

**VIP CLIENTS**

Service dogs require special considerations due to their critical role in the life of their owner.

**MEET THE AUTHOR**

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Amie began working in the field in 1998 as a veterinary assistant. She completed the Veterinary Technician Program at Foothill College in Los Altos Hills, California, and became an RVT in 2010. She has been at the same emergency clinic for the past 22 years and is currently the lead technician. She has been involved in service dog puppy raising since 2002 and has had a hand in raising over 20 puppies. When she isn't working at the clinic or for her nonprofit, Growing Up Guide Pup, she is spending time with her husband Matthew and her current dog-in-training named Pixie. Other critters in the family include retired service dog Penny, career-changed guide dog Ricki, rescue dog Ozzy, and kitty cat Autumn.

# Working With Service Dogs

**I started working with service dogs** in 2002 when I brought home a 9-week-old Labrador to raise to be a guide dog. At the time I did not have a lot of knowledge about service dog etiquette or the incredible things service dogs can do to help people with disabilities, but I thought it would be a fun experience to learn how to train a puppy. As part of the guide dog training, I was able to take that puppy everywhere. Since I was busy with work and school, this seemed like a good option to have a dog in my life and not leave a dog at home alone for a long period of time.



I learned so much during the year and a half that I had the puppy in my home, including how to potty and crate train, teach basic commands and cues, and how to shop and eat at restaurants with one hand because my other hand was always attached to a leash. Some of my best training was from people with visual impairment, who showed me how guide dogs help them navigate the world. I learned how to love a dog, but also how to let it go so it could fulfill its destiny.

The biggest surprise during my early guide dog training was how little my coworkers knew about service dogs. I had only been in the veterinary field for a couple of years and was still in school learning, but I was the one educating everyone at the clinic about what puppy raisers do, how guide dogs work, and imparting knowledge about service dogs and access laws.

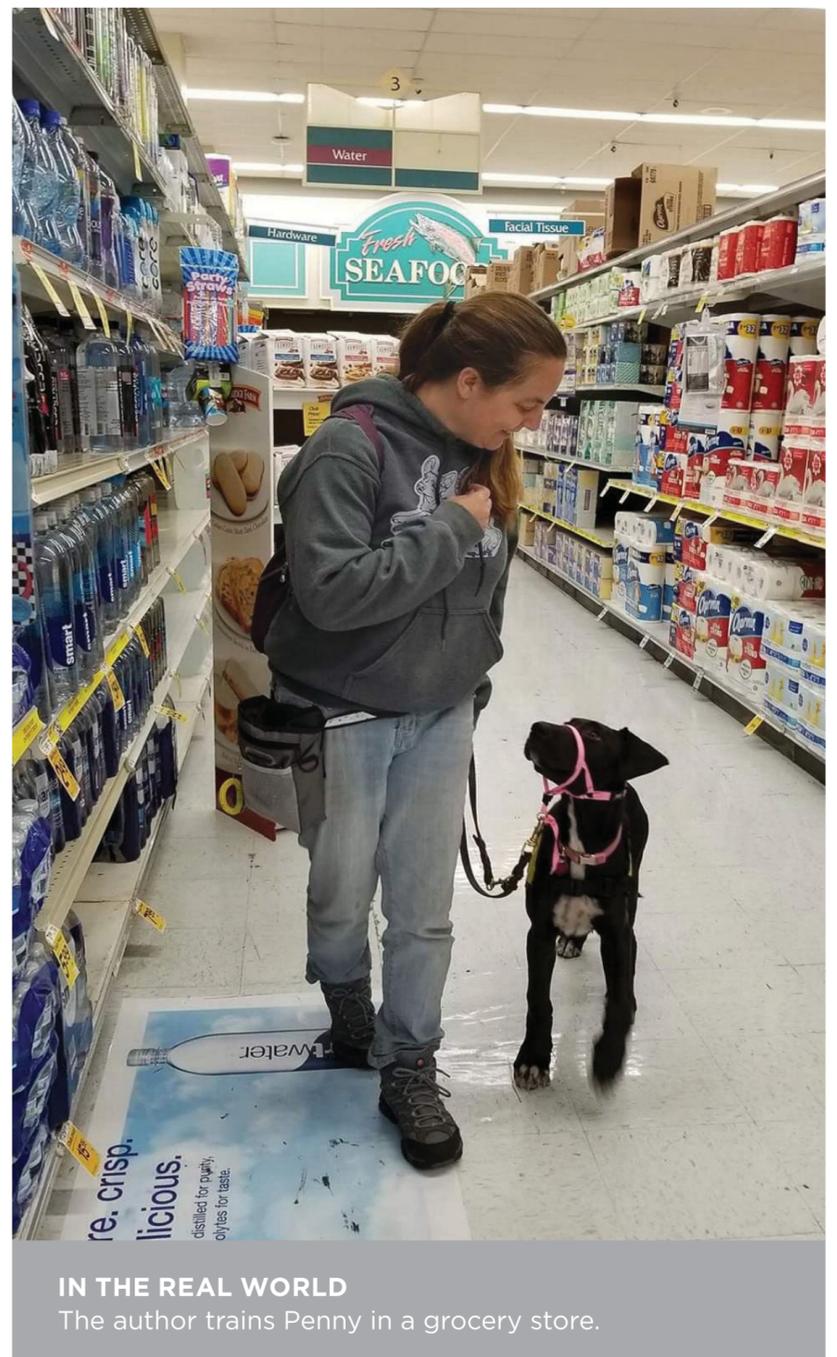
One memory that will stay with me forever is the day I was reunited on graduation day with the puppy I had raised. For the culminating event during graduation I handed his leash to his new life partner. This was the moment where I had an epiphany and the enormity of the guide dog puppy training clicked for me. He sat with me as his partner was led onto a stage and one by one the dogs and puppy raisers were called to be introduced and the passing of the leash ensued. My puppy, now a mature dog, was very excited to see me again after being away for 6 months. But the concern he showed when his new partner left him was life-changing. They had only been training and working together for 2 weeks, but he was extremely bonded to her already and seemed to know that was where he belonged. Once he was reunited with his partner on the stage, he appeared more relaxed. It was then that I realized how strong the human-animal bond was between a service dog and its partner, and I realized he knew his job was to keep her safe. He still loved us and was excited to be reunited with us, but he now belonged with her.

Since that first experience, service dogs and the work they do has become a passion of mine. In 2010 my husband Matthew and I started a web series that followed the journey of a puppy from the time we picked it up to when she was returned. This series has won awards at film festivals globally. In 2014 we formed the first service dog organization with a mission focused on education called Growing Up Guide Pup ([growingupguidepup.org](http://growingupguidepup.org)). Our web series has a growing following, and as we continued to raise puppies we learned that there was a huge disconnect

between the general public and the service dog community. Most people simply knew that service dogs exist, but nothing more—not how they are trained, what they are trained to do, what disabilities they assist with, what laws are in place to protect service dogs and their handlers, and more.

Over the years the number and types of dogs performing service work for individuals with disabilities has increased. This means that more veterinary clinics have service dog clients. Many veterinary professionals have little education on how and why these clients are different than others they see.

I discovered that most people in the veterinary community also fell into the category of the general public. Yes, it is true that veterinary staff know that service dogs exist; however, my personal experience has shown that they do not know much more about them. After being in the field for over 22 years, I have discovered that there is little education available for



**IN THE REAL WORLD**

The author trains Penny in a grocery store.



veterinary professionals about service dogs. With the number of service dogs increasing, we, as veterinary professionals, should be educated on the unique needs of these dogs and their handlers. I have seen lectures specific to the needs of working canines and their partners, but they seem to cover police and military dogs. They are different in certain ways and it is important to understand the differences.

A few years ago, I was asked to give a presentation about service dogs to veterinary technician students at Foothill College in Los Altos Hills, California, where I had trained. I covered basic topics on service dogs that veterinary nurses could learn and make an impact for service dog health. I talked about the different types of service dogs and what they are trained to do to help their partners—these include guide dogs, hearing dogs, autism dogs, psychiatric service dogs, mobility dogs, seizure alert/response dogs, and diabetic alert dogs. I described how dogs can be trained by organizations or individuals and that there are laws to protect public access rights. I discussed how veterinary professionals can help keep service dogs healthy by incorporating preventive care, dental care, nutrition, weight management, and proper health screening for the specific tasks they are trained to perform, such as hip and elbow x-rays for dogs doing weight bearing tasks.

There is also a major concern of people passing their dogs off as service dogs when they are not. With the laws changing for airlines, veterinarians may become part of the process to clear dogs for flying in the near future. Some airlines require paperwork signed by veterinarians for service dogs to fly in the cabin with their handlers. It will be important for veterinary professionals to understand what qualifies a dog to be a service dog and be able to accompany its handler when traveling. Veterinary professionals can even play a role in helping educate non-service dog clients and maintain a safer service dog community.

While preparing this article, I asked service dog users what concerns they have about taking their dogs to the veterinarian and was very surprised that 50% of the people surveyed had numerous concerns and avoided visits unless it was absolutely necessary. Concerns included anxiety of being in the waiting room with other dogs because they were worried about their dog's safety; being separated from their dogs for treatments; and that treatments, medications, and side effects that may affect the performance of their service dog might not be appropriately explained. However, the No. 1



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concern was how the veterinary nurses handled their dogs during a vet visit.

Clients with service dogs are different from other clients. They rely on their dogs for many different things depending on their disability. But most importantly, these dogs give them independence. That independence can be taken away very quickly if their dog gets sick, is injured, or has a traumatic experience. This means they can be extremely protective of their dog and want to know exact details of what will be happening to their dog and how it will affect them physically and mentally. It can take 2 or more years for a service dog to be fully trained. Getting a trained dog from an organization can involve a wait of 2 to 3 years depending on the organization and type of service. Therefore, keeping their dog healthy and working is vital to people with disabilities.

We still have room to grow as a profession when it comes to understanding the needs of service dogs. These patients play a critical role in serving their life partner and deserve the highest level of care. **TVN**

### Resources

- Americans with Disabilities Act: Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs) [ada.gov/archive/qasrvc.htm](https://www.ada.gov/archive/qasrvc.htm)
- Air Carrier Access Act (ACAA) [congress.gov/bill/99th-congress/senate-bill/2703](https://www.congress.gov/bill/99th-congress/senate-bill/2703)
- Department of Transportation (DOT) Service Animals [transportation.gov/individuals/aviation-consumer-protection/service-animals](https://www.transportation.gov/individuals/aviation-consumer-protection/service-animals)
- Growing Up Guide Pup: Pet or Service Dog? [growingupguidepup.org/pet-or-service-dog-that-is-the-question/](https://growingupguidepup.org/pet-or-service-dog-that-is-the-question/)
- U.S. DOT Service Animal Air Transportation Form [transportation.gov/sites/dot.gov/files/2020-12/Service Animal Health Behavior Training Form.pdf](https://www.transportation.gov/sites/dot.gov/files/2020-12/Service_Animal_Health_Behavior_Training_Form.pdf)