**Agency Profile and Project Definition: National Service Dogs**

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**Introduction**

*“One individual, one dog, one life at a time.” (NSD, 2023)*

 National Service Dogs grew from one mother’s search and eventual success in finding a service dog for her autistic child in 1996 (NSD, 2023). The team attracted media attention and increased awareness of the benefits of canine involvement in managing autism; by 1999, Danielle Forbes, Heather and Chris Fowler had founded the “first Certified Service Dog for Autism Program of its kind in the world,” and their model continues to set the standard for service dogs matched with autistic children today (NSD, 2023). Since its conception in 1996, NSD has matched “over 555 Certified Service Dog, Facility, and Companion Dog teams, helped many service dog programs around the world start their own autism programs” and now also produces dogs for PTSD sufferers, Canine Assisted Interventions, and offers companion dog services (NSD, 2023). With these expansions, they are able utilize 90% of the dogs they work with as dogs are trained according to their unique abilities and temperament; those who are unable to become certified service dogs are placed into homes as companions for disabled children (NSD, 2023).

 NSD has national and provincial support arising from its accomplishments and values. Aside from becoming the first program training service dogs for autism, their Canine Assisted Intervention Dog Program was the first in Ontario, and is only one of three in Canada (NSD, 2023). Their mission is “to empower people to achieve their full potential with strategically trained and certified service dogs, catalysts for restorative change” (NSD, 2023). They value collaboration, compassion, ethical training practices, and innovation (NSD, 2023). The organization is accredited through Assistance Dogs International, the Canadian Association of Guide and Assistance Dog School, and one of two-hundred charities out of 85,000 across Canada to be accredited with Imagine Canada for excellence, leadership, and verifiability (NSD, 2023).

**Background**

NSD is a charity dependent on donations, fundraising events, sponsorships, and volunteers to operate. It receives no government funding (NSD, 2023). Over their 8-10 year lifetime, service dogs have an average monetary value of $50,000, but are provided to successful applicants almost free (there is a $50 application fee and a $250 equipment charge if successful) (NSD, 2023). Canine Assisted Intervention Dogs are provided at no-cost to non-profit organizations, but if private or corporate, they can be purchased through the “fee for service” model (NSD, 2023). Applicants are chosen through specific criteria, that considers need, ability to care for the dog, and living arrangements- it is obligation free and does not pressure clients to fundraise or contribute financially (NSD, 2023). Donations do not influence who is matched with a dog (NSD, 2023).

 Problems currently faced by NSD, and applicants are the long wait times and high demand for dogs (NSD, 2023). From time of approval, the average wait time to be matched with a dog is two years (NSD, 2023). NSD is no long accepting applications as they do not have enough dogs available to meet the need (NSD, 2023). The Canadian Foundation for Animal Assisted Support Services identifies “long waiting lists” and “rising costs to acquire, care for, and support service dog teams” (2023) as areas of concern. Service dogs are not factory made; they are sentient individuals who require up to two years to train to standard. The people with disabilities requiring dogs are often on fixed or low incomes, making buying a dog through the private sector out of reach, *if* they can even find one. A study into the Canadian service dog industry found 67% of respondents rated “a service dog fund to help clients in financial need to cover costs associated with their service dog” as very important (CFAASS, 2020). This as well as the lack of suitable dogs, volunteers, and trainers contributes to long wait times. The service dog industry, NSD included, was disrupted by the COVID-19 pandemic, whose restrictions affected dog socialization, puppy development, breeding programs, and team placements, has resulted in less dogs available for placement (NSD, 2022).

 Dogs require specific personality traits to become fully certified service dogs, and often do not make it through training. NSD has their own breeding program to produce healthy puppies with intelligence and a pleasing disposition, but it still takes 1.5 to 2 years for pups to mature, become socialized and trained for service work if they are successful (NSD, 2023). Partnering with other dog breeders and doing personality testing to select likely service dog candidates could help NSD obtain more pups likely to succeed in their program. Also, creating a stream to accept young adult dogs in need of rehoming or that have been placed in shelters could also increase the pool of canine candidates for NSD, expedite training and socialization, and their maturity could allow for more accurate temperament testing. NSD should raise awareness for this project and encourage pet owners to turn to them before a shelter. As post- COVID, volunteers return to their regular routines or are less able to donate their time (NSD, 2022), NSD could benefit from funding to better incentivize experience volunteers to remain with the program for longer or hire and train more permanent staff. With a team of properly trained staff, NSD could produce consistently high quality service dogs more efficiently.

NSD has been proactive in expanding programs, fundraising, and recruiting volunteers and awareness through events, advertisements, their online presence, and involvement within the service dog industry. They have partnered with organizations, such as Wounded Warriors Canada, the Donnor Canadian Foundation, RAWZ Fund, and others to raise awareness and financial supports; they also receive substantial funding through ‘legacy gifts’ (after the donor has passed on) (NSD, 2023; NSD, 2022). Legacy gifts enabled the opening of NSD’s Education Center in 2022 (NSD, 2022), which has fulfilled their vision of becoming a deployment center for NSD service dogs across Canada, and activity and educational site, and in increasing NSD’s accessibility to their community (NSD, 2022). Recent annual reports reveal that annual revenue is increasing, but it is heavily dependent on general donations (47.8% of revenue) and gifts from other charities (44.4%) (NSD, 2022; NSD, 2021).

 NSD has not (based on available information) attempted to repurpose young adult dogs from shelters and private owners for use as service animals. This project of diversifying the source of their dogs expands on their guide dog breeding and training program. Previously, NSD has focused on helping people in need, but including dogs in need of rehoming will also benefit the welfare of dogs that would otherwise be living in inadequate circumstances, placed into shelters, or put down. During the COVID pandemic, dogs were adopted in “record numbers”, but now that their owners are returning to their routines, they are finding that a dog does not fit into their lifestyle and are surrendering these ‘pandemic puppies’ (Pierce & Bekoff, 2021). This is distressful for the dogs as they are accustomed to their use of a ‘human surrogate’ and being attached to their person all day- while this leads to disruptive behaviors and separation anxiety when the dogs are left home alone all day (Pierce & Bekoff, 2021), it can be advantageous for service dog use given their predilection to attach to one person.

Volunteers have been a critical part of NSD but given the continued decrease of volunteerism as inflation affects the affordability of both monetary and time donations (Canadahelps.org, 2023; Natesh, 2023), more incentive needs to be offered for continued participation. NSD has tried to incentivize volunteerism through volunteer bonuses, events, and benefits (NSD, 2021; NSD, 2022; NSD, 2023) but it should expand its staffing and employ qualified dog trainers and caretakers to improve quality of service, efficiency, and continuation.

**Discussion**

 The project suggested is multidimensional in that it seeks to improve well-being and create positive impact for both dogs and people. It connects to NSDs mission statement, “one individual, one dog, one life at a time” (NSD, 2023) in being an individualized service that partners canines with people to improve the lives of both (in the case of repurposing dogs in need of rehoming). Its objective is to address leading concerns in the service dog industry regarding supply, funds, and staffing, and hopefully the research prior to and continuing throughout the product will lead to further innovations to improve the accessibility of service dogs while at the same time reducing the number of dogs in shelters.

* Who: National Service Dogs and its clients. Its clients include people of all ages with physical and mental disabilities; disabled and autistic children and youth; peer support groups and non-profits. The clients are typically unable to afford to purchase a service dog privately, although there is a fee-for-service option for therapy and peer support dogs.
* What:
	+ 1. Potential service dogs to be sourced from puppies to young adult dogs (1 month to 24 months old) from shelters, breeders closing post-pandemic, or surrendered by owner, with potential for success in any of NSD’s training and placement programs.
	+ 2. Create a team of qualified and trained staff to provide well trained service dogs to clients, properly socialize puppies and young dogs, resolve behavioral concerns seen in surrendered dogs, and reduce dependency on volunteers. Also, having a paid team increases consistency, efficiency, and could be used to identify the most effective and time efficient methods to produce a ready-to-place service dog.
* Where: At the NSD primary training center, as well as at any of its other branches. If the program is successful, NSD could educate other service dog providers on strategies they discover throughout the process, to encourage other service dog providers to adopt a similar model to enable them to provide more dogs.
* When: The plan is continually being researched, reassessed, and revised, with the hopes of having a pilot program to test and further refine strategies operating by summer 2024.
* Why:
	+ 1. There is a shortage of service dogs, due to lack of supply, curtailed breeding programs, staffing shortages, and other factors.
	+ 2. There is a surplus of young dogs being surrendered to shelters or rehomed as their owners are no longer able to care for the,
	+ 3. The number of volunteers and donations is decreasing and unlikely to improve given an increasingly precarious economic climate and rising costs of living.
	+ 4. There is an increasing number of people requiring service dogs, plus greater awareness of their benefits and potential applications in a variety of circumstances that is also increasing demand.
	+ 5. The current supply of dogs from delegated breeding programs is unable to keep up with demand.

**Conclusion**

 Although outcomes are never completely predictable, especially when animals are involved, this project has the potential to reform the current service dog industry in a way that will better enable it to meet the volume of and needs of clients in the future. As well as promoting accessibility and inclusiveness for more people with disabilities, it also considers animal rights and welfare. Nonprofits are having to restructure themselves to survive changes in the 21st century, so the findings of this research and its application could also be applied to other social entrepreneurial efforts and as a case study for other charities looking to become more sustainable. The immediate impacts of this project are expected to be on the micro-scale, “one individual, one dog, one life at a time” (NSD, 2023).

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