

# Service Dogs Provide Help and Love



**TO MARV TUTTLE, HIS DOG IS MORE THAN A PET—SHE'S** a lifeline. Yara picks up items, such as a cellphone or keys, that Tuttle accidentally drops on the floor. She can turn off the lights and open drawers. “The dog is incredibly helpful,” says Tuttle, 66, who is partially paralyzed from a motorcycle accident 17 years ago.

The Golden-Labrador retriever mix joined Tuttle and his wife in their San Jose, Cal., home five years ago. Besides performing various tasks, Yara attracts people who ordinarily may have steered clear of a man in a wheelchair. “People approach me more and look me in the eye, thanks to that friendly dog of mine,” says Tuttle, a retired salesman.

If you have a physical, cognitive or mental disability, perhaps you should consider a service dog. Those disabilities include multiple sclerosis, hearing impairments, spinal cord injuries, seizures and severe anxiety. “We’ve seen some amazing transformations over the years when it comes to owners,” says Jeanine Konopelski, national marketing director of Canine Companions of Independence, a Santa Clara, Cal., nonprofit that trained Yara. “Sometimes, it’s even like they’re a new person.”

The first step in finding a service dog is to check the membership list of Assistance Dogs International ([www.assistedogsinternational.org](http://www.assistedogsinternational.org)), which accredits nonprofits that place dogs. The organization visits providers and sets standards on training, placement and follow-up, says Sally Irvin, the vice-president. Before choosing a provider, ask for a list of current clients who

received animals from the group, Irvin says.

Be prepared to wait for as long as two years for a dog. Some groups, such as Canine Companions for Independence, provide their animals at no cost. Darlene Sullivan, executive director of Cochranville, Pa.-based Canine Partners for Life, says her group typically asks for a donation of \$1,000 to \$3,000. “The donation we’ll ask for is based on financial ability,” she says. Some groups charge \$20,000 or more.

## Intensive Training—For the Dog and For You

Before you take a dog, be sure you understand the commitment involved. Canine Companions of Independence requires clients to spend two weeks at one of its regional sites, Konopelski says.

Linda Feld, 67, and her dog, Keith, had to learn 40 commands, from the basics, such as sit and heel, to the more advanced, such as getting the dog to back up. Feld, a retired medical assistant who lives in Apopka, Fla., uses a wheelchair because of periodic paralysis.

When Feld shops, Keith takes the credit card in his mouth and passes it to the cashier. He can pull a refrigerator door open with his teeth and retrieve a bottle of water. “These are many things I always used to have my husband help me with,” Feld says. “This has provided me much more independence.”

You’ll also need to care for the dog, such as bathing, feeding and walking it. When Tuttle and Yara go for a walk, the dog wears a harness and Tuttle holds on to a special leash—and Yara, in effect, pulls the wheelchair. “She was specifically trained for it,” Tuttle says.

Getting a dog is not a walk in the park. New Horizons Services Dogs, in Orange City, Fla., requires potential owners to fill out a detailed application. The applicant’s primary doctor must fill out a medical history form. The group also requires a personal interview.

The group should require that you and the provider keep in touch. Canine Partners for Life checks in extensively during the first six months after placement and then requires a written report from the owner every six months.

Be sure to ask what the organization will do if the dog isn’t providing services properly. “If the placement doesn’t work, we switch out the dog and find the best match,” Konopelski says. She says nearly all of her group’s matches work out. **K ERIC BUTTERMAN**