

Living with Parkinson's Service Dogs for PD



The dog lovers among us have yet another reason to treasure their pups — namely, that service dogs may be able to make life easier for people with Parkinson's disease (PD). At the Parkinson's Disease Foundation, we thought we should explore this topic and see how we might advise our readers to go about finding a service dog. We knew the perfect person to ask, PDF Research Advocate Carolyn Weaver of Freeland, MI. You may recognize her name; since 2008, she has been an active member of PDF's Parkinson's Advocates in Research (PAIR) program, educating communities about PD research. Whenever we see Carolyn, we find her beautiful service dog, Selma, at her side. Here's a conversation we had with her about life with Selma:

Q: Carolyn, can you tell us a bit about Selma, and how you found a dog that is trained specifically to help someone with Parkinson's disease?



Carolyn Weaver and Selma

A: Selma — she is one half Labrador Retriever and one half Golden Retriever — is now three years old. She has been with me since April 2011. A few years after my diagnosis, I learned from an acquaintance about a local organization that trains service dogs for people living with all types of illnesses, including PD.

Q: How does Selma help you with life with Parkinson's disease?

A: Selma is trained primarily to help me with the freezing episodes that I experience from Parkinson's. To help me get moving when I get stuck, she pulls forward while I hold onto a harness that she wears. She knows to pull forward just enough to get me going, but not so much as to pull me over. She is very patient. I move pretty slowly and she just waits for me until I am ready. At that point, she gets me started and we can walk together at a regular pace.

Selma understands some 30 commands in all, including SIT, HEEL, STAY, NO and STAND. She is also able to pick up the phone and other items off the floor and bring them to me. If I fall, I can call her with the command BRACE, and she stands nearby and gets rigid over her shoulders and hips so that I can pull myself up by holding on to her. She can also help to pull me out of chairs and out of bed, using a tug.

Q: We often see you with Selma at conferences around the country. Is it easy to work and travel with her?

A: Selma goes everywhere with me. She goes into a DOWN stay when I am in a business meeting or at a restaurant, and people say they do not even know she is there. To put her in the car, we give her a command LOAD UP and she gets in and sits. She also flies in a plane with my husband and me. She quietly curls up under the seat in front of us. The flight crews love her. She makes it easy for me to take a trip.

Q: How long did it take you to find Selma? Can you tell us about the process?

A: It took me four years from when I first applied for a service dog to when I welcomed Selma in my home. The exact waiting period may differ de-

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pending upon with which organization you work. After my initial application was approved, a trainer visited my home and videotaped me working with a demo service dog, to see if the dog could help with PD-related movement challenges. The tape was used both to qualify me to have a service dog and to help assess what kind of dog was suitable for me (in my case, a dog that would work with a harness to help me with freezing).

After that, the organization found me a dog and trained her over a period of six to nine months. Many times, the costs, which are significant — up to \$30,000 — can be covered by charitable organizations, but that might mean waiting a few years until those funds become available. I wanted to speed things up, so I decided to raise the funds myself. I raised the funds within two years by selling coupons and candles, and approaching local businesses for donations.

Two years after that, I was asked to meet Selma. It was love at first sight. When we finally brought Selma home a few months later, a trainer visited our house regularly to work with us. We became a certified “team” in November 2011.

Q: What do you do to supervise Selma?

A: When I am out in public with Selma, it is my responsibility to keep track of her all of the time and be sure that she is not touching anyone. She is not allowed to sit on the furniture. She has to be on a leash when not in a fenced-in area. She is not allowed to gain more than 15 percent over her ideal weight. The organization I work with feels that a service dog can focus and do its job better if he or she is kept fit and healthy. As my Parkinson’s symptoms change — for instance, as I adapt to a new walker — the organization’s trainers return to help Selma better assist me.

Resource

Assistance Dogs International, Inc.
info@assistedogsinternational.org
www.assistedogsinternational.org

This organization offers a website-only membership directory of service dog providers in the US. Dogs trained in service work can help address some of the challenges associated with PD such as lending balance support, picking up dropped or requested objects, assisting in a medical crisis and more.

Q: What does it mean to you to have Selma?

A: I have never had a dog before, so all of this was new for me. Now I cannot imagine my life without her. When someone lives with PD, as it progresses, it is very common for them to want to just stay at home. It can be hard to be out in public because people stare at you, and you may have a fear of falling. Selma has taken all of that away. People love service dogs, so it kind of takes the attention off of you, as the person with PD, and puts the focus on the service dog. This allows me the luxury to be able to get moving again without people staring at me. She keeps me going.

Q: What do you recommend to readers interested in acquiring a service dog of their own?

A: I recommend that people who are interested do their research and apply now, since the process can be lengthy. I think someone with PD should consider a dog not only to help with balance and other physical symptoms, but also to offer companionship. The confidence Selma has given me is amazing.

Related Fact Sheets:

- Driving and Parkinson’s
- Traveling with Parkinson’s

If you have or believe you have Parkinson’s disease, then promptly consult a physician and follow your physician’s advice. This publication is not a substitute for a physician’s diagnosis of Parkinson’s disease or for a physician’s prescription of drugs, treatment or operations for Parkinson’s disease.

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