

March 23, 2010

Guide Dogs SA.NT to launch Autism Assistance Dog Program

When: Thursday, March 25 – 10:30 am. **Where:** Guide Dogs SA.NT, 251 Morphett Street, Adelaide.

Available to Media: • Opportunity to interview family with Guide Dogs Autism Assistance Dog • Demonstration of Autism Assistance Dog • Opportunity to interview Guide Dogs SA.NT CEO Kate Thiele and Guide Dog Services Manager Tracey Jones

Positive outcomes from a pilot program and an overwhelming demand for services have prompted Guide Dogs SA.NT to officially launch a Guide Dogs Autism Assistance Dog program at 10:30 am on Thursday, March 25.

Guide Dogs Services Manager Tracey Jones says parents participating in a Guide Dogs Autism Assistance Dog pilot program in 2008-2009 reported remarkable changes in their households upon receiving an Autism Assistance Dog.

“One family said they had to get up to their child as many as 18 times a night, but were able to enjoy a full night’s sleep once an Autism Assistance Dog was introduced to their home. Others have told of the joy of being able to safely enjoy simple family outings again and have noticed less meltdowns and stress in their homes.

“With the high prevalence of autism in our community, with reports of up to 50 new cases of autism being diagnosed each month in South Australia alone, we felt compelled to use our knowledge of dog training to help. It is an extension of the services we already offer to people with disabilities.

“We closely follow a Guide Dog training model for our Autism Assistance Dogs, so these dogs are highly trained and responsive.

“Much like a Guide Dog, an Autism Assistance Dog has a great deal of responsibility with the focus on the child’s safety and comfort.”

The dogs are trained to prevent children running away which is a common trait of children with autism.

On outings, the child is tethered to the dog through a belt around the child’s waist while the parent has physical control of the dog through a leash and collar.

The child is able to roam freely, but should they attempt to bolt, the dog is trained to sit or lie down and act as an anchor, to give the parent time to intervene and diffuse the situation. **(A demonstration will be provided on the day)**

Guide Dogs Association of SA and NT Inc | Full member of the International Guide Dog Federation

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- GUIDE DOG SERVICES
- VISION SERVICES
- SENSORY DIRECTIONS
- HEARING SOLUTIONS

Guide Dogs Autism Assistance Dogs are trained to specifically benefit children who:

- Demonstrate the most challenging and severe behaviours
- Are aged between three and eight years old
- Have a confirmed diagnosis of severe autism
- Experience difficulty with impulse control manifesting through tantrums and absconding.

-- ENDS --

Background

Guide Dogs SA.NT

Guide Dogs SA.NT is a not-for-profit working in the disability sector to provide support for individuals with a vision or hearing impairment, and families of children with autism. We help people to find innovative solutions for their lives to help them reach their goals. Guide Dogs has recently moved into its redeveloped head office at 251 Morphett Street where it will have the opportunity to expand and develop its programs for clients. The organisation will be able to further promote its preventative health messages through the opening of the Guide Dogs Discovery Centre, an interactive health education facility, on April 28.

Other services, in addition to Guide Dog Services, provided by Guide Dogs SA.NT are:

- Vision Services
- Sensory Directions
- Hearing Solutions.

Pilot program

A pilot program in 2008-2009 found that the need for the program was high and resulted in multiple expressions of interest.

Other results were:

- Improved child safety
- Reduction of anxiety in the home
- Increased community participation by all family members
- Improved relationships with siblings
- Reduction in isolation/stigmatisation of the child with autism.

Funding

The value of an Autism Assistance Dog is more than \$25,000. We rely on fundraising to ensure the long-term success of the program. Successful applicants must assist with and contribute towards fundraising for their Autism Assistance Dog through sponsorship, donations and community involvement.

Autism statistics and facts

Statistics from the Australian Advisory Board on Autism Spectrum Disorders suggest one in 160 children aged between six and 12 have an autism spectrum disorder. This represents 10,625 children aged between six and 12 years with autism in Australia.

An article in the Sunday Mail in April 2009 stated that 50 new cases of autism are diagnosed every month in South Australia.

Children with autism present a unique set of challenges as they often do not connect well to others or their environment. Changes around them can create anxiety, at times resulting in the child escaping and potentially putting themselves in harm's way. Guide Dogs Autism Assistance Dogs provide a positive intervention.

Further information

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