

Before partnering with a Disability Assist Dog, there are several important points to consider. While thousands of individuals with a disability benefit greatly from partnering with a Disability Assist Dog, it's not the solution for everyone. If you or a loved one is considering full-time Disability Assist Dog partnership, please ask yourself the following 5 questions before making a final decision.

You must know beyond a shadow of a doubt the benefits of partnering with a Disability Assist Dog will outweigh the disadvantages before venturing any further down the path of becoming a Disability Assist Dog handler.

Before beginning, you must understand there are no wrong answers to these questions - only answers that help you make the best decision for your needs and disability. The questions are designed to help you think and they're not meant to be answered with a simple "yes or "no". Partnering with a Disability Assist Dog is a huge step, and every person's needs, desires, disability, abilities and situations are unique. Each set of circumstances deserves due consideration. However, it is up to you to be honest with yourself. Frank and candid analysis/examination of you, your needs, your home life, your dog, your family and your disability is a requirement for ensuring you are not making a choice that could set you back or hurt you, your relationships, your independence your dog, or the Disability Assist Dog community.

Give yourself plenty of time to muse, think and explore your feelings and thoughts concerning partnering with a Disability Assist Dog. Don't make a decision hastily, and try to involve someone you trust in the brainstorming and soul-searching process. We at PPADT are willing to aid in this process as well. You must know beyond a shadow of a doubt the benefits of partnering with a Disability Assist Dog, for you, will outweigh the disadvantages. If, at the end of this post and at the end of your self-exploration, you are not certain a canine partner is for you, it is probably best to wait before beginning the process.

Questions to Ask Before Partnering With a Disability Assist Dog

1) Am I financially able to take on the costs of caring for a dog for 10 to 15 years?

Disability Assist Dogs (or any dog, for that matter) are not cheap. The old saying, "there is no such thing as a free puppy", is completely true. Costs of the dog will include the day-to-day care (food, grooming), all veterinary costs (including yearly vaccinations, desexing and general health care) and transport (should you need to go places) as well as training costs. We at PPADT are happy to outline all possible yearly costing's and things to consider.

- **Costs of Partnering With a Disability Assist Dog**

If you're applying to an Assistance Dog or Disability Assist Dog program, costs can vary widely.

There are application fees, training costs and the initial cost of the dog. There may also be travel costs, assessment and equipment fees.

Many Disability Assist Dog programs initially charge for the dog itself, and costs of \$30,000 or more for training Disability Assist Dogs are not unheard of.

There are grants and scholarships available to defray those costs, and fundraising and/or sponsorship is also always an option. However, you can't count on receiving assistance, and must carefully consider the costs of the program.

- **Costs of Owner-Training a Disability Assist Dog**

If you decide to owner-train a Disability Assist Dog partner, you are responsible for the initial training, advanced training, any necessary titling/certifications, all gear and equipment, and any other required supplies throughout the training process, like food, poop bags, medical supplements and other incidentals.

Additionally, it's not as simple as merely getting a dog from a shelter. Disability Assist Dogs must possess a specific temperament and trainability in order to succeed at the demanding work placed before them, and not just any dog will do. Finding the right dog for your partner can take months, and oftentimes, the only reliable solution is to obtain a well-bred puppy from a breeder known for producing Disability Assist Dogs in their lines.

Well-bred Disability Assist Dog candidates, depending on the breed, can range from \$800 to over \$3,000 dollars in purchase price alone. However, included in that price is the near-certainty that your potential partner is extremely likely to succeed, is physically, mentally and genetically sound and you have breeder support and backup, as well as access to resources, should you need them.

If you obtain a dog from a rescue, you must be CERTAIN it has been thoroughly temperament tested, socialized, possesses the trainability necessary and is medically sound. Hip and elbow certifications via PENNhip or the OFA is never a bad idea, and should be considered mandatory for any dog who is going to be doing brace/mobility support or any kind of weight-intensive task work like pulling a wheelchair or carrying heavy loads. On top of basic hip and elbow certifications, you should determine if your rescue dog is free of genetic illnesses common in their breed or breeds. Nothing is more painful or costly than spending thousands of dollars training and bonding with your partner only to find it is going to be forced to retire years too soon due to genetic, temperamental or structural unsoundness. All in all, it's not unreasonable to expect to spend around \$1,500 to \$2,000 finding, transporting, testing and vetting a rescued Disability Assist Dog candidate, and that is before any of the training begins! It is important to take into consideration the history of the dog prior to the rescue, that may be unknown, and how this may impact the dogs temperament, emotion and trainability, and may result in the need for expensive behaviourist training.

Training itself can vary widely in costs, but you must include a professional, Disability Assist Dog-saavy trainer in your plans. A commitment to regular training is essential and the trainer chosen must be made in consultation with PPADT. Trainers typically charge per class or per hour. Their costs can vary widely depending on qualifications and area. Any trainer used by a possible PPADT candidate should be passed by a PPADT assessor, to ensure they are a trainer capable of helping train a Disability Assist Dog, and able to work with people with disabilities.

In New Zealand, people cannot simply owner train their dog and use it as a Disability Assist Dog. The dog/handler team must be certified by one of the six certifying organisations (under the Dog Control Act and Amendments). Naturally there are program associated costs involved.

- ***Finally, are you prepared to accept full financial responsibility for your potential Disability Assist Dog for the rest of his life?***

Whether you're going to train him yourself or you're receiving a Disability Assist Dog from a program, you and you alone are responsible for vetting, quality food, toys, any additional/necessary training, emergencies, working gear, preventative medication (heartworm, fleas/ticks), grooming, joint or other supplements if necessary, bedding/crates/home stuff, doggy proofing, and many, many, many other incidentals. The price adds up quickly, but many trainers and experts estimate costs run between \$1,200 and \$1,600 a year at a minimum, every year for the rest of your dog's life, not including initial vetting, testing and purchase.

2.) Are you prepared to care or arrange for care for a dog every single day?

Partnering with a Disability Assist Dog is akin to having a toddler. Every day, without fail, your dog must be cared for. This means he or she will need to be taken out several times a day, cleaned up after, fed a nutritious meal at least once a day, ongoing training maintained or improved, mental or physical exercise/stimulation, groomed if necessary, and treated as a companion and living creature, not merely as a tool or object.

- **There Are No Exceptions**

Disability Assist Dogs, like all dogs, are living, breathing animals with unique personalities, needs and requirements. They require constant upkeep and no matter what, you must be prepared to meet their needs. It doesn't matter if it's raining, if you're having a bad day, if there's 4 feet of snow on the ground, if you're in the hospital or there's a family emergency - your Disability Assist Dog MUST be cared and provided for.

*Carefully consider how a Disability Assist Dog would fit into your lifestyle and family. They are not an inanimate piece of equipment that always works flawlessly, and caring for them isn't always convenient. Nonetheless, **even when it's difficult, hard, or stressful, you must be willing to accept full responsibility for your canine partner at all times.** Partnering with a Disability Assist Dog can have many advantages, but receiving the full benefit requires a degree of dedication many individuals can't provide due to their unique situations, busy lives, personality or a plethora of other reasons.*

Additionally, you must have plans in place in case of an emergency. What happens if you're sick? Your Disability Assist Dog is ill? You're unexpectedly hospitalized? You must have back-ups in place to ensure your partner always receives the necessary care.

3.) Are you prepared to always be the centre of attention?

Working with and partnering with a Disability Assist Dog places you smack in the centre of the public eye. Everywhere you go, people will stare, point and gawk and you and your

canine partner. When partnered with a Disability Assist Dog, you will never be invisible. People will stop and engage you in long-winded conversations, ask tons of questions, many of which will be very intrusive or personal, tell you stories about how their dog would be just perfect for this kind of work or how their uncle has a dog JUST LIKE YOURS, except everything is different but the fact they're both black.

- **Partnering With a Disability Assist Dog Can Be Stressful**

Going places will take twice as long, and you must forget about ever being able to just run in and get out quickly again.

*The interruptions will be constant, and at times, downright offensive or rude. People will judge you, **especially if you have an “invisible” disability**, and you must be prepared to calmly assert your rights with your Disability Assist Dog. Expect a great degree of conflict and to have to educate more people than you ever thought possible. You will be challenged, denied access and forced to assert yourself for not only your benefit, but that of the entire Disability Assist Dog community. You are an ambassador for the PPADT team and the wider assistance dog community, and your Disability Assist Dog might be the first people every come into contact with. You must ensure your partner is always presentable, behaving well, on task, and an excellent example of what a Disability Assist Dog should be. Partnering with a Disability Assist Dog carries responsibilities not only to the dog, but also to every other team in existence who may follow in your footsteps. You must always ensure you and your Disability Assist Dog leave an outstanding impression behind you.*

You must always ensure you and your Disability Assist Dog leave an outstanding impression behind you no matter how many times you're interrupted, challenged, judged or stopped. If you're not prepared or you're unable to accept the stresses that accompany working or training a Disability Assist Dog in public and being a constant ambassador/spokesperson, you may wish to consider alternatives to partnering with a Disability Assist Dog.

While this may sound harsh, ask any person with a Disability Assist Dog and they will confirm the reality of what it's like to have a working dog in public with you.

4.) Are you willing and able to accept the training and socialization obligations accompanying a Disability Assist Dog?

Partnering with a Disability Assist Dog is not a “one and done” deal no matter where or how you get your partner. If you receive your Disability Assist Dog from a Disability Assist Dog program, you're going to have to work very hard to bond with, learn to communicate with, and maintain your partner's training. If you owner-train a Disability Assist Dog, PPADT insists that it is done alongside a qualified trainer (in consultation with PPADT), as qualified trainers work years to perfect and build training and socialization foundations from scratch, and then maintain them.

Disability Assist Dogs possess highly trained, intricate and specialized skills and degrees of training. These dogs are not being trained for short bursts in an obedience ring. These dog must be able to work at any time in a 24/7 period. You must be willing to provide (alongside

a trainer) the practice time, boundaries and training to ensure your Disability Assist Dog won't backslide in his training, public access or level of socialization. The more your Disability Assist Dog knows or must know in order to work for you and mitigate your disability, the more vital it is that you work on maintaining and enhancing his skills as frequently as possible. Remember, these dogs love to learn and love to work, so enjoy this training time.

- **Disability Assist Dogs Aren't Always Perfect**

Disability Assist Dogs are not robots, you can't program them and then leave them to run. Sometimes they have bad days, and some days are just truly awful, trying and exhausting. You must be prepared to be mom, dad, teacher, coach, mentor, trouble-shooter, judge, jury, principal, friend, partner and sometimes, even an impartial observer. Being unable to emotionally "step out" of the situation so that you can think clearly, especially if your Disability Assist Dog is struggling or is pushing back, means you likely will miss the real issue and won't be able to fix it. You have to provide (alongside your trainer) the structure, guidelines and boundaries necessary for your partner to thrive and be able to work with you to the best of his ability.

You must commit to upholding your Disability Assist Dog's training, skills and behaviour for the rest of his life, and to be willing to admit when you need further or additional professional help. You cannot be a pushover, and you cannot worry about the opinions of others that may not understand. Boundaries are essential. Disability Assist Dogs must uphold very stringent standards, and sloppy or ill-behaved Disability Assist Dogs wreak havoc on the Disability Assist Dog community as a whole.

- **Training Disability Assist Dogs Requires Specialized Skills**

Another consideration concerning training and socialization involves owner-trainers in particular. Professional Disability Assist Dog trainers spend YEARS learning to train, socialize, ensure success, document and work with Disability Assist Dog candidates, prospects and partners. Not everyone possesses the training background or ability necessary to teach, perfect and hone the behaviours, skills, and tasks required for working Disability Assist Dogs, both in and out of the public eye. However, an easy solution for owner-trainers who don't have the necessary training, documentation or socialization experience is to partner with a professional trainer willing to help guide them on their journey to partnering with a Disability Assist Dog. In addition to possessing exceptional dog training skills, Disability Assist Dog trainers must also be able to work alongside people with a wide range of disabilities.

5.) Are you prepared to deal with conflict?

While many people understand there will be access challenges while training, working and partnering with a Disability Assist Dog, many individuals are not prepared for the other areas of conflict they will encounter. Although we strive to limit these potential conflicts through education and support, it is worth noting that it does still exist.

It is possible that people around you may struggle to understand WHY you need or want a Disability Assist Dog and some relationships may suffer. You should be prepared for support from friends or possibly even of family members, to diminish, especially if you have an ‘invisible’ disability. It is therefore important to have a good stable circle of support around you (be it support workers, medical support, friends, family, and community support).

Additionally, you may encounter strife at work, at school and anywhere else you frequent. Business owners with whom you had an excellent relationship with may begin to resent you and your Disability Assist Dog, even though they allow you access, as is required by law. You may receive, even though technically illegal, varying degrees of treatment or services ranging from merely rude to outright abusive.

You must be able to remain poised, professional and unflustered when faced with conflict.

Are you mentally and emotionally able to not only handle those blows, but to respond professionally, with courtesy and with poise? If not, partnering with a Disability Assist Dog may not be the best option for you.

Partnering With a Disability Assist Dog: Final Considerations

When it comes right down to it, you need to decide whether or not a Disability Assist Dog is right for you and your lifestyle, and at the end of the day, you’re the one who’s going to have to dig deep and accept responsibility for your choices. The above questions should outline some of the major considerations when making this choice.

Disability Assist Dogs bring peace, independence, security and a new degree of ability to thousands of people. If you’re going to take the next step and start the path to having a Disability Assist Dog, congratulations, and welcome to the Disability Assist Dog community. If you’re not though, that’s ok. Disability Assist Dogs are not right for everyone, and we would even hazard to say partnering with a Disability Assist Dog is not right for most people.

We hope to have stirred your thoughts up a bit, and helped you to recognize Disability Assist Dog partnership isn’t as straight-forward as it can seem. This special partnership can, however, be extremely rewarding and change your life forever.