

# Autism Service Dog Awareness

*Copyright © 2007 Todd A. Jacobs*

- This presentation is available for non-commercial use under the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 2.5 License.
- See <http://tinyurl.com/a5rjw> for license details.
- Contact [tjacobs@codegnome.org](mailto:tjacobs@codegnome.org) for commercial or alternative licensing.

# Topic Summary

- What is a Service Animal?
- What is the Autistic Spectrum?
- AS/HFA
- Why Autism Service Dogs?
- Existing Service Dog Programs
- Underserved Populations
- Self-Training
- Future Directions
- Online Resources

# What is a Service Animal?

- A service animal is, in a legal sense, an auxiliary aid that assists a disabled individual in coping with daily life.
- A widely-accepted legal interpretation of “service animal” is an animal that has been individually trained to perform functions that mitigate a person's disability.
- Dogs are the most common service animals, and enjoy the widest social acceptance.

# What is the Autistic Spectrum?

- Autistic spectrum disorders (ASD) are a class of pervasive developmental disorders.
- The most common ASDs are Autistic Disorder (“classic” autism) and Asperger's Syndrome.
- These disorders are neurological, not psychological.
- Despite classification as childhood developmental disorders, they are lifelong disabilities.

# AS/HFA

- Asperger's Syndrome (AS) and High-Functioning Autism (HFA) are spectrum disorders usually marked by better verbal communication than other ASDs.
- Strong verbal skills often mask deficits from casual observation.
- Some people with AS/HFA may not be obviously disabled; however, profound impairments in cognitive and social functioning remain.

# Why Autism Service Dogs?

- Because AS/HFA are often invisible disabilities, a service dog acts as a visible marker that signals special needs.
- Service dogs provide those with ASD assistance in major life functions such as working, socialization, and self-care.
- Service dogs lessen the profound social isolation common to those on the spectrum.

# Existing Service Dog Programs

- Various organizations provide service dogs for young children with Autistic Disorder.
- These dogs are primarily trained as mobile safety tethers for small children who are flight risks.
- Some dogs are trained in behavior-modification tasks such as interrupting repetitive movements.
- Many of these programs charge substantial fees for their dogs.

# Underserved Populations

- Currently, no service dog program directs its services to adults on the spectrum.
- No organization currently trains dogs in tasks related to AS/HFA. Existing programs are primarily focused on tethering for children.
- Adults with ASD are often unable to afford the costs of a program-trained service dog.

# Self-Training

- Higher-functioning adults may choose to train their own service dogs.
- Legal interpretations of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) support the use of self-trained service animals.
- The cost of self-training is often lower than the cost of a program dog.
- Self-training may not be the most effective approach for all tasks, and may not be appropriate for everyone.

# Future Directions

- Increasing public awareness of ASD is critically important.
- Educating spectrum adults on their legal rights is vital.
- Enabling disabled adults to self-train their own service animals demands higher levels of activism and community support.
- Development of national or community-based service dog training programs for ASD is a valuable long-term goal.

# Online Resources

- Training and Advocacy
  - Autism Service Dog Blog  
<http://tinyurl.com/hz9ws>
  - ASD-SD Mailing List  
<http://tinyurl.com/h7pey>
- Legal Information
  - Americans with Disabilities Act  
<http://www.ada.gov/pubs/ada.htm>
  - Department of Justice Service Dog FAQ  
<http://www.usdoj.gov/crt/ada/qasrvc.htm>