

Inquiry into Social Inclusion and Victorians with a Disability

Australian and New Zealand Assistance Dogs, Inc (ANZAD) is a regional chapter ADI (Assistance Dogs International). ANZAD is an umbrella body of not for profit organisations, who train and place Assistance Dogs in Australia and New Zealand. These dogs not only help their handlers with physical tasks, but offer them a form of confidence and independence. ANZAD's members and candidates train service dogs for people with physical disabilities, diabetes, epilepsy, autism, mental health issues, guide dogs for the visually impaired and hearing dogs for those with a hearing deficit

ANZAD is part of ADI's mission and therefore we aim to:

- Establish and promote standards of excellence in all areas of Assistance Dog acquisition, training and partnership
- Facilitate communication and learning among member organizations,
- Educate the public to the benefits of Assistance Dogs and ADI membership

ANZAD aims to regulate and heighten the standards of training, placement and working relationships of Assistance Dogs, while improving the education of staff and volunteers across Assistance Dogs organisations in Australia and New Zealand.

Assistance animals are those that are specially trained to enable people with a disability to participate in all aspects of society. They perform tasks and functions that alleviate some of the effects of a person's disability.

Currently only dogs are used as assistance animals in Victoria although other species are capable of legal recognition under Commonwealth anti-discrimination law.

The generic term for dogs trained to assist people with sight impairments is 'dog guides'.

However, they are usually referred to as 'guide' or 'seeing eye' dogs. These dogs help blind or visually-impaired people to move around safely. The person chooses the direction the team will travel, while the dog makes sure that they safely negotiate obstacles like stairs, kerbs or traffic on the chosen route.

Labradors and Golden Retrievers are the dog breed most often used because they are large in size (enabling them to, for example, assist people through doorways) because of their trainability and their acceptance from the general public. More recently crossbreeds have been used.

Hearing dogs have been available in Australia since the 1980s. They work by responding to specific sounds. These may include a doorbell, alarm clock, telephone, smoke alarm or crying baby. A hearing dog alerts its handler to a sound by making physical contact and leading the owner to the source of the sound.

Organisations training assistance animals for people with non-vision or hearing related disabilities began to appear in Australia about eighteen years ago. Assistance dogs are now trained to access public areas for a wide range of purposes and disabilities.

Under the general term service dogs a number of specific types of support is provided.

Service dogs for people with physical disability are trained to help people with reduced motor skills, mobility problems or have difficulty walking or moving.

Service dogs can pull a wheelchair or help people to walk by providing stability. They may also

be trained to open and close doors, retrieve and carry items, turn light switches on and off, and other day-to-day tasks as needed by their handler. Sometimes they are called 'mobility support dogs'. The breeds of dog most commonly used are Labradors and Golden Retrievers.

Seizure and alert dogs are trained to assist their handlers before and during a medical emergency such as a seizure or diabetic episode. They can recognise early warning signs that a medical emergency is about to occur and are trained to alert their owner. Diabetes dogs detect subtle changes in body scent resulting from hypoglycaemia.

Dogs can also help to ensure the safety of their handler when he or she is having a seizure.

Dogs can be trained to assist by lying on top of their handler during a seizure to prevent injury and can also help their handler to become reoriented and mobile after a seizure.

Psychiatric service dogs are trained to provide support to people with psychiatric disabilities.

These dogs assist people with disabilities including bipolar disorder, panic disorder, depression, schizophrenia, anxiety, social phobias and autism. The tasks performed are tailored to the needs of the individual handler. Tasks may include: alerting their handler to the onset of a manic episode or panic attack; providing a focus point during an episode; providing tactile stimulation to alleviate severe depression; or helping the handler to cope with social situations.

Companion animals are not assistance animals. This is because assistance animals 'work'. They are not pets. Assistance animals have a different status under the law, notwithstanding that they may provide companionship in a similar way to a pet when they are 'off duty'.

Not all animals owned by people with disability are assistance animals. Only those that are trained to alleviate the effects of a person's disability meet the test.

House training or general obedience training is not training to assist a person to alleviate the effects of a disability. Nor is the provision of companionship only. Emotional support dogs only provide companionship and a calming physical presence. They are not assistance animals at law.

Therapy animals are not assistance animals. They are used to improve a person's general quality of life and to facilitate counselling or psychotherapy. They are often used to assist older people and people with low severity physical, emotional, intellectual or developmental disabilities.

However, they are not trained to the same standard as assistance animals and are not trained for public access. Facility animals visit people living in hospitals, mental health units, nursing homes and rehabilitation centres to assist treatment or recovery and improve their quality of life through contact with an animal. However, they too are not assistance animals.

People must have a disability for their animal to be considered an assistance animal. Those with sensory impairment most commonly use assistance animals. However, people with many types of disability use them for everyday support.

Each person's experience of disability is unique, including the onset of disability at different stages in life or for different reasons. Assistance animals may not be suitable for all people and all disabilities. Some people do not like animals, have allergies, or are unwilling to take on the expense, time and responsibility that an assistance animal partnership requires.

Assistance animals provide their owners with a range of benefits. The use of assistance animals increases handlers' social inclusion through greater community participation, social contact and independence. Assistance dogs are very strong social magnets. They open up many social interactions for their owners.

All major training organisations invest significant time and effort to ensure dogs and their handlers are a good match. This includes vetting applicants to ensure they have the capacity to look after the dog so that the partnership can work effectively. It also requires regular follow up and ongoing support to the partnership.

People who have suffered significant injury, including acquired brain injury may use assistance animals. In particular use of an assistance animal has alleviated the effects of physical impairments but also has helped clients with behavioural issues.

Psychiatric service dogs provide a range of benefits to their owners as an adjunct to the person's mental health. Experiencing mental health related disabilities emphasised the value of the dog in helping them deal with anxiety associated with depression, bipolar disorder and/or social phobias. For those with social phobias, depression or other forms of disability that may lead to a reclusive life, an assistance animal may help the person to engage socially.

For some people, having an assistance dog meant they were able to come out of the house for the first time in many months. For others, some of whom had multiple forms of disability, employment had been secured and maintained.

Seizure and alert dogs can become agitated before a convulsive seizure (perhaps being alerted to a partial seizure which may precede a generalized seizure), and of dogs warning carers that a generalized seizure is occurring or has just occurred, thereby enabling prompt and appropriate first aid to be given. Quality of life benefits were effects on interpersonal relationships with strangers. Stigmatization of persons with epilepsy is underestimated and socially devastating and remains a major barrier to societal integration'. Because of the unpredictability of seizures, many people with epilepsy 'limit their exposure to the outside world by staying at home'.

People with a disability sometimes approach private trainers to train their assistance animal. Alternatively, people with disability may learn how to train their existing dog to be an assistance animal and do the training themselves. These people have difficulty with their dog being recognised as an Assistance Dog by service providers who have no clear guidelines on what is or what is not an assistance dog.

Internationally accredited assistance dog training organisations have an application process requiring evidence of the disability. The type of evidence required varies from organisation to organisation. Applicants may be required to obtain a referral, attend an interview or assessment, complete questionnaires about the type and level of their disability, and supply doctors reports, medical histories and personal references. Most of the organisations providing assistance animals to Victorians are members of international bodies, either the International Guide Dogs Federation or Assistance Dogs International.

The Disability Discrimination Act 1992 (Cth) (DDA) includes 'trained' in its definition of assistance animal, it does not say what this means. In the absence of a regulatory scheme in Victoria, the term remains undefined. There are no official training standards for assistance animals in Victoria. Any person can call themselves an assistance animal trainer. There is no regulatory body to oversee the accreditation of trainers.

Training organisations have independently developed their own breeding, training and accreditation criteria or affiliated themselves with international representative bodies which require their members to comply with fixed training and operational standards. However, as the law is silent on this issue, international standards are not legally recognised. The lack of legally enforceable standards creates uncertainty for people who use assistance animals and service providers alike which can limit their social inclusion or risk the safety of the dog owner and the general public.

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