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Client Experience Team

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**To Family and Friends of New Guiding Eyes for the Blind Graduates:**

A new guide dog team has recently completed an extensive guide dog training course.

Even though the basic training has been completed, there remains a considerable amount of work to be done. In the next few months, the new guide dog team must put into practice, in the home area, those things that have been learned during the training experience. This initial adjustment period is most important to ensure what we hope will be a long-lasting, successful relationship between guide dog and handler.

The new graduate will be well-aware of their responsibilities to the guide dog, but you may be a little unsure of what is expected of you as a family member or friend. It is for this reason that we list below a few general suggestions that might help make the next few months easier for all concerned.

**Arrival:** The guide dog team is new, and a bond is beginning to form between handler and dog. By allowing space and limiting interaction between yourself and their guide dog, you are continuing to facilitate the team’s growing partnership.

If you have other dogs in the house, have them initially meet outdoors on common turf. In all the excitement of the new guide dog’s arrival, make sure to show other pets in the household as much or perhaps more attention than you would normally. Please leave all the guide dog’s handling and control to the graduate. It is a common practice to not allow a new dog freedom of the house during the first two weeks at home. The dog should either be on a leash with the handler, in a crate or on tie-down. This will cement proper behavior patterns which will pay off both short and long-term.

Do not give the dog any “special” treatment that you or the handler would not want to continue. A scrap from the table or asking the dog to jump onto furniture “just this once” will be expected by the dog from then on. By exercising a little restraint, you will assist in the handler’s efforts to establish good control and behavior patterns in the house right from the start.

Above all, remember that even though the guide dog is a member of the family, it has only one handler. It is important to allow the handler to have full agency over the developing partnership of the team.

**Feeding and Care:** The handler is responsible for feeding and care. Offering unsolicited food and treats could lead to health problems for the guide dog down the line. While a guide dog’s pleading eyes may attempt to draw you in, there is a specific target weight and food threshold that the handler will need to follow for their guide dog to maintain good health.

The guide dog must be able to relieve on a regular schedule. If the handler is sick or otherwise unable to take the dog out, a family member may do so. However, this is on leash, never with the dog in harness, and the handler’s instructions must be followed.

The handler is expected to groom the dog daily. This procedure not only ensures a good appearance but stimulates oil in the dog’s coat thereby reducing odor. Grooming also removes much of the dead hair from the dog’s coat that might otherwise wind up on clothing and the carpet.

**Travel:** The graduate has been instructed to begin working their dog in a quiet, familiar area around the home. They will gradually increase the length and complexity of their travel routes. If you accompany the graduate, it is important that you not interfere. In the beginning, a good place to walk is three or four paces behind the team and slightly to the right.

Realize that mistakes are bound to occur in the beginning of a new guide dog team’s journey; please allow dog and handler to work them out on their own. If your assistance is asked for, it is perfectly acceptable to step in with an explanation of what is taking place or a description of a particular intersection or route. The graduate may ask to take your left arm for a walk through a new area. This benefits both the dog and handler. Remember that if you are assisting via human guide, the team will always go to the curb ahead before making any turns. Make sure to give the handler time to do what they need for their guide dog at all curbs and steps.

You may occasionally notice the handler do a quick snap and release of the leash. It is necessary from time to time to use this technique to redirect behavior. Do not misinterpret this as cruelty. The correction is followed by praise for the dog when it resumes working or behaving in an acceptable manner. You will soon recognize, as the guide dog handler does, that balance of correction and praise is an important part of working with a guide dog.

Responsibilities of care, feeding and working with a new guide dog may alter previously well-established routines. In the beginning it may appear that more attention is being paid to the new dog than to the family member. Recognize that this is a common response felt by families and friends of new guide dog handlers. In time, the dog will become just another member of the family and these changes in routine will seem insignificant. Realize that the graduate may now experience a greater degree of travel independence. If they have depended on you in the past for travel assistance, do not feel that you have been replaced but instead share in the excitement of the new freedom which the guide dog handler will experience.

Thank you for your interest and cooperation. If you have any questions, please feel free to contact the Guiding Eyes for the Blind Client Experience Team at 888-987-2188.

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