

**Guide to Dog Retirement**

Considerations for the Transitional Process

Life as a guide dog handler is a journey like no other. Through a special bond with your dog, you gain greater confidence in your abilities, define independence, adapt to specific communication strategies, and truly comprehend the fundamentals of teamwork. Just as there are stages of acceptance, transition, and problem-solving throughout your partnership with your dog, retirement inevitably entails its own set of challenges. It is natural, and common, to experience grief and confusion. In this guide to dog retirement, we hope to normalize what you are feeling and offer suggestions on how to navigate the transition process. Everyone’s situation is unique, but we hope much of this guidance will resonate with you. Please do not hesitate to reach out to the Client Experience Team with additional questions or for clarification.

# How do you know when your guide is ready to retire?

Dog retirement is a complex issue with no right answer. The circumstances are diverse and endless.

I am sure we have all heard the phrase, “When you know, you know.” As cliché as it sounds, this is often true. As the handler, you are typically the expert on your dog’s needs and signals. You have learned their norm over time. Some common causes of retirement are medical issues, significant pace drops, excessive sniffing, high distractibility, general reactivity, and/or symptoms of stress. Again, you know your dog best. Your dogs are not robots; they are bound to make mistakes. Try not to immediately jump to the worst-case scenario and be sure to speak to your Regional Guide Dog Mobility Instructor, member of the Client Experience Team, or your local vet for advice.

Sometimes, your dog will not give any indication that he or she is ready to retire. Their work can be purely motivated by their genuine love for the job and bond to you. However, they may not understand their own limitations. It is then up to you to consider their age, health, work expectations, and so on to make the best decision for them.

# When should I apply for a successor guide?

You should only apply for your next guide when/if you are ready. It can be beneficial to be proactive, for example, if you need a city sound or fast paced dog and know your wait time will be a bit longer, but the decision is ultimately up to you. Each handler experiences their own journey with retirement. Dog retirement is often accompanied by varying stages of grief and adjustment based on the relationship between handler and dog, life circumstances, and factors that may be beyond control, such as unexpected health issues. Most important is to work through your emotions at your own pace and act in the best interest of the team. There is no one right way to approach retirement, and no exact timeline to follow. Some handlers lose their dogs unexpectedly, and others must actively choose a path forward. Some individuals retire their guides at the point of training with a new guide, while others benefit from having a gap in between dogs, either by choice or while on the waitlist. You are always welcome to discuss your options with Guiding Eyes or reach out for peer support and guidance.

# Considerations and Recommendations for Guide Dog Retirement

As discussed above, there are countless circumstances surrounding guide dog retirement. We would like to provide you with some general guidelines to assist in the transition.

One way to help the retired guide settle into a new routine is to offer him or her a “special treat” when you and your successor guide head out for a walk, such as a Frozen Stuffed Kong, to keep their mind occupied. You may also choose to leave your new guide at home from time to time to take the retired guide on a solo walk on leash to one of your old favorite places as a team. Maintaining a tradition will allow your retired guide to feel included and capitalize on the unique bond the two of you continue to share.

If you have a family member at home, they can begin to step in and help care for the guide’s daily needs. For example, they can engage in feeding, walking (leash only), relieving, and playing with the retired guide. Your dog will learn that it is acceptable and encouraged to depend on others and form additional bonds, thus giving you the opportunity to focus on your new guide in the future without as much fear of jealousy or competition. Teach your loved ones about dog care, grooming, nutrition, and appropriate exercise outlets, just as you learned in class. Your retired guide will always be loyal to you, but it does not hurt to have some love and support from other sources to assist you both in the transition.

While some retired guides need time and repetition to fully adjust, many others are completely content to stay home on the couch or spend time with their loved ones as a treasured pet. Remember, as handlers, we often have a much more challenging time adjusting than our dogs do. We tend to project our own grief and assume our dogs feel the same way. However, they are highly resilient and adaptable animals. If they indicated they were ready to retire, odds are they will be comfortable with a more laid-back lifestyle and lessening of responsibilities.

Support your retired guides in this rewarding chapter of their lives. It is important to keep your emotions in check. Dogs are barometers of our emotions, both positive and negative. While a handler can intellectually understand the process that is taking place, a guide does not understand it to the full extent and will look to you for reassurance, approval, and/or consistency. Reach out to your support systems, whether in the Guiding Eyes community or elsewhere, to keep a clear and compassionate mind when interacting with our dogs. If we become stressed or upset, that could easily filter down to our dogs.

Some handlers do not keep their retired guides, whether because of housing restrictions, financial hardship, medical reasons, or desire to place the dog with their puppy raiser, friend, or family member. This decision is not made lightly and entails a unique type of grief. If you do not have the ability to keep your guide and cannot locate a safe home for him or her, Guiding Eyes will assist you in making arrangements with an adopter. We will work directly with you throughout the process to ensure that you are informed about your dog’s next home.

Other handlers are struck by losing a guide, either suddenly or due to a prolonged diagnosis. In these situations, it is vital to be honest with yourself and your emotions. Take the time you need to process and heal. Our hearts never truly recover, but sometimes they may open just enough to welcome another four-legged guide someday. The Client Experience Team is here to listen.

## How can I avoid making comparisons between my retired guide and my current guide?

It is inevitable that you will think fondly of your retired guide while working with your new guide. We worked with them for years. We became accustomed to their personality traits, tendencies in harness, style of affection and communication, etc. To us, despite a few flaws, we remember them as the “perfect” dog. We were incredibly in sync. However, we forget that when we began working with our retired guide, there also existed a profound adjustment and learning curve. We made mistakes as a team, issued a fair number of redirections and corrections, and actively worked at building a relationship. You will undergo a similar transition with your new guide. Your new guide will embody its own unique quirks, strengths, and weaknesses. Likewise, your bond will also form in a different capacity. Be patient with yourself and your new dog as you get to know one another. You can always remember your prior guide dog fondly but take the time to appreciate the diversity in each dog and the new skills and outlook they provide you with as a handler.

## Conclusion

Guide dog retirement represents a complex emotional journey with various layers and circumstances. Everyone’s experiences with processing grief and transition are slightly different and uniquely their own. However, connections with fellow graduates are often beneficial in navigating these challenges as a community. When you are ready to talk through your guide’s retirement, the options available to you, and seek guidance on your specific situation, other handlers and Guiding Eyes staff are prepared to support you as needed.