

PUBLIC ACCESS TEST FOR OWNER-TRAINED SERVICE DOGS

From Wendi Coffman-Porter I've trained police K9s, mobility dogs for veterans, and my own life-saving allergy-alert dogs. Training a real service dog is not quick or easy. It usually takes me about two full years of consistent work, followed by a solid one to two months of heavy, repeated public exposures before I will ever pass a dog for full public access.

I never pass a dog after just one outing — that's not how real life works. Public access must be proven over time, in many different places, with many different distractions. This test is split into two phases so you know exactly when your dog is ready to begin safe public training and when they are truly ready to work beside you anywhere.

Print this, keep it in your training binder, and use it as a guide. Check things off only after you've seen the behavior hold up multiple times in real situations.

PHASE 1: PRE-PUBLIC ACCESS READINESS TEST

Purpose: These are the minimum skills your puppy or young dog must reliably have before you safely take them into public places to begin real-world training. Passing this phase means the dog is safe enough to start learning in stores, restaurants, etc.

All items must be reliable in at least 3 different low-distraction locations before moving to Phase 2.

- Sit on command (stays until released)
- Down on command (stays until released)
- Stay (3 minutes with handler 6–10 feet away)
- Reliable recall (“come”) from 20+ feet, even with mild distractions
- Potty on command (in appropriate places, on cue)
- Loose-leash walking / focus on handler (no pulling, no lunging)
- Ignore food on the ground (no sniffing, no eating dropped items)
- Ignore other people (no jumping, no greeting, no begging for attention)
- Calm around babies, toddlers, and children (no reactivity)

- Performs at least one basic service skill reliably (whatever your dog's future tasks will be)
- No barking, whining, or vocalizing when working

Notes for Phase 1: If the dog can do all of these consistently, you can safely begin taking them into public for controlled training outings. If not, keep working at home and in low-distraction areas.

PHASE 2: FULL PUBLIC ACCESS TEST

Purpose: This is the real-world test. The dog must prove they can work calmly and focused in busy, unpredictable environments. This phase is done over multiple outings (never just one day). I usually spread it across 4–8 weeks with many different locations.

The dog must pass every item in at least 5–7 different real public settings before I consider them fully ready.

- Calm entry and exit from vehicle
- Loose-leash walking through large crowds without pulling or reactivity
- Handles other dogs (passing at close distance without distraction or reaction)
- Works calmly around loud noises — including live music in a bar or busy restaurant
- Ignores food on the ground and food being served around them (no begging, no stealing)
- Settles quietly under table or chair in a restaurant (no wandering, no vocalizing)
- Remains focused on handler even with babies, toddlers, strollers, and children nearby
- Handles sudden movements, clapping, cheering, or loud talking
- Stays calm during simulated or real medical situations (fire department visit recommended — sirens, lights, stretchers, uniforms)
- Performs all required service skills reliably in public (at least two tasks per my Rule of Two)
- No elimination, no accidents, no disruptive behavior
- Handler can drop leash or step away briefly while dog holds a stay

Handler must demonstrate full control at all times. No treats or heavy corrections during testing. Praise and calm guidance are fine.

IMPORTANT NOTES FROM MY EXPERIENCE

- Public access is proven over time, not in one perfect day.
- If the dog fails any item, go back to training and try again in a week or two.

- Fire departments are almost always happy to help — call yours and ask for a desensitization visit (sirens, lights, medical equipment). It's one of the best exposures you can give.
- Remember: a real service dog is calm, focused, and unobtrusive. If they draw attention to themselves, they aren't ready.

Final Sign-Off

Dog's Name: _____

Handler's Name: _____

Date(s) of Testing: _____

Tester / Observer (optional): _____

I have observed this team over multiple outings and believe they meet the standards for safe public access.

Signature: _____ Date: _____

Strength stands watch

And so do I.

Wendi Coffman-Porter | *Author & Professional K9 Trainer* www.furpower.org