

# Milestones in Training Service Dog Candidates

By Jeanne Hampl  
NADOI Certified #962/C/M

I have given up counting the number of phone calls I get asking how someone can get their dog “certified” as a service dog. Seldom do I receive calls asking how to choose an appropriate dog or how to train the dog in question. When I ask the callers what training the dog they want “certified” has had, the answer is usually “none.” They have not attended obedience classes. They have not even read a book on training. When I ask about task training, they usually respond “well I just want the dog to come places with me.” Interestingly, these callers do have a disability but have no concept of the training necessary for public access work and no idea that service dogs must be task trained.

So where does a person training a potential service dog begin? I recommend all service dog candidates from puppy to adults attend dog training classes. They should begin with either a puppy or beginner class and continue on until they pass the AKC Canine Good Citizenship Test (CGC). Classes are the first milestone. Successful completion of the CGC is the second. A dog that cannot pass a CGC has no business being out in places of public accommodation.

Once a dog is sufficiently trained to pass a CGC the trainer should download a copy of The Assistance Dogs International’s Public Access Test (PAT). (<http://www.assistancedogsinternational.org/standards/public-access-test/>). The trainer then begins to practice the individual test items such as appropriate loading and unloading of a dog from a vehicle and the dog’s ability to ignore food on the floor. The third milestone is successful completion of the Public Access Test.

While training the dog in public access skills, the trainer /handler needs to determine what actual tasks the dog needs to be able to perform to assist the person with a disability. There is an excellent disability and task list on the website of The International Association of Assistance Dog Partners (<http://www.iaadp.org>). A dog that is not task trained is not a service dog even if its owner is a person with a disability. Federal law clearly states:

*“Service Animals are animals that are individually trained to perform tasks for people with disabilities—such as guiding people who are blind, alerting people who are deaf, pulling wheelchairs, alerting and protecting a person who is having a seizure, or performing other special tasks.”*

The fourth milestone is reliably performing tasks both at home and in public. Program trained dogs and dogs tested by some local assistance dog clubs must perform tasks as part of their Public Access Test. The handler chooses the tasks. Assistance Dogs International requires a minimum of three tasks in their standards for service dog training.

The question, “How do I get my dog certified?” is just the tip of the iceberg. Federal law does not require certification of service dogs. It does require that a service dog be task trained and under the control of its handler and not a direct threat to the health or safety of others.