



Guide Dogs of America

An International Guiding Eyes Program

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Program Overview

Guide Dogs of America (GDA), an International Guiding Eyes program, is a 501 (c)(3) non-profit charitable organization dedicated to providing guide dogs to qualified visually impaired individuals eighteen years or older. All services are provided at no charge to the recipient; however, the cost to produce a qualified guide dog companion, training of the guide dog team, and the follow-up services necessary to insure each team continues to remain safe and effective throughout the team's working life is \$42,000.

Located on a seven and a half acre campus in Sylmar, California, Guide Dogs of America begins by breeding our own specially selected Labrador Retrievers, Golden Retrievers, and occasionally German Shepherds. By controlling the breeding stock, GDA ensures that our dogs meet the three basic requirements: willingness, health, and temperament. Our future guide dogs are born in our own "Puppy Nursery." At seven to eight weeks of age, the puppies are placed with specially selected, pre-screened, volunteer foster families known as puppy raisers, who provide them with basic obedience skills, socialization, and most importantly, lots of love. During this time, each puppy wears a bright yellow jacket, identifying their mission. In most instances, this jacket allows the puppy access to areas that might otherwise be inaccessible to other dogs, e.g. restaurants, businesses, markets, churches, shopping malls, and public transportation. This socialization is important since these are all locations where our students will require their guide dog companion to help them navigate.

After approximately 18 to 20 months, the dogs are returned to Guide Dogs of America for evaluation. If the dogs meet the strict criteria, licensed instructors will use positive reinforcement to train them to become guide dogs. This formal training lasts approximately four to six months. Once formal training is completed, the dogs are expertly matched with blind students taking into consideration their lifestyles and environments. In addition, the personalities of students and guide dog, size, strength, pace of walk, and energy levels of each are also matched to ensure a harmonious relationship.

Each class is limited to a maximum of ten students assigned to three instructors. This small student to instructor ratio allows for greater flexibility and specialized teaching. The training period for first time students is 28 days and for retrainees, 21 days. During class, each guide dog team spends 24-hours-a-day together at our facility. Our dormitory features private rooms, individual relieving areas, as well as lounge, snack, and game rooms. Upon course completion, a graduation ceremony is held for students, dogs, friends, family members, donors, and the general public. The graduates then return home with their new partners and a renewed sense of freedom and independence. Approximately 50 teams graduate through our program each year.

Since its founding in 1948 by Joseph Jones, Sr., a retired member of the International Association of Machinists and Aerospace Workers, GDA has graduated over 3,000 successful guide dog teams throughout the United States and Canada. GDA receives no funding from any government agencies. All donations come from caring individuals, businesses, foundations, clubs and organizations, wills, and bequests. If you would like information on our sponsorship program or to make a donation, schedule a tour, or arrange for a speaker to make a presentation, please contact us at 818-362-5834. Tours are conducted at our facility on Tuesday, Wednesday, and Thursday by reservation.