

How to Retire a Service Dog

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For people who rely on their dogs every bit as much--or more--than human family members, the decision to retire your faithful companion and helpmate can be wrenching. But this story can have a very happy ending, and often does. The process of creating that happy ending begins and ends with respect and love. In between is thoughtful consideration of the best circumstances for your service dog.

Instructions

1. Observe your dog closely and ask for veterinary advice if you have any concerns about his/her well-being or your own safety. Unless your dog suffers a sudden illness or accident, chances are you'll be making assessments based on gradual decline.
2. Decide whether gradual retirement is a viable option, both for you and your dog. Some service dogs adjust well when their "replacement" is introduced to the family, and gracefully accept both a gradual reduction in their working hours and an increase in off-duty snore time. Other dogs, however, aren't nearly so gracious in the face of status change, and they may do better if they're adopted by a friend or family member or returned to their puppyhood home.
3. Retire your dog gradually if possible. Service dogs are selected in part for their love of work, and quitting the job cold turkey can be as devastating for working dogs as it is for people. Let your dog work lightly at least a day or two each week, taking on the simpler outings and allowing the younger dog to do the canine heavy lifting.
4. If rehoming is necessary, put it off as long as possible. Make that change as gradually as you can--for your dog's sake as well as yours. Elderly dogs find major family changes as unsettling as elderly humans do. Have your dog's new family visit first in your home. After two or three drop-in visits to his/her new family's home, arrange for some weekend sleepovers, then longer stays. If this new home is the right home, both you and your dog will know when it's time to finally say goodbye.