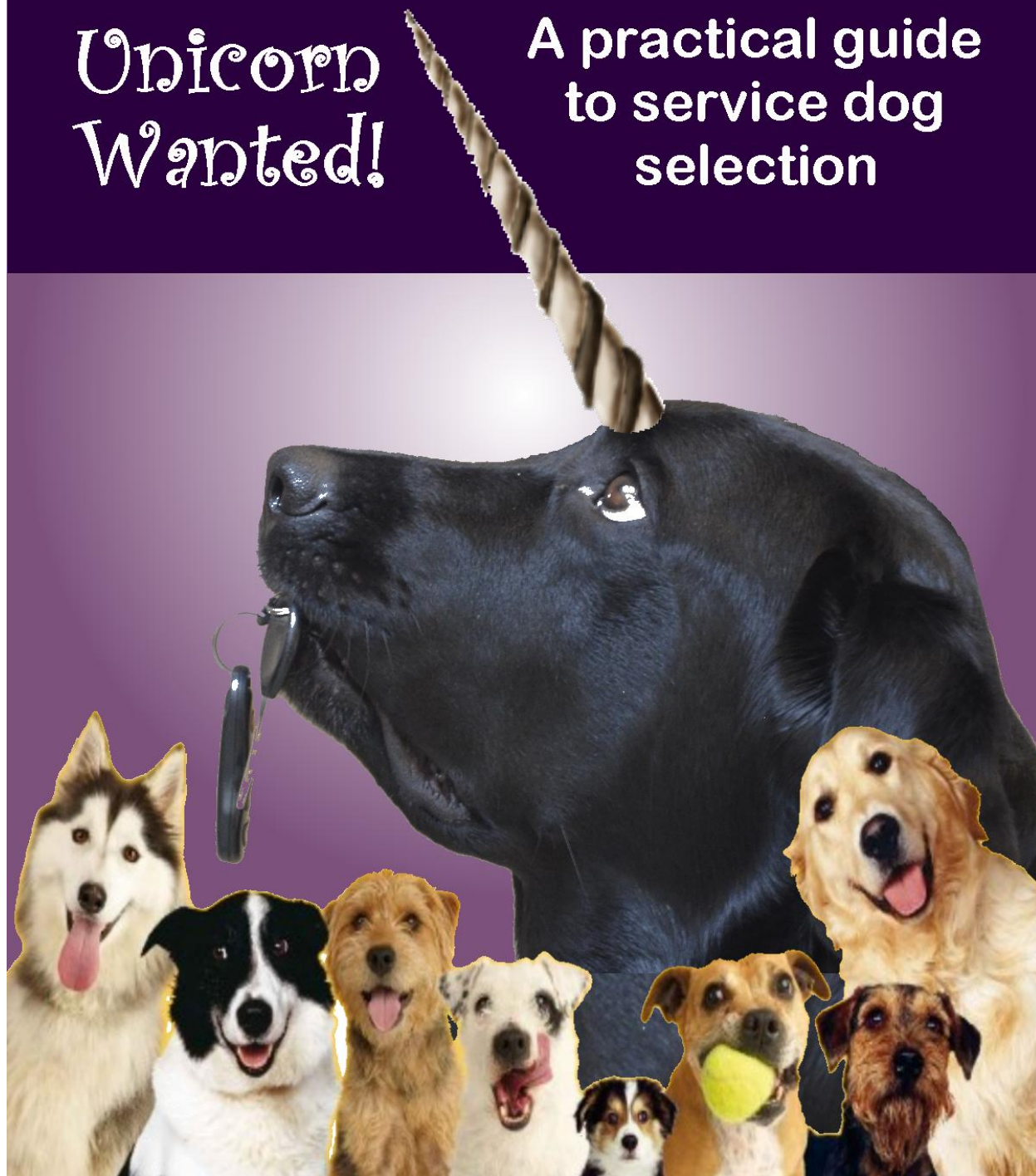


# Unicorn Wanted!

A practical guide  
to service dog  
selection



A publication of Buckeye Service Dogs LLC

Christy Talbert

## **Unicorn Wanted! A Practical Guide to Service Dog Selection**

by Christy Talbert, Buckeye Service Dogs LLC

### **Introduction**

One day I was speaking with a dog breeder about special characteristics a service dog trainee needs to possess. When I finished my description, she laughed and quipped, "*So basically, you are looking for a unicorn on a regular basis.*" Though she meant to be funny, her joke was a pretty good description of what it's like to try to find a service dog candidate. It's the search for an elusive, magical creature. If you purchased this booklet, chances are that you, too, are in search for a unicorn - though you may not realize it yet!

My name is Christy Talbert, and I am the owner of Buckeye Service Dogs, LLC. Since 1980 I have selected and trained more than 250 service dogs (SD) for persons with a wide range of disabilities.

With the recent expansion of SD uses (psychiatric, diabetic, etc.), it is inevitable that an increasing number of people are attempting to train their own dogs. Likewise, the number of dog trainers who want to enter this growing field is exploding. This is not a bad situation, so long as the dogs involved work and behave like true SDs. For that to happen - one must begin with the right dog.

***"On an almost daily basis I receive emails from sincere people asking me to train a neurotic, hyper, or otherwise ill-suited dog as a service dog. These folks are asking me to teach an ostrich to fly."***

Unfortunately, very few people who want to train a service dog for themselves or wish to train them professionally *do* begin with the right dog. On an almost daily basis I receive emails from sincere people asking me to train a neurotic, hyper, or otherwise ill-suited dog as a service dog. These folks are asking me to teach an ostrich to fly.

Even more disturbing are emails like the one I received yesterday. Someone had paid \$5,500 for a psychiatric service dog, and they received was a hyper, nervous Rhodesian ridgeback. The trainer refused to refund the money, and their website proudly brags that they are able to train everything from personal protection dogs to service dogs. Had the client read this document before meeting the dog, the individual would have immediately known the dog was not suitable, and would not have paid for it. Had the dog's trainers read this document, perhaps they would have chosen a more appropriate service dog candidate (SDC).

In the remainder of this booklet, I will attempt to pass on 35 years of experience in evaluating and choosing dogs, so that those who want a SD for personal use or desire to train them professionally will stand the best chance of success. I will begin by narrowing the search down to particular breeds. Then, I'll hone in on the specific traits a good candidate should possess

for various types of service work. I'll end with a practical guide to help you evaluate SDCs from your first contact with the dog owner through your first month at home with your dog. Lastly, I will include a copy of my article on how to choose a service dog trainer. Sound good? Let's get started.

### **Breed Preferences**

Does breed matter? Yes! Certain breeds were created for specific jobs. Small terriers go in holes and kill things. Shepherds guard. Huskies pull. Some breeds were developed to work in very close partnership with man - others were selectively bred to do their jobs in solitude or with a high degree of independence. These genetics are hard-wired. They should not be ignored when attempting to find a suitable SDC.

***"When selecting a SDC, play the odds. Choose from breeds that are known to have an aptitude for this type of work."***

Decades of experience have convinced me that I have the best results with the following breeds: English Labradors, golden retrievers, standard poodles, and Great Danes (for balance work). Mixes of these breeds may work well also (ex: a Dane/lab cross for

balance work). I rarely, if ever, vary from these selections.

### **Highly Recommended Breeds:**

**English Labradors:** It's important to understand all Labradors are not created equal. There are two main categories of labs: American/field and English.

American labs are bred for field trials and often have an extremely high energy level. They are great in the field but can be difficult to live with - and very few make great service dogs due to their energetic nature. American labs are typically taller and lankier than English labs. Their heads are narrower and their noses longer. They often have an intense focus on anything that moves. The ears and tail are often carried higher than those of their English cousins. When they wag their tails against you it may feel like you are being flogged! [High Drive Lab](#)





English labs tend to be shorter and blockier by comparison. They have shorter snouts and a tank-like build. They are characterized by a heavy bone structure and a lower ear and tail carriage. English labs tend to be much more laid back, and calmer. Often these dogs have soft eyes and a wag that never stops swishing slowly back and forth. [Laid Back Lab](#) English labs are appropriate for many types of service work and the calmest ones excel with children.



**Golden Retrievers** can also be a great choice. Goldens can vary widely in temperament and energy level. Look for goldens that act similarly to the English labs described in the previous paragraph. Goldens can excel in service work including seizure, medical alert, and mobility. Nice, calm adults are difficult to find because their owners don't tend to give them up. The major downside of a golden is the profuse coat. Goldens shed quite a lot and because of the color of the coat, the shed hair is very visible.

**Standard Poodles** are great low-allergy choices, and the tall, calm ones are good for balance work. BSD's poodles have also excelled at medical alerting. Standard poodles do not shed, which is awesome. They do require a haircut every six weeks. Many people balk at the idea of having a poodle because they seem dainty or feminine. But, it's all in the haircut. The men who have our standards adore them!



**"Small" female Great Danes** (under 110 lbs), or Danes crossed with retrievers, are often excellent choices for balance work due to their calm and gentle demeanor. Danes can also be wonderful for someone with limited mobility who has a hard time reaching down to pet their dog. Keep in mind Danes tend to have shorter longevity.

**Other Breeds that may be suitable:** Smooth or rough collies, shelties, bully breeds, flat coated retrievers, boxers, and Newfoundland mixes. I steer clear from full bred Newfoundlands, Great Pyrenees, Saint Bernards, and similar breeds because of their huge size, shorter lifespan, and difficult-to-manage coats. Remember that for any longer haired dog with a thick undercoat, grooming, shedding, and coat care are going to be an ongoing issue.



**Breeds that are more likely to become overly protective or aggressive:** German shepherds, Australian shepherds, chows, akitas, Rhodesian ridgebacks, Dobermans, Malinois, shar-pei, some mastiffs, and some bully/pit bulls (in general the herding/guarding/fighting breeds). The real rub with these breeds is many do not display protectiveness initially (when they are not overly bonded). However, six months or a year down the road, you may be in for big problems. This is especially heartbreaking because by then you will be very attached to the dog. I strongly discourage anyone with a physical/mobility/balance problem or autism/cognitive/TBI to get one of these more protective breeds. Some individuals of these breeds may be suitable for adults with seizure or psychiatric issues, (i.e., anxiety, PTSD), if they are strong leaders and experienced dog handlers. However, I implore you, play the odds by choosing a recommended breed.

***The vast majority of doodles I evaluate are very active and wiggly...I'm not saying rule out all doodles, but watch the energy level!***

**Breeds that are usually too nervous or active:** Border collies, many Australian shepherds, terriers and terrier mixes, Dalmations, and many small breeds.

**Other breeds or groups I avoid for various reasons (health, size, lifespan, other tendencies):** Hounds, terriers, greyhounds, American (field) type labs, tiny dogs, giant breeds (except "small" female Danes).

**What about Doodles?** Many folks want a labradoodle, goldendoodle, or mini doodle because they do not shed and are allergy friendly. I have trained numerous doodles and evaluated many more. The vast majority of doodles I evaluate are very active and wiggly. As a result, they do not make great service dog prospects. If you want an allergy friendly dog, my strong

suggestion would be to find a nice, friendly, calm standard poodle. I'm not saying to rule out all doodles - but watch the energy level! Also, keep in mind that not all doodles are shed-free.

### Male vs. Female

Both male and female dogs can make great service dogs. In general, I prefer females because of their maternal qualities (and in the case of Danes/Dane mixes, their smaller size).

I do see some gender differences in the behavior of various breeds. Very few male labs make it through my program, and the "macho" ones never do. Male golden retrievers tend to do pretty well. I like male and female standard poodles equally well.

When evaluating male dogs watch out for a very masculine looking/acting dog. Consider things like: Does the dog require an extremely strong correction to notice that you're on the other end of the leash? Does it take a bunch of manhandling? Does it seem like it might get protective or act dominant? Does it raise its hackles and/or mount other dogs (or you!)? Is it more interested in its surroundings than you? Female dogs may also act quite masculine and have these same characteristics. I avoid these dogs.

Very macho Labradors have features similar to a rottweiler or mastiff. Pass these dogs by. Instead, look for the softer features and expressions shown in the lower row of dogs.



### Temperament

Now that we have narrowed the search to a few breeds, we can begin discussing the characteristics of individual animals. Through the years I have observed most dogs that "fail" at being service dogs are able to do the work tasks. However, they fail because they can't handle the lifestyle and/or their owners can't handle them. Reasons include fear, aggression, too much energy, etc.

***"Training will NOT change the basic temperament of the dog."***

Training will NOT change the basic temperament of the dog. Even the best trainer can't train an extremely active dog to be a couch potato. A couch potato is never going to be a performance animal, no matter how well trained. [Couch Potato Doing Agility](#) [Boarder Collie Doing Agility](#)

So, in order to be successful, you are going to have to be extremely selective. Remember, you are looking for an

EXCEPTIONAL dog, not just a nice dog, or a friendly dog, or a dog that needs a home. *You are looking for a unicorn.*

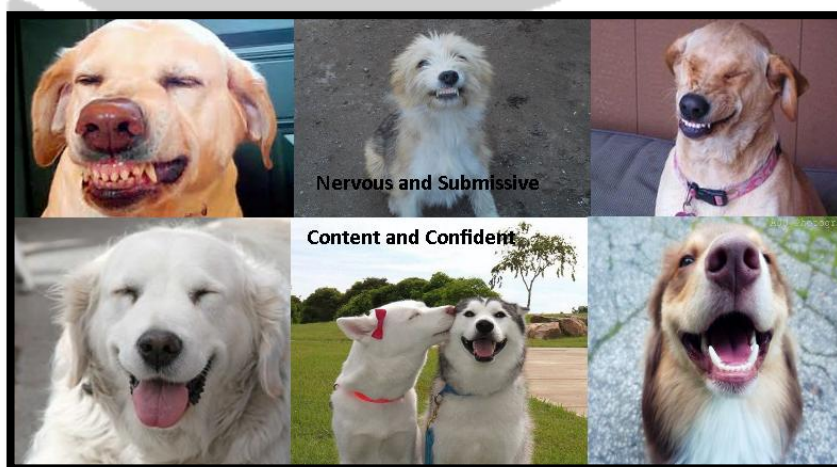


If you want a lab, you are looking for the exceptional "1/500" Labrador retriever, not just "a friendly Labrador retriever." Same with the other breeds we are considering. The dog you select should have a number of amazing qualities. These include but are not limited to:

- calm demeanor
- attentive
- emotionally responsive
- courageous
- eager to please
- a "soft" response when corrected
- motivated by food, praise, play, or all three
- soft eyes
- biddable
- affectionate

Red flags would include:

- fearfulness, trembling
- growling or excessive barking
- unresponsive to leash correction or "no" (bull neck)
- hyper, excessive jumping, chewing
- easily distracted, not tuned in to you
- protectiveness of people, territory or food/toys
- anxiety when separated from owner
- "smiling" (showing teeth in submission or nervousness). While these dogs may not be aggressive, the submissive smile tends to indicate a more nervous dog, and the public will often interpret this behavior as aggressive.



Look for a dog more focused on you than other dogs, distractions, etc. The dog should be sensitive without being easily flustered or anxiety prone. Soft and biddable.

### Other Characteristics to Consider

#### **Physical Suitability:**

In addition to having the correct demeanor, a service animal must be physically suited to the task at hand. The animal must be free from serious physical defects and any debilitating condition or injury that would interfere with its ability to do its job. A dog with a chronic condition (bad allergies, thyroid, etc.), a dog with poor hips, poor eyesight, or a serious injury or birth defect would not be able to fulfill its job and may even injure itself or its human partner in the process.

Your dog must also be a good physical match for the tasks that will be required. A 6'4", 250 pound man would not be able to use a 22", 50 pound Labrador for balance work, no matter how wonderful the dog was. A large, tall man needs a large, tall dog. Those with allergy issues need an allergy friendly dog. What physical characteristics should your dog possess? Do you need a strong dog? A large dog? A dog that does not shed?

#### Age

#### **Six weeks to eight months:**

I get many calls from people who have just acquired a puppy to train as a service dog. I strongly suggest you do not get a young puppy, and here are some reasons why:

1) Getting a puppy is like adding a newborn child to the family. Do you really have that kind of time? Do you have the physical and emotional capacity to deal with at least six months of toileting accidents, whining, chewing, and the like?

2) Remember, we are looking for a unicorn. What are the chances that your aunt, neighbor, or the breeder down the road just happens to donate EXACTLY the dog you will need? The chances are very, very slim. More than likely you will get something that you would not have chosen had it been an adult. Most of the people I interact with who acquired puppies end up with dogs that are unsuitable for service work. Yet, they have become attached to the dog, so they end up giving up their dream of having a service dog. Or, they attempt to make the dog they acquired as a puppy work, although it's fundamentally not suitable.

***"Getting a puppy is like adding a newborn child to the family. Do you really have that kind of time? "***



3) Especially you are a parent of a child with autism or another disability - do you REALLY need more chaos in your life? Probably not. *But that's exactly what a puppy will bring.* Many children do not like puppies because they jump, nip, and never stop moving. This does not make for a good bonding experience.

4) If you acquire a just-weaned pup, it will be *at minimum* six or eight months before you can begin any real service dog training with your puppy.

5) Often puppies become attached to the wrong member of the household, not the person for whom they were acquired. This bonding problem is very difficult to fix.

6) It is difficult to screen puppies for medical or temperamental problems. With a young adult dog, "what you see is what you get."

The new craze: Many breeders selling puppies as "potential" service dogs. This has become the latest fad - particularly doodle breeders. These breeders select puppies that they believe might be good service dogs someday (or, perhaps the puppies that didn't sell quickly...). Then, they do some extra obedience and socialization with the puppy. The older pups are then sold (at a hefty fee) as potential service dogs. While I'm sure there are success stories, there are serious problems with this paradigm:

- Often these breeders and trainers don't have substantial service dog training experience. (What they do have is a desire to sell their dogs at a hefty price.)
- Even a well-trained four-month-old puppy will require a substantial amount of continued training to maintain what the breeder started. Otherwise, soon it will be acting like any other puppy.
- These breeders often encourage families to buy their puppies for children with autism. As previously stated, this is usually a disaster in the making and likely to lead to disappointment.
- The breeders often are not experienced with service dogs or people with disabilities, and there is a great risk that the puppy will not be suitable for service dog work.
- In the end, I'm not sure this saves you time or effort, even if the process works. You will still need to locate a suitable trainer or train the dog yourself.

### **Adolescent Dogs:**

For our purposes let's consider dogs 7 months to 1 year old as "teenagers." All things being equal, you will probably stand a better chance picking a teenager than a "puppy." Eight month old dogs tend to behave in a manner comparable to their adult selves. Yes, they will be more rambunctious, (likely) chew things up, and have a short attention span. But, a calm teenager is likely to become a calm adult.

However, teenage dogs may have health problems (such as hip dysplasia) that are not readily observable at such a young age. In addition, certain traits such as protectiveness may not manifest themselves until the animal is more mature. So, take care if you choose a teenager.

### **The sweet spot: 1.5 to 3 years:**

These young adult dogs tend to be over the worst of their adolescent behavior. Their attention span is fairly long, and they still have many working years ahead of them. Physical and behavioral problems can often be easily identified.

### **The older dog (4-8 years):**

A healthy, suitable older dog is able to learn any task a younger dog can learn. However, the dog will have a shorter working life (most of my dogs work to ages 9-12). I do sometimes suggest 3-5 year old dogs for very young children. These are usually ultra-calm female labs which bring maturity to the team by balancing out the child's immaturity.

### **Supplies**

Have these on hand before you begin your search:

- A crate or cage in which to house the dog at night or when you are away
- Food and water bowl
- A good quality dog food (I recommend grain-free)
- A dog bed, leash, training collar (prong or chain), small soft training treats, flea shampoo, a few toys
- A nylon slip lead



### **Where to Obtain Your SDC**

In general there are several avenues for attaining trainees:

**Breeders:** Breeders will have puppies for sale but may also have teenagers or adults they have decided not to use for their breeding programs. All breeders are not created equal. A reputable *professional breeder* will likely do health checks on their dogs and have a record of health tests for their bloodlines. *Hobby breeders* may offer AKC papers for their dogs, but likely have not done much in the way of health or genetic testing. *Puppy mills* often call

themselves "breeders" but house dozens of dogs of numerous breeds in cramped and unsanitary conditions. Visit the breeders premises whenever possible to gain an understanding as to how the dog you are evaluating was raised.

The benefits of buying a young adult dog from a breeder may include: Health guarantees, AKC or UKC registration (important to some people but not to me), a sales contract that may allow you to return the dog if there is a problem, and the ability to look at the parents or related animals to help determine what the dog may be like as it ages.

This isn't to say buying from a breeder is a guarantee. Often, when I've purchased young adults from breeders, I've found them to be sorely under socialized. Some of these dogs have rarely or never left the breeder's property. Many are raised in kennel situations and aren't used to being in homes. They can be very focused on dogs and less attuned to humans. Some are raised in homes but stay in their crates most of the time due to the breeder having so many dogs.

Typical places to find dogs from breeders include: Puppyfind.com, Craig's list, Internet searches (Hoobly and Oodle), breed clubs and rescues, and Facebook groups devoted to particular breeds.

### **Dog Shelters, Humane Societies, and Rescue Groups:**

These terms can be confusing, so let's take a moment to define them.

A *Dog Shelter or pound* is typically a city or county facility which houses stray dogs and attempts to re-unite them with their owners or find them new homes. Most of these facilities do not turn away dogs. Dogs typically don't stay in these shelters very long - sometimes as little as three days, after which a decision is made to euthanize the animal, place it up for adoption, or send it to a rescue or humane society.

A *Humane Society* is usually a non-profit organization that takes in dogs (and often other animals) whose owners must give them up. Some of these organizations take every dog that is brought to them, others accept animals based on space. Often humane societies have a record of the pet's behavior, the reason the animal was surrendered, etc. Humane societies can have fairly stringent criteria for adopting their animals. These policies vary by organization. Some humane societies do not euthanize animals and others do.

***Do you have the emotional fortitude to turn down hundreds of potential animals in search of your unicorn? Or, are you going to fall in love with a dog at the very first shelter you visit, and take it home even though it is not a unicorn?***





A *Rescue* is usually a non-profit and typically takes dogs from local or distant animal shelters if those dogs are in serious danger of being euthanized. The rescue may have a centralized facility or be a network of foster homes. Rescues, like humane societies, often have eligibility requirements to adopt. *Breed Rescues* limit their intakes to a particular breed of dog.

About one half of the dogs I train are unwanted animals, usually from rescue groups. I love the win-win associated with giving an animal a second chance, a loving owner and a great purpose while providing a person with a disability a partner and helpmate.

Having said that, if you are searching for a single dog to train for yourself, I am not sure rescue is the way to go. Here are some questions you may want to consider if you are thinking of rescuing a SDC:

- Do you have the emotional fortitude to turn down hundreds of potential animals in search of your unicorn? Or, are you going to fall in love with a dog at the very first shelter you visit, and take it home even though it is not a unicorn?
- When rescuing a dog you must make a decision about whether to adopt in a very short amount of time (often 30 minutes or less). If you get the dog home and it is not what you hoped it would be, do you have the strength to return it and keep looking for your perfect match?
- Are you able to travel several hours to evaluate dogs? The best rescue dogs are usually adopted very quickly, so you may have to drop everything to drive three hours to evaluate a candidate.
- Does your living situation meet the requirements of the rescue or shelter in question? (Many require fenced yards, vet references, etc.)
- Are you prepared to deal with the medical expenses that may be associated with rescuing a dog? Rescue dogs often have ear and skin infections or other treatable conditions that require immediate veterinary care.

- Rescue dogs often require more remedial training than dogs from pet homes or breeders. They may get car sick, bark in their cages, have horrible house manners, be more fearful, or a host of other issues that might not be detectable during their evaluation at the shelter.

### **Re-Homed Dogs:**

*If you are in search of a SDC to train for your own use, perhaps the best option is to acquire a dog that a great home simply cannot keep anymore.* These are dogs that are being displaced because of moving, divorce, a death, or other life situations. Typically these animals can be found through internet searches or on Craig's list.

The benefits of acquiring a dog that a family or individual is re-homing include:

- The current owner can provide detailed information about the dog. Does it like children, other dogs, cats? Is it protective of the home? Is it afraid of strangers? Does the dog have medical issues? What kind of food is it eating? Etc.
- These dogs are often already spayed/neutered
- They are often well-rounded and have had a variety of experiences in the home and in the community
- They have been loved and know what it is to have people care about them
- Typically, the adoption fee is reasonable (\$500 or less)
- You can observe the dog in the home when you go to assess it

***"Perhaps the best option is to acquire a dog that a great home simply cannot keep anymore."***

A word of warning:

There is a certain amount of risk involved with going to a stranger's home (usually with cash) to evaluate a dog. Be careful. If the situation seems dicey or the animal is located in a bad section of town, consider meeting at a public place and bringing a friend along for the ride.

### **The Search Process**

Hopefully, by now you have a general picture of what makes a good SDC as well as your options for procuring a dog. So, now let's move on to the specifics of how to go about your search.

In most cases, you likely begin via an Internet search. You also might begin by visiting a shelter facility, and we'll address that in the next section.



### Internet Search:

For our purposes, let's say I'm looking for a lab as an SDC - either sex. Since I'm in Ohio, I begin by searching "Ohio Labrador Retriever"

A variety of listings pop up including Hoobly Classifieds, Oodle, breeder websites, Puppyfind.com, and rescue groups. I'll go through these one by one, immediately eliminating anything under 8 months old (no matter HOW CUTE it is!). I'll also eliminate dogs over age 3, and dogs with chronic medical conditions. Now it's time to get serious and start reading (or really, interpreting) the remaining ads and viewing pictures.

Have you ever purchased a home? If so, you know there are codes embedded in real estate advertisements. "Handy Man's Special" means the house is falling down. "Cozy" means "hobbit-sized." "Could use a few updates" means green and orange shag carpeting from the seventies.

It's the same with dog ads. Pay attention to the wording of the advertisement. Also look for code words in your phone conversations with owners or rescues. Here are some commonly used phrases and what they "really" mean:

***"Have you ever purchased a home? If so, you know there are codes embedded in real estate advertisements. "Handy Man's Special" means the house is falling down...it's the same with dog ads. Pay attention to the wording of the advertisement."***



Code word or Phrase	Meaning	Go look?
Energetic, needs room to run, super playful/friendly, a great running partner, a big puppy, etc.	This dog never stops moving. It has one gear - GO!	No. You don't need a tornado.
Good watchdog	Protective of house and people Barks a lot May growl or bite	No. Make this dog a service dog and it will become more protective still.
Strong	Either has had zero training or is completely unresponsive to correction	Maybe. Depends on other traits. Ask them to send a video of the dog on leash.
Shy	This dog could be terrified of people or just a bit hesitant and in need of socialization.	Maybe. Ask them to send a video of the dog interacting with people or in a public setting.
Does not like to be left alone	This dog will rip your house to pieces if you leave its sight.	No. You want to keep your couch.
Does not like nails done, vet, whatever...	Reactive when provoked	No.
Sweet, gentle, loving, kind, loves to cuddle, sweetheart...	The description says it all	Yes!
Laid back, couch potato, calm, perfect gentlemen, etc...	This dog is easy to live with	Yes!

My Internet search for labradors in Ohio produced a few possibilities. The next step is to contact the seller/rescue/breeder. Usually I begin by sending an email (although sometimes I call if there is a phone number). I word my email as follows:

*"I'm looking for a dog to train as a service dog to assist someone with a disability. The ideal dog is a young, healthy, calm dog that would enjoy having a job and going everywhere with its owner. Reading your ad, I thought your dog might be a fit. Do you think your dog would enjoy this type of life? If so, would you mind sending me a short video of you interacting with your dog (give text number). Also, please send a few additional pictures. After I see the video, if your dog seems like it might be a match, I'd love speak with you by phone and hopefully set up a time to meet your dog. Thanks for your time."*

Getting a video and additional pictures is especially helpful if the dog is not located nearby. A video gives you a better feel for the temperament of the dog, and might save you hours of travel.

After I have received the video, if I like the dog, I try to speak to the owner by phone. During this conversation I ask the following questions:

- 1) How long have you had the dog?
- 2) How old is the dog? Is this an estimate or an exact age?
- 3) Why are you offering the dog for sale?

- 4) If a rescue dog, what does the rescue know about the dog's history?
- 5) Any health problems (with labs I'd ask about ear infections, skin issues, hip/lameness)?
- 6) What is the dog's reaction to strangers, kids, cats, other dogs, small animals, etc.
- 7) Does the dog like to go for rides and go places?
- 8) What is the dog's activity level in the home when nothing is going on (1-10, with 1=couch potato and 10=tornado)?
- 9) Is the dog a chewer, barker, food protector?
- 10) If the dog accidentally got out the door, what would it do (run away, stay close, go visit the neighbors?)
- 11) Is it altered? Up to date on shots? On heartworm preventative?
- 12) Has the dog ever growled at someone? Under what circumstances?

### Evaluation Visit

If my contact with the seller or rescue went well, then it is time to go and meet the dog. My preferred evaluation location is in a public setting such as a dog-friendly store (Lowes, a large pet store, Tractor Supply, etc.). I love doing evaluations in public for a couple of reasons. First, It's safer than going to a stranger's home. And, practically speaking, if a dog does well when taken from its owner and handled by a stranger in a public setting, that says a lot about the dog's confidence and ability to adapt to new situations. As I walk the dog around the venue, I'm watching the dog's reactions closely.

***"Getting a video and additional pictures is especially helpful if the dog is not located nearby. A video gives you a better feel for the temperament of the dog, and might save you hours of travel."***

- 1) Is it fearful of automatic doors, carts, loud noises, shiny floors, approaching strangers, etc.? If it startles, how long does it take to recover?
- 2) Does it respond to my leash corrections, voice, changes in direction, etc?
- 3) Does it seek people or shy away?
- 4) Will it allow me to handle all four feet, open its mouth, and lay it on its back?
- 5) How distressed is it about leaving its owner? (Usually I ask the owner to wait outside the establishment.)
- 6) Does it seem comfortable or "shut down"? Is it hyper? Is the tail tucked or wagging?
- 7) Is it stress panting, whining, balking, straining to get away? Did it have an accident due to anxiety?
- 8) After a few leash corrections does the dog begin to track with me? Does it wag its tail when I praise it?
- 9) Do I see any signs of lameness or injury?

A dog that does well in this exercise will be calm, interested, friendly, and not obviously stressed. By the end of 15 minutes the SDC will be watching me attentively, wagging its tail when praised, and responding to my commands (if it knows any obedience).

### **Evaluations in the home of the owner/breeder:**

Visiting the home will tell you much about how the dog is being cared for and how it reacts to new people entering its territory.

When the owner answers the door, watch the dog's reaction carefully. Is it happy to see you? Does it growl or bark protectively (a brief bark is fine). Does it approach immediately, or is it skeptical/fearful/alooof?

Often the owner of the dog is anxious to prove that the dog behaves well and tries to control the dog's behavior by holding the dog back from greeting me or making the dog stay. I usually take a seat and ask the owner to let the dog do whatever it wants, so I can observe the dog's unhindered reaction to me. I talk to the dog and pet it (if it approaches) and don't worry too much about the dog's manners. I can teach manners. I want to know what the dog is *like*.

Some things to look for as I speak with the owner:

- Does the dog make eye contact?
- Does it seem attached to its owner?
- Does it settle down after the initial greeting period?
- Does it eventually lay down? If so, does it lay close to its owner?
- Does it seek your attention? If so, how?
- Is it a whiner or barker?
- Will the dog let me put the leash on it or does it back away?

After I have interacted with the dog and visited with the owner, I take the dog for a walk outside. I have brought with me a six foot leash and a chain training collar, or a nylon slip lead. During the walk, I'm looking for the things I listed in the previous section - how the dog responds to me in an environment with a variety of stimuli. Calm, controllable, attentive, friendly - that's what I'm looking for. It does not have to be trained to walk on leash, but after a few firm corrections and a lot of praise, it should start getting the idea. After I have observed the dog in the home and on lead, I have a pretty good picture of the dog's personality.

When you are evaluating an SDC ask yourself: Can you see this dog behaving well out in public? Does it seem like it would be easy to live with? Does it seem bonded to its present owner? On the gut level, does this dog seem like the dog for you?



If this dog isn't "the one" for any reason, it's fine. You don't owe the owner an explanation. If, however, you believe you want to try this dog, ask a few additional questions.

- 1) How much are they charging for the dog? (\$100-1,000 is a pretty fair range). Keep in mind if it's not altered you will need to do that.
- 2) Do they have the vet records and pedigree (if it is a purebred)?
- 3) If you get the dog home and realize it is a poor fit, how long do you have to return it to them? Will you get your money back?

### **Evaluating a dog at an animal shelter, rescue, or humane society:**

First, determine that you are not going to allow your heart to short circuit your brain. Remember, you are searching for a unicorn. You are not looking to rescue an abused animal or find a family pet, and this is not primarily a mercy mission. Steel yourself and be prepared to see lots of cute and sweet dogs that don't fit your profile. Remind yourself that you probably will be leaving without a dog.

Begin with a quick walk-through of the entire shelter, observing the animals in their cages. you're looking for animals that:

- fit the breed and age profile
- seem friendly and are quick to approach the front of the cage to see me
- make eye contact and sit or stand and wag their tail in a calm, laid back manner
- are not barking like a fool, spinning circles, or throwing themselves at the door of the cage
- look reasonably healthy
- have not made a complete mess of their cage with feces, food, torn up toys and beds, etc.

Now that you have done your walk-through, go back and take a second look at any dogs that caught your eye. Read any information available on the card on the kennel door. Spend more time observing them. Try to entice them to bark or get excited. In an authoritative voice, ask them to sit. Do they?

If you want to see the dog out of the cage, make note of the cage number and go to the shelter desk. Ask the attendant to tell you everything they know about the dog. You may find out why the owner released it. Does it like kids? Is it housebroken? Does it fit the criteria we have already discussed? Ask to see the dog out of the cage.

***"Remember, you are searching for a unicorn. You are not looking to rescue an abused animal or find a family pet, and this is not primarily a mercy mission."***

Take your dog for a walk, using a nylon slip lead or chain training collar. Use the exercises and questions in the EVALUATION VISIT section to get a feel for the dog as you work it on leash.

If your evaluation has gone well and you feel a connection with the dog, you may have found your unicorn. It is time to take the dog home and enter the next phase of evaluation.

### At Home

When you finally bring a dog home, regardless of where it came from, you'll likely be super excited. However, you are still in evaluation mode - so don't fall in love just yet!

I recommend keeping the dog on leash with you at least 75% of the time (in the home) for the first 2-3 weeks. This means you are attached to the hip, and the dog is literally going everywhere you go. If you are in the kitchen, so is the dog. You're going to learn a bunch about your dog by keeping it so close to you - and you'll avoid bathroom accidents, chewed furniture, the dog darting out the door, or it becoming overly attached to another member of your household. You'll also find out every endearing or irritating habit the dog has.

After the SDC seems settled in (usually 3-5 days) begin basic obedience training. As you are training, observe your dog's responses. Is it hard to handle? Stubborn? Does it enjoy being trained? Does it like treats? How fast did it learn what "No!" means? Does it seem to want to be with me? Is it respectful of your authority? Scared of men? When you finally bring a dog home, regardless of where it came from, you'll likely be super excited. However, you are still in evaluation mode - so don't fall in love just yet!

***"When you finally bring a dog home, regardless of where it came from, you'll likely be super excited. However, you are still in evaluation mode - so don't fall in love just yet!"***

Evaluate your dog's bad habits and begin to set household behavior rules. Ask yourself how difficult it is to gain compliance. Did it take 100 corrections before the dog learned not to jump on you, or two?

Once your dog has mastered some basic obedience skills (walking on a loose lead, sit, down, and stay), you can begin going on pet friendly outings such as pet stores, parks, and animal friendly stores like Lowes and Tractor Supply. Refer to the previous section regarding how to evaluate a dog in public.

In general, as you live with your dog, ask yourself whether this dog is "easy" to live with and handle or difficult. Red flags for your dog include:

- Tough to handle around your home (it's not going to get any easier out in public)\*
- Creates stress in your life and family

- Many housebreaking accidents (this could mean a bladder infection, so be sure the problem is not physical)
- Begins to exhibit separation anxiety (tears up cage and escapes it, non stop whining and barking) etc.\*
- Barks aggressively, growls, or bears teeth to family members or visitors\*
- Does not seem to bond to you (if it got out the door you'd never get it back)\*
- Chronic health issue you can't resolve (you should take your dog to the vet within the first two weeks)
- Growls or barks in public\*
- Severe fear in public, even after numerous positive outings\*
- Chronic carsickness (this should go away as the dog begins to enjoy going on outings, if it does not, then that's a problem)

\* These problems are deal breakers, return the dog.

Any of these are grounds to return your dog and find a more suitable candidate. Remember, every dog has some flat sides or quirks - but whatever your dog's issues are, you're going to be living with them for the next ten years.

If your dog has made it through its first month at home with flying colors, you have likely found your unicorn! Congratulations! I wish you well on your journey of training your own service dog or finding a trainer to help you in the process. If you are looking for a trainer, I'd strongly suggest reading my article titled "Choosing a Service Dog Trainer." I've included it below.

Service Dogs



## Choosing The Right Service Dog Trainer or Organization



*Exercise due diligence by looking for red flags, asking the right questions, and checking references.*

Every few weeks I receive call or email from heartbroken would-be service dog client. While the details of the story change, the theme has remained the same for more than 25 years.

Someone urgently wanting and needing a service dog raises a large sum of money (or pays with their own funds) to receive a dog. But, the dog never materializes. The client has already invested significant time, effort, emotion, and money. However, it has become clear (usually after months of broken promises) the trainer is either unwilling or incapable of delivering the promised animal, trust has been breached, and there is little hope of a positive resolution.

Maybe even worse than the above scenario, the client ends up with an animal completely unsuitable (by temperament or poor training) to be utilized in service dog work. Sometimes the dog is just unmanageable. Or, maybe it's bitten someone. Not only has the client invested money and time, but, they've opened their heart to an animal they sincerely believed was going to be a lifelong companion, and now are faced with difficult decisions such as what to do with the animal, whether to try to get a refund, and whether this service dog thing is worth doing at all.

Don't get me wrong here – I'm NOT suggesting that if a trainer is capable, things will never go amiss with a team. We are dealing with two living, breathing beings, and one of them doesn't even speak English!

The best, most experienced, most reputable trainers (myself included) occasionally have situations where a team does not work out as expected. (See the FAQ section of this site for more on this issue). But a reputable trainer is experienced enough to know the pitfalls to avoid, see problems when they start to arise, and know when it's best to "call it" and try another dog. Most of all, a reputable trainer will keep working to make the unfortunate situation right.

If you are considering obtaining a service dog, be it from a non-profit organization or a private trainer, know that it is your responsibility to exercise your due diligence and choose a trainer or organization that has a track record of success and with whom you feel comfortable working.

To help you to avoid situations like I've described above, I suggest you ask any trainers or organizations you are considering working with the questions that follow (along with any others you may have). Don't be shy about this. Often, people seem to think that an interview about a dog is a one-way street ("Will the training organization take ME as a client?").

That's not the case. You are the customer. They need to win you over with a track record of success (including client references), courteous interactions, and a caring attitude toward people and dogs.

### ***Questions you should ask when selecting a service dog provider***

#### **How long have you been training service dogs?**

Keep in mind that while a service dog organization or company may have been in existence a long time, there is often a high turnover of staff. You need to know how experienced the trainers you are working with are, not just how long the organization or company has been in existence.

#### **Specifically, what are your qualifications as a service dog trainer?**

Being successful at other types of dog training such as obedience, protection, etc., does not necessarily qualify the person as a service dog trainer. Going to a dog training school where they spent a day or two talking about service dogs isn't enough either.

#### **Where do you get your dogs? What breeds do you use?**

If the trainer says you should choose your own dog, this is a huge red flag! Who is supposed to be the "expert" here?

#### **What kind of screening do you perform for health and behavior?**

#### **Do you specialize in a particular type of service dog?**

#### **What is your experience with persons with disabilities, and my particular disability?**

#### **Are you willing to let me contact, as references, several people who have working service dogs from you?**

A trainer or organization ought to be able to easily come up with several happy clients with disabilities to sing their praises.

#### **What costs are involved on my end?**

#### **What type of training philosophy/methods are used?**

### **If I am paying for my dog, when are the funds due?**

I do not recommend you paying the full amount up front if you are paying for a privately trained dog.

### **Where will the dog stay, and what conditions will it be in during training?**

Except in the rarest of circumstances, the dog should NOT be living with you during training.

### **How and where will the dog placement be conducted? Will I need to travel? How long will I need to stay if I'm travelling?**

### **After the dog is placed in my home, what follow up will I receive?**

### **What responsibilities will I have regarding working with my dog?**

### **Do placements ever fail?**

This may sound paradoxical, but I'd be highly skeptical of anyone who said placements never fail. Either they are fibbing, or they are quite inexperienced.

### **What is your refund policy?**

### **When does the ownership of the dog pass to me?**

Some organizations retain ownership of the dogs they train for the life of the dog. I don't like this policy, but it's up to you whether you can live with it.

***Watch out for red flags that may be indicators of potential problems***



1. Beware of anyone promising the moon, particularly in the area of alerting for seizures and medical conditions. These situations are difficult and sometimes impossible to replicate during training unless the condition to which the dog is alerting has a clear scent indicator. While many dogs successfully alert, it's often more of a talent than a trained behavior.
2. While anyone, myself included, can have a bad day, the trainer or organization you choose should be generally polite, patient, and willing to listen. You are the reason for their existence!

3. If you are paying for your dog out of pocket or fundraising, be wary of anyone who wants all the money up front. It would be acceptable and normal to have a portion of the funds up front, since your trainer or organization is incurring expenses as they train your dog.

### ***Good intentions aren't enough***

In this article, I've attempted to help potential clients educate themselves in how to choose a trainer or organization that is right for them. In doing so, I've painted a fairly dark picture of what can happen when someone places their trust in the wrong trainer. I would like to say, however, that I think the majority of trainers who have failed to provide appropriate service dogs are not attempting to defraud anyone. These (mostly) experienced dog trainers simply believe that by virtue of their previous dog training experience, or tangential experience with service animals, they are qualified and able to produce dependable results. It isn't until later, when they are neck-deep in a quagmire of team problems, that the gaps in their knowledge and abilities become evident. This is why it is extremely important that you, as a customer, ask the right questions and gather as much information as possible before choosing a trainer/organization.

### **Qualifications of Christy Talbert, Owner, Buckeye Service Dogs**

#### **Service Dog Training Experience:**

- Began working with service dogs in 1980, at the age of 16.
- Obtained my BS in Agriculture with a major in Animal Science from the Ohio State University in 1986.
- I have worked successfully with approximately 250 service dog teams in my career, either training the dogs directly or overseeing staff and volunteers that I personally educated in service dog training and client services.
- I have trained more than 30 volunteers and staff in basic and advanced service dog training and client services. I currently mentor ten young trainers toward this end. I authored an 80 page volunteer training manual for service dogs, which was used for many years by Assistance Dogs of America.
- Evaluated thousands of rescue dogs for potential service dog work.
- I selected, trained, and placed a golden retriever named Farley with his client Brenda Mosely. Farley eventually became the Delta Society's Assistance Dog of the Year in 1997. This competitive and highly coveted international award given to a single dog in acknowledgement of the superior training, bonding, and partnership of the team.
- I was on the committee that developed the Assistance Dogs International Public Access Test, which assesses the suitability and safety of a service dog team in public.
- I am certified by the State of Ohio DODD as a service dog provider. This means that the state pays for me to train service dogs for certain consumers.





- Graduate of Debby Kay's Super Sniffer workshop, on how to train diabetic alert dogs.

**Experience with persons with disabilities:**

- For more than 30 years I have worked with adults and children affected by various disabilities including deafness and deaf/blind, autism, MR/DD, accident victims, MD, MS, ALS, CP, emotional and cognitive disorders, and multiple disabilities.
- I am a former program manager for a severe behavioral classroom for Franklin Co. MR/DD. The individuals in my class were some of the most violent in Franklin County.
- I am former program staff of Recreation Unlimited, Camping for the Handicapped (where I met my husband Fred, who has also spent his life serving people with disabilities).
- I am fluent in American Sign Language, and my husband and I had a deaf/blind friend live with us for more than a year.

**Conclusion:**

Thanks for purchasing this booklet. My hope is that by following these guidelines, you'll be able to find a great service dog candidate and trainer. I welcome your feedback at [BuckeyeServiceDogs@gmail.com](mailto:BuckeyeServiceDogs@gmail.com). Also, feel free to visit our website, [BuckeyeServiceDogs.com](http://BuckeyeServiceDogs.com).

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