**Chapter 28: Public Transportation and Air Travel**

In this chapter, we will outline some specific procedures that may be helpful when utilizing various modes of transportation including buses, trains, car services, and airplanes. As a guide dog handler, you are responsible for keeping your dog safe whenever possible. This principle definitely comes into play when riding in any sort of transportation. The guidelines in this chapter will let you know what has worked in many situations for many people. However, every situation is different so always consider your dog’s safety and comfort when deciding where to position them in any vehicle.

**Buses** are considered one of the most utilized modes of public transportation. Many small towns have a bus line even though they don’t run as frequently as bus lines in large cities. Many guide dog handlers ride buses on a frequent basis and access this mode of travel most consistently. Here are some basic guidelines about working and riding buses with guide dogs:

* Learn the bus lines and schedules for your neighborhood, this will help you avoid standing and waiting for long periods for buses which may never come
* Learn what type of entry your buses typically have. Are there steps to get into the bus? Is there a railing on either side? Is it a “kneeling” bus that lowers as the doors open?
* Your dog can work up to the bus, learning to target the open door. Take a moment to praise and reward at the door, ensuring that your dog understands this is the desired target.
* It is your choice whether to work or heel your dog onto the bus. Some buses have steep and/or narrow stairs that make working difficult, while others have wide flat entries. It’s up to you to decide what works best.
* Try to locate seats closest to the exit door. You’ll also want to consider the seat arrangement before positioning your dog. Seats may be arranged in rows or along the sides of the bus facing the center aisle.
* For seats that face center, check if there is space under the seat. If so, place your dog in Close position with their rump under the seat. If there is no space under the seat, position your dog sitting sideways in front of you. Place one foot behind his rump, and his head should rest over your opposite knee.
* If the seats are positioned in rows, it is generally best to back your dog into the row before you take a seat yourself. This allows you to tuck your dog completely in out of the way.
* When the bus is crowded, it is best to keep your dog sitting up so he doesn’t take up too much space and his paws are less vulnerable to being stepped on. If the bus in not crowded or you are riding for a long time between stops and your dog lies down, be conscious of where he is and stay alert. You may need to have him sit up out of the way as people walk by.
* You can also protect your dog’s tail by tucking it in between your foot and the dog’s rump.
* Always be aware of what your dog’s head is doing, do not allow them to scavenge off the floor, visit with other people, or investigate their belongings.

Once off the bus, immediately pick up the harness handle and work to the nearest curb. Bus drivers are known for not pulling up close to the curb line and often you will need to work in the street for several feet before reaching a curb. Working in harness allows your dog to avoid potentially dangerous situations as you find your way up onto the sidewalk.

Another thing to be aware of when traveling by bus is local weather conditions and extreme temperatures. While waiting for the bus, seek shelter or shade if possible, particularly in very hot or cold weather. You may find it necessary to use booties to protect your dog’s feet if you need to stand and wait for longer periods of time. Waiting for a bus in December in Buffalo, NY can be brutal: and waiting for a bus in Tucson, Arizona in July can be downright relentless.

**Trains** are also a popular means of transportation, especially in larger cities. Trains can vary greatly from one city to another though. Some have underground subways while others have elevated tracks that run overhead. Some train systems utilized raised platforms while others operate at ground level. Working with your guide dog on raised platforms presents particular challenges, so we will cover that in greater detail in a later chapter. Otherwise, riding a train with your dog is very similar to riding a bus.

* Be sure to familiarize yourself with your city’s train system, routes, and schedules.
* Learn how the train cars are set up, and any particular hazards you may encounter such as a gap between the boarding platform and the train, a narrow aisle, or a small step that your dog must learn to locate.
* In most cases your dog can work up to the door and may be able to work inside depending on the layout of the train car.
* Determine the best position for your dog based on the seating arrangement and available space. Remember to protect his paws and tail as much as possible and be aware of where his head is.

**Passenger vans**, such as those used by Guiding Eyes during residential class training, are generally handled a bit differently when it comes to getting in and out. This type of van often requires some climbing, bending, and maneuvering as you get in and out. The steps tend to be narrow and uneven as well, which means that your dog will likely enter the van in one big jump rather than controlled steps. This combination can lead to injury if you are knocked off balance or if your dog jumps unexpectedly. So, it is preferrable to have your dog Sit and Stay while you climb into the van. Release your dog with “Break” or “Let’s Go” when you are ready for them to jump in. The same process should be used for exiting the van as well. Be sure to give your dog plenty of leash length as you’re climbing in so that you are not inadvertently pulling the collar before you are ready for the dog to jump. Typically, there is not much space while riding in these vans, so it’s generally best to position your dog lying down close to you wherever there is space. Be aware of where his head is and what he is doing at all times.

**Car services** (taxis, Uber, Lyft) and **personal cars** driven by family and friends are also extremely popular ways for guide dog handlers to get from place to place. Of course, cars come in a wide variety of shapes, styles, and sizes. It is especially important to consider safety and comfort for yourself, your dog, and your driver when deciding where to position your dog. There are essentially four potential options depending on the type of car:

* Front foot well: This position allows you to ride in the front passenger seat and keep your dog with you. Start by sitting sideways in the seat, then bring just your left leg into the car. Invite your dog to step up into the footwell and position him to sit facing you. Reach down and be sure that your dog’s tail is tucked in, not hanging out the door. Use your right foot to pin the tail safely against the dog’s rump, then close the door.
* Rear footwell: This is typically the preferred position when taking a taxi or other car service. You will sit on the back seat and your dog will sit or lie on the floorboard on the opposite side (there is not enough room for your dog to sit in front of you). This can be achieved by either getting in first and sliding all the way across as you bring your dog in, or by having your dog get it first and backing them to the opposite side as you get in yourself. This maneuver can be tricky to get the hang of, particularly in a smaller car.
* Rear seat: Is some cases there is simply not enough space for your dog to ride comfortably on the floorboard, so you may choose to position your dog on the seat itself. A sheet or large towel can be used to protect the car’s upholstery.
* Cargo area: This position is **not** recommended when using a car service as it requires you to be separated from your dog. However, if you are riding with a family member or friend, this may be a good option. Again, you can use a sheet or blanket to protect the car’s interior and give your dog something comfortable to lie on. Most dogs will settle in quickly and ride comfortably in this position.

\*NOTE: The cargo area option is only available in SUV or station wagon type vehicles.  **Never** put your dog in a trunk or hatch that is closed off from the main cabin area of the car.

**Air travel** comes with its own unique challenges, though many of the same guidelines apply once you get to the plane. But first you’ll have to navigate the airport and get through security. Airports tend to have wide open spaces with lots of people moving in different directions. This can be rather confusing for your guide dog and they may have difficulty identifying a clear path. Keep in mind that if you are not well acquainted with a particular airport, you cannot expect your dog to know where to go without any direction from you. You may find it is necessary to allow your dog to follow your traveling companions in this situation, or if you are travelling alone, seek assistance from the airline. This type of assistance may also help expedite the process of getting through security.

When it comes to passing through the security checkpoint, you will likely find that not all TSA agents are adequately familiar or comfortable with procedures for dealing with service dogs. A good agent will know that they cannot ask you to remove the dog’s leash and collar (In truth, they cannot ask you to remove any of your dog’s equipment, but some handlers choose to remove the harness and send it through the scanner with the rest of their belongings.) The agent will have you use the standard metal detector (not the newer X-ray scanner). The most effective way to do this is by placing your dog in a Sit-Stay near the scanner. Step through or ask the agent to guide you through while holding out your hand with the leash so that hand comes through last as you call your dog through. The leash and collar WILL set off the alarm. At this point, the agents will likely need to physically check the dog and/or your hands. This can range from a quick check under the collar or swab of your hands to a full pat down of you and your dog. The latter is uncommon but not unheard of. You may also encounter agents that are afraid or uncomfortable touching your dog and will have to call in another agent. The whole process can be time consuming and frustrating at times. Try to be patient but know your rights. Never allow anyone to separate you from your dog.

Now that you’ve made it through security, you’ll probably have some time to wait before boarding. You may want to check in with the gate agent as well to make sure they know you are flying with a service dog. Sometimes they can get you a better seat (more space for your dog), and they can make sure you have assistance for pre-boarding if necessary. As you are waiting to board, be sure to keep your dog out of the way as much as possible. Tuck her under the seat if there is room, and always be aware of what she is doing. Airport floors are often a mecca of discarded items and dropped food.

When it's time to board, you can choose to work your dog down the jetway or use sighted guide, but once you’re in the plane itself you’ll need to set the harness down and keep your dog behind you as you follow the narrow aisle between seats. Hold the leash very short to prevent your dog from visiting other passengers as you pass. When you’ve reached your assigned row, you can remove your dog’s harness and stash it in the overhead bins along with your other carryon items. Then get your dog to back into the row before you slide in yourself. Airplane seating can be a tight squeeze, but there is some space under the seat in front of you. Take your time and be patient as your dog figures out how to use this space. Most dogs will settle and ride quietly throughout the flight but be prepared that they may become startled or nervous especially during takeoff and landing. If your dog seems anxious or sits up suddenly, try to reassure them with soft praise and slow petting. Sometimes you can even use your feet to help contain them to the area in front of your seat. When you reach your destination, remember to collect your harness and any other items, and try to get your dog to a park area as soon as possible, especially after a longer flight.

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