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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 recently completed an extensive guide dog training course. Even though the foundation of training has been well-established, there remains a considerable transition ahead. In the next few months, the new guide dog team must apply the skills they learned in class to their home area. This initial adjustment period is most important to ensure what we hope will be a long-lasting, successful relationship between the guide dog and handler. The handler will be well-aware of their responsibilities with a guide dog, but you may be unsure of what is expected of you as a family member or friend. Below, we outline some general suggestions that might help make the next few months easier for all involved.

**Arrival: As a new guide dog team,** a bond is just beginning to form between handler and dog. By allowing space and limiting interaction between yourself and the 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 maintenance and control to the handler. It is encouraged not to allow a new dog freedom of the house during the first few weeks at home. The dog should either be on a leash with the handler, in a crate, or on tie-down. This cements 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 proactively establish good control and behavior patterns in the house. Additionally, 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 draw you in, there is a specific target weight and food threshold that the handler must follow for their guide dog to maintain proper health. Even though the guide dog is a member of the family, it has only one handler. The handler must have full agency of the developing partnership and well-being of the team.

**Daily Care:** The handler is responsible for the dog’s daily needs, such as feeding, relieving, and grooming. 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 handler 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 handler, do not interfere unless explicitly asked to do so. Walk three or four paces behind the team and slightly to the right.

Mistakes are bound to occur at the beginning of a new guide dog team’s journey; please allow dog and handler to resolve challenges on their own. If your assistance is requested, 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 handler may ask to take your left arm for a walk through a new area. This benefits both the dog and handler. If you are providing human guide, the team will always go to the curb ahead before making any turns. Give the handler time to process changes in elevation, such as steps, doors, curbs, etc., so they can appropriately navigate these objects with their dog and orient themselves accordingly.

You may occasionally notice the handler utilizes a quick snap and release of the leash if the dog becomes distracted or commits a clearance error. It is necessary from time to time to use this technique to redirect and correct poor behavior or misjudgment. 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 caring for 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 you. 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. The handler may experience a different, sometimes 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 handler’s excitement around newfound freedom.

Thank you for your interest in contributing to the guide dog team’s success. If you have any questions, please feel free to contact us at 888-987-2188 or clientexperience@guidingeyes.org.

Sincerely,

The Guiding Eyes for the Blind Client Experience Team