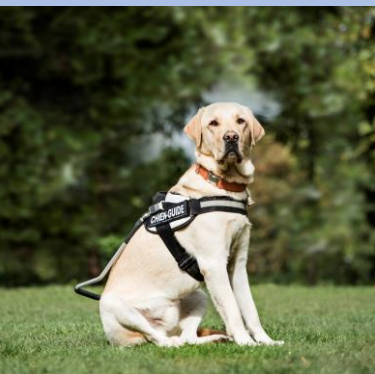


# Assistance Dogs



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An assistance dog, sometimes referred to as a service dog is a companion dog which is highly trained and accredited (by various means) to help an individual with disability or a special need and is covered under law in Australia by the *Disability Discrimination Act 1992 (DDA)*. The law under this Act mandates rules regarding unfair treatment of people accompanied by assistance animals, stating that treating a person with a disability less favorably because they are accompanied by a guide, hearing or other trained and accredited animal is unlawful. The law also clearly defines disability and the conditions it encompasses. A well-known example of an assistance dog is a guide dog who assists a vision impaired handler. Importantly, whilst an assistance dog may provide companionship and comfort to their owner, they are not a pet.

Currently there is no nationally recognised accreditation standard for assistance dogs nor national register in Australia. Each state is left to enforce their own standards to varying degrees. In NSW there is no formal system of accreditation or registration by state or local government agencies. And this can cause difficulty and confusion for people seeking to have their own dog assessed and accredited as an assistance dog. To further complicate this matter the DDA does not define the type or length of training required nor the qualification standards required of a trainer providing certification. It is up to educators and trainers to set their own standards.

In Australia there are certain organisations that due to their reputation, high standards of training and the nature of the disability that is being assisted are given automatic public access rights. This means they can take their dog into public spaces and onto public transport. They are legally recognised, and their dogs acknowledged due to the assumption they meet the criteria of an assistance dog under the DDA. Guide Dogs, mindDog, Vision Australia Seeing Eye Dogs and Lions Hearing Dogs are examples.

For those who do not qualify for an assistance dog through one of these organisations it is a more complicated process with the burden of proof lying with the handler. An individual must decide when, where and how they require assistance from their dog. For some, a companion dog at home who is trained to do basic tasks is all that is required. For others they want to have their dog accompany them in the community. The complexity of the training required, the tasks needed and where the dog will go will determine the training and support that is necessary.

The options available other than obtaining a fully trained and accredited assistance dog are varied including employing the services of specialised assistance dog trainers or even self-training. There is nothing in the Act that prevents an individual from self-training if they can provide proof that the training undertaken means the animal meets the requirements of the Act. Meaning, that the persons condition is considered a disability and that the dog helps to alleviate the effect of that disability. Also, that the dog meets standards of hygiene and behaviour appropriate for a public space.

So, how do you prove that a dog meets these standards? Assistance dogs are required to undertake a Public Access Test (PAT) as part of their training. This establishes a minimum standard of behaviour, showing that the dog is well-behaved, that the handler has control of the animal and that they are unobtrusive in public spaces. There are many variations of the PAT which are based on requirements set by Assistance Dogs International but modified by trainers and organisations to reflect Australian standards. Like all training and accreditation surrounding assistance dogs in Australia, the credibility of a PAT is related to the professionalism and credibility of a trainer or organisation. Con't