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Guide and Service Dogs

What are guide dogs?

Guide dogs are trained to lead the blind or vision impaired. The dog acts as a pilot to direct its owner in a straight line unless directed to turn, while avoiding obstacles in all directions.

How do I get a guide dog?

Blind Veterans are assessed and trained for orientation and mobility. If a guide dog is preferred, information on how to contact guide dog schools is provided. Partnership with the guide dog is provided through non-VA affiliated guide dog schools.

What benefits does VA provide?

Blind Veterans with working dogs are provided veterinary care and equipment through VA Prosthetics and Sensory Aids. VA does not pay for boarding, grooming, food, or any other routine expense associated with owning a dog.

What are service dogs?

A service dog is a dog trained to do specific tasks for a person that he or she cannot do because of a disability. Service dogs can pick things up, guide a person with vision problems, or help someone who falls or loses balance easily. For example, a service dog can help a blind person walk down the street or get dangerous things out of the way when someone is having a seizure.

Protecting someone, giving emotional support, or being a companion do not qualify a dog to be a service animal. To be a service dog, a dog must go through training. Usually the dog is trained to:

- Do things that are different from natural dog behavior

- Do things that the handler (dog owner) cannot do because of a disability
- Learn to work with the new handler in ways that help manage the owner's disability

Because the handler depends on the service dog's help, service dogs are allowed to go to most public places the handler goes. This is the case even if it is somewhere pet dogs usually cannot go, like restaurants or on airplanes. But there are a few exceptions. For example, service dogs can be asked to leave if they are not behaving well.

How do I get a service dog?

Each Veteran's case is reviewed and evaluated by a prescribing clinician for the following:

- Ability and means, including family or caregiver, to care for the dog currently and in the future
- Goals that are to be accomplished through the use of the dog
- Goals that are to be accomplished through other assistive technology or therapy

The Veteran will be informed of an approval or disapproval of their service dog request. Veterans approved for service dogs are referred to [Assistance Dogs International-accredited agencies](#). There is no charge for the dog or the associated training. It is important to know that ONLY dogs trained by ADI accredited agencies are eligible for veterinary benefits and emotional support dogs are not currently covered.

What benefits does VA provide?

Veterans with working service dogs are provided veterinary care and equipment through VA Prosthetics and Sensory Aids. VA does not pay for boarding, grooming, food, or any other routine expense associated with owning a dog. The VA is responsible for getting pet insurance on the animal. It doesn't actually pay the veterinarian directly*-allowing the veteran to choose from a larger pool of veterinarians.

*To accept payment directly from the VA, the veterinarian would need to register as a contractor which many are not willing to do.

Guide and Service Dogs Frequently Asked Questions

To support an active and independent lifestyle VA provides benefits for guide and service dogs. The job of a guide dog is to assist the blind. A service dog assists someone with a severe to profound hearing impairment or someone with a physical impairment that substantially limits mobility.

1. What is the difference between a guide dog and a service dog?

A guide dog is trained to assist the blind. A service dog is trained to help those with severe to profound hearing loss by alerting the individual to a variety of sounds or someone with a physical impairment that substantially limits mobility by assisting in the performance of a wide variety of tasks depending on need and training (e.g. opening doors, retrieving, etc.).

2. How do I determine if I am eligible for a service dog through VA?

- **Hearing, Guide, Mobility:** The Veteran should meet with their VA Clinical Care Provider to begin the application process for this benefit. The specialist will complete an evaluation and make a clinical determination on the need for assistive devices, including a service dog. Once the evaluation is completed and a service dog determined to be the optimal tool for the Veteran's rehabilitation and treatment plan, the provider will work with the Veteran to obtain the necessary information and documents to request the benefit on behalf of the Veteran through coordination with the local VA Medical Center Prosthetic and Sensory Aids Service.
- **Mental Health Mobility:** The Veteran should meet with a VA Mental Health Provider to begin the application process for this benefit. The mental health provider and care team will evaluate and determine whether the mental health condition is the primary cause of the Veteran's substantial mobility limitations. The team will also assess whether a mobility service dog would be the optimal intervention or treatment approach for the Veteran. If the team considers a service dog to be the optimal intervention, they will request the benefit on behalf of the Veteran through coordination with the local VA Medical Center Prosthetic and Sensory Aids Service.

Each Veteran's case is reviewed and evaluated by a prescribing clinician for the following:

- Ability and means, including family or caregiver, to care for the dog currently and in the future
- Goals that are to be accomplished through the use of the dog
- Goals that are to be accomplished through other assistive technology or therapy

The Veteran will be informed of an approval or disapproval of their service dog request by the VA Prosthetics and Sensory Aid Service. Veterans approved for service dogs are referred to Assistance Dogs International or International Guide Dog Federation-accredited agencies.

*Please contact your local Prosthetic and Sensory Aid Service Department if you have additional questions. Use the [Facility Locator](#) to find the local Prosthetic and Sensory Aids Service near you.

3. Does VA actually provide the guide or service dog?

No. Veterans approved for guide or service dogs are referred to accredited agencies. Many of these organizations do not charge for the dog or the dog's training.

4. If it is determined that I am eligible for a service dog, what benefits does VA provide for my guide or service dog?

VA will pay for veterinary care and the equipment (e.g. harness and/or backpack) required for optimal use of the dog. Veterinary care includes prescribed medications, office visits for medical procedures, and dental procedures where the dog is sedated (one sedated dental procedure will be covered annually). Vaccinations should be current when the dog is provided to the Veteran through an accredited agency. Subsequent vaccinations will be covered by VA. Prescribed food will be reviewed on a case-by-case basis.

Veterinary care does not include over-the-counter medications, food, treats, and nonsedated dental care. Flea and tick medications are considered over-the-counter and are the responsibility of the Veteran along with over-the-counter dental care products (bones, dental treats, etc.). Grooming, boarding, and other routine

expenses are not covered.

5. Does a service dog serve the same function(s) as Animal Assisted Therapy or Animal Assisted Activity dogs?

No. Animal Assisted Therapy and Animal Assisted Activity dogs are used either to assist therapists to accomplish therapeutic goals or for general engagement of the patients. Neither type of dog is for personal use by the Veteran. They are used only in a medical setting.

Additional Resources

- [Fact Sheet on Service Dogs Veterinary Benefits](#)
- [Service Dog Veterinary Health Benefit](#)

Non-VA Related Resources

- [Assistance Dogs International](#) (Service Dogs)
- [International Guide Dog Federation](#) (Guide Dogs)
- [National Association of Guide Dog Users](#)

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