



# Atlas Assistance Dogs® Handler/Dog Team Certification Program

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## Introduction

Thank you for your interest in Atlas Assistance Dogs® (Atlas). You are in the process of making a life-changing decision, and we appreciate how difficult that can be. Investing your time, effort, and money in a service dog is not a decision to take lightly. Countless numbers of people with disabilities or medical conditions have benefited from a service dog and have been able to thrive and live a full and independent life because of their four-legged partner. There are many options you may be looking at for how to obtain or train a dog to help mitigate your disability. We hope this program description can help you in your decision process. Should you have any questions at all, please contact [info@atlasdog.org](mailto:info@atlasdog.org)

## Atlas Assistance Dogs

Atlas Assistance Dogs is working to eliminate obstacles that prevent qualified individuals from obtaining a service dog. Some of the ways we do this are:

- Train and provide certification at internationally recognized standards for service dog handler teams
- Teach, test, and certify qualified service dog trainers
- Work with all dog breeds
- Serve a wide range of disabilities and age group
- Operate in multiple geographical areas
- Provide funding for clients who need financial assistance to obtain and train a service dog
- Maintain a peer support network for clients to ask questions, share ideas, and encourage each other
- Participate in research and development that will lead to better support for assistance dogteam

## Terminology – Clients, Handlers, and Teams

In our documentation we often use the terms client and handler interchangeably, as in most cases they are the same person. Along those lines, in most cases, the certified team has two members, the client (who is also the handler) and the dog.

In some cases, where the client is not able to handle the dog themselves, a handler (usually a parent or other family member) is additionally certified as part of the team and is expected to take the role of the active participant in training. In these cases, the team that will be certified is the combination of the client, handler, and dog. The handler and dog alone without the client would not be a certified team and would not have public access rights. Throughout this document, please interpret the team as the client/dog or client/handler/dog depending on your situation.



Some other potential teams:

- A client may be supported by more than one handler.  
In these cases, the working team is the client, dog, and whichever handler is present.
- The client may have more than one dog certified.  
Unless each dog performs discrete tasks that the other absolutely cannot perform, the client would typically only have one of the dogs with them in public and working at a given time.
- A single dog may serve more than one client.  
As an example, this is not uncommon for allergy alert when multiple children have the same allergy. When in public, the working team would include at least one client, a handler as applicable, and the dog.

## **Our Values and Training Methods**

All people and dogs deserve to be treated ethically, compassionately, and as individuals. This is core to Atlas' values. We partner with trainers, doctors, educators, clients, and researchers to ensure that the most ethical, scientific, and effective training approaches are available to each person and each dog we work with.

We believe training is about forming trusting relationships with dogs and people. All Atlas Team Facilitators and Atlas Certified Trainers have committed to using positive, non-aversive training methods, and we ask the same of our clients. It is all about communication and understanding how to facilitate the best two-way communication possible with our clients and their dogs, as well as between ourselves and our clients. In positive training, we focus on what we want the dog to do, and, as necessary, help the dog find alternative behaviors to do instead of the ones we don't want.

We understand that learning how to train a dog can be difficult and that there is a wide variety of information about different methods of training. When you start working with Atlas, we will ensure you are using non-aversive methods and make sure you understand why positive training maximizes training success and promotes greater physical and emotional health for the dog.

## **What Does Certification Mean?**

You might not be aware that there is no national standard certification in the United States, and that the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) does not require any type of certification or documentation to prove that your dog is indeed a service dog. However, many organizations and service dog programs do offer their own certifications to ensure the service dog team meet certain standards.

Atlas Assistance Dog's standards for certification ensure that service dog/handler teams are thoroughly trained. Becoming an Atlas Certified Team assures that you have been tested and trained to internationally recognized protocols. Atlas has developed certification standards to exceed all base requirements set by federal laws under the ADA. It is a validation of your hard work and acquired skills. It is how we confirm that you and your dog are ready to function confidently and safely in public settings



and that the dog won't be dangerously distracted by noise, shopping carts, other dogs, food temptations, and all other stimuli you and your dog may encounter.

Certification is not just about your dog. Atlas strives for our clients to be fully prepared for any situation they might encounter while navigating the sometimes very challenging world. Atlas certified clients know their rights as service dog handlers and have been coached on how to advocate for themselves when confronted by people in public who might not be so knowledgeable.

## **Atlas Team Facilitators**

All clients are assigned an Atlas Team Facilitator who is their hands-on trainer, advocate, and partner through their certification process. Facilitators are volunteer trainers who have gone through extensive training on how to work with Atlas teams. They work hands-on with our clients and their dogs in-order to introduce and/or refine their dog's disability tasks, work on public access skills, and educate them on their rights as service dog handlers in-order for them to be fully prepared for Atlas certification. Atlas requires that the Team Facilitator and handler/dog team work together for a minimum of six months prior to certification.

Team Facilitators are how we as an organization provide you with the proper support and preparation as you get ready to go out into the world as a service dog handler.

## **Atlas Certified Trainers**

Atlas Certified Trainers are private dog trainers who have gone through our extensive program to learn how to work with people with a wide range of disabilities and health conditions. They do not work for Atlas or work with our clients. They learn how to train dogs to help their clients use their dog to mitigate their disabilities and allow the clients to live full, thriving, and successful lives accompanied by their service dog.

Atlas Certified Trainers have pledged to use only positive training methods and treat all dogs and humans in an ethical, caring, and humane manner.

Atlas Assistance Dogs does not require our clients to work with Atlas Certified Trainers before entering or during the Client Certification program, and we recognize that not all people will need the support of a private trainer. However, if you do, we highly encourage you look for an Atlas Certified Trainer in your area as these are trainers who have learned how to work with clients in a way that will help them meet our standards and treat clients and their dogs in the best possible way.

Atlas Certified Trainers are listed on our website and sorted by region. You can contact the trainer directly to discuss your needs.

## **Application and Certification Process**

In order to qualify to begin Atlas' Client Certification program, we require that your dog be at least 14 months old, has passed their AKC Canine Good Citizen (CGC) evaluation, can pass Atlas' Team Readiness Assessment which includes a temperament test, and is mature enough to start working in public.



Our application process involves a shorter pre-application to first help us determine if Atlas may be a good fit for you and your dog. If we determine that this is the case, we will send you a more detailed application to fill out. The detailed application will require you to provide:

- Proof that you have passed your CGC test
- Two to three video submissions demonstrating your dog's level of training and skill such as how they walk on leash, their comfort around body handling, and how they react around other dogs. This helps us determine if your dog may need some more training before moving forward in the application and assessment process.
- A Letter of Medical Indication from your medical or mental health provider establishing you have a condition that falls under the Americans with Disabilities Act and that you would benefit from a service dog.
- A health assessment form completed by your veterinarian to ensure service work is safe for your dog. This is a two-part form: the first asking about general health, the second covering X-rays. We require all dogs to have X-rays of their hips and elbows after the age of 18 months and by the time they are certified, but do not require X-rays before applying. Please have your veterinarian advise you on the best time to have your dog X-rayed.

If a dog is supporting multiple clients, each client must complete a pre and full application and provide a Letter of Medical Indication from their doctor. Our standard application accommodates a single handler in addition to the client and one dog. If additional secondary handlers or an additional dog are involved, we can provide an Additional Handler Form and Additional Dog Form upon request.

Atlas does not have a minimum age for clients or handlers. To be the primary handler of a dog, the individual must be mature enough to do the day-to-day training required of our program and be able to demonstrate they can safely and responsibly manage and care for their dog on their own. Please note that anyone under 18 will need the approval of their guardian or parent to go through our program, and that guardian will need to be present at the initial phone interview as well as in-person evaluation.

To begin, please read through our frequently asked questions (FAQs) found on our website (<https://www.atlasdog.org/client-handler-dog-team-certification/>). Before formally applying, make sure you have gone through our *Application Readiness Checklist*, *Team Readiness Assessment*, and *Guidelines to Self-training Approaches*.

These documents will help you determine if you meet our criteria and are ready to apply. If you have any questions email [info@atlasdog.org](mailto:info@atlasdog.org), or we will happily conduct an initial assessment phone call with you to establish your needs and your eligibility under the Americans with Disabilities Act, discuss your dog's present suitability, determine whether Atlas is a good fit, and go over our program.

Our program is designed to support clients/handlers who actively participate in teaching their dog the necessary disability skills. Many of the skills for mobility, medical alert, psychiatric assistance, and hearing alerts, can be learned effectively through our client-trained model. If our assessment determines that your dog needs skills that require complex decisions about how to act or require an extended training period, or if you need more significant support in training your dog, we will recommend you partner with a specialized trainer or look at alternative approaches. If we agree the program is a good fit for you, but you or your dog aren't quite ready, we will discuss next steps.



When you feel you are ready to apply, please click on the “Start Pre-Application” button found on our website. Upon review, we will either send you our full application to fill out, where you will also upload your forms and videos directly, or we will discuss other possible options than Atlas which may suit your needs better.

Upon receipt and review of your full application, we will schedule a video intake interview with you that will determine provisional acceptance.

When you are provisionally accepted by our program, we assign a Team Facilitator to work with you and schedule a detailed two-part assessment. This evaluation includes a virtual discussion portion with your facilitator, as well as an in-person temperament and obedience testing of your dog, assessment of your ability to work with your dog to meet your goals, and determination if you are ready to move forward with the program. A regional Team Facilitator Lead as well as your assigned Team Facilitator will handle the evaluation. Anyone else who is part of your training or support team is welcome and encouraged to attend and participate. Anyone who will handle the dog regularly or be an active part of training is required to attend.

It is our goal that anyone who is provisionally accepted is likely to pass the in-person assessment and that the evaluation is a time for you and your Team Facilitator to meet and begin working together. As discussed in the last section, the Team Facilitator’s role is to take you and your dog through the specialized stages of service dog training, including disability skills, and navigating the environments you experience day to day. If the evaluation determines you are ready to move forward as an Atlas client, the Team Facilitator Lead will outline a three-stage training plan that you and your Team Facilitator will follow to prepare you and your dog for certification and to be the best working team possible. If evaluation determines you or your dog are not ready, but the program is a good fit, next steps will be discussed with the goal of getting you on track and working successfully in our program with a Team Facilitator.

From the date of a successful evaluation, you and your dog will work with your assigned Team Facilitator for a minimum of six months prior to certification. Please be aware of the possibility that you might be put on a waitlist, as our nearest Team Facilitator might be at maximum capacity. Frequency of meetings will typically be at least every two weeks to begin and a minimum of once a month until you are ready to take your public access test and certify.

## **Public Access Test**

The final step in certification is our Public Access Test (PAT). This is an evaluation of your ability to function safely and appropriately in public settings as a service dog team as well as a demonstration that your dog performs tasks that mitigate your disability. The evaluation will be conducted and recorded by your Team Facilitator. They will then send the video to Atlas for a final review.

Your Team Facilitator will work with you to prepare you for your PAT. They will only have you take the PAT once you decide as a team that you are ready.

Certification is valid for a year. We require annual recertification to ensure you and your dog continue to function well together as a team and that we can provide you support as needed. Recertifications can be done any time during the quarter that contains the anniversary of your original certification.



After the first two annual recertifications, teams can do a re-certification test every other year. They will only be charged for their updated ID cards annually.

## Program Requirements

In order to ensure that our clients are getting the best support possible and staying on track, Atlas asks for a few commitments from our clients.

**Weekly Logs:** Clients submit a weekly log to track their progress, successes, and report any concerns they might have. These logs can be easily submitted online.

**Atlas Courses:** All Atlas clients take a series of courses as they work through the training program. These cover areas important to your success as a working team, including understanding positive training methods, dog body language and communication, health and maintenance of your dog, the Americans with Disabilities Act, Becoming a Working Team, and our Public Access Test. These courses are written into your training plan and your Team Facilitator will be there to help guide you through and discuss any questions you may have. All clients need to successfully complete these courses prior to taking their Public Access Test for certification.

## Fees

Atlas strives to keep costs to our clients as low as possible. In most cases, our fees total \$700 per client/dog or client/handler/dog team, broken down as follows:

- Call or email communication to discuss our program and determine if it is the right fit for you: Free
- Application fee: \$25
- Team Readiness Assessment: \$100
- Training fee: \$450. This is the standard fee for six months of training with an Atlas Team Facilitator (equivalent to \$75 per month of training). If you need more than 6 months, we add \$75 per month. Additional fees may apply if you need more involved disability skill training or live further than an hour's drive from your Team Facilitator.
- PAT fee: \$125, which also covers the cost of the vest and ID card.
- Annual recertification fee: \$75, which includes an updated ID card.

Payments of the training fee can be made in up to two installments. The first is due after a successful evaluation, the balance is due at the three month point of training.

Travel fees may apply if you live further than one hour from your Team Facilitator. Advanced training fees may apply if you need more involved training than our Team Facilitators normally provide. All fees will be discussed during your phone interview and will be confirmed after your in-person evaluation.



If an additional dog is part of the certification, additional evaluation and training fees will typically apply. They will vary on a case-by-case basis and will be discussed during your phone interview and in-person evaluation. The certification fee applies for each client/dog team, so if a dog has two clients, the fee would typically be doubled. We will discuss this with you during your phone interview and in person evaluation. Additional handlers for a single client and dog do not usually impact pricing.

## **Conclusion**

Thank you for spending the time going through this document and learning about our handler/dog certification. Please contact us with any questions you might have about service dogs or our organization at [info@atlasdog.org](mailto:info@atlasdog.org). Once you are ready to apply, fill out Atlas' Client Application.

We hope to hear from you soon!





## Appendix

### Is Atlas a Good Fit for You?

Atlas Assistance Dogs works with people who wish to work with their own trainer or train their own dog, as opposed to going through an organization that trains and places dogs. There are many benefits to this:

- You are fully involved in your dog's training
- You develop a deep connection and bond with your dog from day one
- You work through problems and difficult situations as they arise, building your skills as a trainer and handler
- You have on-going and personalized support from the Atlas organization the entire time you and your dog are a certified team
- You significantly lower the cost of training and don't need to wait multiple years to receive a dog
- You have the support of an experienced Atlas Team Facilitator who helps you refine your skills and helps you and your dog build confidence in your ability to work in all environments you normally use

However, owner-based training is not a good fit for everyone. It requires a long-term commitment, daily work, and a good support system. When deciding whether owner-based training and getting certified through Atlas is for you, you might want to ask yourself the following:

- What type of tasks will you need your dog to do? How complex are they? Is this realistic for self-training?
- Are you able to commit to training and working with your dog on a consistent basis from puppyhood to adulthood?
- Do you have a good support network to help you with training, emotional or physical challenges you may face, and emergency care for your dog?
- Can you commit to meeting with your Team Facilitator on average twice a month for a minimum of six months?

Be honest with yourself about your needs, desires, and abilities. If you are unsure about these questions, we will happily discuss them with you and see if Atlas is indeed a good fit for you!



## **Is a Service Dog for You?**

Have you considered some of the challenges you may confront as a service dog handler?

Walking around with a service dog is like walking around with a bright fuzzy neon sign. Service dog handlers often do not go unnoticed and tend to solicit a good amount of attention. You might be asked questions about your dog, their training, and even your disability. Beyond the common interactions with the general-public, you might also run into barriers when entering places like restaurants, stores etc. from people who do not know the laws surrounding service animals. Before committing to a service dog, it is important to think carefully about whether this is something you are willing to face.

Our Team Facilitators will help you learn how to manage these types of public interactions and educate you on your rights. They will coach you on how to advocate for yourself and help you build your confidence when out in the world.

If you have any questions about what being out in public with a service dog might be like and are unsure if this is for you, please contact us and we can discuss this further with you.

## **What is Involved in Self-Training?**

Training your own service dog can be an extremely rewarding process. You develop a deep bond with your dog from the start, have a common language with them, and can personalize the disability mitigating tasks you need them to do (compared with a dog that comes to you trained knowing certain cues that may not be useful to you).

However, training your own service dog involves a great amount of time and commitment. It is necessary to keep up with the dog's training daily and to be consistent. Even with the coaching of a private trainer, it is your responsibility to practice with your dog between sessions. Just like learning to play a musical instrument, your dog will not progress if you are only relying on sessions with your trainer; you must practice every day.

Self-training can sometimes be frustrating. Because you are working with your dog daily, you might not always see the small improvements. You might get frustrated if you think the dog is not progressing fast enough. That is why a good support system to help you when you are struggling can be essential.

Sometimes all it takes is an outside pair of eyes to help you see the progress and celebrate each success, no matter how small. Because when it comes down to it, watching your dog learn new cues and realizing that the incredible amount of work you have put in has paid off is a highly rewarding feeling.

## **How to Decide if You Need a Professional Trainer**

Atlas' focus is on providing the disability skills training and public access training necessary to make you and your dog successful as a working team. We do not work with puppies, do boarded training, or handle foundational obedience and behavior issues. There are many skilled trainers out there who can help you in these areas, and we encourage you to work with them if you need them. We are here to fill the great need for specialized training and support to take you and your dog through preparation to become a working service team once the dog is sufficiently mature and has a solid foundation.



There is not a right or wrong approach regarding training with a private trainer or doing training on your own. It all depends on what will be successful for you. If you or people in your household who are part of your support system have been around dogs most of your lives, you may feel equipped to teach more advanced behaviors to your dog on your own. You may have a dog who is already very well trained and may be offering some of the needed disability skills on their own and just need help fine tuning those skills and preparing your dog to work in public. Your dog may have solid obedience manners and a great temperament, and the disability skills you need may not be complex. In those cases, you likely won't need the help of a private trainer and will be successful with the support of our program.

However, if your service dog is one of the first dogs you've had or trained, or you have a complex set of tasks for your dog to perform that would benefit from daily expertise, then looking for a trainer to be your coach is highly recommended. In addition, many people and dogs can benefit from group and puppy training classes during the earlier parts of their training journey.

### **Qualities to Look for in a Trainer**

Searching for a trainer can be hard. There are currently fewer service dog trainers than there are people in need of service dogs. This is just one barrier that Atlas is trying to confront.

Atlas offers an extensive program to teach dog trainers how to work with people with disabilities and train service dogs using only positive, ethical, and caring methods. We believe that all trainers working with people and dogs should show compassion and understanding and create a safe space for their clients.

When searching for a trainer, or during your first interactions, we highly advise you to ask the trainer about their training methods. We acknowledge that people train dogs in a wide variety of ways; however, there is an extensive amount of evidence that using non-aversive, positive training methods results in greater long-term success and causes less emotional and physical harm to the dog. Examples of aversive methods include shock collars, prong collars, leash pops/jerks, emotional intimidation, flooding/overwhelming the dog, and physical corrections such as muzzle holds.

Please be aware that if you chose to apply for certification with Atlas Assistance Dogs, we will not accept the use of aversive training methods. If such methods have been used, we will work with you to shift how you work with your dog.

Finally, when working with a trainer, you want to make sure you feel listened to and that there is open communication. If a trainer is imposing their ways on you, this might not be a good fit. Ultimately you want to be comfortable with the person you are working with.

### **Qualities to Look for in a Service Dog**

Service dogs can be of any breed and come from any background, be it a breeder or a shelter. What is important to look at when evaluating if the dog is appropriate for you is the dog's temperament and how the dog will suit your specific needs.



**Breed:** Picking the breed or mix for a service dog is a personal decision. First, you want to determine what size is appropriate for you. Do you need a large dog suited for mobility support? Do you need a smaller breed that's easy to transport and care for due to frequent hospitalizations or travel? Do you have the ability to exercise a breed known for high their energy levels?

**Temperament:** First thing to look at when choosing a service dog is their temperament. Remember that training and temperament are two different things. If a dog is exhibiting a normal behavior such as pulling on a leash or jumping up to greet, that can be rectified with training. However, the dog also needs to be comfortable around strangers, accept being touched, recover quickly from startling experiences, and have been socialized as a puppy with other dogs and with as many types of people and situations as possible.

If a dog exhibits fear, timidity, reactivity, or aggression; or if the dog has health or structural issues, they are likely not a good service dog candidate. Working as a service dog is asking a lot of your dog; be sure what you are asking them to do is healthy and fair to ask of them.

Many trainers can help you evaluate a dog's temperament.

**Disability Skill Needs:** You need to make sure your dog has the physical ability as well as desire to do the types of tasks you need. If you need them to carry and find items, it is important your dog like to retrieve. If they need to provide physical support, it is important they have the right body structure and are large enough. If you work in a very busy public environment, they need to be very comfortable with activity. In many cases, there are multiple ways to have a dog meet your needs that are more in alignment with their natural preferences. Your Team Facilitator will help you with this analysis.