



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. Emotional support, companion, and therapy dogs are unregulated, and do not have public access rights in NZ.

Disability assist dogs **must be trained and certified** by one of eight organisations* authorised under the Dog Control Act 1996:

| | |
|--|---|
| <u>Assistance Dogs New Zealand</u> | <u>New Zealand Epilepsy Assist Dogs Trust</u> |
| <u>Hearing Dogs NZ</u> | <u>Pawsible Service Dogs</u> |
| <u>K9 Medical Detection</u> | <u>Perfect Partners Assistance Dogs</u> |
| <u>Mobility Dogs</u> | <u>Blind Low Vision NZ</u> |

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.

Certified disability assist dogs have the right to access any public place and private business – including supermarkets, health facilities, shops and malls, food outlets, motels or hotels, movie theatres and restaurants. Disability assist dogs are entitled to travel on all forms of public transport, including in taxis. Permission may be needed to enter a marae or church.

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 provider 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. Each authorised organisation maintains their own training and assessment process for prospective handlers. 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.
- 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.
- **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.
- **Wait lists 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 expensive.** 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 provider directly, or visit the Department of Internal Affairs' website: <https://www.dia.govt.nz/Dog-Control-Disability-Assists-Dogs>.

*Note: K9 **Search** Medical Detection was removed from the list of authorised organisations, effective 20 December 2024. This organisation can no longer train and certify disability assist dogs. K9 Medical Detection is a separate organisation and is still authorised under the Dog Control Act.