Guiding Eyes Graduate Call

Date: Wednesday, August 19, 2020

Topic: An overview of class and field training protocols.

Presenter: Mike Goehring, Regional Guide Dog Mobility Instructor (RGDMI) - Guiding Eyes for the Blind

Moderator: Liz Bottner, Guiding Eyes Graduate Council President

Facilitator: Victoria Keatting, Guiding Eyes Graduate Council Vice President

Victoria introduced Mike Goehring and commented that he is a great trainer who has helped many of us with problems.

Mike Goehring started with an overview of the training model at the school. He first provided some background information related to the Guiding Eyes COVID-19 response. Back in March, 179 dogs were in the kennels and within six days, 176 dogs were in homes of staff and volunteers. Work came to a halt for all of the trainers as no in-person training was being conducted. it felt strange. The Regional Guide Dog Mobility Instructors (RGDMI’s) reached out to their graduates when COVID-19 started to touch base and see how graduates were doing. Remote troubleshooting was also conducted when possible. We all thought this would be short lived and no one thought it would be the new normal. The training department looked at what the training model would look like go forward. Many people got to work on different projects with different groups of staff and new technologies were embraced. Remote follow-up has taken place and all of the GDMI’s got comfortable with technologies such as FaceTime and tZoom.

Other Updates:

The lecture series has been rewritten and is currently being rerecorded and will be up on the website soon. Audio described videos will be available at the end of the lectures in the lecture library to supplement the audio and text material. Mike has written a song called "Puppy Boots", which is featured in one of the videos.

Training Updates:

Movement back out into the field is taking place. In-person training is being done on a case-by-case basis, including all follow-ups and home interviews. The management team is monitoring the states and their COVID-19 numbers. No air travel is being allowed and all travel is being done by car, because of safety concerns for all of the training staff.

Training Protocols:

The graduate will be sent an electronic signature form and will be asked three questions:

Have you had a negative COVID-19 test in the past 14 days?

Have you experienced any symptoms of COVID-19 in the past 14 days?

Have you been exposed to someone who has tested positive for COVID-19 in the past 14 days?

Temperatures are asked to be taken daily, with temps below 100.4, all students and field reps will be wearing masks and some masks will be on hand. This will be done into the future any time GDMI’S will be present. Home trainings are begun and 10 have been done with one starting with three at the end of the month. Three in September with two more possible, the school will be shifting more to a home training model. We are fortunate to have a good home training model; many grads have fewer problems in the two years after graduation and most are veteran handlers.

Home Interviews:

Home interview are being conducted virtually, unless the location of the graduate can be reached by car. The route portion and Juno walk are going to be done in person. Mike has made a protocol for videoing and instructions are being sent out for that to be successful. We are starting back slowly but think in time things will smoothly get going to our new normal. Mike stated appreciation for a good graduate base.

Admissions:

Applications are coming in at a more normal rate after being slowed. Wait times are hard to calculate, because of the stoppage on dogs being trained as well as trainers not being able to train. Dogs are being evaluated and 80 dogs are in training currently.

Home Foster Program:

Ten dogs in the program are going home home in the evenings and on weekends to home fosters, instead of staying in the kennel. Alumni Hall is the drop off between 7:30 AM and 11:00 AM, when the instructor trains the dogs and then in the evening they go home. At the end of August, the number of dogs will be doubled, 20 dogs in the foster program. The UK has a similar program. This gives the dogs the chance to keep up good house behaviors and keeps the stress of the dogs down as well. The school has seen good results.

In for Training Tests (IFTs):

since March, no new IFT’s have been done and there is no set time for when those will resume. Mike commented on asking for patience and that the school is gearing toward maximum safety for everyone. Mike is very proud of the school for the way everyone including graduates have reacted.

Graduate Questions:

Gail Handler asked with home training how far in advance should I contact the school?

Mike answered s soon as possible, especially if the dog is around eight. This is especially important for fast walkers, because of the demand. It’s better to be in the cue sooner than later.

Linda Hunt wanted to know if home training will include train and platform training in New York City?

Mike answered that at this time, there is no formal class training for safety concerns, including public transit, because of safety concerns, but if the trainer and student are comfortable with working on public transit if it meets with CDC guidelines and COVID numbers, that decision is between trainer and student. Mike also stated that no class training was being held, but home training would be done on a case by case basis. Mike stated that the RGDMI’s are Using a new headset to use where a student and instructor can talk to each other, the name of the headset is Vertix and it’s used by cyclists and everything is done in real-time.

Barbara Mills wanted to know the expected wait for a Shepherd.

Mike suggested that she should stay in touch with the AdmissionsDepartment. This is because things are so much slower because no training with dogs had been done when the school had to shut down.

Dee wanted to know If dogs aren’t in for IFT’s, will the dogs be older when they are issued and how will this transpire.

Mike could not give a definitive answer, but stated that some dogs will be older and some breeding has been withheld. Some may be older and some may not, Del Rodman is managing the CDC and is monitoring this.

A follow-up question was asked related to preference of training being given to a graduate who had to send a dog back? And is that a priority placement.

Mike stated that has always been in place and is still being followed.

Deborah wanted to know in the home foster program and asked if the house manners would be better? She has had issues with her dog chewing paper and other less than desirable things and wondered how the dogs are chosen for the home foster program.

Mike did not know the answer and said that this is a pilot program and that the dogs selected is a sampling of dogs to be in the program, and there will be a continuation of dogs living in a home setting. Many dogs after graduation get into a settled place and many of their paces slow down and this gives a good idea to see what happens there.

Sally wanted to know more about the communication headset and how it worked with hearing aids.

Mike stated that it will depend on the hearing aids and implants and might be better to use phone technology instead. Open ear After Shocks are options as well. It would be worked out with the instructor ahead of time. Vertix headsets are the ones being mainly used and all of the field staff have them and three sets are on campus and can be signed out for work.outside of the school.

Judy in Nc wanted to know about the percentage of breeding that was Held back until the end of April.

Mike said he did not know the exact percentage of dogs being bred currently.

Sheila wanted to know since her guide Pumpkin is being retired and the puppy raiser will take her, how will retiring work? will the puppy raiser come out and get her or will the school help with placement?

Mike thinks the raiser would be the best way unless it’s a real priority. If the raiser can come and get her, that would help, because the trainers are not being allowed to fly. Calling the school is the best bet or arrange it with the raiser.

Mike also stated that since there will be more home trainings conducted, for those trainers who haven’t done many home trainings, a mentoring program is taking place with a senior mentoring instructor.

Charlie wanted to know since he is retired what kind of activities would be good for his semi retired guide dog.

Mike said puzzle games are good where you hide treats and the dog finds them. Hide and seek is a good game where you hide and call the dog and when he finds you have a celebration. Running obedience and tug for that matter are good as well as fetch. Stuffed Kongs can be good too.