

## FACT SHEET: OUR GUIDE DOG TRAINING

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Lots of people are really interested in learning more information about our dogs-in-training and the basics like where they live and what they learn. This fact sheet has heaps of extra information – so whether you're completing a school assignment; wanting to know what the next steps are for the Guide Dog puppy you're raising; or are generally just interested; the following should help answer those questions.

### **Kennelling**

Once a puppy reaches 13-15 months of age, the now young adult dog is returned to our Breeding and Training Centre in Bald Hills to commence training. We recognise this transition into training with an in-for-training personal interview and Certificate of Appreciation to thank our valued Puppy Raiser volunteers and introduce the trainers that will take the dogs on the next stage in their development. There are often a few tears, but they're quickly replaced with a feeling of accomplishment as the dogs move on in their preparations to help change the lives of Queenslanders who are blind and vision impaired.

The dogs now take residence in our kennels and are boarded with a kennel mate to play and enjoy any relaxation hours with. The two dogs become best mates and often enjoy free run games and time together. We have a dedicated staff of kennel attendants working seven days a week to look after their every need, including food, grooming and even the occasional hug.

If for some reason a dog doesn't enjoy the kennelling experience as much as the others, we have a boarding program that can cater to its needs. Boarding for dogs-in-training provides a similar family environment to what they experienced in the Puppy Raising Program, so the dogs can feel at ease and focus on their training.

### **Vet care**

Guide Dogs Queensland has a dedicated vet that caters to our colony to ensure our dogs remain the happiest and healthiest they can be. All our dogs undergo regular check-ups and vaccinations, and the vets visiting the kennels can also keep an eye on anything our dedicated kennelling staff or trainers may have noticed while the dog is in training.

The soundness of our dogs from such well established breeding lines, coupled with the right diet and plenty of exercise, means our dogs are almost always in excellent health.

## **Diet and exercise**

As with all dogs – but especially with food-focussed Labrador Retrievers and Golden Retrievers that make up a majority of our colony – a good diet is essential to keep our dogs in top physical condition for their working lifestyle.

Our Guide Dog colony is fed on Advance branded pet foods. Advance is an Australian made, premium dry food that is widely reputable and backed by leading scientific nutritional research. Advance has supplied dry food to Guide Dogs Australia breeding and training centres for over 10 years with great results in the health of our colonies.

Exercise is also a key component to our healthy dogs. All our dogs receive a minimum of 1.5 hours exercise every day, weekends included. During the week, our dogs are also out busy working to learn the basics of guiding and develop their skills so they can eventually take on the responsibility of guiding a Queenslander who can't see as well as they can. It's a big responsibility and the reason why they train so hard during their time in kennels – oh, and they really love it too!

## **Our trainers**

There are “dog people” and then there are our trainers. These trainers don't just love dogs, but also love bringing out the full potential that each dog has so it can achieve a real sense of satisfaction in the work it does.

Our trainers each undergo extensive training themselves before taking on the responsibility to train a future Guide Dog. Most trainers start their careers working in our kennels where they familiarise themselves with the dogs and get to know the best ways to handle them to achieve the best results.

Each Guide Dogs Queensland trainer has completed a cadetship with us or another accredited Guide Dog school (over 18 months to two years) where they learned from experienced senior trainers the best ways to teach dogs-in-training the skills they'll need to perform the guiding role. Each trainer has also undertaken regular skill checks, completed exams, and undertaken an assessment program from senior trainers and the Guide Dog Training Manager before they can take on the role as a Guide Dog trainer.

The success of dogs in the trainers' care is closely monitored and regular team meetings and shared methods always keep our trainers up-to-date with new techniques and ways to solve any training challenges that may arise.

## Training objectives

Putting the life of a blind or vision impaired Queenslander into the paws of a well-trained dog is not an easy decision, so our training has to be the best it can be to ensure the working team of a blind or vision impaired handler and Guide Dog remains safe.

The objectives of our training are:

1. Produce quality, confident working Guide Dogs that can handle a wide range of environments and complex conditions to keep their handler safe.
2. For the Guide Dog to maintain a high standard of obedience and behaviour in social settings and everyday living to promote confidence and independence in vision impaired handlers.

## Training in Queensland conditions

At Guide Dogs Queensland, we love our dogs and take the responsibility of caring for them very seriously. To best train our dogs in the guiding role, it's essential we get them out into the community as much as possible – as after all, this is where they'll spend the majority of their time when out working.

We also realise the Queensland environment throws up a number of challenges we need to be aware of so our dogs stay in the best health possible. We're well prepared for this and have the plans, policies and procedures to match, along with the right equipment to look after our best friends. This includes:

- 🐾 Specially designed vans – while we transport our dogs in much the same way as major organisations like the Queensland Police Service, Australian Defence Force and other organisations like the RSPCA, our specially designed vans exceed industry standards, with custom made transportation cages designed for large dogs; flow-through air and venting; readily available cool water; and even thermometers so trainers can keep an eye on the temperature. Even when stationary, our vehicles have been chosen to allow for maximum ventilation
- 🐾 Varied staff hours for trainers in hotter months so training can start and finish early away from the hottest parts of the day
- 🐾 Set operating temperatures for our outside training – if it gets too hot, our trainers return to the centre or operate inside air conditioned venues like shopping centres
- 🐾 Keeping our dogs at a healthy weight allows them to be cooler as they're not carrying excess weight to insulate them
- 🐾 Regular monitoring of upcoming conditions by the Guide Dog Training Manager and training of all staff to both detect the first signs of over-heating in dogs, as well as ways to help cool and hydrate dogs effectively if they get too hot.

## Places we train

Our dogs go where people regularly go. This is an essential part of their training to prepare them for the outside world and the challenges they'll face every day while working as a guide. Places we regularly visit include:

- 🐾 residential neighbourhoods, including basic traffic training
- 🐾 rail and bus stations (including entering, exiting and riding public transport)
- 🐾 shopping centres and malls
- 🐾 cafes and restaurants
- 🐾 city streets, including crossings

The Guide Dogs Queensland Breeding and Training Centre at Bald Hills also has specially designed facilities to maximise the experience for our dogs in preparation for their working life. This includes a set of specially designed *environmental enrichment zones*, a first in Australia for Guide Dogs and assistance dogs, modelled after a Swiss design to provide a range of experiences to the dogs that they would expect to find in the outside world.

The zones include a specially designed Tactile Exposure zone – a path covered in different surfaces, escalator treads, grates and grills, etc – so the dogs get used to walking over them and become accustomed to the feel in a relaxed and positive way. We also have a maze designed to mentally stimulate the dogs and improve their problem solving skills; an exploration area with structures, boulders, and run through the tunnels; and a free run area perfect for games to encourage the dogs to sprint, play and release energy.

## When does a dog complete its training?

In short, when the dog consistently performs its work safely and effectively it is assessed as being ready for allocating to a person who is legally blind. This usually occurs when the dog is around 20 to 24 months of age.

The process isn't quite as easy as it sounds though. Each Guide Dog-in-training undergoes rigorous assessment by the Guide Dog Training Manager to not only have the abilities to pass the required accreditation needed to work as a qualified Guide Dog (under the Guide, Hearing and Assistance Dogs Act 2009), but also to meet the high internal standards of Guide Dogs Queensland. Our Guide Dogs are among the best produced in Australia and we are very proud of that achievement, so a lot of work happens to prepare our dogs to achieve that level of quality.

## **What happens to the dogs that don't become Guide Dogs?**

Not all dogs will successfully complete their training as a Guide Dog for any number of reasons. This could be for something as simple as sensitivity to wearing the guiding harness, or a lack of drive for the guiding role. These dogs however may still be perfect for other roles that assist the community, like as an Assistance Dog, a Companion Dog or as a Facility Dog.

## **What is the final step for a Guide Dog-in-training?**

Once a Guide Dog has successfully completed its training, the dog moves to our Guide Dog Client Services team to be matched with a blind or vision impaired handler. This matching process looks to match both the dog to the client, as well as the client to the dog to ensure the needs on both sides of the new relationship are being met.

Following matching, the new team spend a few weeks together under the watchful eye and guidance of a Guide Dog mobility Instructor, to train the new team on regular routes the pair will walk and places they will go. This bonding period also allows the new team time to get to know each other and develop a relationship that will last a lifetime.