

PRESS RELEASE.

Proposed Assistance Dogs Laws kept Muzzled on a Short Leash

A coalition of organisations widely recognised for their industry expertise and comprehensive training standards welcome the intent behind a clear and accessible registration process and recognition of assistance dogs within the ACT which will be implemented from 1 July 2020.

Assistance Dogs Australia, Guide Dogs NSW/ACT, Integra Service Dogs Australia and Canberra Blind Society, were members of the steering committee tasked with developing the regulation underpinning the assessment and accreditation of Assistance Dogs within the ACT.

During the numerous working group deliberations, we raised concerns as to the thoroughness of the proposed assessment and accreditation process proposed to be adopted under the Domestic Animals (Accredited Assistance Animal Public Access Standards) Determination 2020, and indicated the proposed process will likely lead to further conflict of training standards and outcomes across various state jurisdictions. We are of the collective view that these concerns have not been adequately addressed and raised this with Minister Steel.

The proposed new ACT regulations, which are based on the Queensland Guide Hearing and Assistance Dogs Act, provides trainers and assessors with guidelines as to what behaviours and competencies the assistance dog must be able to demonstrate. There are concerns that the proposed assessment process and standards under the ACT regulations are not as stringent or comprehensive as those applied under other jurisdictions.

As is the process within other States, the ACT will recognise organisations that have been accredited by the State Jurisdictions of South Australia, Western Australia and Queensland and international Accreditation organisations Assistance Dogs International (ADI) and International Guide Dog Federation (IGDF).

We have no objection to this where those assessments and registration processes are known to appropriately assess and determine what the assistance dog does to alleviate the impact of the handler's disability and provides assurance that the assistance dog has the suitable temperament and training to be working in often high stress environments such as on public transport, busy shopping centres, cafes etc.

A registered independent assessor or a registered assessor at Domestic Animal Assessors at Transport Canberra and City Services (TTCS) will be responsible for assessment of self-trained assistance dogs.

We are concerned that some organisations and individuals that have attempted and failed to gain accreditation through International bodies or State jurisdictions may now be able to gain recognition under the Federal Disability Discrimination Act through securing accreditation through the proposed ACT laws which they then can exploit across the nation. This lowers the standard for all Assistance Dogs Australia wide and puts, the handlers, the general public and the dogs in harm's way.

Any organisation placing assistance dogs in the ACT that has not gained state or international accreditation should have any dog they purport to be an assistance dog assessed by the ACT's independent registered assessor.

In raising these concerns with Minister Steel, he recognised that the registration and regulations introduced within the ACT cannot conflict with Commonwealth Laws but that the ACT system should be one that is of benefit to ACT residents and ACT based assistance animal trainers.

Assistance Dog organisations accredited under ADI or IGDF, The Australian Human Rights Commission, airlines and other transport operators as well as registered clubs, and other service providers have been asking the Federal Government to review the DDA laws on Assistance Animals so we can collectively achieve a comprehensive, clear and consistent assessment, accreditation and registration process for Assistance Dogs nationwide.

Standards lie at the heart of what we do – providing highly skilled and trained dogs who alleviate the impact of a person's disability.

We want to be sure that members of the public understand that training skilled assistance dogs is a highly professional task that must be undertaken by trainers experienced in working with assistance dogs, but also highly skilled in understanding the impact of an individual person's disability so that dog, and then that 'working team' can be trained and supported to have an effective and safe working relationship.

People with disabilities have the right to a highly skilled dog that will be of assistance to them and enhance their lives.

There is an increasingly significant problem with poorly trained dogs being passed-off as assistance dogs and the public has a right to be protected from individuals who misrepresent their level of assistance dog training expertise.

These new laws do not remedy this situation.

For Further comment, please contact Richard Lord, CEO, Assistance Dogs Australia on: 0418297555 or Ben Johnson, CEO, Integra Service Dogs Australia on: 0412 547 889

Scott Grimley, client of Guide Dogs NSW/ACT and representative of Canberra Blind Society would welcome the opportunity to share his experiences of working with his Guide Dog Dudley in and around the ACT and the importance of ensuring appropriate training and accreditation standards.