



Vision Australia Seeing Eye Dogs

Seeing Eye Dogs

Animal Welfare Code

Choice – Care – Connection

At Vision Australia Seeing Eye Dogs we take a person-centered approach in how we support people who are blind or have low vision, (referred to as Seeing Eye Dogs clients). Our clients are at the centre of everything we do.

In harmony with this, we use a ‘dog-centered’ approach in how we care for our Seeing Eye Dogs pups and dogs from birth to retirement*. This approach enables us to respond to the individual needs of every dog.

We believe that happy and healthy dogs are essential in achieving the best outcomes for both dogs and their clients who are blind or have low vision.

The Seeing Eye Dogs Animal Welfare Code follows the three guiding principles of choice, care, and connection.

***for the purposes of this document, the word ‘dogs’ refers to puppies and dogs of all ages.**

Who we are and what we do

In breeding, caring for, and training Seeing Eye Dogs, we strive to develop and maintain innovative, high-quality dog services valued by people who are blind or have low vision.

We are an accredited member of the International Guide Dog Federation (IGDF) and Assistance Dogs International (ADI).

How does a Seeing Eye Dog support a person who is blind or has low vision?

A Seeing Eye Dog works as a team with a person who is blind or has low vision (a client) to safely, efficiently, and confidently travel to work, participate in education and

recreation activities, visit friends and family, to use public transport, and to access the community.

Many Seeing Eye Dogs clients share with us that they experience a reduction in fatigue and anxiety, and an increase in speed and confidence when travelling with their Seeing Eye Dog.

“Seeing Eye Dog Neesha is my guide and she’s my companion, my confidence, my company. The world is our oyster, we travel and walk into a room filled with strangers with no concern at all because we’ve got each other.” - Cassie, Seeing Eye Dogs client

Seeing Eye Dogs pups and dogs living happy and healthy lives

At Seeing Eye Dogs our commitment and responsibility to the welfare of our dogs is governed by:

- International Guide Dog Federation and Assistance Dog International standards, and
- National and state-based domestic animal welfare legislation,

and is guided by:

- our principles of choice, care, and connection,
- the Five Domains Model¹ of animal welfare,
- positive reinforcement training methods,
- the humane hierarchy of behaviour modification², and
- a least intrusive, minimally aversive approach to dog handling³.

The Five Domains model of animal welfare, developed by David Mellor, is a widely recognised animal welfare model which promotes positive experiences and welfare outcomes in the five areas of:

- nutrition,
- living environment,
- health and fitness,
- behavioural interactions, and
- mental state.

*In our day-to-day operations at Vision Australia Seeing Eye Dogs, we apply the five domains model of animal welfare through our three guiding principles of **choice, care, and connection**.*

Choice

We are committed to all our dogs having a sense of choice and control in their lives, and opportunities to take part in interesting and enjoyable activities.

Training

All dogs receive regular and consistent positive reinforcement to support their success.

- Positive reward-based training is used with all our dogs based on the individual dog's preferences.
- Rewards are given when the dog chooses to complete a behaviour we would like to encourage.
- When given the choice, our dogs will choose to repeat these rewarded behaviours.
- Rewards provided are based on individual preferences and needs, and may include verbal praise, food, physical contact (pats), and play.
- The environment is set up to make it easier for our dogs to achieve the desired behaviours to become a working Seeing Eye Dog.

Engagement

All dogs are provided with opportunities to choose how they engage in enjoyable activities and rewarding behaviours.

This includes a variety of daily activities provided to meet each dog's individual needs such as:

- social activities; interacting with people and other dogs and engaging in play,
- natural dog behaviour; chewing on safe dog chews, and using food dispensing toys/puzzles to encourage problem-solving,
- regular age and health-appropriate physical activities such as walking and safe off-lead play with humans or other dogs,
- age-appropriate training activities to provide mental stimulation, and
- access to a variety of environments which allow them the choice of how to engage with their space, including moving towards or away from interactions with people and other animals.

Co-operative Care

All dogs are provided with choice and comfort in their everyday care.

- Seeing Eye Dogs is committed to implementing cooperative care with all our dogs.
- Cooperative care provides opportunities for dogs to choose to actively participate in their everyday care.
- Cooperative is a two-way communication between the dog and the person.
- Our dogs are rewarded with verbal praise, pats, and food so they feel confident and comfortable in everyday activities such as bathing, grooming, and administering medication.

Care

We are committed to all our dogs receiving the highest level of care regarding their nutrition, health, and environment.

Health

All our dogs receive regular grooming, health care, and nutrition that meets their individual needs. This includes:

- regular grooming and nail trimming to maintain a healthy condition,
- expert routine health checks, and timely veterinary care if unwell,
- preventative health care as recommended by their treating veterinarian including:
 - worming preventatives,
 - flea and tick preventatives, and
 - vaccinations appropriate for the dog's life stage,
- a nutritionally balanced diet that meets the age, health, and reproductive stage of the dog, and
- a balanced and healthy diet, and fresh drinking water.

All our dogs in our breeding program are:

- supported by experienced veterinarians with professional expertise in canine reproduction,
- carefully selected based on their health, temperament, and the future needs of our clients, and
- given the very best care from our breeding team who are guided by external experts to remain up-to-date with current best practices.

Environment

All our dogs are housed in safe, secure, clean, and comfortable spaces including homes, training vans, and kennels. These spaces:

- are temperature controlled and/or monitored,
- are regularly cleaned,
- provide access to water and space to rest,
- provide dogs with the opportunity to move around and rest comfortably, and
- are free from potential hazards.

As part of formal training, Seeing Eye Dogs are often transported in specially designed Seeing Eye Dogs training vans. The temperatures in training vans are monitored with thermometers to ensure our dogs' safety and health at all times. Our dogs are also provided with water and are regularly checked by staff and/or volunteers.

Holistic care

Many elements work together to support a dog's welfare.

Providing care that considers the interaction of multiple factors such as the dog's environment, nutrition, age, social interactions, and health allows us to maintain higher welfare standards.

All clients, volunteers, and staff who care for our dogs will:

- check and monitor a dog's health and body condition,
- provide everyday care to our dogs with minimal stress,
- recognise signs of when a dog may be distressed or unwell,
- respond to each dog's mental and physical needs, and
- know what to do in a medical emergency.

Connection

We are committed to our dogs achieving meaningful connections and relationships with all people who provide them with care.

Positive connections

Education and support

Everyone who cares for our dogs will receive ongoing education on the most up-to-date information on animal welfare, effective inter-species communication, and how to use ethical and effective handling strategies.

Positive and meaningful connections between dogs, clients, volunteers, and staff are supported by:

- being aware of, and responsive to, a dog's individual needs and behaviours (this includes introducing new experiences and interactions with other people, animals, and environments at a pace that ensures the dog's comfort),
- using ethical and effective dog handling and positive reward-based training strategies,
- regularly engaging in a variety of enjoyable activities together such as grooming, exercise, and play, and
- ensuring dogs feel safe and secure when transitioning through different steps in our program and life stages.

Connecting the dog to the role that they choose

Our teams identify the best pathways for each dog, including graduating as a working Seeing Eye Dog, other assistance roles, or offering companionship to a family as a pet.

Connect and collaborate with partner organisations and industry experts

- Seeing Eye Dogs values the importance of national and international collaborations on learning and research to promote overall improvement in the care and outcomes for dogs bred to become Seeing Eye Dogs, dog guides, or service dogs.
- We proactively explore alternative roles with partner organisations for Seeing Eye Dogs that are better suited to other assistance or service dog careers.
- Seeing Eye Dogs engages with external experts to review our practices when opportunities for improvement are identified that require additional expertise.

Life Transitions

- We stay connected with all dogs in our program and support them through transitional phases including career change and retirement.
- Every one of our dogs is special, however, not all dogs are destined to become a Seeing Eye Dog.
- Our team explores many options for our career-changed dogs. Where appropriate this may be with another organisation in an alternative role or adopted as a pet by a loving family.
- We promote positive transitions by effectively communicating the dog's needs and preferences to the person and/or people who will be taking over care of the dog at each transition point.
- We ensure that any person or organisation that will take over the care or ownership of a Seeing Eye Dog has the knowledge and ability to provide the same standards of welfare provided by Seeing Eye Dogs.

We provide the highest level of care to ensure our dogs live happy and healthy lives, so they can support people who are blind or have low vision live the life they choose.

A Seeing Eye Dogs journey

Puppy-hood

After birth, our pups spend the first eight weeks of their lives with their mother and siblings. They are cared for by highly skilled puppy centre attendants who manage their health, development, and early socialisation.

Our pups are then placed into homes with loving volunteer puppy carers. They are regularly visited by Seeing Eye Dogs puppy development trainers who support puppy carers to raise happy and healthy Seeing Eye Dogs.

From these early stages, our dog care and veterinary teams provide ongoing support for all our dogs' physical needs and emotional wellbeing.

Upon reaching adulthood each dog's health and behaviour is individually assessed before entering our breeding or training program.

Breeding

- Dogs that join the breeding program undergo additional health checks to ensure their optimal health, and the health of future generations of Seeing Eye Dogs.
- Our breeding program uses the latest research and practices to ensure we meet the highest ethical and welfare standards.

Training and matching with clients

- Dogs that join the training program undergo approximately five months of intensive training with instructors.
- Instructors teach the required behaviours and skills for each dog in training to become a Seeing Eye Dog. Some examples include stopping at kerbs and guiding the client safely around obstacles.
- Our instructors work closely with our prospective clients to match them with a dog that best suits their needs, such as their walking speed, lifestyle, and the environments they travel in.

Support for Seeing Eye Dogs client and dog teams

- Instructors provide intensive initial support to a client and their dog for them to learn how to safely and efficiently travel together as a team. A client also learns how to care for their dog's physical and emotional wellbeing.
- Instructors continue to provide ongoing support throughout a client and dog team's journey together until retirement.

A Seeing Eye Dogs retirement

- Many factors may lead to a Seeing Eye Dog retiring, including the dog's health, mental well-being, mobility, and age.

- Our instructors provide support to the client to plan for their dog's retirement and transition to a successor dog.
- Once retired, a Seeing Eye Dog is commonly adopted by the client, a member of their family, or a friend.
- If the client or their family chooses not to adopt, Seeing Eye Dogs will assist with finding the dog the most appropriate loving home.

References

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