

Truly Man's Best Friend

By Reg P. Wydeven
July 28, 2007

A few weeks ago in church, we were completely thrown for a shock. A very nice family we see there regularly had a dog with them. At first, we couldn't believe that instead of leaving him in the car, they brought their dog to mass.

Then we noticed, however, the dog was wearing a harness, so we determined that he was a guide dog. Of course, we were then very concerned that someone in the family was injured and suddenly needed assistance from a guide dog.

Finally, some fellow parishioners informed us that this family very selflessly trains these dogs to assist blind, deaf or otherwise disabled people. Needless to say, the dog was the hit of the service, as everyone wanted to get a look at him as they went up for communion.

A few weeks ago I wrote about some of the horrific treatment dogs have received in this country, namely, the inhumane treatment following Hurricane Katrina, the maladies tied to puppy mills and the alleged abuse by NFL quarterback Michael Vick, which grows in gruesomeness as the story unfolds.

Thankfully, guide dogs very deservedly receive statutory protection under the Wisconsin Statutes. There is a specific statutory section affording these very important dogs very important rights.

Specifically, the Wisconsin Statutes provide that no business owner, manager or employee "may deny access to a blind, deaf or mobility-impaired person for the reason that the person is being led by a dog specially trained, or being trained, to lead blind or deaf persons or to provide support for mobility-impaired persons." Just like a disabled person can't be denied access because of a guide dog, someone training a guide dog, like our fellow churchgoer, has the exact same rights.

Further, business owners cannot assess extra charges against a person due to the presence of a guide dog. However, if the dog causes damage to the premises, the dog owner is responsible for the cost of any such damage.

The statutes state that these rights for guide dogs extend to "... any place of public accommodation, amusement or recreation, including any inn, hotel, restaurant, eating place, barber shop, billiard parlor, store, public conveyance on land or water, theater, motion picture house, public education institution or elevator."

In Wisconsin, anyone who owns a specially trained guide dog receives a free dog license annually. To distinguish them as guide dogs, these special pups can wear identifying harnesses or leashes or even a special cape. Also, to prove to skeptical business proprietors, the dog owners should maintain the dog's credentials issued by a school for training guide dogs.

Anyone who violates these statutes protecting guide dogs can be fined up to \$100 or even imprisoned for up to 30 days, or both.

Coincidentally, guide dogs almost always have very unusual names. Logically, if a guide dog was given a common name like 'Champ', it could become confused if it hears its name being called by someone other than its owner, which can be dangerous. Secondly, guide dogs have a very serious job to do, so they don't always appreciate reactions other dogs get, like my two-year-old's proclivity to run up and hug every dog he sees (allergies and all). So always ask the owner's permission before petting a guide dog.

To learn more about the importance of guide dogs, visit www.guidedog.org.

This article originally appeared in the Appleton Post-Crescent newspaper and is reprinted with the permission of Gannett Co., Inc. © 2007 McCarty Law LLP. All rights reserved.