

What Every Caregiver Needs To Know About Service Dogs

by Joan Froling

IAADP has been frequently contacted over the years by parents and spouses seeking a service dog to assist them in watching over a disabled loved one with Alzheimer Disease, Downs Syndrome, Autism, TBI (traumatic brain injury), or some other serious cognitive impairment. They fear for the safety of the mentally disabled person. They want a dog trained to alert them if the cognitively impaired family member attempts to leave the house or the yard.

I view such requests with sympathy. It is exhausting to be constantly vigilant. I commend the person for leaving no stone unturned in the effort to keep a loved one safe. Then I level with them. As wonderful as service dogs can be, they are not the right kind of assistive technology for every disability and every situation.

While in theory it is possible to teach a service dog to perform a hearing dog type alert, responding to a bell jingling on a door or back yard gate when it is opened, it is wrong to put a dog in charge of a disabled person's safety. A dog is not capable of handling that kind of responsibility. The dog won't have the faintest idea that his failure to perform as desired could result in an injury to the disabled person or even a fatality. As trainers, we have no way to communicate to the dog the dangers posed by traffic, bullies or inclement weather to a mentally impaired patient. The best we can do is teach a dog that if he performs a certain behavior like barking or seeking out the caregiver in response to a certain stimulus like a bell, he can earn a treat and praise from a caregiver.

Unfortunately, earning a milkbone is not always the highest thing on a dog's priority list. If he is taking a nap or eliminating or watching a squirrel or chewing on a rawhide bone, he may be too preoccupied to respond as the family hopes for. Ill health, thunderstorms, anxiety over changes in the household routine or lack of practice are additional reasons why reliance on a service dog in this situation is akin to playing Russian Roulette.

I've been looking for alternative solutions for families in this predicament. I don't discount the therapeutic value of an assistance dog. I can appreciate the benefits of a facilitated partnership. But on a pragmatic basis, with regard to this particular safety issue, the caregiver needs to find something more dependable out there than a dog's desire to earn a treat.

I recently came across an innovative high tech device which seems quite promising. It is called an "Open Door Security Monitor." It is a wireless alarm system. Powered by batteries, the remote transmitters can be attached to doors, windows or gates without any tools being needed. One monitor can keep track of three transmitters. If anyone opens a door, window or gate to which a transmitter is attached, the small portable monitor emits an alarm and a light on the monitor changes from green to red to indicate which one of the exits have been breeched. A

caregiver can keep the monitor in the kitchen while she is cooking or on the night stand when she goes to bed. The photo advertising it shows a partially open front door with a baby crawling out of the house, graphically illustrating the kind of situation in which this Open Door Security Monitor could be worth its weight in gold.

To obtain more information or place an order: see the Hammacher Schlemmer Catalog www.hammacher.com (800)543-3366 (1) #64698H \$49.95 Monitor and One Transmitter.

Note:...the monitor unit can display up to three transmitters on three different exits if you buy additional transmitters. (2) #65004H Additional Door Monitoring Transmitter \$29.95

Another situation that keeps coming up is one in which a worried parent cannot be in the same room round the clock, seven days a week, watching over a family member with multiple disabilities or a disease with life threatening aspects. A number of mothers have called or written to IAADP seeking a service dog who can watch over a disabled child for a few hours in the afternoon while they do housework or at night while they sleep. The dog is expected to run and find her if the child has a seizure or respiratory crisis or some other serious medical emergency.

Expecting a dog to "go get help" without a command is commonplace after decades of exposure to fictional canine heroes like Lassie and Rin Tin Tin. I grew up in the 1950's watching Lassie and Rin Tin Tin save somebody in almost every television episode. It never occurred to me as a child that Hollywood scriptwriters might be distorting the way real dogs think and act. Today as dog trainer watching the re-runs, it is readily apparent Hollywood often endowed their canine protagonists with unusual reasoning powers and a fictional "rush to the rescue," instinct in the plots they cooked up. They probably regarded such embellishments as "harmless entertainment." Regrettably, the cumulative effect on the public is confusion about what can realistically be expected from a dog, especially one trained to be a service dog.

Misinterpretations of canine behavior compound the problem.

The first time a child has a seizure, a dog may run to "mom" for comfort because he is nervous about the strange behavior. The family assumes the dog came to alert them to the seizure as he is deeply concerned about the child's welfare. The dog's egocentric scaredy cat behavior could serve a useful purpose if it kept reoccurring. Typically, though, most dogs adapt rather quickly to new situations. Pretty soon, a seizure or some other kind of medical problem will become a "ho hum" event, just a normal part of everyday life in that household. The day will come when the dog no longer bothers to get up to nervously seek out reassurance from another family member.

While efforts to train a dog to respond to certain cues (symptoms) may be the game plan, you can't force a dog to medically monitor a patient and take action if certain symptoms occur. He may prefer to hang out with the caregiver or another family member rather than lying for hours next to somebody's bed, keeping vigil. Even dogs who bond closely with a bedridden child or adult can't be trusted to perform as we might wish they would. There will be days when that dog won't feel like interrupting his nap to go earn a cookie. He is not being "bad," or "stupid," he is just being a normal dog. He can't imagine the potentially tragic consequences of his failure to carry out the desired task.

For the sake of the disabled person's safety, I try to educate families that there are limits to what a service dog can reasonably be expected to do. No dog should ever be expected to function as a babysitter or respite caregiver.

Most families appreciate the honesty, for it spares them from going on a wild goose chase and it encourages them to explore alternative ways to improve the safety of a disabled loved one.

For a worried parent or spouse who can't spend all their time at a family member's bedside, catalogs like Sharper Image offer a wall mounted camera and a portable television monitor. The camera can transmit images of the sleeping child or adult to another room. This enhances the chances of detecting a seizure or some other medical emergency "in time." It allows a busy mom to cook dinner for the rest of the family without being tormented with anxiety about leaving the disabled person alone in a bedroom. The equipment which would allow her to keep a weather eye on a loved one costs about \$150. Whether viewed as an alternative to a service dog or as a sensible "back up plan," I'm delighted to discover this kind of security surveillance equipment has now become an affordable option for families in need of it.

I think it also could offer service dog trainers a marvelous training aid, enabling them to monitor the dog's behavior in another room during a real or simulated crisis. It might even enhance the team training in some cases, allowing a trainer to analyze and pinpoint why the dog is not performing as desired when alone with his new partner. [with the student's consent, of course] Additional coaching, specific to the disabled person's abilities and dog's temperament and the nature of the problem could be given to help the student overcome a service dog's resistance or confusion about a certain task.

IAADP's Information and Advocacy Center would like to compile a list of alternative or "back up" ideas for members of the public who seek to address serious safety issues with a service dog. If you someday come across an innovative idea, device or an actual service dog task which might help caregivers who are worried about the safety of disabled loved ones, please consider sharing it with IAADP.

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