

GUIDE DOGS: Frequently Asked Questions

KENTUCKY OFFICE OF VOCATIONAL REHABILITATION

BLIND SERVICES DIVISION

Jennifer Roark and Dianne Lanyi

Certified Orientation and Mobility Specialists

Q: What is a guide dog?

A: Guide dogs are service animals trained to lead people who are visually impaired around obstacles and to detect objects such as curbs, steps, and doors. It is a myth that guide dogs can tell when traffic lights are red, yellow or green. Nor can they read street signs or determine when it is safe to cross a road. They depend on the guide dog user for leadership and direction. Guide dogs are highly trained working animals, not therapy pets, emotional support animals, or guard dogs.

Q: How do I go about getting a guide dog?

A: First, you must successfully complete Orientation and Mobility training, which takes time, patience, and a sincere commitment to learning.

You must be able to:

1. Use your white cane daily
2. Have a variety of routes to travel and practice them often
3. Retain skills and remember routes
4. Walk a mile at least 3 to 4 times a week
5. Use traffic sounds to safely cross streets independently, including intersections with traffic lights
6. Have a genuine *need* for a service dog (e.g., to get to work, school, etc.)
Desiring a guide dog because you are lonely, bored, or fearful and want a dog to ward off intruders are not good reasons to apply for a guide dog.
7. Afford to care for the dog and meet all of its needs on your own. If you do get a guide dog, the dog is *your* responsibility.

Keep in mind: Guide dogs can foster confidence and independence, but they are not for everyone. Having a guide dog is a huge commitment. They require your care and devotion 24/7, 365 days a year.

Q: How long does it take to get a guide dog?

A: O&M training can take a few months or several months, depending on each person's learning pace and other factors. Then, after you apply to a guide dog school, you may be on a waiting list for 6 months to a year, depending on the school. Please be aware that not every person is accepted for training.

Q: How do I know where to apply?

A: First, you will need to do research and find a school that suits your needs. You can search for reputable, accredited guide dog schools by checking out the International Guide Dog Federation at www.igdf.org.uk or Guide Dog Users Inc. at <https://guidedogusersinc.org/>. The schools mentioned on these websites typically offer follow-up care and support to the guide dog user. The best schools also have their own dog breeding programs and onsite veterinarian care. There are no guide dog schools located in Kentucky.

Q: What is the application process?

A: Each guide dog school has its own application process, so you need to speak to the Director of Admissions of the guide dog school you are interested in. Although your O&M instructor will be asked by the school to provide information about the O&M training you completed, it is up to the school's admissions committee to decide if you are a good candidate for a guide dog.

1. Fill out the application and submit it.
2. Submit a video that demonstrates your orientation and mobility skills.
3. Submit an eye report from your ophthalmologist, medical records, references, and other documentation. This may include a background check or statement regarding mental health.
4. Schedule a home visit. Most schools send a representative from the school to your residence to do an in-person evaluation. They will assess your travel skills and also see if the environment is acceptable for a guide dog. The home visit may include a Juno walk, which is a simulated walk with a guide dog where you will be blindfolded and led by the interviewer while holding a harness and taught to give basic commands to "Juno" the dog.
5. Your O&M instructor is bound by a professional code of ethics to provide the school with accurate, honest information. Please do not ask your O&M instructor to embellish or ignore information regarding your O&M training.

Q: What are the vision requirements?

A: Most schools require that you meet the legal definition of blindness: visual acuity of 20/200 or worse, or a visual field of 20° or less, with correction (while wearing corrective lenses).

Q: What is training like at the schools?

A: Be prepared to travel out of state and stay 2 to 4 weeks, depending on the particular requirements of the guide dog school. Typically, the days are long, beginning early in the morning and lasting until dinner time, with homework in the evenings. *You must be able to independently manage your medications, do all daily living tasks independently, and adhere to a strict training schedule.* The training is rigorous. You must have good physical stamina and be psychologically fit. Be prepared to correct the dog and be able to handle attention from strangers.

Q: How much does it cost to obtain a guide dog?

A: At most schools, there is minimal to no charge for the dog, training, transportation, lodging, or meals. Funding for guide dog schools is provided solely through private donations.

Q: Can I train my own dog to be my guide?

A: Reputable schools breed their own dogs to ensure that specific traits are present in each litter. There is currently no law that prohibits a person from training a dog to be their guide; however, this practice is *strongly discouraged* by accredited guide dog schools and O&M professionals.

Q: What is the cost of caring for a guide dog?

A: Guide dogs require high-quality food, veterinary visits, grooming, bedding, equipment, and may require medications. If you cannot afford to financially provide for a guide dog, you should not apply for one. Many schools retain ownership of the dog; you should consult with a staff member of the school to find out what their policy is. Keep in mind that guide dog schools can remove a dog if it is being abused or neglected, if it has repeatedly shown aggressive behavior toward humans or other animals, or if the dog has bitten someone.