



# GUIDE-DOGS ASSOCIATION

South Africa

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Guide Dogs • Service Dogs • Autism Support Dogs • College of Orientation and Mobility

## Introduction

Since 1953, South African Guide-Dogs Association for the Blind (GDA) has strived to expand its offerings to the differently-abled community of Southern Africa, extending beyond Guide Dogs to include Service Dogs for people who are physically impaired, Autism Support Dogs for children with autism, and the College of Orientation & Mobility, whose Orientation & Mobility (O&M) practitioners teach people who are visually impaired to continue their lives in a safe and efficient manner and how to use a long cane as a mobility aid.

## WHAT WE DO?

**Guide Dog training:** We breed, rear and train our own dogs. Guide Dogs are trained for people who are blind or partially sighted. Being visually impaired means one experiences difficulties in moving around without assistance, making the individual dependent on other people. However, at GDA, we train well-bred dogs to be the guides of people who are visually impaired, making them both mobile and independent. Guide dogs are trained solely to be the mobility aids of the blind and visually disabled. Among other things, they are trained to:

- Walk around obstacles
- Stop at Krebs; listen to traffic then cross the road.
- Respond to short commands: Find the stairs, directional commands (left, right, forward, back)

**Service Dogs:** This is one of the secondary functions of the Association. Service dogs are trained for people with physical disabilities. Generally, the dogs used here are very gentle. People with physical disabilities are by nature of their disability restricted in their functional abilities. A person confined to a wheelchair may not be able to retrieve a mobile phone that was dropped or open a door because of restricted movement and are therefore dependent on the help of others. In order to improve the independence and dignity of the physically disabled, the Association trains dogs so that they can perform some of these functions.

Below are a few things service dogs are taught to do.

- Retrieve items that the person with a disability might have dropped.
- Open doors and draws by pulling on special tags that have been attached to the doors.
- Closing doors by pushing the door closed.
- Locating a second person on the instruction to "Find."
- Taking an item to or from a second person.
- Barking on command.
- Putting their paws on the lap of the person with a disability, so that the dog can be groomed or given affection.
- Other tasks requested by the client if these are within the capabilities of the dog.

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## South African Guide-Dogs Association for the Blind

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**Autism Support Dogs:** An Autism Support Dog plays a role in making the world a less threatening and lonely place for an autistic child. Children on the Autism Spectrum are prone to “bolting” or running off and the presence of the dog prevents this from occurring. The family are able to visit malls, parks, and beaches without the constant fear that the child may run off. An added benefit is that autistic children are also less isolated from society. The families notice that the autistic child’s social interactions usually improve.

### ***College of Orientation and Mobility:***

Like everybody, a blind person wants the freedom to go to the local shops and bank, visit friends, attend church and carry out ordinary daily tasks, without being dependent on another person to guide them or do things for them. This requires both mobility and skills of daily living.

Mobility can be achieved in many ways. For some visually impaired people, a guide dog is the ultimate solution to getting around in the sighted world, both independently and safely. But most people, who cannot see well, or at all, live in circumstances and places where having a guide dog just isn’t possible. These people need an effective alternative means of independent mobility.

Mobility can be achieved with the help of a long cane. With proper training, the cane becomes an extension of the blind person’s sense of touch. In order to use the cane effectively, the visually impaired person must develop accurate sensory responses to all kinds of information provided by their environment. There is also a very precise technical skill required to teach manipulation of the cane in order to make it a safe and viable tool for orientation and mobility.

While many visually impaired persons are able to figure out for themselves how to do daily activities such as cooking, cleaning and grooming, there are others who require training. There are also assistive devices that the visually impaired person can make or buy to make activities such as identifying money or pouring liquid, easier.

The Orientation and Mobility Instructor has the task of teaching the client these skills and provide such assistance. Every client is different and training can take weeks or even months for the visually impaired person to achieve his or her required level of efficiency, safety and independence.

The College of Orientation and Mobility offers a two year Diploma course comprised of theory, practical and workplace experience to train Orientation and Mobility Instructors. To be able to teach others how to effectively use a long cane, trainers must learn every practical aspect of usage themselves. Students therefore walk blindfolded for about 60 hours in both urban and rural environments and situations. An equal amount of time is spent observing fellow students travelling. Students also conduct various daily activities while blindfolded.

Other skills that are covered include conducting lay counselling, networking with other service providers, preparing maps and using assistive devices.

In terms of theory, students learn about the theory of facilitation and assessment of learners, the structure of the eye, medical conditions affecting the eye, low vision and child development. About half of the students’ training takes place at the College, while the other half requires them to work at their organisation and at a school. This work takes place under the supervision of the College staff. On return to their service organisations and/or communities O&M Instructors can then effectively train blind and visually impaired persons across South Africa on the skills of daily living and mobility using a white cane. One trained Orientation and Mobility practitioner can effectively train on average 40 blind persons per annum. Currently 100% of our students are black and 98% of the beneficiaries of their training are black.

## **Our Objectives**

The main objective of the Association shall be to improve the mobility, independence of action and overall well-being of visually impaired people and other persons with disabilities. This shall be attained through:

### **a. The provision of working dogs (guide, service and autism support dogs)**

1. Breeding and training dogs to act as efficient and safe guides for visually impaired people and to assist people with physical disabilities.
2. The training and instruction of visually impaired and physically disabled people in the proper and safe utilisation of working dogs and in the essentials of canine care and management.

### **b. Orientation and Mobility education**

1. The development and provision of skills programmes relating to the orientation and mobility for visually impaired people.
2. The training and instruction of suitably qualified Orientation and Mobility Practitioners in the techniques of orientation and mobility for visually impaired people.

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