

UDS Introduces Future Service Dogs to New Facility



Rhonda Taylor (foreground) works with Labrador retriever pup Tara at the new United Disabilities Services service dog training center in the Greenfield Industrial Park, as program manager Jill Harris (back) works with Charlie, who is handled by Abby Williams (not visible). The new facility will centralize a process that was previously spread out to homes and other facilities and provide more consistency to the successful program

By Rick Hiduk

On May 20, United Disabilities (UDS) unveiled a new service dog training room at its headquarters at 1905 Olde Homestead Lane in the Greenfield Industrial Park, Lancaster, and introduced two new trainees to the public. If the two Labrador retriever pups, Tara and Charles, successfully complete their training, they may have an opportunity to help a person with disabilities build confidence and lead a more independent life.

Over the course of two years, the pups will be taught to perform basic daily tasks such as opening and closing doors, picking up clothing, turning on lights, retrieving and delivering, and even getting something out of the refrigerator. They must also be desensitized to many sounds, such as the whirring of a wheelchair. Labs are often selected because of their easygoing manner and their tolerance for noises and inconsistent human behavior. They will master more than 80 commands to help a person with a disability to bridge the gap between their physical limitations and their needs.

In addition to service dogs, UDS provides "companion dogs" for people with autism or depression and "facility dogs" that are trained to work in long-term care facilities and schools, assisting physical, occupational, recreational, and social therapist.

According to UDS service dogs program manager, Jill Harris, the agency places approximately five dogs per year. The success rate for training the dogs runs about 75 percent.

UDS chief communications and development officer, Cindy Davidson noted that the new training facility provides a centralized and dedicated space for the service dogs program. In the past, training was conducted at a nearby animal hospital and in the homes of the handlers. Davidson cited long-time UDS supporter and volunteer Ruth Lasof, who recently passed away, for providing the funds that made the center possible.

"She was a true puppy-hugger," Davidson said of Lasof and her love for the dogs.

Abby Williams of East Hempfield Township and Rhonda Taylor of Conestoga met Charlie and Tara, respectively, less than a week before they were brought to the new training center to work with Harris.

Williams had been working with another dog for 18 months that was about to be placed. The eminent departure was bittersweet. "It's hard to let go," she stated.

Taylor agreed, but added, "When you see what they can do for someone when they are placed, it helps you get through it." Tara is the third dog that the Taylor family has worked with. Their association with UDS started when Rhonda's daughter and 2009 Penn Manor High School graduate Christi Taylor took on the training of a service dog as a senior project.

Volunteers are needed to cover many facets of the service dog training program. In addition to the primary handlers, who take the dogs into their home, puppy sitters are needed to give the trainers a break or to care for the dogs in the event of an emergency. Many volunteers, like Lasof get their start as "puppy pals," who assist the primary handlers by giving the dogs some extra attention and opportunities for exercise. Volunteers are also needed for special events and fundraisers.

For more information about the UDS service dog training program, interested readers may log on to www.udservices.org or call Davidson at 397-1841.