

WHAT SERVICE DOGS CAN BE TRAINED TO DO A REAL HANDLER'S GUIDE

I've spent decades working with dogs — from police K9s to mobility dogs for veterans to my own life-saving allergy-alert partner. One thing I tell every new handler is this: a service dog is a working partner, not a pet, not an emotional support animal, and never a protection dog. They are never trained to bite, guard, attack, or threaten anyone. That's not what service dogs do.

A true service dog is individually trained to perform specific tasks that directly help mitigate a person's disability — something the handler cannot do for themselves. Under the ADA, even one solid task can qualify a dog, but I always recommend at least two (my personal "Rule of Two") because these dogs work 24/7 and deserve to be truly helpful.

Here's a comprehensive list of real, legitimate tasks service dogs can be trained to perform. I've grouped them by category so you can see what might fit your needs. This comes from my own experience, accredited programs, and years of watching dogs change lives.

MOBILITY & PHYSICAL ASSISTANCE TASKS

- Pull a wheelchair or walker
- Provide counterbalance or bracing for stability while walking
- Help the handler stand up after a fall
- Steady the handler during balance loss
- Open and close doors (push plates, tug straps, or handles)
- Turn lights on/off
- Pick up dropped items (phone, keys, medication, etc.)
- Retrieve specific named items from another room
- Push elevator buttons or automatic door buttons
- Carry small items in a backpack or side pouches
- Assist with dressing/undressing (pull off socks, pants, sleeves)
- Help with bed-to-wheelchair or chair-to-standing transfers

MEDICAL ALERT & RESPONSE TASKS

- Alert to oncoming seizures (before or during)

- Alert to blood sugar highs or lows (diabetes)
- Alert to heart rate or blood pressure changes
- Alert to impending fainting, syncope, or dizziness
- Alert to migraines or other neurological events
- Alert to allergic reactions or specific airborne allergens (like corn proteins in my case)
- Respond by bringing medication, waking the handler, getting help, or guiding the handler to safety
- Deep Pressure Therapy (DPT) during medical episodes
- Block the handler from falling into danger during a medical event

PSYCHIATRIC & MENTAL HEALTH TASKS

- Interrupt panic attacks or dissociative episodes
- Provide Deep Pressure Therapy during anxiety or PTSD episodes
- Wake the handler from nightmares or night terrors
- Ground the handler with tactile stimulation (nudge, paw, lean)
- Block or “pass block” in crowds to create personal space
- Guide the handler to an exit or safe place when overwhelmed
- Interrupt repetitive or harmful behaviors
- Alert to rising anxiety, flashbacks, or PTSD symptoms
- Provide room-clear or safety-check behaviors for severe PTSD

HEARING & SENSORY ALERT TASKS

- Alert to door knocks, doorbells, or someone calling the handler’s name
- Alert to phone ringing, alarms, fire/smoke detectors, or oven timers
- Alert to important public announcements or baby crying

ALLERGEN & SCENT DETECTION TASKS

- Detect specific food or environmental allergens (corn, gluten, nuts, dairy, latex, etc.)
- Alert before exposure to airborne allergen proteins
- Check food or surfaces for safe vs. unsafe items
- Guide the handler away from an allergen source

VISION / GUIDE TASKS

- Guide around obstacles, curbs, stairs, or overhead hazards
- Find exits, specific locations, or named people

DAILY LIVING & RETRIEVAL TASKS

- Retrieve medication from a counter or bag at a set time
- Bring water or a beverage
- Help with laundry (drop clothes in hamper)
- Fetch a specific person in the house for help
- Find lost items like keys or phone

OTHER HELPFUL TASKS

- Find the handler if separated in public
- Go get a trusted person for help
- Provide balance support while the handler is dressing or in the shower (with proper cues)

These are just examples — the possibilities are as unique as the disabilities they help with. The key is that each task must be trained to directly help with something the handler cannot do on their own.

If you're raising or training your own service dog, start with the exposures and socialization checklist (also on this site) and build your tasks slowly. And remember: real service dogs are calm, focused, and never disruptive. They're not there to protect you by biting or threatening — they're there to stand watch with love and steady work.

Strength stands watch

And so do I.

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