**Interview Questions: British Columbia & Alberta Guide Dog Organization**

Website: <https://bcandalbertaguidedogs.com/>

\*Date of Interview: March 8, 2024, with Bill Thorton

1. Your website says you use labrador retrievers, golden retrievers, or a mix of the two in your program. Have you ever experimented with other breeds, and what were the results?

-There is a foundation in Connecticut that only uses German Shepherd dogs, but they are an anomaly.

-Service dogs have been utilized since 1929. German shepherds where the original guide dogs trained to serve blind or visually impaired German veterans. The breed is no longer used often for service dogs because although they are excellent working dogs, they can be protective of their owners or too dominant or aggressive towards other dogs, which can make them unsuitable for public access work. Because the breed needs a job, they can be difficult to find suitable homes for as they need to be kept working. They have been found to have one of the lowest success rates among breeds for service dog work, although they make excellent police and military dogs.

-Despite many breeds of dogs having been trained (or tried to) for service work, golden retrievers and labrador retrievers remain the dog breeds of choice. Specifically, they need to come from a well bred lineage of which the genetic and medical history of the parents is known, and from dogs chosen for their temperament to meet the unique needs of the job. Dogs need to be able to work at least 8 years, and they need to be healthy to do this.

-Poodle crosses have gained popularity, but he does not recommend using them because they’re lineage cannot be traced.

-given the high failure rate of dogs to complete public access certification and reliably perform, he strongly recommends only using dogs specifically bred for that purpose; it is also the more cost-effective way, as more dogs make it through the program.

1. Your website says that dogs are sourced from your own breeder program, or from other guide dog organizations; also that you begin training dogs while in the early puppy stage. Have you/do you ever take in young adult dogs or dogs from shelters for training?

They have tried, and he has trained dogs from shelters and rescues himself, but typically they are unsuitable as fully certified service animals and their working life cannot be estimated due to not knowing their genetics or history. He has talked to other programs who have tried to use shelter or rescue dogs, and of every hundred dogs, ten or less were able to become fully certified service dogs- he has encouraged these groups to start a breeding program if their goal is to produce service dogs. They could however, still be placed as trained family or companion animals into homes who do not want a dog for public access work, at a reasonable cost.

1. What is the approximate success and failure rate for dogs in your program to become certified as service dogs competent for public access?
* Currently, they are a bit behind in their program due to lack of socialization during the COVID lockdowns. But currently their success rate is 68% (that become fully certified).
* BC-AB service dogs has very high standards for health, temperament, and breeding. Their success has risen through a diligent breeding program selecting dogs specifically with the traits for service work
1. What does your program do to rehome dogs who would be unable to pass public access training, or otherwise are unsuitable for the specific service dogs that you specialize in? Are there other streams they go into (like service dogs, facility dogs, comfort dogs, trained companion animals)?
	1. They work to find appropriate homes that best suit the dog and prefer working homes where the dog will have a fulfilling life. They may become companion animals, therapy/facility/comfort dogs, etc.
	2. This is a reason why they do not use German shepherds/collies- high energy dogs- they are hard to place into homes where they will be properly cared for, as they need a job and lots of exercise that the average person is unlikely to give them.
2. For a business start-up interesting in transitioning to a non-profit organization, would you recommend beginning as a private business (for more freedom in program development) or advise that they begin to develop themselves as a non-profit immediately?

-recommended starting as a for-profit, as it is just one individual (me) starting off and having to build a program and develop the skills and knowledge necessary to produce quality trained service dogs

1. Have you had any clients that expressed interest in a trained service dog for psychiatric assistance of support for autism, but as a companion animal without needing to go out in public as a fully certified dog?

\*did not discuss, mentioned in earlier question that there is still benefit in this and they place dogs into homes who are still good dogs, but not suitable for public access.

-says that their dogs that don’t make it through the program are still very good dogs, that make excellent companions even outside of working homes

1. Which type of service dog is in the most demand from your program?

\*Autism support dogs- cannot keep up with demand

- was able to increase the number of dogs produced for people with autism this year to forty (from 29 several years prior). He recognized that 85% of the training for autism support dogs and psychiatric support dogs was the same, so had the trainers who normally trained psychiatric service dogs train for autism assistance as well

1. Is there a particular demographic that you find your volunteers fit into more? For puppy raisers and dog boarding?

-they have not studied the demographics yet, but he thinks perhaps they should. They see a range of people who volunteer.

Most volunteers are puppy raisers: they are often families, empty nesters, or seniors. Families like the puppy raising because their child gets a puppy without them having to keep the dog for years (especially if the child loses interest) … the child gets the education and responsibility of raising and looking after the dog.

1. It sounds like you are established enough that people request dogs from you. But when the organization was starting up, how did you connect with people with disabilities who were looking for service dogs?

-Thorton himself had trained dogs prior to his career at BC-AB guide dogs and had an excellent reputation. The organizations he worked for before continued to want to match people with dogs from him.

-When they decided to start training service dogs for autism, reached out to organizations serving that community

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1. What have you found to be the most successful in recruiting volunteers?
	1. Most of their volunteers are puppy raisers. They have puppy raisers bring their pups to any events and conferences they go through. Word of mouth through the puppy raisers as they interact with people while going out with their dogs during their normal day is possibly the best form of recruitment; people are excited to talk about the pups and what they are doing to socialize and train them.
2. In your experience, do you think youth at risk, or marginalized groups would be able to help train and socialize young dogs for service work, with supervision and guidance?
	1. It depends. For the dogs to thrive and learn, they need consistency, and the people need to have reasonable training skills with dogs or be able to develop them throughout the program.
	2. You need to consider whether the program is set up to help dogs, or people. The people may enjoy it and benefit more from it then the dogs, if the program does not consider the dog’s needs.
3. What online training programs for aspiring guide dog instructors would you recommend?

-there are not service-dog training specific certifications, it is a skill developed through experience, effort, and continued learning

1. It mentioned that community events are a large part of your fundraising efforts. What kinds of events have you found to be the most successful in attracting participants and raising funds?
	1. Legacy funds, donations, grants, and funding through foundations are their largest source of income
	2. It is very hard to make substantial money through fundraising events, unless the people attending are ‘very well – heeled’ . It also takes a lot of effort, time, and uses financial resources to put on fundraisers.
	3. Fundraisers they do or have done are galas, golf tournaments, and trivia nights.
2. What are the demographics that typically attend these fundraising events? – difficult to host, not a set demographic
3. How often are canine and human client matches successful?

98%. Nothing will be perfect with imperfect creatures (referring to both

1. What are some specific things you look for while screening applicants to check their suitability for caring for a service dog, while remaining inclusive?
	1. They deal with people who are marginalized, restricted as part of the job
	2. (asked about discrimination regarding people’s socioeconomic class and being able to afford a job and provide a g good life for the dog): The criteria varies based on the program. They need to be able to afford standard care and have a stable life, housing (not just relocating frequently). People need to be stabilized enough to care for the dog.
	3. BC-AB guide dogs helps clients financially if the dog develops health issues. It is emotionally and financially better to help keep the service dog team together.
2. Other:

-They stopped taking applications for dogs around when COVID started. COVID hit the industry hard, as they had to curtail their breeding program and could not run classes or socialize dogs properly during the lockdown. The industry is still recovering, he predicts it will take at least three years to regain the ground they lost during the COVID pandemic. The demand for fully trained service dogs has remained high.

- He says it is unethical to pass off a dog whose health or behaviors are uncertain as a service dog. Dogs already have shorter lives then humans, he said you should be breeding dogs that are generally capable of an eight year work life with retirement at around ten years old. If any of their dogs later develop health issues, they pay to treat the health issues that developed themselves to keep the service dog team together.

-they only accept clients from BC and Alberta