

Service Dog Etiquette

By Comrade Steve Bogue

My name is Steve Bogue. I'm a medically retired Veteran with Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) along with other physical injuries. I have a service dog who is trained to assist me. I'm also a member of Branch 641.

It can take a year or more for a handler to train a service dog, which is how their bond is created. The handler and their dog are very in tune with each other. When one feels something, the other one does too. When the dog is touched, the handler, in a sense, is touched as well. Service dogs are fairly new and it's a strange thing for people in general. As a dog handler, you realize this very quickly your first time out in public. The dog is trained to focus on the handler despite "reasonable distraction". For example, going to the grocery store and resisting the temptation of what they smell. This is very tiring on the dog but that's their job. "Unreasonable distraction" is, unfortunately, committed by people with good intentions. People love dogs. It's a cultural thing for people to pet dogs even though it may say "DO NOT PET" on their vest. What they do not realize is once the dog is touched, the handler's anxiety goes up, the dog loses focus and the team gets out of sync. There are many unreasonable distractions that a team's deal with, ranging from a person staring at/talking to the dog, questions about the dog, calling the dog and snide remarks. The list goes on. Awareness is the key. Like everything that is new, people are unsure how to approach it. I know when I first took my dog out when I was in uniform it was the hardest thing I have ever done. I knew I was being judged I could not wait to get to the safety of the Mental Health unit to hide. It's still not easy going out with my dog but if I can help people understand and give courage to others, it's worth it.



My daughter required books at Algonquin College and while in the book store there, I was surprised how the students were very respectful of my dog and I. More so than most adults we encounter, in fact. Months later my daughter brought home a pamphlet for service animals on campus. Now it all made sense. The students were informed. This is what I have been looking for, "Service Dog Etiquette." I have created a simple list of what not to do from this pamphlet to educate and help the public understand us handlers and our service dogs.

The Handler and Service Dog Rules are as follows:

- Don't stare at the dog
- Don't make eye contact with the dog
- Don't make distracting noises or talk to the dog
- Don't feed the dog
- Don't be invasive (photo taking or standing over the dog)
- Don't ask personal questions ("Why do you have a dog?" or "What does your dog do for you?")
- Don't approach handler to give complements ("Your dog is pretty") or ("Your dog is so well trained"). It's well intended but it spikes the handler's anxiety. They know how well trained the dog is because that is the expectation.
- When in doubt, don't.

There are many clubs and units out there helping Veterans and I can only speak for the training I have done and received via Canadian Veteran Service Dog Unit (CVSDU). If there are Veterans or First Responders that feel that require a service dog, they can visit CVSDU.ca and apply. Those wishing to help another Veteran benefit from their own service dog, CVSDU is a registered charity (#839865797RR0001). Donations can be made at CVSDU.ca or by directing your annual United Way contribution.

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