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## Overcoming obstacles with man's best friend

By Gailynne Ferguson  
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The writer, Gene Hill, once wrote about his dog: "He is my other eyes that can see above the clouds; my other ears that hear above the winds ... He has told me a thousand times over that I am his reason for being ... He is loyalty itself... He has taught me the meaning of devotion... With him; I know a secret comfort and a private peace... His presence by my side is protection against my fears of dark and unknown things. He has promised to wait for me... whenever... wherever - in case I need him. And I expect I will - as I always have." Though this is paraphrased from a much longer Gene Hill quote, it speaks volumes for those individuals whose lives depend so much on their canine partners.

Over the next several weeks, the Community Connection will embark on a journey into the world of the service dog whose loyalty to their partner goes above and beyond what most people share with their human partners. What is the service dog's history in the United States? What type of dogs are used? What tasks do they actually perform? What laws enable service dogs to go where no other dogs are permitted? What service dog organizations support our area and how can the general public help these organizations accomplish their goal to aide individuals who need assistance to carry out daily activities that many of us take for granted?

Most of us are familiar with Guide and Hearing dogs but not many people realize that service dogs are used for many more life issues that people face. There are Seizure Alert dogs and Sensory Signal Dogs, sometimes referred to as Social Signal Dogs. There are Mobility Dogs to aide individuals with stability and balance while walking. Psychiatric Service Dogs help those suffering from post-traumatic stress or bi-polar disorders, agoraphobia and panic attacks to mitigate psychiatric disabilities.

It is important not to confuse service dogs with Therapy or Emotional support dogs. The Americans with Disabilities Act defines service animals as "dogs that are individually trained to do work or perform tasks for people with disabilities. Examples of such work or tasks include guiding people who are blind, alerting people who are deaf, pulling a wheelchair, alerting and protecting a person who is having a seizure, reminding a person with mental illness to take prescribed medications, calming a person with Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) during an anxiety

attack, or performing other duties. The work or task a dog has been trained to provide must be directly related to the person's disability. " They are NOT considered pets and are protected under the Americans with Disabilities. Therapy dogs and Emotional Support Dogs ARE pets which participate in either animal-assistance therapy (such as in nursing homes and schools) or are incorporated into a treatment process to assist in alleviating health related symptoms of an individual. Therapy and Emotional Support Dogs, though important for the health of individuals and an aide in the individual's rehabilitation, are not specifically trained to work alongside of people with disabilities. There are other federal laws for Emotional Support animals and those that are prescribed for individuals with mental disabilities.

On this journey, we will look at organizations such as Canine Partners for Life (CPL), a Chester County Assistance Dog International (ADI) accredited organization dedicated to training service dogs, home companion dogs and residential companion dogs to assist individuals who have a wide range of physical and cognitive disabilities. We will also focus on The Seeing Eye, Inc., (Mooristown, NJ) a Guide Dog non-profit agency serving the blind and visually impaired as well as touch upon other agencies within driving distance such as Guiding Eyes for the Blind (Yorktown Heights, New York); The Northeast Regional Center of Canine Companions for Independence (CCI) (Medford, New York); Shore Service Dogs (Salisbury, MD); Susquehanna Service Dogs (Harrisburg, PA); Amazing Tails, LLC (Oxford, PA) and New Hope Assistance Dog, Inc., (Warren, PA). Each agency specializes in a particular type of service dog.

Legislation has helped those with disabilities access public places, find housing and travel freely without discrimination but there is still a lot that needs to be done in educating the public about the wonderful tasks these dogs do for their partners which this writer is learning as well which this writer is learning as well. Next week, come along as we learn about the service dogs provided by Canine Companions for Life and The Seeing Eye, Inc.

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