



Factsheet for health practitioners: Options for patients seeking an assistance dog in New Zealand

When discussing options for patients seeking an assistance dog, it is important to understand:

- An assistance dog is not the right form of support for everyone.
- Significant training and resources are required.
- Patients must work with an authorised provider.
- Demand is far greater than supply.

Increasing numbers of disabled people are seeking support in the form of a trained assistance dog. This factsheet outlines the options available in New Zealand, and key matters for health and disability support providers to consider.

What is a disability assist dog?

In New Zealand, the law recognises ‘**disability assist dogs**’, often referred to as assistance or service dogs, and provides protected access rights. Emotional support, companion, and therapy dogs are unregulated, and do not have protected access rights in NZ.

Disability assist dogs **must be trained and certified** by an organisation authorised under [Schedule 5](#) of the Dog Control Act 1996:

- [Assistance Dogs New Zealand Trust](#)
- [Hearing Dogs for Deaf People New Zealand](#)
- [K9 Medical Detection](#)
- [Mobility Assistance Dogs Trust](#)
- [New Zealand Epilepsy Assist Dogs Trust](#)
- [Pawsible Service Dogs](#)
- [Perfect Partners Assistance Dogs Trust](#)
- [Royal New Zealand Foundation of the Blind Incorporated](#) (Blind Low Vision NZ)

K9 Search Medical Detection (K9SMD) was removed from the list of authorised Schedule 5 organisations on 20 December 2024. Any dogs certified by K9SMD before this date retain their legal access rights. From 20 December 2024, no dogs can be certified by K9SMD.

These organisations train dogs to work with people with a range of different disabilities, including vision impairment, hearing loss, autism, cerebral palsy, and epilepsy. Disability assist dogs are trained to perform specific tasks that assist their handler and enable them to be as independent as possible.

Protected access rights

Disability assist dog teams or teams in training have legal access rights under the Dog Control Act 1996. They may enter public places and private businesses that are open to the public, even where general “no dogs” policies apply. This means they are allowed in:

- buses, trains, taxis, and other public transport
- shops, movie theatres, and other retail spaces
- cafés and restaurants
- hotels and accommodation buildings
- hospitals and other health facilities
- public buildings and services (for example reception areas)
- places of assembly, including churches and conference facilities
- education settings.
- Any of these places can set reasonable conditions, for example, the dog must stay on the floor and remain under the handler’s control.

Who can get a disability assist dog?

A letter from a medical professional, such as a doctor or counsellor, is not enough for a person to receive a disability assist dog or have their pet dog certified as one. If you receive queries from patients or clients seeking a disability assist dog or certification of their own dog as a disability assist dog, we recommend you encourage them to contact an authorised organisation to discuss what options may be available.

Certifying organisations do not train, register, certify or accredit any dog that is not part of their programme. The authorised Schedule 5 organisations have agreed minimum training and certification standards for their disability assist dogs. Each organisation will consider a range of factors including the nature of the handler’s disability, their capacity to engage in training, and their ongoing health and other support needs.

Key facts about disability assist dogs

- **Not every dog is suitable to work as a disability assist dog.** A dog must have an appropriate temperament, drive, and standard of health. Many prospective dogs do not successfully complete training due to the high standard required. Generally, authorised organisations do not accept pets into training, and will breed or source dogs themselves to ensure the best chance of success.
- **Disability assist dogs are still dogs.** They require care and attention, and opportunities to take a break from their work. They cannot be on duty 24/7.
- **Timing matters.** Many people apply for a disability assist dog during periods of acute distress or when they are at their most unwell. Sadly, this is often not the right time to take on the responsibility of raising and training a disability assist dog.

- As required by their Schedule 5 certifying organisation, a disability assist dog needs to reliably perform **at least three specific, trained tasks** that directly assist the person with their disability. Simply accompanying their handler in public is not a task. This is in line with international best practice set out by Assistance Dogs International and the agreed minimum training and certification standards the authorised organisations have agreed to.
- **The training process for disability assist dogs can be extensive.** Much of the training process involves the dog and the handler working together. There is a high cognitive and emotional load that is required consistently over two or more years. Applicants often underestimate how much work is involved — and when things become overwhelming, the risk of burnout is high for both the handler and the dog.
- **Waitlists can be long.** The high standards required, and costs mean that supply of disability assist dogs cannot keep up with demand. Waiting lists can be years long, and this should be considered by aspiring handlers.
- **A disability assist dog is costly.** The lifetime cost of a disability assist dog can be high, including training, healthcare, and specialised diet. Many providers are volunteer-led, and handlers must secure some or all of the funding required themselves.

More information

You can learn more by contacting an authorised organisation directly, or visit the Ministry for Cities, Environment, Regions and Transport's website: <https://www.mcert.govt.nz/our-work/local-government/dog-control/disability-assist-dogs/>