



About guide, hearing and assistance dogs

Guide, Hearing and Assistance Dogs Act 2009

The Queensland *Guide, Hearing and Assistance Dogs Act 2009* commenced on 1 July 2009. This Act seeks to:

- assist people with a disability who rely on a guide, hearing or assistance dog to have independent access to the community
- ensure the quality and accountability of guide, hearing and assistance dog training services.

In doing this the Act reaffirms an individual's rights of access if they are supported by a certified guide, hearing or assistance dog. It also puts in place a mechanism for the easy identification of guide, hearing or assistance dogs that have been certified under the legislation.

A guide dog, hearing dog or assistance dog is specially trained to perform specific physical tasks and behaviours to assist a person with a disability and reduce their need for support. The dog must be able to pass a public access test to ensure it is safe and effective in a public place or public passenger vehicle, and able to be controlled by its handler in all situations.

The *Guide, Hearing and Assistance Dogs Act 2009* defines a guide dog, hearing dog, or other dog individually trained to:

- perform identifiable physical tasks and behaviours to assist a person with a disability in a way that reduces that person's need for support
- has passed a public access test conducted by an approved trainer or approved training institution within 7 days before being certified
- is not a restricted breed as defined under the *Local Government Act 1993*
- is de-sexed and vaccinated
- has not been declared a dangerous dog under a local law.

Most people are familiar with the guide dogs used by people with a vision impairment. However, there are many other dogs that assist people with a disability in their day-to-day activities, including dogs that:

- alert people with a hearing impairment to specific sounds
- pull wheelchairs or carry and pick up items for people with mobility impairments
- flick light switches on or off
- help people with mobility impairments to balance.

A guide, hearing or assistance dog is not a pet or a 'companion' dog.

Dog training and tasks

Teamwork with a dog trained to perform useful tasks empowers people with a disability to have more self-sufficiency, prevent injuries, summon help in a crisis, and help increase awareness of what is happening around them. There are more than 100 tasks that guide, hearing and assistance dogs can master to assist with daily-life activities and safety concerns.

During the first 12–18 months, a puppy carer will, with help from a certified trainer, teach the puppies basic obedience skills, socialisation and to be comfortable with travelling in a vehicle.

Once this is accomplished, the trainer will teach the dog a set of tasks appropriate for a particular disability. Then both the person with a disability for whom the dog has been trained and the dog will undergo 4–8 weeks of intensive training as a team.

For further information:

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Guide dogs

Guide dogs take directional commands and find an appropriate path of travel. They indicate changes in elevation – even allowing for the handler to avoid obstacles at head-height – avoid oncoming traffic, navigate around obstacles and locate objects on command.

The handler makes most of the decisions for the team, but guide dogs are carefully conditioned to refuse the Forward command under certain circumstances where it would be unsafe to proceed.

Hearing dogs

Hearing dogs are trained to alert their handler to specific sounds, primarily in the home setting. Some hearing dogs also work outside the home, alerting their handler to specific sounds in public settings and vehicles.

Instead of barking, hearing dogs get the attention of their handler by touch – either a nose-nudge or pawing – then the dog leads the handler to the source of the specific sound. Some trainers may teach the dog to lie down next to the handler to indicate a smoke alarm, after alerting the handler to the sound with a touch.

Assistance dogs

An assistance dog supports people with a disability other than vision or hearing impairment. Some assistance dogs have mastered more than 50 tasks to assist their handler.

A number of the performed tasks may also prove useful to individuals with hidden disabilities such as psychiatric disorders and potentially life-threatening medical problems or conditions which cause chronic pain.

Public access test

A public access test is approved by the Department of Communities to assess if a dog is safe and effective in a public place or public passenger vehicle, and able to be controlled by its handler. All certified guide, hearing and assistance dogs must regularly take this test.

A dog that displays any aggressive behaviour (growling, biting, raising hackles, showing teeth etc.) will be eliminated from the test. Any dog that toilets in a building or shows uncontrollable behaviour will also fail the test.

It should be noted that dog skills may deteriorate over time, particularly if the handler does not appropriately praise the dog for performing a task. All guide, hearing and assistance dogs rely heavily on their handlers' feedback, especially praise, to reinforce and motivate desired behaviours.

It is a requirement of the *Guide, Hearing and Assistance Dogs Act 2009* that approved trainers provide proof of regular testing and ongoing support.

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