

On August 10, 2019 I had the opportunity to visit Leader Dogs for the Blind in Rochester MI. What a great experience!! I along with other Vice District Governors mostly from Tennessee and South Carolina were invited to tour the facilities and learn about what Leader Dogs for the Blind do. I think that if you've been a Lion for any amount of time, you've heard about Leader Dogs. Dogs are trained from an early age and are matched with a recipient. The dog and recipient then spend time together on campus in Rochester for training. All of this is a NO COST to the client. What a great program!

Things you might not have known:

Leader Dogs also provide Orientation and Mobility training. This would be training on how to use a cane, how to use a human guide, solving problems along a route, re-orienting yourself, shopping and soliciting assistance.

This program is also provided at no cost.

Leader Dogs provide GPS units and training on how to use them.

This is at no cost.

Since 2007, Leader Dogs have provided a Summer Experience Camp for teens.

16 and 17 yr. old legally blind teens attend and are coached in Leadership Development and Intro to Guide Dogs.

Campers also spend time with their peers, GPS devices are incorporated throughout the week in a variety of environments. The Camp also includes a college campus visit and tour.

As with other Leader Dog services, this is at no cost.

These are other services Leader Dogs provide that we may not hear about.

Lions Clubs International founded Leader Dogs for the Blind in 1939. It all started in 1938 when 3 members of the Uptown Detroit Lions club saw a need. Another Uptown member was unable to get a guide dog through other organizations. The first clients were housed in a Detroit hotel.

In April of 1939, Lions Leader Dog foundation was incorporated as a Michigan non-profit. In May the foundation moved out to the Rochester Hills Campus where it resides today.

In June of 1940, the name Leader Dogs for the Blind became official.

Leader Dogs now has their own in-house breeding program. Occasionally they accept dogs from other working dog organizations, most of the dogs are breed in Rochester.

Dog breeds used are Labrador retrievers, golden retrievers, German shepherds or Lab/Golden crosses. Puppies are given to volunteer puppy raisers at 7 weeks of age. There are about 400 puppy raisers in 22 states and Canada. They teach the puppies basic obedience, house manners and socialize them in the communities.

After 12 to 15 months, the puppies are returned to Rochester for further training. On campus they undergo 4 more months of harness training from professional guide dog mobility instructor where they learn such skills such as stopping at curbs, avoiding obstacles and finding doors.

If the dog is successful, they it is matched with a potential client.

A few dogs are "career changed" during this process. A major reason for career changing a dog is frequent ear infections. If a dog is prone to ear infections, this would be a financial burden to the client.

Career changed dogs can go to other service organizations such as police and customs or become assistance dogs. Other dogs are available for adoption. These dogs make terrific pets or service animals but are not well suited to be guide dogs.

The working life of a guide dog is usually 8 to 10 years. Some people choose to keep the dogs however if for any reason they cannot keep the dog, Leader Dogs for the Blind takes them back and finds them a loving home.

There is some much more information about Leader Dogs for the Blind and what they do every day. If you are interested in more information, go to leaderdog.org

In closing, all the services I mentions above come at no cost to the client. Funding for Leader Dog come from individual donors, endowment interest and service organizations like Lions Clubs. I think the number they mentioned was that 18% of last years' 15-million-dollar budget came from donations from individual Lions Clubs. We as Lions have a long history with this organization. Our donations make up a large portion of their annual budget, we are an important part of their support and success.

Lion Ray Fujiura
Sunnyside Lions Club
VDG District F