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Guide Dog Handlers Access Rights

As you and your dog head home and start your new life together as a team, remember that you may be the first guide dog team that a person has ever met. Some people are not aware of the rights or proper etiquette for working with a guide dog team, and we as guide dog handlers are constantly educating others. Remember to remain calm, patient, and polite whenever possible while advocating for your individual needs and rights. Leave a good impression that reflects well on the guide dog handler community.

In your various travels, you will encounter many people who want to pet your guide dog. If someone asks permission, you have the right to say no, and in most scenarios, are encouraged to do so to solidify the bond with your dog. You might say something like, “thank you for asking, but my dog is working right now. He cannot be pet.” If the person persists, you may choose to explain your dog’s job as a guide dog, how he or she could become distracted which would put your safety at risk. If you choose to give permission, make sure your dog is under control. Remember that no one is entitled to interact with your guide. It is strictly your choice.

You may also run into a handful of denials when entering restaurants, stores, or hotels. Service dogs are legally able to accompany you everywhere the general public is allowed. If denied entry or service, start by politely explaining that your dog is a guide dog. It may be helpful to indicate your harness. Reference the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) verbally or in writing on the National Association of Guide Dog Users (NAGDU) app on your smartphone, which describes the ADA and any relevant laws for specific states and Canadian provinces. If an understanding cannot be reached, ask to speak with a manager or supervisor. If the denial continues to escalate, it is in your Rights to call the police. Make sure you file a police report. Additionally, you can file a complaint online with the Department of Justice at ada.gov. Do not hesitate to share your story with local media outlets, post to your personal social media platforms, or write a public online review. Remember, regardless of the outcome, it is crucial not to place you or your dog in emotional or physical harm’s way.

When considering future advocacy efforts, it may be helpful to think of the following:

1: We often do not realize when we are advocating for our rights as a guide dog team; it comes naturally. We depend on advocacy skills as part of daily routines. The most seemingly small and inconsequential gestures have a significant impact on the ways in which we view ourselves and how our confidence grows in turn. As blind and low vision individuals, our mere disability forces us to take charge of a situation more than we give ourselves credit for. We grant ourselves the power to explore various avenues of self-advocacy due to all the inherent practice opportunities in place.

2: Self-advocacy skills do not develop overnight. Self-advocacy is a masterpiece in the making; it is not something you are instantly familiar with or adept at. It can feel like quite a daunting task at first. It requires a great deal of patience, trial, and error. We constantly discard old approaches for new ones or add to an ever-growing repertoire of problem-solving strategies. You must believe in the benefits of advocating for yourself to maximize your impact. For example, when you plant a garden, it must be cultivated with care and patience to grow over time. You may not observe the best showing the first year, or even the second. The point of the matter is that your effort is continuous.

3: While self-advocacy may mean that you speak out on your own, you do not have to do it alone. Assuming that advocating for yourself is a completely solo effort places unnecessary pressure on you. Every advocate deserves a community that provides fresh perspectives, backup, and/or guidance. Learn to properly delegate tasks if you carry too much weight on your shoulders. Your supporters may be comprised of family members and friends, or you may find mentors with similar lived experiences. Either way, there are people waiting to offer a helping hand in times of need.

4: Sometimes you must choose your battles. We are all human, and it is only natural to feel run down at times. We may strive for perfection in our efforts, but the true test is confronting the reality that we physically and mentally cannot eliminate every single barrier in our paths. Each day brings a new set of circumstances, triumphs, and difficulties. You may feel a nagging responsibility to conquer every issue, but if you are approaching that issue with frustration and desperation born out of exhaustion, your overall impact may not be as significant as if you took a step back to evaluate the situation. Be prepared for both good and bad days. Focus on the basics of self-care.

5: We never truly stop learning about self-advocacy. Whether you are brand new to self-advocacy, or consider yourself a seasoned veteran, there is plenty of room for growth. We can always learn new lessons or approaches from others. An effective self-advocate is one who can draw from not only their own life experiences, but the perspectives and trials of their peers. There is limitless room for innovation and creativity. As society evolves, so do strategies for advocacy. Guidance and understanding between various generations, identities, and groups is critical to remaining open-minded and resilient.

Please feel free to call the Guiding Eyes for the Blind Client Experience Team at 888-987-2188 or email us at [clientexperience@guidingeyes.org](mailto:clientexperience@guidingeyes.org) with any questions.