

Guide dogs lead in Daytona Beach City has high number of service animals

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DAYTONA BEACH -- DAYTONA BEACH - Doug Hall glides like a German shepherd - at least that's how one guide dog trainer explained it to him. That is until his white cane hits a crack in **the** concrete sidewalk and jolts him.

"My preference is a dog, because I walk fast. About a foot in front of a traditional length cane," he said. "With a cane, you use feel. With a dog, you listen. Dogs will anticipate and take evasive action."

Hall, who's had six guide dogs in **the** past 37 years and is a vocational counselor at **the** Division of Blind Services Orientation and Adjustment **Center** in Daytona Beach, has no intention of letting his membership in Guide Dog Users of Florida lapse, even though he's currently between dogs.

The advocacy group started here three years ago, in part, because **the** city has one of **the** largest populations of guide dogs, per capita, in **the** state.

The precise reason may be difficult to pin down, Hall said, but Florida has a guide dog training school, and Daytona Beach has at least three rehabilitation programs **for the blind - the** Orientation and Adjustment **Center**, which is part of **the** Division of Blind Services, **the** Conklin **Center for the Blind** and **the Center for Visually Impaired**. Additionally, Daytona Beach has **the** world's largest Talking Book Library, Hall said.

Kathleen Trutschel, Daytona Beach resident and founder of Guide Dog Users of Florida, says **the** biggest problem facing users is that people still don't know where working dogs are allowed. "There are still some restaurants and stores that deny people entry," she said. "In New York, it's cabs and buses."

It wasn't too long ago that Trutschel, a first-time guide dog user, went to an Ormond Beach restaurant and was unable to convince **the** owner that her dog, Myah, is allowed by law to accompany her.

"I went outside to call police, but then she denied she said I couldn't come in," Trutschel said. "We did go in to eat - to prove we could - but I haven't been back there since."

Discrimination is just one of **the** issues Guide Dog Users of Florida tackles. Along with other state and national groups, it is trying to ensure airlines provide relief areas **for** service dogs as mandated by a year-old rule of **the** U.S. Department of Transportation.

During a recent teleconference - **the** method used by **the** statewide group to meet - Port Orange resident Kati Lear shared her experience inside **the** Atlanta airport.

"I asked where I could bring Sophie and (airport officials) gave me a newspaper and told me to take my dog into **the** bathroom," Lear said.

Ideally, members would like to have an area accessible from **the** secure area of **the** airport.

A group of "puppy raisers" visited **the** airport in Sarasota to find they had to make an inconvenient hike away from **the** terminal, said Debbie Grubb, Bradenton, chairwoman of public education.

"They had to go through **the** baggage area, cross traffic and go through a hole in **the** fence," she said, noting **the** hardship this would create, especially **for** someone who needed to make a connecting flight.

But members of **the** group are also there to help and support each other as they navigate their relationships with their dogs.

"All dogs are as bad as you let them or as good as you make them," Hall said. "Each of us has developed our own way, and have opinions about how to do things. I still need people to tell me about things I don't know."

Guide dogs undergo about two years of training, Trutschel said. Users are required to train with their dogs **for** a minimum of two weeks if they are an experienced handler or 26 days if it's their first dog.

"There are a lot of signals **for** both **the** dogs and **the** owners to learn," she said.

"Forward" and "find **the** door" are among **the** easier commands **for the** dog to learn. "Intelligent disobedience," or intentionally disobeying instructions when it would be unsafe to comply, is not.

"Having a dog makes it much easier to (cross streets) in traffic," said Jody Milisavic, **the** group's treasurer and a reservationist at Votran **for** its para-transit service. "If it's not safe, (Rusty, her third dog) would not go."

Milisavic got her first dog when she was 20.

"I was getting ready to go to college," she said. "It boosts your self-confidence, and you can move so much faster (than with a cane)."

The 36-year-old mother of two said she felt somewhat vulnerable as a woman "tapping around with a cane."

"You're always with someone," Milisavic said. "You're never alone because you're there with your dog."

Even at work, Rusty sits under her desk.

"Fortunately, we have big desks," Milisavic said.

Did You Know?

Germans began training blind veterans with guide dogs after World War I.

*Dorothy Harrison Eustis, a wealthy American dog breeder and trainer, visited **the** German training school and wrote a story about **the** guide dogs **for the** Saturday Evening Post.

*Morris Frank, a young blind man in Tennessee, wrote to Eustis in Switzerland, where she was living, and persisted until she agreed to let him come there to train him with a dog.

*Eustis asked Frank to start a school when he returned to **the** United States. He founded **The** Seeing Eye in 1929.

SOURCE: Guide Dog Foundation **for the** Blind

Cutline: Photo 1: Jody Milisavic takes a break from her job and goes **for** a short walk with her service guide dog Rusty near **the** Votran complex in South Daytona recently. Milisavic is an advocate **for** guide dogs and a member of Guide Dog Users of Florida.

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Photo 2: Dorothy Harrison Eustis