

Assistance Dog Access before ADA  
By Sheila O'Brien M.Ed  
Chair of Assistance Dogs International North America Regional Chapter Board  
Special Advisor to America's VetDogs and the Guide Dog Foundation

In honor of the 30th Anniversary of the Americans' with Disabilities Act (ADA), I would like to give you some insight into how Guide, Service and Hearing Dogs obtained public access prior to its enactment.

Guide Dogs were the first assistance dogs to be introduced in this country in the late 1920s. As more and more people (many of them veterans who lost their eyesight in WWI and WWII) sought the services of Guide Dogs, states were petitioned to enact laws of public access that stated a guide dog must be properly "harnessed" when in public.

Service Dogs and Hearing Dogs came on the scene in the mid seventies. As one of the first Hearing Dog trainers, one my responsibilities was to travel from state to state with my 'demo' dog, Molly Malone, to educate and convince them to amend the state Guide Dog laws to include Hearing Dogs. Because of that, many of the Hearing Dogs wore "harnesses" in public to comply with the Guide Dog Law. Eventually states started to change their laws to accommodate other types of Assistance Dogs. Still it was problematic for public identification of Hearing Dogs as they tended to be small shelter rescues and their partners had the invisible disability of deafness or hearing loss. Some states required Hearing Dogs to wear yellow or orange harnesses, orange leashes or collars and the state of MD required an orange tag. If a Hearing Dog traveled from state to state with his or her partner, a variety of leashes, collars and harnesses had to be packed to make sure the Hearing Dog would be allowed public access.

In 1987, Assistance Dogs International, composed of a coalition of assistance dog training organizations, thought they had solved the problem by officially identifying Hearing Dogs with a yellow and orange leash. This did not prove to be as successful a campaign as ADI had hoped, as the public expected, large German Shepherds to be the only dogs capable of doing Assistance Dog work.

Fortunately, the Americans with Disabilities Act was passed on July 26, 1990 and this Federal law identified Service dogs not by what they were wearing but by the behavior and the tasks they were trained to do to directly mitigate their human partners' disabilities.

