



Handling a Courthouse Facility Dog

Deciding on the staff member to be the primary handler of the Facility Dog is a critical part of establishing a successful program. Although more than one person can usually be trained to use the dog at work, there will be one person who is responsible for decisions about the dog's use and handling. The considerations for deciding on the primary handler fall into two categories – practical considerations and dog handling expertise.

Practical considerations

1. Living arrangements.

The Facility Dog will live with the primary handler, and so will be at her house evenings and weekends, and will be her responsibility when on vacation. All members of the handler's family have to be in agreement with having the Facility Dog as part of the family group. Are there other pets who need to be taken in to consideration? Is there a fenced yard for the dog? Where will he sleep and stay when the handler is away from home? The American Kennel Club's essay **Are You Ready for a Dog?** (http://www.akc.org/future_dog_owner/ready_for_dog.cfm) may help you think through some of the issues around having a dog join your household.

2. Financial considerations.

While a Facility Dog may be "free" in the sense that there is usually only a small cost to acquire the dog from a nonprofit association, in most cases the ongoing cost of the dog will fall on the shoulders of the primary handler. The annual cost of owning a pet dog has been calculated by many organizations at averaging about \$800. One web page that will help you see the different costs involved is at <http://www.peteducation.com/article.cfm?cls=2&cat=1671&articleid=1543>; look at the list of categories of expenses to get an idea of what you might be paying for on a regular basis. The primary handler of a Facility Dog should be certain that these costs will not be a problem for her, or she might consider making arrangements with the administrators of the facility to cover some of these expenses over the years.

3. Emotional involvement.

Most healthy Facility Dogs will work with their handler for about 8 years. The dog will be around 2 years of age when he is acquired, and by 10 years of age will probably need to be put on a less active schedule for the remainder of his life. The primary handler will need to decide what happens then. Should she get a new Facility Dog in order to continue her work, keeping the original dog as a pet? Is there another family member ready to adopt the older dog as a pet? It is inevitable that a handler will become attached to a dog over the course of years spent working together and it is wise for a potential handler to consider whether she will be able to handle difficult decisions about her dog partner in the future.

Dog handling abilities

1. Prior dog handling experience.

Because working with a Facility Dog involves juggling all of your regular responsibilities on the job, plus the added dimension of using a trained dog, it will be helpful if the handler has had experience in the past training and working with dogs, whether in obedience, agility, herding, tracking, or so on. Participating in any type of dog sport will have taught the handler to communicate smoothly with her dog.

2. Professional characteristics.

The ideal dog handler will be patient, self-confident, observant of her environment, and flexible enough to add a new tool to her working life. The Royal Canadian Mounted Police have an excellent essay entitled **The Qualities of a Good Dog Handler** (http://www.rcmp-grc.gc.ca/pds/cntr/hndlr_e.htm) that outlines many of the characteristics that will apply also to a good Facility Dog handler.

3. Continuing education.

In addition to continuing education in her field of expertise of law, child advocacy, elder abuse, victim advocacy, or other areas, a good handler will also be eager to constantly expand her knowledge of the field of dog behavior and training. The dog training nonprofit that your Facility Dog came from is your best source of resources and materials suitable for use with your dog.