varied. So I just want to say that we're going to provide support through that process, and we have come up with some various options to make it as accessible as possible for everyone. We are working with an accessible pharmacy through the Be My Eyes partnership. So I just want to tell everyone that we are going to be asking clients to get tested but we will be providing support to make that is easy as possible. So that was kind of the update on testing and as we all know, things change and we will apply differences as they come they come up.

So the vaccination topic. I think I can say, and I think all of us kind of feel, some excitement about vaccinations and how they're going to change things, because I think they are going to change things. I'll start by saying eligibility for vaccines and availability is also inconsistent between countries, states, and counties. And so it does make finding guidance difficult. Now one of the nice things is that just this last Monday, the CDC came out with guidance for fully vaccinated individuals. So it's always great when they come out with some really strong guidance that we can use to apply yo our program. We are encouraging our staff to be vaccinated. And each state has a different timeline of how those vaccinations are being rolled out. But the good news is that the vaccinations will change how we can provide service, and I reference the CDC coming out with that guidance on Monday only because we need a little bit more time to fully apply that guidance to our very, very complex system that we have, and I really enjoyed listening to Cheryl and Vanessa and Theresa talk about the complexities of our system. And hopefully that is a little bit more understanding of this - the layers that we have to think about - but it could, it could change a lot of things. You know one of the things Cheryl talked about was that right now we're serving clients within a driving distance. And so vaccinations might change who we can serve, and if flying becomes an option, that really changes things. It could possibly increase the client-to-instructor ratio, which just means that we can serve more. And I think that you know - I hope this goes without saying - but everything that we're doing is to try and serve as many people as we can and get back to our full mission. So many of the questions that all of you had, was talking about attending training, and will we require vaccines, and how will we determine priority. So what I'll say is that we are still considering that new guidance and we will we want to have a solid plan in place before we before we roll out and start scheduling people. So one of the things this last year I think has been - a lot of the answers have been - we don't have exact, what the exact plan yet. So I'll just say that we need to take a good hard look at that guidance and see how that's going to change things. But it will change things.

As far as priority for training, I think people asked about you know, what about the people who have been waiting the longest, and how will you determine that? And what I'll say about that is we have a lot of considerations to take into account with having people come into training. But we know - we have a full picture of everyone that's been waiting - we know how long you've been waiting, we know where you live, and where you've been waiting. We know what kind of dog that you want, and how long you been waiting. So I say that to give you some peace of mind that we have the puzzle in front of us and we're just going to be layering what the vaccine - how that how that changes things - and looking to get people served as soon as possible. So how long you been waiting will be absolutely be a factor. Dog match, the timing of training, how many clients we're currently serving in residence, will also be part of that equation. So again, our priority is really safety, and we're very excited about the vaccines and what that means for the organization. I think that we have felt the weight this past year, as I know all of you have, as far as not being able to fully run this organization. And we are really excited about opening back up and we feel like in the next few months, that that will be the case. So again, we want to have a solid communication plan when we start scheduling people, and so we'll be using these next few months to get that going. [unintelligible] what we did learn is, you know, putting putting the organization back together is a very complex task and I think that we've done that and we are on the up-ramp to opening back up.

So I wanted to take this opportunity to thank all of you for your patience. I know this year has been really hard and waiting to train for a guide dog to make that even harder. So we are so grateful that you continue to choose us, and we will be in contact about what the plan is as far as how we're going to be scheduling classes and opening back up, given the new vaccine guidance that we have. So thank you to all of you for your patience this past year. And with that I am going to turn it back over to Chris.

[CHRIS BENNINGER]

Thank you Susan. So in full disclosure, since Theresa talked a little bit about the background that I had when my camera is turned off - thank you Teresa - I actually didn't realize that that was picture was on there. [LAUGHTER] But it is a picture of my Basset Hound Hank. And Hank, so you know, he's got a very, very long back; very, very short legs; and very, very long ears. And he is in his bright blue raincoat. He's completely covered in blue except for his face - [Theresa: Adorable!] - and I actually think he looks like a foam roller at the gym [LAUGHTER].

But I am hopeful that all of you really did, you know, appreciate the Town Hall today. I'm hoping we were able to answer your questions. I do realize that, you know, due to time constraints we probably have not been able to answer all the questions that were submitted today, or prior to our meeting today. So we really believe that responding to all of your questions are ... is very, very important, and so we will be in the next week sending out an email communication that includes a link with today's recording of the webinar, but included in that will be a document that provides written answers to all of the questions that we weren't able to add answer today.

I also know that most likely there's additional questions that have been raised, just based on what we've said. So if you have additional questions, we would really appreciate you submitting that via an email to - I'm going to read this twice - igraduatesupport@guidedogs.com. So that's igraduatesupport - all one word - at guidedogs.com. And if you submit those questions then we'll make certain that we will include the answers to those questions as well in the upcoming email and the link that we send out.

And then Lauren reminded me to say that if you have any, any questions, always feel free to call the GDB Support Center anytime, and that number is 800-295-4050. So 800-295-4050 if we can help or support in any way.

So before we say goodbye I do want to echo what Susan said and thank you all for your patience. Thank you all for believing in guide dogs, committing to our mission, and you know standing by us as we work through all of these complications of COVID this past year. But we're excited to be re-engaging our mission and we're looking forward to seeing all of you on campus one of these days soon. So on that note, I've asked everybody - all of our panelists - to come back to the screen and so that we can all say goodbye. So thank you all so much.

[ALL PANELISTS]

Thanks everyone! Thank you everybody! Take good care! Have a good evening. Bye everyone.

[NARRATOR]

For more information about Guide Dogs for the Blind, please visit our website at guidedogs.com or call us at 800-295-4050.