**Guiding Eyes Graduate Quarterly Call January 27, 2025 summary**

**Topic: Myths and Misconceptions – Navigating a World with Fake Service Animals**

**Panel:**

Jolene Hollister, Guide Dog Mobility Instructor and Manager of Running Guides, Guiding Eyes for the Blind

Madeline Bruggeman, Regional Puppy Instructor, Richmond, Virginia, Guiding Eyes for the Blind

Gary Norman, Health Law Professor and Guiding Eyes for the Blind Graduate

Melissa Carney, Community Outreach and Graduate Support Manager, Guiding Eyes for the Blind

Pat Leahy, Graduate Council President, thanked everyone for joining the first Quarterly Call of 2025. He acknowledged Linda, a Guiding Eyes graduate that suggested the topic for this forum and appreciates receiving input from others with prior topic ideas, and thoughts for future forums.

“We want this time together to be interactive, to listen and learn from each other, and think about the possibilities.”

 Pat, along with Judy Mathews, Council Vice President, began the panelist introductions:

Jolene has been with Guiding Eyes for the Blind since 2000. She is a Guide Dog Mobility Instructor (GDMI) and Manager of Running Guide. Jolene is an athlete: runner, swimmer and cyclist. She uses these athletic abilities to compete in Sprint Triathlons a few times each year. Her two pet German Shepherds, Cruiser and Rookie, complete Jolene’s family.

Madeline, a Regional Puppy Instructor (RPI) and puppy raiser for Guiding Eyes for the Blind, oversees the Richmond, Virginia puppy raising region. She has a master’s degree in Anthrozoology, the study of human and animal interactions. Before coming to Guiding Eyes, Madeline worked as an advanced trainer at Service Dogs of Virginia.

Gary is a lawyer, a licensed consultant, and adjunct law professor of health care, law and policy, all of which he is currently teaching. he collaborates with Ziggy, a black female labrador, his fourth Guiding Eyes guide dog. Coincidentally, Jolene trained Izzy.

Melissa, Community Outreach and Graduate Support Manager, has several duties, such as providing individualized support and developing community-based resources for clients navigating various stages in their Guide dog journey. She empowers guide dog handlers at resolving access discrimination issues, educates prospective clients on guide dog readiness, and leads blindness and guide dog awareness presentations. Melissa graduated Cum Laude with a BA in English and Psychology. She lives in White Plaines with Aron, a yellow male Lab. They have been a working guide dog team for 8.5 years. In her spare time, Melissa has created a YouTube channel called Forward Together to blog her and her partners adventures and positive perspective living and working with their guide dogs.

Pat invited Jolene to begin the discussion. In her words, this is the new hot topic; a tricky subject to discuss on some avenues, not as black and white as we would like it to be. We are well versed in the guide dog world, knowing what tasks our trained guide dogs perform. With the rise of so many service dogs; psychiatric/medical/diabetic alert dogs, hearing dogs and wheelchair assistance dogs, for example, it is not always obvious what task the dog performs. This is the tricky part - identifying whether the animal is a fake service animal or not. As trainers, we try to focus on whether the animal is fit for public access; is it behaving appropriately and is it well groomed. With the growth of pet friendly businesses everywhere we go, we (GDMIs) use these animals as another distraction that the working guide dog team might encounter in their daily lives.

Madeline was grateful to be part of this discussion - a complicated topic with a lot of gray zones. She shared that a big responsibility in our puppy program is making sure that our volunteer raisers are taught how to set up their puppies for success in public places and how to be good representatives of Guiding Eyes and working dogs in general. We (RPIs) focus on teaching our volunteer puppy raisers how to manage those distractions in the best way possible, to always respect others comfort by removing the pup if necessary and being prepared to clean up if their pup has an accident, for example. As a previous service animal trainer, she agreed that it is often difficult to identify if the animal is actually a service animal, in training, or a pet. True service animals come in all sizes and breeds; wearing a jacket, vest or harness is not mandated. It really does come down to what the animal’s behavior is and how the handler is working/managing the animal.

Gary acknowledged the wonderful introduction and said what a pleasure it was to be with everyone. He reiterated the complexity of this topic in that we want to protect our guide dog teams and know that the law has consequences that are understood and has internal and external compliance, referred to as form versus function. Gary feels the best training is through peer-to-peer learning. It becomes a personal issue if we encounter an unruly pet while we are out working with our guide dog. It is important to know how to use laws to protect the working guide dog team. Sham, a term used to describe a fake service animal, as well as a poorly handled service dog, can lead to nullifying our access rights under the law. Some states have enacted laws with penalties against dog attacks and/or, a Sham service animal law, which penalizes the owner for posing their pet as a service animal or declaring that they themselves are a person with a disability.

Melissa had her time at the mic. She wanted to tie in the emotional consequence of dealing with fraudulent service animals and the safety risks that both us and our guide dogs endure. It is an emotional situation that strikes us when we least expect it. It can be very scary when we hear a dog barking or lunging at us and we do not know where it is. There is no barrier as to when and where it can happen. Melissa personally empathizes with our struggles, noting that she and the Client Experience Team offer peer support for graduates experiencing these issues. “Because I am solution oriented, I want to point out that the Advocacy lecture takes place at every class, a source of support and talking through different avenues we can take to educate our communities to work together to come up with solutions on how to avoid unsafe situations.”

in general, be aware of your surroundings. Be diligent at learning if the building you enter is pet friendly, where the customer service desk is, and where the closest exit is if you feel the need to remove yourself and your dog. Always prioritize safety for you and your guide dog.

The discussion began with alternating questions submitted prior to the call to those coming from attendees that were present.

Q. Madeline, from your experience as a service animal trainer, what are some of the signs that differentiate genuine service animals/dogs to those that are not legitimate?

A. As a service animal trainer, I was more aware of the equipment used by other schools and organizations. Many dogs are privately trained and are not required to wear any vest or harness that identifies their service. Therefore, we look at the dog’s behavior. We can certainly ask the handler what task the dog is trained to perform but may not want to get close enough to ask if it is unruly, hence, observe the behavior and determine if the animal is not well trained or suited for public access.

Q. Will training techniques change to accommodate this world, in other words, teaching us as handlers how to respond, how to be calm and support our dogs so we do not have to worry about their careers?

A. Jolene does not feel anything specific needs to be changed in the training of our dogs, although, education that dog distraction, wherever it occurs, is on the rise in current times. Be aware of your environment. If any dogs are nearby, remain calm and use this as an opportunity to increase your engagement with your dog, help your dog remain focused on you, and the work at hand. Avoid focusing on an animal that you feel does not belong where you are. In those moments, your dog senses your thoughts and thinks there is a reason to be distracted.

Comment: It is more than training the dog, it is training the human, to not transfer anxiety down the leash to the dog.

Comment: Gary chimed in - the human piece is especially important. These situations are scary; triggering the fight, flight, or freeze response in us. We need to be in the right state of mindfulness so we can calm ourselves, engage with our dog, and get help if we need it. If it is truly a bad situation; you or your dog are hurt, a legal response may include documenting the situation with a video, capturing the license plate, etc.

Q. Melissa, please discuss advocacy resources including the GEB ID card which is offered to guide dog teams. Why is it that proof of training is not required to enter public places? (I would not have a problem showing my ID card my school provided).

A. the Guiding Eyes ID card is a useful resource to show if you are not getting anywhere verbally during an access denial. It certifies that we are a guide dog team that has completed training, and includes the two questions that can be asked of us: (1) is the dog a service animal required because of a disability, and (2) what work or task has the dog been trained to perform? (If you have misplaced your ID card, contact Guiding Eyes for a replacement). However, the ADA does not require that documentation, such as your GEB ID, must be shown. There are many handlers who believe that some type of verification system would help us. Similarly, the airlines have taken action because of the issues with illegitimate service animals and emotional support animals. They created the Department of Transportation (DOT) form in an attempt to rule out some of those fraudulent pets and restrict pet owners from entering the airplane cabin with their animals. NAGDU has developed an advocacy app for your smart phone that can display written information that may be shown when you are not successful verbally.

Gary added his thoughts to this question. The law does not have a lot of poignancy unless public officials, prosecutors and law enforcement, actually know the laws. There is room to Partner with animal sections of State Bar Associations to educate what the service animal laws are, as well as our rights to public access and accommodations.

Q. What advice do you have if we encounter a dog and feel we need to protect ourselves and our dog?

A. A graduate shared how she handles those situations. Her guide dog will stop well in advance of the oncoming dog. She and her dog will then step aside on the sidewalk in a safe place and tell the passerby to continue on their way. She and her dog then proceed.

Jolene added that these situations can be team specific, what works for one team may not be the same for another team. Eventually, we understand our dogs “tell” us and indicate when they may be distracted by another dog. It may be an abrupt stop, dig into their harness a little bit more, for example. Dogs are pretty honest when they are distracted and will tell you in one way or another. As soon as you get that feedback, engage with your dog and advocate for what you need and/or think is best in the moment. If the situation was very unsettling for you and your dog, find a quiet place to reset, taking a few deep breaths, and calm yourself before moving on.

On the puppy side, Madeline suggested puppy raisers remember to support their pup appropriately for their age. The younger puppy will follow the handful of food, allowing you to get some distance from the distraction and the two of you to refocus. The older pup that knows more will need direction, such as a game of touch, giving you both the opportunity to engage with each other and redirect away from the distraction. Remember, keep it fun, engage with your pup, and they will learn.

Q. How can sighted individuals help with this problem? Would guide dog handlers appreciate a sighted person stepping in to body block, or act as a witness to a fraudulent dog that is causing problems, putting the guide dog team at risk? Is this over-stepping boundaries?

A. Gary encourages us as handlers to be mindful of the situation, is it a typical distraction or a truly dangerous one? On a personal level, Gary stops working his dog and stands between his dog and the pet team he feels is of true concern and asks the person to continue to pass by, that he is working on a task with his dog, with the intent that the other person thinks they are actually helping him - a form of reverse psychology. our sighted friends and/or loved ones can certainly play a part of the solution, as they are part of our universe of dog handlers that we have built a relationship with.

Q. Are there state-specific laws that govern the rights of puppies in training versus the working guide dog?

A. Yes, some states do have laws that are clearly written regarding the rights of a pup on program (in training), versus a guide dog in training, versus the working guide dog team. the laws in many states are vaguely written, often referred to as having “gray areas/language.” Here is a link that may help clarify the laws in your state:

https://www.animallaw.info/topic/table-state-assistance-animal-laws.

Additionally, The Seeing Eye and National Association of Guide Dog Users (NAGDU) both have an app available for your smart phone

Q. Jolene, can you give an update on the Running Guide Program? A. we are still here, she chuckled. The trick with the Running Guides Program is like waiting for a specific pace or perhaps a city temperament dog that does not run, you get told the same thing. The number of dogs that run ebbs and flows with the dogs that are currently in training. Jolene did several evaluations of dogs that were not overly interested in running. There are currently 13 accepted and routinely running. She indicated a few more dogs will be evaluated in the next few weeks. As the weather warms up, longer runs with the dogs will prep them for placement.

Q. what suggestions do you have when someone asks how we got our dog and how they can take their dog everywhere too?

A. Melissa offered to address this question, but first said she is often asked: what pet store did you get your dog from? Once the laughter stopped, Melissa continued. She begins by saying, “this is my guide dog. He spent approximately two years of intense training to become my guide dog.” If you use factual numbers, it tends to scare people off from what the process is. Melissa also tells the person about the standards of proper and appropriate behavior, emphasizing how her dog is not greeting or engaging with them, that he is focused on his work, which requires a lot of effort on his part as well as effort on the handler. Depending on the amount of time you have, do your best to educate on what truly makes a good guide dog team; the work you put into the process as the handler and the intensive training the dog undergoes to be fit for public access.

Gary noted that aside from the topic issues, people have asked how he works with his dog, where his dog came from, and how does his dog know how to guide him. he responds, “It’s a team effort, a collaborative project.” They both have specific skills that blend together harmoniously. The sighted public that does not live with a guide dog team mean well, but do not understand the level of the partnership between the guide dog and handler.

Q. how do you handle a neighbor who claims their pet is a service dog when you know it is not a service animal?

A. Melissa suggests taking an approach of compassion. When confronted by a neighbor with a dog that may be friendly but acts out inappropriately; the person is not monitoring the interactions of their dog with yours, perhaps the dog is pulling on their leash, running under your guide dog, simply being a distraction. Be polite, tell the neighbor your dog is a service animal, that he is a guide dog for people that are blind, and that he is held to some strict behaviors. “In order for him to do his job and me to stay focused and direct him as his handler, I would really appreciate it if we could follow the same respectful behaviors with our dogs.” emphasize the point of respect, that you want to walk down the hallway or sidewalk understanding our boundaries, knowing our dogs being appropriate in their interactions, benefiting the safety of each of your dogs and that of your neighborhood.

Madeline added, if you are a puppy raiser and have neighbors eager to get involved with your puppy in ways that are more distracting than helpful, use empathy and ask them to help train your guide dog puppy. Give them a task, such as standing still so you can practice walking past them or have them walk toward your puppy but back up if the pup gets excited. The neighbor that feels they are being helpful are less likely to be offended and give you any push back.

Q. What can we do to prevent a dog attack and what should we do if our dog is attacked?

A. Dog behavior is unpredictable in ways we cannot necessarily prepare for. A handler’s reaction in the moment varies from yelling, kicking, letting go, to holding on for dear life. Most guide dogs will not retaliate. Try to draw attention to the situation so you can get assistance in ending the attack, and help getting your dog to a veterinarian to be examined. Always seek professional advice even if nothing serious seems to be visible – your dog may have underlying injuries. Your dog’s physical safety comes first, then shifts to how the attack affected their mental health. Your next step is to call Guiding Eyes to discuss what happened and what you need to do next. Your dog may need a couple of days off if possible. If you have established doggie playmates, let your dog interact/play to rebuild their confidence around another dog. High value treats are useful when you are working your dog and other dogs are in the vicinity, making it a positive experience. some dogs will bounce right back from an attack while others may not, all of which depends on the severity.

Q. if an interaction occurs in a place of business, should we make an incident report?

A. Melissa suggests calling the police regardless of your location. Mind you, an attack on your dog is an attack on the entire team. You and your guide dog are one entity. Tell the police you were attacked, not emphasizing your dog, therefore, they will come to your aid, take a report, and not simply contact animal control. An attack on your mobility tool is an attack on you. If you do not have the energy to file a report during the attack, document what happened, take pictures, if possible, then file a report as soon as you feel emotionally capable of doing so.

Gary agreed, health and safety come first. Conversations that explore and set a protocol, documenting the scene, are beneficial for us.

Q. Do you think requiring a standardized certification test would be more beneficial in preventing fraudulent service dogs in public, or do you think it would be more harmful and create more barriers for the disability community, owner trainers, and private trainers?

A. this is a topic of its own, a complicated policy issue. There are a lot of considerations on both sides, and we do not have enough information to formulate what is best. As noted above, the airlines have taken action, an example of what that might look like. This is a difficult question with pros and cons, points that we need to continue to talk about.

Q. How do we handle a person with a cultural background that does not understand our laws or what constitutes a guide dog?

A. This is a tricky one. It depends on how much information you feel comfortable disclosing. You may want to explain that you are blind, and your service dog is your mobility aid, referred to as a guide dog. This is not a perfect solution, but it may help them understand your dog’s purpose and/or ease any fear they may have.

Judy shared this link to a flyer/poster, although it relates to Rideshare, it may also help bridge the gap.

<https://pinetreeguidedogusers.org/rideshare-poster/>

the panelists offered their closing remarks:

Madeline appreciated being able to listen to each other’s perspectives. We all agree it is a challenging topic. Coming at it with an empathetic viewpoint rather than asking direct questions or being offensive can make it easier to have a productive conversation. Educating, spreading awareness, relying on and engaging with your dog to get through those day-to-day interactions, is the best we can do for now.

Melissa thanked everyone for joining the conversation. It is a very personal and emotional journey for many of us, a type of conversation that takes courage. We all want to be part of the solution; we want to work together to figure out how to empower each other; how we can keep each other safe; how we can bring awareness to the issue. The key lies in education. let’s build resource materials as a Guiding Eyes community, whether it be handouts, presentations, public speaking engagements, strategies, and so on, with safety as the priority.

Gary thanked everyone for joining the discussion. The laws policy comes through collaborative conversation - each of us supporting each other, as a sighted person or a dog handler. “I admire Guiding Eyes and am happy to contribute to the organization in this way.” Gary has received two wonderful guide dogs from GEB and feels he has become a better human and perhaps, a better handler, working with everyone.

Jolene thanked Pat for allowing her to be part of the discussion. “If I can leave one last thought; do your best to remain calm in any given situation, engage with and handle your own dog.” Jolene suggested we make our choice in the moment as to how we will handle the situation, be it education, walking away, or speaking with a manager. It is our right. Keep this in mind as we figure out how to make the world a better place for everyone that has a service dog.

Pat and Judy thanked everyone for spending the evening together, sharing a conversation that is a tough and complex topic. They appreciated the contributions and viewpoints the 135 attendees, including Guiding Eyes graduates, puppy raisers, trainers, and friends, offered to help make this issue somewhat bearable and understandable.

Rollcall ensued.