

Service dogs not only provide a lifeline, helping people adapt and function in their day-to-day lives, but also unfettered companionship.

- *Is your dog slowing down?*
- *Is he or she having trouble getting up from the floor or laying down on the floor?*
- *Is she fine at home, but seems to be sore or limp a bit after working?*
- *Does he hesitate on elevated or slippery surfaces or when coming out of the vehicle?*
- *Does she lower her head routinely when stepping on only one of her front limbs?*
- *Does he have trouble performing specific tasks?*
- *Do elevators now cause her anxiety when they didn't before?*
- *Is he just not himself sometimes or you've noticed a little personality change?*

Just because a Service Dog may complete a task well, does not mean s/he is pain-free, or feeling his/her best. More often than not, compassion and drive override their own physical and even mental needs as a Service Dog. Adrenaline kicks in and instinct and drive take over, so a Service Dog will ignore pain or injury. Service Dogs are so capable of getting into *the Zone*, they can focus out even severe injuries. Just as much as a Search Dog is driven to find a lost person, a Service Dog is driven to support his/her handler. So even though they train, play and work hard, they may still be lame, painful or even have a significant injury they are not revealing to their handler.

Because Service Dogs are often good at hiding their injuries when on the job, looking for subtle signs can help pinpoint an injury early. Routine, job-related physical, medical and mental assessments are important for Service Dogs to help prevent or find injuries early.

Specialized routine evaluation (every 6 months) is highly recommended for early detection of strains (e.g., neck, back, shoulder muscles, forelimb extensor muscles) or injuries [e.g., tendonitis, chronic inter-vertebral disc disease (IVDD)], avoidance of major injury (e.g., tendon tears, back injury), optimal effective treatment, specialized rehabilitation focused on your Service Dog's needs and fast return-to-duty. Even with no obvious lameness, an underlying soft tissue (e.g., muscle or joint strain) or altered joint biomechanics (e.g., elbow, shoulder, knee, hip) can contribute to a subtle but uncomfortable change in gait or movement, forelimb reach, head/neck position discomfort, etc. Routine specialized exams relevant to your Service Dog's jobs are critical for longevity of their service career as well as comfort and care.

VSC K9 ReC Center Rehabilitation Medicine is not just about a checklist of physical exercises for your Service Dog. Our specially trained K9 Team strives to evaluate, diagnose, treat, recover and provide expert specialized and individualized rehabilitation and/or conditioning of your dog so that s/he trains and performs at her/his best!

Remember medical illnesses can also contribute to pain, lameness and even subtle changes in ability of your Service Dog to perform their job. Some examples of general health changes that may hinder performance include the following.

- Changes in eyesight or eye infections can contribute to decreased ability to perform job-related tasks.
- While calm on the outside, underlying anxiety can produce mild or intermittent stomach upset, even days or weeks after a stressful event.
- Chronic skin or ear infections can lead to not only decreased hearing, but also decreased comfort and willingness to perform necessary activities.
- Respiratory infection or even undetected pneumonia can lead to tiredness or simply less motivation to perform job-related tasks.

The VSC K9 ReC Center not only evaluates for rehabilitation related changes (e.g., orthopedic, neurological, soft tissue injury) but also other medical illnesses that may contribute to pain, lameness and even subtle changes in performance.

Our specially trained K9 team understands that many things contribute to not only health and well-being, but optimal athletic performance. We strive to continually better understand the finely tuned, complex, multi-dimensionality that makes up the Service Dog so that s/he trains and performs at her/his best!

If you think your Service Dog may have early signs of injury or illness, please contact us to schedule a K9 ReC Center Initial Consult. No referral required.

Assisting the healthy Assistance Dog!

Service Dogs offer their handlers the gift of freedom, independence and companionship. The VSC K9 ReC Center is highly motivated to assist in longevity of their service career as well as their comfort and care, offering specialized physical and mental conditioning for your Service Dog.

Your Service Dog needs special exercises too!

Often, conditioning any dog is approached simply by repeating a task over and over. Would an elite marathoner train by just running? No. Simply repeating a task, can result in increased injury risk through repetitive motion stress, over working tissues such as muscles, tendons, joints, etc. This increases the breakdown of these tissues. Chronic, repetitive stress can result in discomfort and a decreased ability to perform certain job-related tasks. Like carpal tunnel symptoms that develop in people that use their hands repeatedly in the same way (e.g., typing). It can also contribute to advancing chronic disease like arthritis and intervertebral disc disease (IVDD)/back pain. The VSC ReC Center K9 Team strategically prescribes different types of exercises for improving strength, dexterity, endurance, etc. focused on *decreasing* injury risk and reducing discomfort, even in retired Service Dogs.

Service Dog mental health

Just as in humans, both physical and mental health contribute to not only performance, but also reducing risk of injury. While physical training helps the body be prepared for doing the job, *it's the brain and mental health that put the body in the right place at the right time when most needed.*

VSC K9 ReC Center not only evaluates physical conditioning, but mental health as well. Examples of this evaluation include:

- ability to focus on a cognitive task
- ability to mentally focus during a physical task
- effect of physical or mental distraction on focus
- ability to adjust to both mental and physical challenges quickly and safely

Affect (emotion), cognitive performance/problem solving, ability to generalize, aptitude, and so much more contribute to and alter not only mental function but also physiology, health, and certainly job-related performance. While physical training helps the body be prepared for getting the job done, remember it's the brain and mental health that put the body in the right place at the right time. *Just as humans do better mentally and physically with physical stress-relieving activity, so do service dogs.*

VSC K9 ReC Center can help you maintain a well-balanced service dog. Call us and ask for the K9 Team.

Veterinary Specialty Center is guided by the belief that companion animals deserve state-of-the-art medical care in a kind and comforting environment. The courage of our patients, the loyalty of their human families, and the devotion of our referral veterinarians inspire our vision. It is sustained by the contributions of our compassionate, knowledgeable and dedicated staff and built upon a tradition of providing unsurpassed healthcare for animals.

