

Hearing Help From A Man's Best Friend

By Linda Bilodeau

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Throughout history, people have used dogs for companionship, hunting, herding, sport, and security so it comes as no surprise that dogs can be trained to help us hear. Yet, dogs were never trained as hearing dogs until the 1970s. Given this history, I was captivated by Chrissy Smith's talk on Hearing Dogs during a recent Zoom session put on by the Kentucky Home Chapter of the Hearing Loss Association of America. Chrissy is a certified trainer for Duo Dogs, Inc., a St. Louis based nonprofit organization that trains dogs to help people with mental and physical disabilities as well as those with hearing loss.

One of the many goals of Duo Dogs, Inc. is to train assistance dogs to aid clients with hearing and/or mobility issues. Such dogs are taught fifty skills and can perform two hundred tasks. Mobility dogs can open and close doors as well as retrieve and carry small items. Hearing dogs are trained to respond to household sounds such as a ringing telephone, appliance buzzers, smoke and security alarms, doorbells, a crying child, sirens or any other sounds that the client needs. Since many people with hearing loss have balance and mobility issues, they can request a dog trained in both areas.

Hearing and mobility dogs are vetted for personality and their overall willingness to learn. Chrissy finds that Labradors and Golden Retrievers make the best hearing dogs because they are people friendly. Labradors and Golden Retrievers do not tend to be aggressive, nor do they bark excessively.

In most cases, Duo Dogs, Inc. breed their own puppies. Newborn dogs receive 24/7 care at a Duo Dog facility. All dogs have to be certified as healthy before undergoing training. Training is done according to standards established by Assistance Dog International and Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) requirements.

Puppies are cared for in kennels until they are sixteen weeks old. As they come of age, the dogs are placed in volunteer homes where they learn basic socializing

skills. At 4 to 6 months of age, the dogs are returned to a Duo Dog center to begin formal training. When deemed trained, a dog and client are matched. From there, the client and dog train together. Bonding between dog and client generally occurs in two weeks.

Anyone receiving a hearing dog must realize that these animals are not pets. Though the dog needs to be cared for and loved, they are working animals, on duty 24/7.

It costs \$40,000 to train and care for each dog. Duo Dogs rely on corporate and private donations. To apply for a dog, one must be at least 18 years old. An application is available online and includes a number of questions about the applicant's home and needs. All applicants are required to video tape the interior of their houses and provide an audio of the sounds they want their dog to learn. Applicants must pay an application fee and prove they can financially care for the dog.

After submitting the application, it normally takes one year before a client receives a dog. This is partly due to the availability of dogs and partly due to the fact that hearing dogs have to be trained to hear the sounds that the client requires.

Trainers stay in contact with their dogs and clients. A visit is scheduled two weeks after a dog and client are matched. Other follow-ups occur at six months and then annually thereafter. If the client does not live close to a training facility, follow-ups are accomplished via video and telephone calls. Dogs retire after ten years. At that point, the client can keep the dog or return him to Duo Dogs. Alternately, the client can ask for a new hearing dog and keep the original dog.

All clients agree to care for their dogs in a reasonable way. When outside, the dog must be leashed. Also, they must wear their jackets, which identifies them as assistance dogs. Though a client can feed the dog what they want, they are encouraged to keep them on a Purina Pro diet, since that has been the dog's source of nutrition. Visit the Duo Dog, Inc website for more information. Duo Dogs, Inc. is one of many organizations providing hearing dogs. Others

include Dogs for Better Hearing, 4 Paws for Ability, and Little Angels Hearing Dogs. Each organization has a website with further information.

If you suffer from hearing loss and are thinking of adding a dog to your family during the upcoming holiday season, consider a hearing dog. These special animals help people stay independent and might help you ease your way as you meander through the hearing world.