





# A DOG'S PURPOSE

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LOCAL NONPROFIT PARTNERS THE VISUALLY IMPAIRED WITH COMPANION CANINES AND COMMUNITY.

For the blind, guide dogs serve as furry friends and amiable assistants, and here in the Aloha State, one organization in particular has been connecting locals in need with certified canines for nearly 40 years. **GUIDE DOGS OF HAWAII** — now located on the corner of South and Cooke streets — started in 1955 to help those seeking guide dogs maneuver the quarantine regulations in place at the time.

When the segregation situation for animals was successfully modified to exclude service canines, it opened up more opportunities for the visually impaired and their pups. For one, those traveling in and out of the state could do so with their guide dogs and not have to worry about the state's arduous isolation period. Most importantly, though, it meant Hawai'i residents could now get guide dogs from the mainland. Previously, the state could only obtain certified guide dogs from other rabies-free countries like Australia or New Zealand.

"Our last dog that we brought from New Zealand was about \$70,000," recalls executive director Jeanne Torres.

Now, being able to get U.S.-trained canines allows Guide Dogs of Hawai'i to save a little on costs and appropriate those funds into other areas of need, including non-guide dog handling.

“We try to do activities with our clients to give them a broader perspective,” says Torres.

Outings range from watching movies at Ward to visiting area farmers markets and checking out Children's Discovery Center, and just this past February, the group headed to 'Ohana Hale Marketplace to experience the local vendors.

But a lot of the connection starts closer to home base, so it's a good thing, then, that the nonprofit moved to its current building at 715 S. King St. Ste. 110. It's 3,000 square feet of space to give clients a place to do crafts like acrylic painting, weaving and looming, as well as areas for group and peer meetings. There are also programs that cover general wellness, home independence, technological skills, mobility, vocational training and more.

“You tell us where you want to go and we go along for the ride,” Torres explains. “We point out what resources are available for you to use, but it's all your choice.”

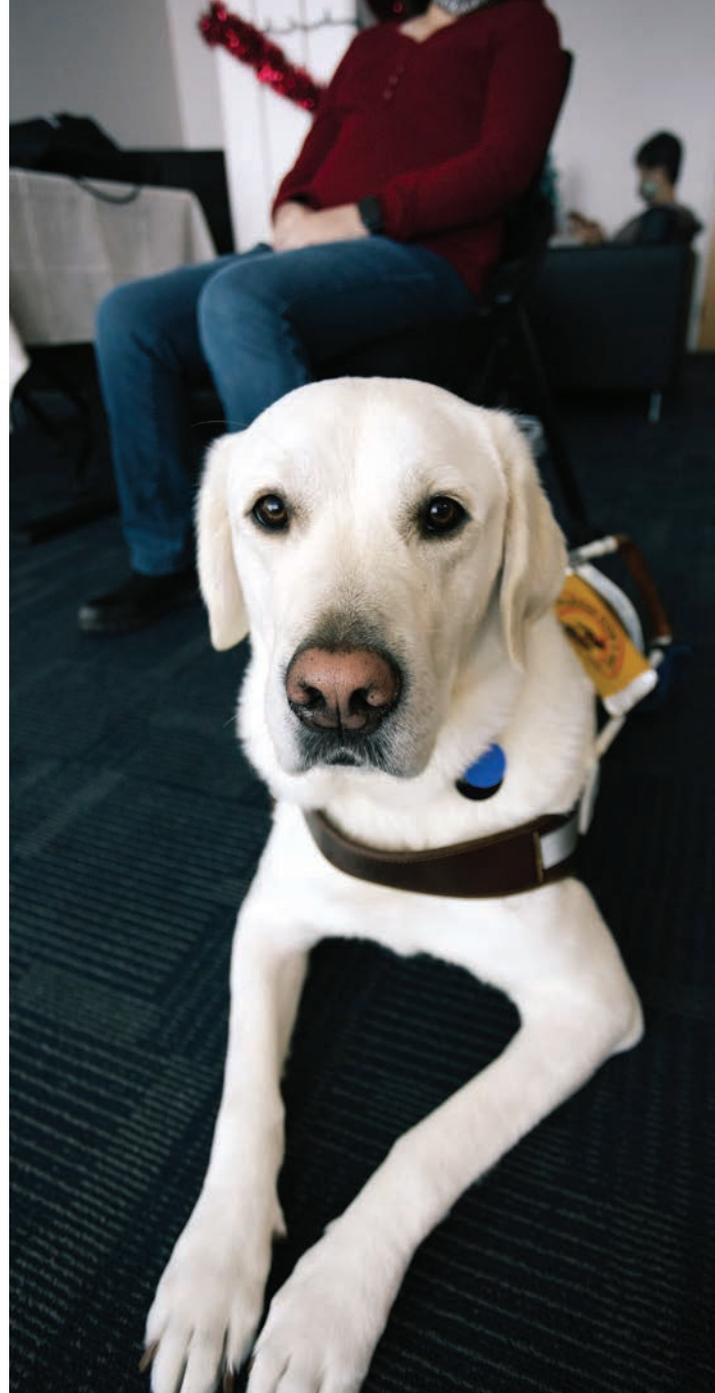
For decades, guide dogs have been helping their handlers go everywhere from home to work to the grocery store — or even a day out with friends — but Guide Dogs of Hawai'i looks at the person holistically.

“At the end of the day, it's still about the guide dogs, too,” says Torres. “Because in order for the guide dog to do its job and for the person to enjoy working with the dog, the person needs to be the leader of that team — confident. And they can only achieve that through the support of the different stages of their lives.”

Those who started with Guide Dogs of Hawai'i as kids have now gone on to college, and then to starting careers and families — and each step of the way, the nonprofit was there to help.

“As blind people age, the stages of their lives drastically changes,” Torres explains. “Their way of life changes and they have to adapt.”

From keiki to kūpuna, there is support and mentoring available, but most valuable is the sense of community Guide Dogs of Hawai'i offers. There are camping trips, large-scale projects like a podcast (slated to have hit streaming sites in February), educational tech programs and so much more.



No matter the setting, though, the goal remains the same: bring people together.

“A lot of times they're the only blind person at their school, and having access to other individuals like themselves is very few and far between,” Torres says. “They know they're not alone. When we can get all these children together, they can know there are other people just like themselves. They become more confident and can be more successful as blind individuals.”





That confidence will serve both the human and their potential guide dog, if they choose to partner up.

While Guide Dogs of Hawai'i has expanded its services over the last decade, the canine companions remain the organization's bread and butter.

Torres, who became blind in her mid-30s, has had four guide dogs in the time since. Her most recent, Maggie, is a golden retriever and is Torres' first U.S. dog. Currently, Guide Dogs of Hawai'i places about one or two guide dogs with a handler every year, but with more and more people utilizing its services and applying for canines, Torres sees that number growing in the coming years. Already in 2022, there are three individuals applying for a canine guardian, and Guide Dogs of Hawai'i is ready to help with support for both parties. The organization gives the humans resources and chances for connection, and gives the dogs access to free organic dog food, professional grooming and assistance for veterinary care.

"It lifts that burden off of the individual," explains Torres. "Many of them are on a fixed income and can't afford regular care."

To that end, Guide Dogs of Hawai'i covers the entire cost of the animal for qualifying applicants, as well as the aforementioned costs of care. It's all in place for a reason, and Torres would love for every blind person to be able to have a guide dog companion because "it opens so many opportunities for the individual," but understands that it's not for everyone. It's why Guide Dogs of Hawai'i also offers free canes and helps with orientation and mobility training, among its myriad other programs. But even those who choose not to have a companion animal benefit from hanging out with the guide dogs at group meetings. Studies state that merely petting a dog releases the feel-good hormone oxytocin, and these canines prove time and time again that they are indeed humans' best friends.

"All of our dogs give comfort and companionship," she explains. "But more than that, they give us the courage to take that step forward." ✕

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