

BORZOI AS SERVICE DOGS

by Alicia Miller

We have all seen them: the dedicated Golden Retrievers, Shepherds and working-type breeds dutifully leading the blind, caring for someone in a wheelchair, monitoring a kid with diabetes and a dozen other noble tasks that most of us would never consider asking a Borzoi to do. Borzois are too independent, too self-sufficient and in some cases have way too much of a sense of humor to consider using as service animals – right? Well, the answer is completely the opposite. There is one type of service dog that Borzois are not only suited for; everything that makes them a challenge to train for other tasks makes them ideal for becoming Psychiatric Service Dogs (PSD).

So what makes a good PSD and what makes them different from just Emotional Support Animals (ESA)? Well, for one a PSD is heavily trained and qualifies as a service animal under the law and an ESA is not trained and does not qualify as a service animal. Most PSDs start out as ESAs and are trained from there. So what makes a Borzoi an ideal candidate for becoming a PSD? In one word; independence. Unlike most working breeds, a PSD has to combine the seemingly polar opposite qualities of being extremely self-motivated but trainable and also being extremely clingy and loving. In other words, they have to think for themselves and be Velcro dogs. A breed like, say, a German Shepherd Dog is highly motivated, bonds wonderfully, very trainable and completely unsuited to become a PSD. Although they are a dream to train, they are not an emotionally independent animal. If their person panics or is afraid, they too become panicked and afraid, or at least convinced there is some sort of threat because of their complete trust in their human. A Borzoi, even the most loving and wonderful, makes up their own mind about a given situation and this is the critical element in any successful PSD.

The tasks of a PSD can be varied, depending on the ailment the dog is there to help with, but there are some general tasks that most of them are trained to perform:

- Wake human on time – important as they may be partially sedated by drug side effects
- Remind human to take medication on set schedule, even bring medication to the human.
- Recognize onset of flashback, panic attack, hallucination, or other altered mental state. Stimulate human through touch, licks, play, physical deep pressure to draw attention away from attack, catatonic state or flashback to the dog or to pull a human out of a hallucination by signaling there is nothing there.
- Give the human an excuse to get out of an uncomfortable social situation by acting out on secret command.

- Brace and support a human made dizzy by medication or medical condition. Allow a human to use them to pull themselves up or to use them as something to lean on. (VERY EASY to teach)
- Wake human from nightmares and guard (be touching) during sleep to reduce hypervigilance.
- Constantly touch to ground their human, and initiate, demand petting to soothe human
- Be a steady shoulder to cry on without freaking out and provide unconditional support
- Step between human and others, form a physical barrier, imposing enough to prevent accidental jostling
- Form a social bridge for the human. Be something safe to have people concentrate on and talk about other than the person while still stimulating and facilitating interaction and re-engagement with society
- Never leave the human alone, always be a safe companion
- Alert for seizures and perhaps prevent psychogenic seizures

Unfortunately right now there is a massive need for more PSDs out there. Up to one third of our soldiers coming back from the wars are exhibiting signs of PTSD and other psychiatric traumas and also traumatic brain injuries that can result in permanent complications. We also still have thousands of Vietnam War vets still suffering from the traumas of their war and that is only in the military sector. In the civilian world we have victims of violent crime, child abuse, and people with organic brain disorders like schizophrenia, bipolar type 1 and a dozen other maladies. All of these issues can be treated in part by a well-trained PSD. A recent



study found that 83% of PTSD sufferers with a PSD experienced a reduction in symptoms, an additional 40% were also able to reduce their medication.

A couple of years ago, my daughter had the idea to donate one or two of her pups to the Veteran's Administration for the Afghanistan or Iraq war vets. We had repeatedly discussed the psychological trauma of the wars, because she had met some soldiers suffering from traumatic brain injury while I was still in the Army and knew their children. Rhiannon and I had researched the requirements for PSDs and came to the (at the time) startling conclusion that Borzois were the ideal service animal for this task.

Two years later, both dogs are working PSDs and both have dramatically altered the lives of their people. The one placed with the VA made such an impact that a councilor at the VA called and asked us to provide more animals and training for those in the greatest need. Although it took months, we now have free transportation for the dogs through PilotsNPaws and Operation Rodger, free training with 3 different trainers with over 90 years of experience between them (and others are signing on), lifetime discounted and free veterinary care for the animals through the SPCA and participating veterinarians, 4H volunteers for raising, training and socialization of pups, free registration of the service animal, and the official support of the DAV and several nonprofit Army organizations. The veterans care and interaction with the dogs are monitored and guided through the bonding period with emergency phone numbers to call in Arizona.

Right now we are providing animals and training to those in the most need and working to train vets to train other vets so this program can grow across the country. There are 70 - 100% disabled veterans asking to be put on waiting lists for the dogs from Washington State to Tennessee. Some are in wheelchairs, some use canes, some are walking wounded and all are in need.

The donations of the dogs have been handled through the Tucson area DAV. Although this project is relying on donations, the DAV and Bandido Charlie's nonprofit association offer receipts for the donation of Borzoi candidates for PSDs. They offer \$1500 USD credit for a carefully screened puppy and up to \$5,000 credit for a Borzoi over a year old and under 4 with both potential and lots of socialization and training in basic obedience and/or above behaviors. These are able to be used as charitable deductions for tax purposes.

I have seen the difference that these dogs make in the veteran's lives and it is amazing. Each time I have seen a dog successfully placed with a person it has brought tears to my eyes. It is

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almost magical, as these dogs bring solace and even more important, the hope for personal peace to people who have seen too much war. I have always known that our Borzoi were special but trained for this, they are true angels of mercy. They save lives.

If you would like information on how to participate, donate a dog or time to this program, or how a veteran would apply for an animal through this program please contact Alicia

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