



Service Dogs Alabama Overview

A non-profit serving adults, Veterans and children with disabilities throughout the state of Alabama, Service Dogs Alabama (SDA) is dedicated to providing medical and psychiatric Service Dogs to children, adults, and Veterans with disabilities and Facility Intervention Dogs for schools, youth facilities, and courtrooms.

SDA was founded in 2010 as K-9 4 Kids and received independent 501(c)(3) status in March 2015. SDA has developed a state-of-the-art training complex in Hope Hull, AL (Guice Slawson Training Complex); built an additional kennel facility to complete finishing training in Madison County, AL; created a prison-based dog training initiative, as well as implemented a Facility Dog program. SDA is certified by Assistance Dogs International (ADI), the world-wide authority that sets the gold standards for training and placing service/facility dogs.

Service Dogs Alabama exists to find solutions to today's most significant problems by training dogs that will assist in tasks that will change the lives of children, adults, Veterans, and Facility Intervention Dogs in schools and court systems. These skilled dogs have an unparalleled and powerful effect on the independence, confidence, security, physical health, and psychological stability of the individuals and groups that they serve.

Over 100 dogs have been placed with qualified individuals/facilities throughout the state of Alabama.

Each dog spends 2-3 years in training. During this time, each dog goes twice to Service Dogs Alabama's inmate training program, where SDA typically has 15-20 dogs in the prison at a time. The inmate trainers must follow SDA's training manual and keep excellent records for SDA trainers. The inmates are a vital part of the dogs' training. It is an honor for an inmate to be on the Service Dogs Alabama dog team, and they take excellent care of the dogs while the dogs are in the prison program. Many inmates have shared that the dogs in training have saved their lives because caring for and training of the dogs gives the inmates a purpose in life and a positivity that they would not otherwise experience in prison. Beyond SDA's inmate training program, Service Dogs Alabama has 2 full-time finishing trainers and 1 full-time trainer who

works with the dogs prior to the finishing phase of their training. SDA also has a full-time kennel manager and a part-time kennel assistant. These ladies handle all the daily care for the dogs.

SDA relies on volunteers to puppy raise and to socialize older dogs in training. These volunteers are trained by SDA trainers. The dogs live with the volunteers on average for 3 months. The puppy raisers work on basic commands, while the socializers take the dogs out on public access outings during their time with each dog. SDA is grateful for the dedication of the puppy raisers and socializers to help teach the dogs home manners and expose them to a variety of different situations during their time in training. Volunteers have monthly training check-ins with SDA trainers.

Service Dogs Alabama's Service Dogs are trained as PTSD Assistance Dogs (retrieve medical bag, night terror alert, pick up dropped items, and stand in a place where person feels vulnerable), Wheelchair/Mobility Assistance Dogs (fall alert, pick up dropped items, retrieve items, push handicap accessible buttons, tug open doors and drawers, brace, assist with removal of sock and shoes), Seizure Alert Dogs (fall alert, nudge & vocal alert, retrieve medical bag), and Autism/Anxiety Intervention Dogs (nudge, put weight in lap, put paws in lap or on shoulders, lean into, stand/lie behind).

Service Dogs Alabama's Facility Intervention Dogs are an alternative tool that can assist educators to better read and address the needs of at-risk students, as well as addressing social, emotional, behavioral, and academic needs of all students. Furthermore, Facility Intervention Dogs can enhance teacher effectiveness. Facility Intervention Dogs are also placed in shelters and facilities that serve victims of abuse and trauma. In these spaces, children can deliver forensic interviews to the dogs in a comfortable, friendly space. Additionally, they are placed in facilities such as hospitals where they are working to decrease stress and trauma and even aid in grief counselors' work. Facility Dogs are trained by Service Dogs Alabama and are paired with a primary and a secondary Handler in the facility. These handlers have been trained with their assigned dog by Service Dogs Alabama trainers. The dogs live with the handlers, and they only work in their assigned facility.

SDA would not be able to complete its mission without the generosity of individuals, organizations, and communities. Each dog's maintenance, training, and placement costs are funded through grants, corporate contributions, family foundations, and individual donations. SDA maintains ongoing fund development to support the annual operational budget which includes the average annual placement of 15-20 Service and/or Facility Dogs. The total cost of placing one Service or Facility Dog is roughly \$40,000.



Emily's Words: Why SDA?

Emily D., Service Dog Recipient



Why SDA? The better question is why not SDA! SDA and the hearts involved, from those in front of the camera to those behind the scenes; from those loving on puppies to those cleaning out kennels, are truly changing lives. From the volunteers to the board of directors. From those who donate five dollars to those who sponsor/ donate thousands.

Terms such as “changing lives”, “lifesavers”, etc. are used so lightly nowadays, to the point of I normally roll my eyes when I hear them. However, when I say SDA has saved my life, saved my independence, I truly mean it. Not only does SDA provide life-changing, life-altering, lifesaving, fully certified service dogs, they provide a big extended family, lifelong friendships, and endless support systems. SDA becomes family.

SDA provided me with my first service dog, Tucker, when I was a freshman at Faulkner University. God, family, and Tucker are the only reasons I was able to be extremely successful in my college career. Tucker physically helped me walk to each class, he gave me boldness and courage, he warned me of coming seizures, he brought me out of my darkest seizures when no human could reach me, and the bond we had was truly unexplainable and priceless. He literally saved my life countless times, from alerting to seizures and giving me time to get away from activities that could be dangerous during a seizure, to physically catching me before I could fall and hit my head.

Kenzie, my successor service dog, is like my oxygen tank! She gives me security that no human will ever be able to give me. I know she has my back, no matter what. If you know this dog at all, you will know that she is as stubborn and hardheaded as her mama, which is why she is the perfect service dog for me. Kenzie is working twenty-four-seven. She alerts to my oxygen level dropping, oncoming seizures, high heart rate, high blood pressure, joint pain, and she knows when her mama needs a huge, wet kiss across the face! If it is not safe for me to

get up after a seizure, yet I am determined to stand up, Kenzie will literally put her paws on me, force me back down, and will sit on me until she deems it is safe for me to stand up. When Kenzie wears her harness, she enables me to go outside by myself, water my plants, work in my garden, feed my birds, and so much more. Kenzie has kept me out of a wheelchair. Kenzie is my fur-angel!

I could go on and on about Tucker, Kenzie, and SDA. I could go on and on telling you how amazing Ashley, Summer, Caroline, Paige, Amy, and so many other are, but I could not supply the words to do them justice. Until you become part of the SDA family by volunteering, donating, sponsoring, even praying for SDA, you won't understand what you are missing out on. So, I'll stop rambling on now and end with: why not Service Dogs Alabama.

Good Dog

Sean Dietrich February 2, 2023
Author, Sean of the South



She has long red hair. Fair complexion. A high-school senior. Quiet. Mild mannered. When she speaks, her voice sounds like Locust Fork, Alabama.

Her name is Morgan. Seated beside her is Clarabelle, a black Labrador wearing a Service Dog Alabama vest.

Morgan has paralysis on the left side of her body; her left hand doesn't work. She has frequent seizures, she is sensitive to light. She has diabetes. She has low vision, and is nearly blind in one eye. Her intestines are paralyzed, too, so digestion is an issue. A day in the life of Morgan is no walk on the beach.

Her health issues stem from a previous bout with encephalitis (brain swelling). The encephalitis complications should have killed her. But they didn't.

"Took me six months to learn to walk again," she said. "But I knew I could do it. I believed I could."

She's a tough cookie. Morgan practically grew up in Children's hospital, in Birmingham. Her youth was nothing like the average American childhood. While most kids were busy playing in their backyard sprinklers, eating Flinstone Push Ups, Morgan was in a hospital room, relearning how to walk.

Her mother remained at her bedside. When Morgan was too paralyzed to feed herself or hold her head upright, nurses did these things for her.

"My happiest childhood memories are at Children's hospital. Those people love me."

In her teenage years, things have gotten even tougher. What she misses most is her independence. When you deal with the medical trials Morgan deals with, you're always under supervision. This gets old, fast.

"I couldn't do anything on my own. Couldn't even walk the school hallway without nurses hovering around me, waiting for me to have a seizure."

Morgan wouldn't sleep by herself, for fear a nighttime seizure would kill her. She wouldn't eat by herself, for fear that she would choke. She couldn't drink a bottle of water without someone nearby.

"I was always afraid. Always."

But her story has a good ending, inasmuch as Morgan isn't afraid anymore. Not even a little bit. Because now she has Clarabelle.

Enter Clarabelle. You're looking at 65 pounds of pure black Lab, seated beside Morgan, wearing a bone-serious face. The dog glances at me now and then, but the animal makes it clear, she's not here to mess around.

Clarabelle is working. She is constantly monitoring Morgan's physical body, ready to alert for an oncoming seizure.

"Before Clarabelle, I had no independence. I couldn't even go to the bathroom by myself. Now, I do everything by myself. I'm a regular kid... Sorta."

Thanks to Service Dogs Alabama, Morgan is independent. To prove it, next semester, Morgan is going away to college. She will be a freshman at UAB. Morgan will live on her own. She will do everything on her own.

Morgan will live the obligatory college life. She will do all things ordinary college kids do: she will spend hours creating TikToks, listen to loud music, eat too much junk food, and waste entire years of her life learning about the cosine.

Meantime, Clarabelle will continue to do her job. She will alert before Morgan has a seizure. She will help Morgan off the ground after seizures. She will help Morgan walk if need be. Clarabell even helps Morgan get dressed.

"Clarabelle is my everything. We're so tight. She totally feels it when I'm suffering. We're that close.

“One time, I couldn’t breathe, and they thought I was dying. The ambulance came. But Clarabelle wasn’t allowed to be with me when I was with the paramedics. So she was freaking out and barking. Because she considers me her baby.”

When Clarabelle finally reunited with Morgan in the hospital, Morgan was intubated, attached to a ventilator. It was a hard sight to see. But nobody took it harder than Clarabelle.

“Clarabelle got so upset when she saw me on that breathing machine, she started puking and crying. Then, she jumped up in my bed, laid her body on me. Nobody could get her off. She wouldn’t even leave me to go pee. I am her child.”

I ask Morgan what it’s like having a service dog wherever she goes.

“Well, before Clarabelle, I was so scared. Nobody understood me. Nobody could relate to what I was going through. I was friendless and alone. Clarabelle saved me. Clarabelle gave me back my life. I wish more people knew how great she is.”

I’ll tell as many as I can, Morgan.



Summer's SDA Story

Summer Rogowski, Former Inmate Trainer/Current Lead Trainer for SDA

One of the most common questions I get asked is how I became involved with SDA.

A little over 3 years ago, I found myself stuck on the wrong path of life. As a result of bad choices, I landed in a Florida state women's correctional facility. When I got there, I was still very much not able to accept accountability for my actions. I was blaming everyone else for the situation I found myself in. I was angry at the world, at myself. I was very withdrawn, and I felt sorry for myself. I felt the situation I was in was everyone's fault but my own.

Within the first two weeks of my time at Gadsden Correctional Facility, I sat in on an SDA Dog Team orientation. I did not go there by choice. We were required to sit through the program. The Dog Team brought in dogs and shared what the program was all about. Dog Team tryouts were the next week. I began the tryout process and instantly fell in love with SDA. I very quickly realized that everything I thought I knew about myself was not correct. I was not assertive. I was not confident. I was not patient. I was not accountable for my own actions. Pretty instantly a change started to happen within me when I joined the team. Being responsible for the dogs

and playing a role in their purpose and mission changed me. Through wanting to do the best for the dogs, I realized I had to look inward and fix some things in myself. Until I made my own heart changes, I could not effectively train the dogs. As time progressed and I grew emotionally, my ability to train the dogs grew. It was a perfect storm. My outlook on life changed. My goals changed. My hopes and aspirations evolved. Most importantly, I learned that positive goals and aspirations, that my hopes in life, were attainable. In the midst of one of the most chaotic places on earth, I had a sense of calm and stability because of my mission with the dogs. For the first time in many, many years, I could see a future for myself, a life beyond the now.

I served on the Dog Team for 2 years, and as my time of release approached, fate stepped in and gave me the chance to join the SDA family permanently and professionally. On July 29, 2021, I boarded a Greyhound bus in prison-issued tennis shoes that were a half size too small and fifty dollars in my pocket. I headed north to Montgomery, AL. I felt excited and anxious. I had no idea what I was walking into. I knew absolutely nobody. Due to the restrictions of prison, I had only had about 30 minutes' worth of conversations with Ashley, my new boss. Despite all the unknowns, I absolutely knew I was making the best decision for myself. Because of the confidence I now had in myself through my time with the dogs in prison, I trusted my choices. I knew that I was making the right decision.

A year and a half later, I have been able to create and maintain a stable life for myself through my work with SDA. I have my own place to live; I've bought a car; I've weathered some major health challenges. I am a vital member of the SDA training team, serving as Lead Trainer in the

Hope Hull Training Facility. Perhaps most importantly, with the support and encouragement of my SDA family, I have found the confidence and humility to repair relationships in my family that had long been broken.

One of the reasons I love this organization is because at its heart, SDA is about second chances. Our recipients get a second chance at a more fulfilled life with their Service Dog walking alongside them. A major component of our dogs' training happens through our inmate training program. The Dog Team is comprised of anywhere from 50 to 70 inmates, people just like me, who experience a second chance at life through their work with the dogs. Finding themselves at rock bottom, these inmate trainers learn life skills and make changes in their very core as they work with the dogs.

People ask me if I would do it all over again. My response is that if I knew I would be where I am today as a person, I would go through the darkest moments of prison again because those moments taught me so much. I experienced incredible personal growth on the Dog Team. I wouldn't want to change my path in life except for the people I hurt along the way.

Contributing to Service Dogs Alabama not only helps in the dogs' care. Your contribution is also vital in keeping our inmate training program up and running. That program changes lives just like mine.

Full Circle!



August, 2020: Summer as an inmate trainer and Asher as a puppy



December, 2022: Summer as SDA Lead Trainer and Asher in the final weeks of his training
before being placed as a full Service Dog with a Veteran