

Assistance Dogs Need Homes for Good

Not all owners can keep their retired assistance dogs for life. You can help.

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Eleven-year-old Linders bounded into the pool, circling after his water ducky. "He'd swim all day if you let him!" exclaims Debbie Logerfo of Richmond, Va. Logerfo and partner David Low adopted Linders from Guiding Eyes for the Blind last June, after arthritis and other medical issues brought an end to the yellow Labrador Retriever's eight-year career as a guide dog. These days, Linders swims and relaxes on a 4-acre farm with the couple's three other dogs: 3-year-old Davos, a Bernese Mountain Dog; 3-year-old Zeus, a Pyrenean Mastiff; and 1-year-old Itsy Bitsy, a Cavalier King Charles Spaniel. "He's totally devoted to us - he never leaves my side," Logerfo marvels. "We are very fortunate to have him as an addition to our family."

Most service, hearing, and guide dogs retire around age 10, usually due to medical conditions. In addition, "depending on what the dog does - for example, pulling a wheelchair or doing lots of tugging - the energy level could be too low [to continue working]," says Lu Picard, executive director of East Coast Assistance Dogs in Torrington, Conn.

Many dogs retire as companions in the same homes where they served as assistance dogs. Others are given to friends or family. Still others are returned to the training or placement facility they came from. "They're usually returned with great difficulty on the part of the graduate," acknowledges Kathy Kraft, released/retired dog program manager at Guiding Eyes for the Blind in Yorktown Heights, N.Y., where Linders was trained. "After all, they've spent many years together as working partners as well as close friends."

Each year Guiding Eyes graduates about 162 working teams and places an average of 13 retired guide dogs in adoptive homes. Canine Companions for Independence, based in Santa Rosa, Calif., reported similar numbers. In 2003, the program placed 165 dogs with partners who have disabilities. That same year they re-homed 15 retirees. "It takes a big heart to adopt a retired service dog, because we know that their time left on earth will be limited," says Story Kirshman, national participant program director for Canine Companions for Independence. "But the trade-off can be so worth it." Logerfo agrees, running out of fingers while listing Linders' good qualities: well-mannered, housebroken, easy to take anywhere, rides well in a car, knows all basic commands, gets along well with other dogs, loves everyone.