



BERGIN UNIVERSITY of **CANINE STUDIES**
Frequently Asked Questions

Is this the Assistance Dog Institute?

Yes, you found the right place. Bergin University is the home of the Assistance Dog Institute. Students at our university learn to train dogs for clients with disabilities. We breed, raise and train golden retrievers and Labradors; our students (with faculty oversight) train our dogs and then the students train the clients as handlers for the assistance dogs.

Do you provide assistance for things like medical care for my own dog?

Thank you for your inquiry. We do not provide assistance for personal dogs or our dogs once the dog is placed with a client.

What does an assistance dog do?

Very good question, people may assume that an assistance dog is merely a well-trained companion dog. Our dogs offer so much more to our clients. A service dog helps people with disabilities to be more independent. Some of the tasks that assistance dogs are able to perform are to tug open doors, cabinets and drawers, turn on/off light switches and retrieve dropped or needed items. A hearing dog alerts to the sound of the phone or knocking at the door, a social/therapy dog helps a child focus on reading or visits the sick and elderly, a psychiatric assistance dog provides calm companionship and the avenue for interacting positively with people.

My dog can do a lot of commands and I would like to take my dog with me everywhere I go, can you give me a license or cape to let me do this?

You love your dog! Although your dog is wonderful, it is a pet and not a service dog. We provide documentation and a cape to our graduating clients when we match the client with one of our dogs; businesses may look for this when you enter their establishment with a service dog. We do not provide this for dogs that have not graduated from our program as assistance dogs and we only train our dogs. We do not accept other people's pets into our program. A graduate of our Social Therapy Training certificate program does not have the public access rights of an assistance dog so you would still need permission from any business in which you enter.

How do you match a dog with a client? Do I get to choose my dog?

We assess the dog's and the client's personality as well as the client's requirements for assistance with specific tasks and the level of skill of the dog. The personality assessment is important to ensure that the dog's personality fits well with the client. A very quiet dog would not be a good fit for an outgoing client.

We select the dog for the client because we know the dogs well; however we would not place a dog with a client if the client does not bond with the dog.

How long does it take to get a dog?

Once your application is complete there may come a long period of waiting, which is the most difficult period for clients. As you will read in the packet, it may take up to two years to be matched with a dog or it could take less time. Some of the factors are a client waitlist, the availability of dogs and their level of training for a specific client and the personalities of both the client and the dog because we match the client and dog based on their personality.

Unfortunately we are unable to be specific about a date or even a ballpark estimate, which is why it is difficult for a client to wait. Please understand that we would love to

place a dog as soon as a client requests a dog, especially because the need is so great.

My child needs a service dog; my doctor recommended it to me. How can I get a dog for my child?

A child must be able to command and care for the dog as well as bond with the dog to ensure that the dog will always be focused on the child and not an adult caregiver for the child. We have found that usually a child over the age of ten may have the wherewithal to command a dog. The dog needs to know that the child-client is their "parent/caretaker" and we confirm this during the client training. We have placed dogs with children as young as five.

How do I apply for a dog?

If you have email we can quickly send you the packet, just send a message to the following email address and request the assistance dog application:

info@berginu.org

If you do not have email, you will need to call us and we will send you an application. Our phone number is 707-545-3647.

What do I have to do for the application?

A completed application includes the following:

1. **A non-refundable \$25 application fee** (made out to Bergin University). The application fee is waived for clients who are former members of the military.
2. The completed **Program Application form** (the form is enclosed).
3. The **Medical History form** completed by your physician or primary care specialist (the form is enclosed).

4. A **personal letter of reference** from a friend, teacher, or someone other than a family member.
5. A **professional letter of reference** from a therapist, social worker, teacher, or any other professional with whom you have contact.
6. A **one-page letter** stating your reasons for wanting a service dog and how you feel the dog would benefit you.

How much does it cost to get a dog?

As you know from earlier questions and answers, it may take some time to be matched with a service dog and costs may change from the time you submitted your application to the time when a match is possible. You will find the specific costs in the application packet that we will send you. There will be a tuition cost (with the exception of former members of the military) for your training when you come to the two-week client training here in Santa Rosa, California.

You will also need to cover your housing and meals and incidental expenses while you are here for the client training. There will be a purchase price for the dog (with the exception of former members of the military). Of course there will be costs for the dog when you get home such as veterinary expenses and other items necessary for the well being of the dog.

Approximately six months after your graduation you will need to return with your dog for a follow up visit of approximately one hour; this visit allows us to confirm that the match has been successful. This will be a great opportunity to ask any questions you might have now that you have lived with your assistance dog for the last six months. You will need to consider this travel expense in your over-all financial planning for an assistance dog. After the successful visit we would formally (paperwork) transfer ownership of the dog to you.

If I were able to raise the money to cover the cost for tuition and a service dog, would people who contribute money be able to write it off on the taxes?

Well that is an interesting question; unfortunately this is not the same tax deduction as one could claim for a charitable donation. You would not be able to write off a contribution made to help a specific person.

I was wondering if there are any scholarships or discounts that your agency provides based on income?

We would love to be able to provide this service to clients however at this time Bergin University does not offer scholarships, financial aid or discounts for assistance dogs.

Where do you get your dogs?

We breed our service dogs and social/therapy and facility dogs; we get hearing dogs from animal shelters and rescue groups. In the future we may have psychiatric service dogs that are rescued dogs.

What health screenings do you perform?

We are very careful with our breeding and screening for hips, elbows, general physical, heart, eyes and any seemingly necessary test depending on the dog or breed.

How many of your dogs fail to become public access service dogs?

It may surprise our readers to learn that 50-70% or more of our dogs are placed in roles other than as service dogs. They become working dogs in fields such as scent

detection, facility dogs, social therapy dogs and other working roles. About 30-50% are public access service dogs.

What would cause a dog to fail?

A dog might fail due to health or temperament issues. We carefully assess our dog's personality as well as their health.

What training methods do you use?

We start training pups at 3 1/2 weeks of age so responses are positively reinforced and thus more embedded than if taught at a later age.

Our methods are primarily cognitive teaching (focusing on the mind) with some classical conditioning, not operant training. We teach through positive reinforcement, our dogs are not yelled at or hit or in any way made to fear the trainers (students).

We use verbal markers, luring, targeting and some problem solving and insight learning methods. No leash corrections are used, in fact dogs are almost always in harnesses. No electronic collars, no pinch collars and no choke chains are used.

Describe how you train a retrieve.

We start training pups for 5 minutes at 3 1/2 weeks of age. At that time, we throw the item to build a desire to retrieve.

Do you transfer ownership of the dog? If so, when?

We have a test at six months - if all goes well and payment is made in full, the dog ownership is transferred.

Can a handler train their service dog to compete in obedience/agility/freestyle?

Certainly, our dogs are agile and active.

Have you ever removed a dog from a disabled handler? If so, why?

No, however we would if the dog was mistreated or neglected or the client requested a removal due to an inability or desire to care for the dog.

How long is client training?

You would come to our site in Santa Rosa for two weeks where you would be paired with the dog most likely to become your assistance dog. You would be in charge of the dog's care twenty-four hours a day for the two weeks once we have determined that you could competently do this. You would arrange your housing with our office if you were staying in our dormitory or you could stay at a near-by extended-stay hotel that many of our clients use because the hotel allows dogs and ground-floor rooms are available.

After client training how often would I need to return to the training center?

You are always welcome to come back and visit, we like to keep in touch! You would need to return for the six-month test or if there is a problem that can only be resolved by coming to the training center.

Do you train dogs for counterbalance where the handler pulls up on a harness? What type of harness do you use?

This a good question, yes we do train our dogs for counterbalance and we use our own design or a sensation harness.

I sometimes use a manual wheelchair. I have arm problems that make it painful to have a dog pull hard enough to move my wheelchair. Would you be all right with me never learning wheelchair pulling?

Yes, this skill can be difficult for many clients; it is also difficult for people with enough arm strength to do the maneuver.

What happens if within the first year a dog is not working out? What happens with the money?

We have thought about this and determined that dogs are replaced up to four years if the problem resides with the dog and not with the client's method of handling the dog.

What happens when it is time for a dog to retire?

This is a difficult decision that we leave to the client. Remember, by this time the ownership of the dog has been transferred to the client. You might want to consider applying for a successor dog a year or two ahead of time based on how long it may take to match a dog with a client. The usual factors listed in an earlier answer are significant for getting a successor dog. You need to apply, be interviewed and successfully complete the course.

Is someone in Texas too far to be placed with a dog? Is there an age requirement?

As long as other criteria are met we are happy to place dogs with any client who is able to come to our campus to be trained with our dog and who is able to demonstrate that they can care for, work well with our dog and bond with the dog.

How can I get a dog to help me with seizures?

Training a service dog for seizures is difficult. We know dogs alert to seizures however we do not know how to simulate a seizure to train a dog to alert to it.

This is a great idea however at this time Bergin University is not training or placing seizure alert dogs. Below is a list of agencies that do place seizure alert dogs that you can contact:

Pennsylvania:

Amazing Tails 717-529-6875

K-9 Partners For Life 610-869-4902

New York:

Canine Helpers for the Handicapped 716-433-4035

North Dakota:

Great Plains Assistance Dogs 701-685-2242

How can I get a dog to help with my anxiety? I am severely disabled with mental illnesses, ocd, agoraphobia, gad, and other problems. My family is worn to a shred trying to help me cope, and I sincerely need a Psychiatric Service Dog.

This is a great idea however at this time Bergin University is not placing psychiatric assistance dogs with the exception of those placed with military veterans with PTSD.

My child has been diagnosed with autism, how can I get a dog for my child?

This is a great idea however at this time Bergin University is not placing autism assistance dogs.

My parent has been diagnosed with Alzheimer's or dementia, how can I get a dog for my parent?

This is a great idea however at this time Bergin University is not placing dementia assistance dogs.

My spouse and/or child and I could each use a service dog, could we share an assistance dog?

Families often share resources however a service dog is something completely different. We would not place a dog to be a service dog for two people because the dog and client need to bond created through the care and commanding of the dog. That bond is not shared among family members the same way pet relationships are shared. A service dog has to be alert to whatever is happening with a client and cannot be split in two. It is important that the person who receives the dog is the person who cares for the dog.

I am hard of hearing with a 65% hearing loss. I did have a hearing dog a long time ago. It was a great help to me. Since then I have had other dogs that I have tried to train but nothing totally trained, my hearing is getting worse with age and I have noticed it is hard to hear many of the noises around me. Is there any way I could get an official hearing dog that would benefit me greatly?

This is a great idea however at this time Bergin University is not placing hearing assistance dogs.

My child has not had a sense of smell his entire life. I am concerned for him and my grandson - because he cannot detect smells like "gas" for a stove. How can I get a scent detection dog?

This is a great idea however at this time Bergin University is not placing scent detection assistance dogs.

I am interested in finding a social-service dog for my child who has severe speech and language difficulties and therefore has difficulties keeping pace with peer interactions. She also has difficulties with sensory defensiveness and anxiety. I believe a service dog would help her avoid hair pulling and provide a calming sense that will allow her to access more education, friendships and self-esteem. How can I get a service dog for her?

Truly, dogs provide wonderful comfort and companionship however at this time Bergin University is not placing social-service dogs.

I would like to know what is required to get a balance-service dog for a person with progressive MS?

Balance issues are difficult to address because a person who needs help with balance could be easily pulled off balance by a dog. We are very careful when considering a client's balance needs and we rarely place a dog with someone who walks and could fall down; usually we do not provide balance-service dogs.