A person and dog with leashes

Description automatically generated**Chapter 35: Going Home with Your Guide Dog**

Very soon, you will be leaving to go home with your new guide dog. Although this will be the end of class, it is only the beginning of your life with your dog. You have likely been thinking about your return home quite a bit, and you probably have a few questions. This chapter is divided into several sections and will answer many of the most frequently asked questions. If you still have unanswered questions after reviewing this chapter, please bring them up with your instructors who will be happy to discuss further. At this point, you are probably feeling fairly comfortable working as a team. However, you are now taking your dog and transitioning him or her to a place that you know very well but that your dog does not know at all. In this situation, the dog will look to you for guidance and structure. It will be extremely important that you are consistent in what you ask of your dog and follow a routine very closely. Your expectations as both a handler and caretaker must be fair and realistic.

Throughout your class, we have been coaching you into becoming a trainer by teaching you a variety of techniques to work with your dog. It is now time to take what you have learned and put it into practice without the watchful eyes of an instructor over your shoulder. Remember that your dogs will always be dogs, first and foremost. People who have had guide dogs before can tell you that it can take anywhere from six months to a year to become a solid team. Have patience with your dog, and with yourself, and work through issues as they come up. If you are returning home with a successor dog, remember that you are starting over from scratch, and the new dog will not be accustomed to the routine at home. Allow yourself time to acclimate your new dog to living in your home and working in your familiar areas.

***THE TRIP HOME***

For those of you that are flying home or taking the train, your travel day will begin by giving your dog only a small handful of food for the morning meal, and a few licks of water. By limiting the dog’s intake prior to travel, you can minimize their need to relieve during the trip. It’s a good idea to carry a small amount of food in a treat pouch or other accessible location for the journey as well. You should also ensure that your dog urinates and defecates prior to your departure. If you are heading home by car with family or friends, you can feed and water your dog normally, stopping along the way to accommodate park times as needed. Upon returning home you will resume a normal feeding and watering schedule.

If you are flying home, instructors will accompany you to the airport. In most cases, we can obtain gate passes and go with you through security and all the way to the gate. If this is not possible, we will ensure that you receive assistance from the airline staff. Many airlines will try to put you in a bulkhead or other seat where there is room for the dog. Even if there are no bulkhead seats available, it is the airline's job to accommodate you and your dog. They may even be able to block the seat next to you if the flight is not full. It is a good idea to speak to the gate agent as well as flight attendants as they may be able to get you a better seat.

Getting through airport security with your dog can be the most challenging part of the journey. If you are lucky, TSA agents may allow you to bypass long lines, however many of them do not know how to handle the dog as you pass through the scanners. You are **not** required to remove equipment from your dog; however, you may choose to remove the harness and send in through the machine with the rest of your personal items. **Do not** remove the collar and leash. TSA agents **cannot** physically separate you from your dog. The recommended method for passing through the security scanner is to make a long leash and place your dog in a Sit/Stay, then pass through the scanner yourself, extending your hand with the leash as far as possible. The metal on your dog’s leash and collar will set off the scanner as you call them through. At this point, the agent should either physically check around the dog's collar, swab test the equipment, or swab test your hands. If the agent you encounter is not familiar with the procedure, or is not comfortable with the dog, they may need to call in a supervisor or another agent. Try to be patient and cooperative with this process, while attempting to educate the agents as necessary.

Once you reach the point of boarding the plane, you will be permitted to pre-board and airline staff will escort you down the jetway and onto the aircraft. Before getting situated in your seat, remove your dog's harness and stow it in an overhead bin. Back your dog into the row, then get yourself situated. Your dog may seem a bit nervous about the tight space at first. Take your time getting them positioned and offer soft praise and reassurance. Because you will be boarded early, your dog will have plenty of time to get settled. They may even fall asleep while waiting to take off. Be prepared that they may become startled during take-off and landing. Talk quietly to your dog or reach down and check in with them to help make sure they stay calm. Remember that most dogs have not been on a commercial flight before, so the experience is all new and they may need a bit of support.

Upon arrival at your destination, airline staff should escort you to the baggage claim area where you should have a friend or family member waiting for you. Make it a priority to get your dog to a park area as soon as possible, particularly if it has been a longer flight. This can be done in a parking lot or other quiet area if there is no designated “pet relief” area available. Once that is taken care of and you’ve retrieved any luggage, you’re on your way home!

***MEETING FAMILY MEMBERS***

Initially, family members should have little direct interaction with the dog. They may greet your dog and pet them gently as long as you have them sitting and under control, but the petting should be brief. Eventually family members will be able to interact with your dog more, but you should always remain the primary care giver. This can be especially difficult with small children. Do your best to keep initial interactions as calm and quiet as possible. Remember that everything is new for your dog, and it’s up to you to help them acclimate.

Family members, especially children, may want to help you care for your new dog, but initially you should be the only one to provide basic care for your dog including feeding, parking, grooming and playtime. This will help to solidify the bond between you, and help the dog understand that you are the one that can provide support and guidance. Gradually you can allow more interaction and even teach other family members to care for the dog in case you should become ill. You should remain the primary caregiver throughout the dog’s career, but it’s up to you to figure out what that looks like for your particular situation. It can vary greatly from one handler to the next, one household to the next.

***ARRIVING AT HOME***

The first 24 hours after arriving at home with your dog should be primarily dedicated to getting some much-needed rest, and helping your dog acclimate to his new home. One of the first things to do is take your dog to the area you have designated for parking. Your dog may be hesitant to relieve itself on a new surface, just like in class, so you will have to be patient and allow 10-15 minutes at each park time just like you did in the first few days with your dog in class.

Avoid taking your dog to any large, overwhelming, welcome home parties or other gatherings in the first few days. This can be very stressful to the dog and does not aid in establishing a routine. Initially, you should also try to avoid leaving the dog alone for long periods of time. When you do begin to leave the dog alone after a couple days, do so for only a few minutes at a time at first, just like we did in class, to ensure the dog is able to stay quiet and relaxed. This should not be done until the dog has had a chance to settle in and become comfortable in its new home.

On your second day at home, you should begin teaching your dog how to work in your home area. Start with simple routes that you know well and can succeed at, taking time to reinforce important targets like your front door or mailbox. From this, you can build on positive experiences. This is essentially what we did in the beginning of class. You, as the handler, were the new variable so we started with familiar routes and support from instructors. At home, the only thing familiar to your dog is you, so you will be the one providing support and direction as your dog learns new routes and routines. We’ll talk more about initial routes a bit later....

***OTHER PETS AT HOME***

If you have another dog, you should introduce the two dogs on leash in a neutral area (to prevent your other dog from becoming territorial or possessive). Have a family member or friend hold your pet dog so that you can handle your guide dog. Allow the two dogs to greet briefly, then move away from each other. Depending on the dogs, you may need to do this a few times until both dogs seem relaxed. Interactions between the dogs should be closely monitored for several days until they have fully acclimated to one another. Dogs should be separated during feeding times to prevent any competition or food stealing. Dogs can become jealous of one another. Try to split your attention between animals and pay close attention to all dogs’ behavior and signals. If you find that you need to separate the dogs for a period of time, use a crate, baby gate, or ex-pen to confine one dog to a separate room while you spend time with the other. If you have any concerns about introducing your new guide to another dog at home, please speak with an instructor for advice.

Cats can usually fend for themselves pretty well. Depending on your cat’s temperament and experience, they may hide for a few days when a new dog comes home. They can defend themselves if confronted by the dog, but its best to give them space until they are ready to interact. Keep your dog on leash or confined to prevent chasing the cat until the two are accustomed to cohabitating. The most important thing to consider if you have cats at home, is that your dog must not have access to the cat's food or litter box! Food can be placed up on a shelf as long as your cat is able to jump up to it. Or you can use a baby gate to block off one room. Cats can access the room by jumping over, or you can place the gate up high enough that cats can slip under, but your dog cannot. There are many creative solutions to achieve this separation, so you’ll have to figure out what works best in your household. Though your dog does have some exposure to the cats that live at Guiding Eyes, they may not have lived with cats in a home. It may take several weeks for cats and guide dogs to be comfortable around each other. Be patient, do not allow the dog to chase the cat, and they will start to figure each other out.

Pets such as birds, rodents, ferrets, etc. are seen by the dog as prey, and should be kept out of reach and not introduced to the dog. Your dog may not have experienced living with small pets before. Most dogs will quickly get used to their presence but may show interest at first. Small pets should be physically separated from dogs at all times.

***FEED, WATER, AND PARK SCHEDULE***

When you arrive home, try to spend a couple of days on a similar Feed-Water-Park schedule as we used here at Guiding Eyes. Then you can begin to adjust it to fit your schedule. Shift feed, water, and park times gradually, no more than an hour every couple of days until the schedule suits your lifestyle. Dogs thrive on routine. Of course, they can be flexible to a degree, but its best to stick with the same day-to-day routine as much as possible. If you have crossed time zones on your journey home from New York, there is no need to adjust for the time change. It’s likely that the travel day will throw off the schedule anyway, so you can simply pick up with the regular schedule on local time.

Continue to feed your dog twice a day. Feeding times should be 8-12 hours apart. Meals can be divided equally or slightly larger in the morning or evening to make measuring easier. Try to get in the habit of using a portion of your dog's kibble as training treats throughout the day. Anything left over can be added back to the evening meal. Feeding at regular intervals can help regulate your dog’s parking habits as well. You may find that feeding a larger portion of the meal in the morning or evening works better for your dog’s schedule.

You may decide to change your dog's diet when you get home, but it is best to stick with a dry kibble. We will give you a 5-pound bag of the food your dog is currently eating to take home with you. We generally recommend sticking with high quality name brands such as Hill’s, Purina, Iams, or Eukanuba. You may choose to feed your dog more expensive premium food if you like, but it’s not necessary. We do ask that you avoid cheaper, generic brands such as Ol'Roy at Wal-Mart. A good quality dog food will help keep your dog healthy and in good condition. Cheaper foods have mostly fillers and minimal nutrition. Your dog will need to eat more in order to maintain a healthy weight and may empty more frequently, not to mention negating any cost savings. Any diet changes should be made over a period of several days. On the first couple days, the meal should be ¾ the original food and ¼ the new food; then half and half for a couple days; then ¾ the new food and ¼ the old food, then finally feed only the new food. This allows your dog’s digestive system time to adjust.

Use caution when adding treats to your dog's diet. Many commercial dog biscuits are high in fat and calories and can cause your dog to gain weight. A Milk-Bone labeled for a large dog is more than an entire meals worth of calories. Many brands sell “mini” sized treats, or Charlee Bear treats are a better choice. Never feed table scraps to your dog. If your dog is allowed to eat human food from the table, they will be far more inclined to beg at the table or try to scavenge food off the floor.

When it comes to water, its recommended to start by measuring your dog's water as you did during class. This helps to regulate your dog's water intake, and therefore their need to urinate. Offer two cups at a time for a total of eight cups throughout the day with the last offering at least two hours before bedtime. Once you’ve established a consistent park schedule at home, you can decide to switch over to free water, meaning you will leave a supply of fresh water out for your dog all the time. Most dogs will self-regulate when water is always available, but you should monitor your dog closely at first to make sure they are not inclined to drink the entire bowl at once. If your dog does consume a large quantity of water at once, be aware that they will likely need to urinate about an hour later. Some dogs will drink and drink until the bowl is empty no matter how much water is offered. Those dogs should be kept on a watering schedule, otherwise they are very likely to have accidents. When it is hot in the summertime, you may offer water more frequently, but do not let the dog tank up. Ice cubes can be a fun treat to give your dog when the weather is hot - most dogs love them.

Plan ahead and select a park area at home before you arrive with your new dog. Most dogs will park more readily on grass than on concrete. However, if you allow your dog to park on grass most of the time, they may then be reluctant to park on concrete when you need them to. It is easy to switch from concrete to grass, but it is more difficult to go the other way. No matter what substrate you choose to use, it will take some time to reestablish your dog’s parking routine once you return home. Start by sticking to a similar schedule as we used during class. Your dog must be parked a minimum of 5 times per day and may need more frequent opportunities as they are getting used to a new park area. Remember that it may take several weeks to establish reliable park habits, and every dog is an individual. You must accommodate your dog’s needs when it comes to parking. Make any changes gradually, be patient and use only gentle encouragement. There is no way to “make” your dog go. You can reinforce what you want though by using plenty of genuine, excited praise after your dog relieves.

Always pick up after your dog. If you dispose of waste promptly, your park area should not smell. Also, picking up after your dog lets you monitor the condition of their stool, which can be an indicator of their overall health. It is also good for the image of guide dog users when you are seen picking up after your dog. You can purchase pick-up bags in bulk online, or sometimes get some from your local grocer. Get in the habit of stuffing your pockets, purse, etc. with pick-up bags, as you never know when you might need them. If you park on a solid surface, you may wish to clean it occasionally with a garden hose and a bit of bleach solution. If you are lucky enough to have a fenced in yard with a high enough fence that you plan to use for supervised play, you should still park the dog on leash in a designated area before playing with them in the yard. If your dog gets accustomed to parking off leash, they may become reluctant to go on leash when you are traveling away from home.

***FREEDOM IN THE HOUSE***

If you have not already done so, you’ll want to “dog-proof” your house before you consider allowing your dog freedom - pick up food items on low shelves, cover or conceal trash cans, etc. Have appropriate chew toys available for your dog, so they will be less likely to chew something inappropriate. When you first bring your dog home, you’ll want to keep your dog with you on leash for a few days, just as you did when you received your dog at the beginning of class. Walk around the house with your dog, allowing them to get familiar with their new surroundings. It is highly recommended to use a crate at home, although a tie down is also an acceptable way to confine your dog when you cannot have them with you on leash. Wait until your dog has adjusted to a regular park schedule before starting to allow freedom in the house.

Begin by allowing the dog freedom in one room at a time, following a successful park time so that you know accidents are unlikely to happen. Close doors and block off hallways to limit access to different rooms. Stay in the room with your dog and monitor their behavior. If your dog does pick up something it shouldn't, tell the dog to Leave It, then replace it with a chew toy and praise. Providing a dog bed or blanket for your dog may help them understand that is their spot and settle in.

Accidents may happen early on. If they do, go back to keeping the dog on leash for a while and clean the spot thoroughly with either club soda, vinegar, or a commercial cleaner. A thorough cleanup is important; otherwise the dog may return to the same spot and go there again.

Gradually allow your dog freedom to access more areas of the house. If there are other people living in the house, especially children, make sure they understand the importance of keeping the doors to the outside shut at all times. Once your dog is reliable in the house, it is still a good idea to continue to have them with you in the same room most of the time. At this point the dog can be off leash but should be easily located when needed and not wandering onto other floors of the house or rooms unattended. This way you will be able to monitor your dog’s behavior and prevent them from doing behaviors that are not acceptable. It also teaches the dog that they can have freedom but still check in with you. When the handler moves from room to room the dog will most likely follow unless they are in a deep sleep.

You may find it helpful to set up dog beds or blankets in different rooms so your dog starts to understand where they should be, such as in a corner of a bedroom or living room. Dogs like to be where they can see what's going on but should also be out of the way. Your dog may even pick his own spot and you can place a mat or bed there.

You may choose not to allow your dog in the kitchen, especially during meals or meal prep time. If this is your preference, use the crate or tie down for a while when you are working in the kitchen and cannot focus on what your dog is doing. Also, dedicate some time each day to working with your dog, teaching him to stay out of the kitchen or specifically stay on a bed or mat nearby. Some dogs may be familiar with a “Place” command from their puppy homes. Speak with an instructor for more information on building this skill.

Your dog should never be off leash outside in an unfenced area. If you want your dog to be able to play ball or swim, you may use a long line. You can let your dog off leash in a fenced-in yard, as long as the fence is high enough and you stay out with the dog. Electric fences are not practical, because they do not prevent your dog from being stolen or getting attacked by another dog.

***RECOMMENDED TOYS***

Many commercially available dog toys are not safe for your dogs, particularly when used without supervision. However, there are many high quality, durable toys available. For unsupervised time, Guiding Eyes recommends only “DuraChew” Nylabones, classic Kongs, or unstuffed sterilized natural bones. Nylabone and Kong brands sell many different toys nowadays, so be aware of what you are getting. Any other toys will need to be supervised to make sure your dog doesn’t destroy them and/or consume pieces which can be very dangerous. Consider the size of the toy, chew bones should be at least 7-8 inches long; ball-shaped toys should be at least the size of a tennis ball or larger. Try different types of toys to discover your dog's favorites. Stick with high quality toys. They are more expensive but much more durable. Cheap toys are cheaply made and will be quickly destroyed. In addition to Nylabone and Kong, some other quality toy brands are: Planet Dog, West Paw, Tuffy’s, JW Pet, Benebone, Ruffwear, Chuck-It, Outward Hound. Antler chews and tennis balls are also popular. If your dog enjoys tennis balls, try to find a source for used “real” tennis balls made for playing tennis. The cheap ones sold for dogs will be easily destroyed. All toys should be checked periodically for damage. Discard any toy that your dog manages to tear large pieces off. Chew bones should be discarded when they are down to half of their original size or when they pose a potential choking hazard. Be aware of safety hazards such as rubber balls with only one air hole, or hard toys with small openings that can potentially get stuck on your dog's tongue or jaw. Toys such as stuffed animals, squeaky toys and tennis balls are acceptable only for interactive play with your dog, meaning that you are actively part of the game such as retrieving or tug games.

**Rawhide is never appropriate for your dog.** Although dogs love it, they can consume rawhide very quickly and it is not easily digested, causing intestinal blockage and choking hazards. **P**ig's ears, cow hooves, bully sticks and other such “natural” chews should also be avoided as they can upset your dog’s digestive system.

***INITIAL ROUTES***

When you begin working your dog at home, you must know your route if you expect to succeed. Keep in mind that the environment will be all new to your dog and you need to teach them what targets are significant. You must be able to tell whether you are drifting off course or running over a curb so you can redirect the dog. It is ideal if you can heel your dog through a familiar route using your cane or a sighted guide before you attempt to have your dog work the route. Have the dog sit and reward at all curbs and significant targets. Take some time to start teaching landmarks, and backchaining important targets like your front door or mailbox. If you have access to sighted assistance, you might ask that person to follow when you first start working your dog. They can help you make sure your dog is learning the route correctly. Dogs generally pattern fairly easily, and if they learn the route incorrectly it can be difficult for them to relearn it later. Do everything you can to set yourself and your dog up for success.

It is also ideal for you to take a few days off work to let the dog settle in; however, we know this is not always possible. If you must return to work immediately after getting home, take it easy on the first day. Get a ride if possible and give yourself plenty of extra time to get there. Ideally, you should work a practice run without any time constraints. You should have already established a place at work where your dog can sleep, drink, and park; show these areas to your dog on the first day. Set up a crate or tie down if there are times you need to leave the dog unattended. You may take the dog's harness off at work for those times when the dog is just resting.

If you have recently moved but are still tentative on some of your routes, contact an O&M instructor or one of our guide dog mobility instructors for assistance. It is important that you start off by being as successful as possible. It is very important that the new dog be patterned to the routes in a step by step process. If you work long, complicated routes be sure that you show the dog the route and work through a building process rather than assuming that the dog will learn it the first time out. It is also important that you teach the dog a few routes very well rather than jumping all over the place from the start. Generally, handlers that have three consistent routes find it easier for the dog to acclimate and perform well.

The most common errors that a new handler may make when they return home are:

1. The handler does not know their routes well or does not take enough time to teach the dog their routes.

2. The handler does not give the dog enough work or provide energy outlets through play or other exercise.

3. The handler does not keep up with the counter conditioning and continued exposure to normal distractions, both animals and food.

4. The handler is not consistent with the dog in the household, therefore reinforcing poor behavior instead of positive ones.

**VETERINARY SERVICES**

Ideally you should choose a veterinarian before you arrive home with your dog. Ask local dog-owning friends for recommendations or search online. Call a few different offices, explain your situation and ask questions to help you determine which might be the best fit for you. Some vets may offer discounts or even free vet care for working guide dogs. Choosing a veterinarian for your dog is not unlike choosing a doctor for yourself or your child. It’s important that you are comfortable and have positive interactions with the staff. Also consider how you will get to the vet’s office. An office close by that you can walk to can be convenient for routine care, but keep in mind that if your dog is ill, they will not be able to work to the vet’s office. Make an emergency plan to have someone drive you or use a car service. It is a good idea to take your dog for a physical exam shortly after you get home, so you and the dog can get acquainted with your vet before you need him or her. You should also know the nearest 24-hour emergency vet and how you would get there in the event of an emergency. Make sure you can easily access the phone numbers for both your local vet and emergency vets.

Allowing your dog to become obese is one of the most detrimental things you can do as a guide dog owner. We take this problem very seriously, as it is a form of abuse. In order to monitor your dog's weight closely, it is recommended to weigh your dog monthly for the first several months after you return home. Most vet offices will allow you to come in and weigh your dog at no charge, as well as some pet stores that are equipped with a vet hospital scale. If you notice a change in your dog's weight over the course of a couple of months, you can adjust their food amount accordingly. Once you reach a point where your dog’s weight remains constant for a few months, you can be fairly confident that the ration is correct, and you can extend the time between weigh-ins. Continue to weigh your dog at least twice a year as you may need to make adjustments as your dog ages.

***EXTREME TEMPERATURES***

Use common sense when working in extreme heat or cold. Remember that Labs are generally much more sensitive to heat than to cold. Any time you are uncomfortably hot outside, your dog probably is too. In extreme heat (over 90 degrees), you should not work your dog more than 10-15 minutes without stopping to cool off. You may give a little water while working a very hot route, or step in an air-conditioned store for a few minutes. Working too long in extreme heat can cause heat stroke or heat exhaustion, and possibly even death. In the summer it is best to work in the cooler mornings and evenings as much as possible. It may be necessary to use booties on your dog in very hot weather. In hot climates the corners at crossings can become very hot and cause dogs to pad their feet. If your dog is not wearing booties, try to stop in the shade of the building line, wait and listen for traffic. When you know the signal will change in your favor, work to the down curb, praise and then cross. This way your dog does not have to stand for an extended time on the hot surface. You can check the temperature of the road or sidewalk surface before heading out. Place the back of your hand down against the surface. If you cannot hold your hand there for at least 10 seconds, consider using booties.

In the winter, many areas put salt on the sidewalk to prevent ice from forming. This salt can be irritating to dogs' feet and cause padding as well. After a walk in a salted area, wipe the dog's feet with a towel to remove the salt. Booties may be necessary in these conditions as well.

If you live in a very cold climate, you may need to use a soft-soled bootie (Mutt-Luks) to keep your dog’s paws warm and a jacket that your dog can wear in conjunction with the harness.

***CONTACT WITH GUIDING EYES***

Guiding Eyes has a dedicated line that is covered by Guide Dog Mobility Instructors during regular business hours: (914)243-2201. You can use this number anytime you have a question or need to get a message to your class instructor. When you call this number, you will likely need to leave a message and will receive a call back within 24 hours. Please leave a clear message with your name, your dog’s name, when you graduated, a phone number where we can call you back, and a brief description of why you are calling. Usually, if you are having a problem, we will first give you some suggestions over the phone and ask you to implement them. If you try the suggestions but continue to have an issue, we may send someone out to work with you at home and determine the next steps, either an instructor or one of our Regional GDMI’s.

You will also receive a call from your class instructor 3-4 weeks after you leave Guiding Eyes. This gives you some time to settle in with your dog at home and see how you are doing as a team. At that point, your instructor will likely ask you about your dog's house manners, park schedule, guide work and routes, as well as whether you have established contact with a local vet. If we don’t hear anything else from you after that, your instructor will check in with you again 6-8 weeks later. After that, it is up to you to contact the school if you encounter any problems.

During your time in class, we have given you a variety of tools to help you work through common problems that guide dog users experience. Try to use these tools when you encounter issues at home. You may be able to resolve the issue without assistance. However, don’t wait too long to seek help if you need it. Small problems can quickly become larger problems or safety issues, and the longer you allow the problem to go on, the more difficult it will be to resolve. If you are not able to see improvement over the course of a couple of weeks, seek assistance from an instructor.

***YOUR DOG GUIDE AND THE PUBLIC***

Members of the general public can run the gamut when it comes to understanding guide dog etiquette. Whether we like or not, working with a guide dog does draw attention. Most people will be respectful and leave you and your dog alone to carry on with your business. But some will feel compelled to approach you and you will learn to field a myriad of questions and comments directed toward you or your dog. Just ask any guide dog user or trainer and they will likely have many stories to tell. Try to be patient with the public; educate when you can and politely decline when you need to. Remember that you are representing not only yourself, but your school and guide dog users everywhere.

If someone offers you help and you don't need any, tell them you don't need any help, and thank them politely. Try not to get offended; if you are disrespectful, people will be less likely to offer to help the next person, who may want it.

If people want to pet your dog, it is your choice whether you let them. We strongly recommend that you do not, at least in the early stages of your relationship, and many guide dog handlers would prefer that no one ever allow the public to pet guide dogs. It is very easy for dogs to become people friendly, and start working from person to person hoping to get petted. If you do allow people to pet your dog, have them sit and set down the harness handle. Make sure your dog remains calm throughout the encounter. You can even reward your dog with food when they hold position and allow strangers to pet them while keeping their attention on you. If you do not want your dog petted, just say no politely, and if you have time, explain why. It never hurts to educate.

When working your dog, always be aware that people are watching, whether you know it or not. Try to be discreet and quiet when correcting your dog. People will notice especially if you raise your voice or appear frustrated with your dog. Keep your physical handling to a minimum and remember to follow up with redirection and praise. People are much less likely to have negative feelings if they see you praise your dog after they resume working appropriately. Attempt to incorporate food reward when you are able as the public shows a very positive response to this. Giving a dog food is something that all people can relate to, whether you are a dog person or not. Of course, this is good practice from a training standpoint as well.

Sometimes people call Guiding Eyes to report that someone is abusing their dog guide. In most cases, the person has simply misunderstood a correction or other interaction between the handler and dog. If someone calls to complain about you, we will notify you of the complaint and ask you to explain what happened. We will give you the benefit of the doubt in most cases, but we do follow up on every complaint and you may receive a visit from a staff member depending on the situation. Though it is rare that these complaints are valid, we are committed to ensuring the well-being of all Guiding Eyes dogs, as well as the safety of each team.

***ACCESS RIGHTS***

The law guarantees you the right to have your guide dog with you everywhere you go that the general public is invited to go. There are, however, certain exceptions to this law. The law does not cover places that the general public is not invited to, such as hospital operating rooms. It also does not cover private homes (though it DOES cover rental properties). The law also says if your dog is dirty or very ill behaved, you can be asked to leave, and the property manager will be well within his rights to ask you that.

There are also some places that are not specifically covered by the law, but that common sense should tell you are not good places to bring a dog. These include very loud rock concerts, amusement parks (if you plan to ride any rides), fireworks displays, ski lifts, demolition derbies, and the like. Zoos are a gray area. Many zoo officials are concerned that the presence of a dog, which is a predator species, could cause a panic among the prey species in the zoos. As a result, some states have laws barring guide dogs from entry. Many larger zoos have kennels where you can leave your dog for the day. If you have any question, you should call before you go and know the laws of your state.

You should also know that you are legally responsible for any damages caused by your dog. If your dog has an accident, you need to clean it up (though the great majority of stores and restaurants will assist you). If your dog chews something in a hotel room, you will have to pay for it. Any business can legally deny you access if your dog is out of control, is dirty, or has a foul odor. You must keep your dog clean, presentable and under good control for public access.

The most common places guide dog users are denied access are certain ethnic restaurants and taxis or car services like Uber or Lyft. If you are denied access anywhere, try to stay calm and confident. Let the staff person who challenges you know that this is a guide dog and all legitimate service dogs legally have access rights. If the person still persists, remain calm, but you may raise your voice slightly so that other patrons (most of whom will know about guide dog laws) realize what is going on. Ask to speak to the manager. Know your local access laws and be able to show them on your phone or carry a paper copy. For more information on how to handle denial of access, please refer back to the Advocacy Lecture.

Denial of access is a difficult issue and each individual guide dog handler will deal with it in their own way. Keep in mind that you must remain calm in any conflict situation. If you start yelling and making threats, you can be thrown out legitimately, not to mention how your negative emotions can adversely affect your dog. Do your best to educate the public. If that doesn’t do the trick, you can choose to pursue legal action. Guiding Eyes does not become involved in lawsuits over access issues.

***A FEW MORE IMPORTANT THINGS***

* No one else, sighted or blind, should ever work your guide dog. You have worked very hard to get where you are with your guide dog, and you do not want to jeopardize that relationship by letting someone else confuse your dog.
* You should never take anyone sighted guide while working your dog and expect the dog to clear both of you. You also cannot expect your dog to clear carts, wheeled luggage, strollers, etc. that you are pulling on your right side.
* Everything we have done here is for a reason. Keep it up when you go home, and you will be successful. Practice obedience regularly to maintain good control and keep your relationship strong. Correct and rework errors. Work the dog daily to maintain and solidify its work pattern. Groom the dog daily to keep it clean and healthy. Monitor the dog’s weight.

*Updated September 2020*