

European Guide Dog Mobility Instructor Training Benefits of Standardisation in the training of guide & assistance dogs

Introduction

Europe is where the modern guide dog movement began and in many Member States of the European Union, blind and partially sighted people can enjoy access to skilled and proficient organisations providing this unique mobility service. In other Member States, aspiring organisations are being assisted to raise their standards of guide dog training and service provision to match the highest in the world.

Standards: International Guide Dog Federation (IGDF)

High standards of training must be facilitated and maintained across Europe, both to ensure that guide dog users are not to be put at risk when they go out with their guide dogs and that service providers support access for guide dogs to their premises thereby ensuring that guide dog users are not discriminated against.

High standards of behaviour are also necessary for individual partnerships that is to say, for guide dog users and their dogs. Strengthened rights of access at EU level, whether to public transport or the built environment, bring new responsibilities, including ensuring that the general public, who come into contact with the blind or partially sighted user and his or her dog, are not put at risk from the dog's training, behaviour or health.

Currently, the International Guide Dog Federation (IGDF) is the global organisation which sets and monitors standards for training guide dogs around the world, including in Europe. It ensures that these high standards are met and maintained by its members. IGDF standards are already common to all full member organisations of the European Guide Dog Federation (EGDF) and its associate members aspire to attaining them. IGDF standards are currently accredited upon application for full membership and thereafter, every five years, by a team of international IGDF Assessors, including 10 from EU Member States.

Definition of a guide dog

EGDF members consider that all legal rights of access should be linked to harmonised and high standards of training across Europe linked to a common definition of a guide dog. With the recent implementation of a number of new regulations at EU level, including the EU air regulation on the rights of disabled passengers and passengers with reduced mobility when travelling by air - and the future extension of these rights to other modes of transport - this definition is crucial for national implementing authorities and also provides a reassurance to the service providers that the dogs they have a duty to admit are trained particular standards.

A Sub-Group of ECAC (European Conference on Civil Aviation) Facilitation Working Group which considers the access needs of passengers with reduced mobility, developed the following definition:

“recognised assistance dog” means guide and other assistance dogs, which are highly trained to assist a wide range of disabled persons with everyday tasks. Guide dogs which are trained primarily to provide mobility assistance to blind or partially sighted people are trained by an organisation that is accepted by and affiliated to the International Guide Dog Federation (IGDF). Assistance dogs are trained by an organisation that meets the full membership criteria of Assistance Dogs International (ADI)”.

This definition was incorporated into ECAC Doc 30, the facilitation manual for the European air industry, in December 2009.¹

Europe’s guide dog users influence standardisation

The European Commission is currently publishing new standardisation Mandates addressed to CEN, CENELEC and ETSI to facilitate improved accessibility for disabled people - e.g. Mandate 420 on public procurement in the built environment - and is considering bringing forward a new EU Accessibility Act in 2012. EGDF welcomes such proposals as they will assist in the full implementation of Article 9 on Accessibility in the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with

¹ ECAC POLICY STATEMENT IN THE FIELD OF CIVIL AVIATION FACILITATION
ECAC.CEAC DOC No. 30 (PART I), 11th Edition/December 2009

Disabilities. It will be essential that Europe's guide dog users influence any such new initiatives and actively engage, through their national

standardisation bodies, in shaping any new European standards related to accessibility. Between 2011 and 2013, EGDF will pilot the first training in standardisation for Europe's guide dog users enabling them to influence standardisation and accessibility in favour of their particular needs and rights.

Current situation at EU level

The provision of guide dogs varies between Member States, ranging from countries, such as the UK, where guide dogs are provided by a charity for a nominal cost to the owner of 50 pence sterling (around 57 cents), to provision via the Member State's social security system which in some cases, such as Germany, seeks only to provide the cheapest guide dogs. As a result of that latter practice, blind and partially sighted people are being put at risk from poorly and insufficiently trained dogs. EGDF has begun discussing these concerns with key government representatives in order to ensure that guide dogs Europe are trained to safe and recognised standards across i.e. standards which are currently set and monitored by the International Guide Dog Federation. In the context of developing a common curriculum for guide dog mobility instruction across the European Union, a common set of standards for dog training is crucial. Such standards agreed at European level and applied in the context of guide dog training would then replace standards for training, set and applied at national level, and so help to ensure a level playing field for guide dog users across Europe.

Conclusion

To secure and maintain freedom of movement for guide dog users both within, and between, Member States, it is vital that we establish training standards that will deliver guide dogs with consistent and high standards of behaviour and guiding skills.

EGDF is fully supportive of the objectives of the Leonardo project and is delighted that CEN is involved.