



A Day in the Life of an Assistance Dog

Supporting Both Working Ability *and* Whole-Dog Welfare

Assistance dogs are **highly skilled working partners**, but they are also living, feeling animals with *physical, emotional, social, and behavioural needs*. A well-balanced assistance dog lifestyle should include not only task work and public access responsibilities, but also meaningful opportunities to rest, play, explore, decompress, and simply “be a dog.”

The following example illustrates what a healthy, welfare-conscious day *might* look like for a typical assistance dog team while incorporating the principles of the Five Domains Model of Animal Welfare.

It is also important to recognize that the medical condition, disability, energy limitations, or daily realities of the handler may not always allow for this type of routine to occur perfectly, consistently, or independently every day. In ethical assistance dog partnerships, there should ideally be a support system or designated resource person available to help ensure that the dog’s physical, behavioural, emotional, and welfare needs continue to be met during periods when the handler may temporarily be unable to fully provide these opportunities themselves. Supporting the welfare of the assistance dog is a shared responsibility that helps protect both the dog’s well-being and the long-term success of the team.

6:30 AM — Calm Wake-Up & Potty Break

The dog wakes up with their handler and goes outside for a relaxed sniff-and-toilet walk. Rather than rushing immediately into “work mode,” the dog is given time to decompress, sniff, stretch, and orient to the environment.

Welfare Domains Supported

- **Behaviour:** sniffing, exploration, movement, toileting
- **Mental State:** calm transition into the day, reduced stress and frustration
- **Environment:** predictable and comfortable routine

7:00 AM — Breakfast & Hydration

The dog receives a nutritionally balanced meal with access to fresh water. Some meals may occasionally be offered through enrichment feeders, scatter feeding, snuffle mats, or food puzzles to encourage natural foraging behaviour.

Welfare Domains Supported

- **Nutrition:** balanced, species-appropriate food and clean water
 - **Behaviour:** foraging and problem-solving opportunities
 - **Mental State:** enjoyment, engagement, and satisfaction
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7:30 AM — Relaxation / Free Time at Home

Before beginning work responsibilities, the dog has time to rest comfortably, interact socially with family members, chew an enrichment item, or simply relax in a quiet and predictable home environment.

Welfare Domains Supported

- **Environment:** comfort, predictability, rest
 - **Behaviour:** choice, retreat, relaxation
 - **Mental State:** comfort and emotional security
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9:00 AM — Assistance Work / Public Access Outing

The dog accompanies their handler to work, school, appointments, or errands. During this time, the dog performs trained tasks such as mobility support, medical alert, psychiatric interruption, guide work, hearing alerts, or other assistance functions depending on the team's needs.

The handler monitors the dog's stress levels, body language, hydration, temperature, and fatigue throughout the outing.

Welfare Domains Supported

- **Health:** monitoring fatigue, injury prevention, hydration
 - **Environment:** safe and manageable working conditions
 - **Mental State:** confidence through clear communication and predictability
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11:30 AM — Midday Decompression Break

After focused work, the dog is given a meaningful break away from public demands. This may include:

- a sniff walk,

- quiet decompression time,
- free movement in a safe area,
- play with the handler,
- or opportunities to explore natural environments.

This period is extremely important for preventing chronic stress and emotional fatigue.

Welfare Domains Supported

- **Behaviour:** exploration, play, free movement
 - **Mental State:** stress reduction, pleasure, recovery
 - **Environment:** quieter and lower-pressure setting
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12:30 PM — Rest Period

Many assistance dogs spend portions of the day resting quietly near their handler. A welfare-conscious routine ensures the dog has access to a comfortable resting space and is not expected to remain in prolonged hyper-vigilant working states without breaks.

Welfare Domains Supported

- **Environment:** comfort and rest opportunities
 - **Health:** recovery and physical restoration
 - **Mental State:** relaxation and emotional regulation
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3:00 PM — Training Games & Relationship Building

Short, enjoyable training sessions help maintain skills while strengthening the dog-handler relationship. Sessions may include:

- reward-based training games,
- cooperative care exercises,
- scent games,
- mobility skill maintenance,
- or fun trick training.

Importantly, not every interaction revolves around formal work.

Welfare Domains Supported

- **Behaviour:** learning, play, problem-solving

- **Mental State:** engagement, confidence, enjoyment
 - **Health:** ongoing skill maintenance and physical awareness
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5:00 PM — Off-Duty Exercise & Social Time

The dog has an opportunity for species-appropriate exercise such as:

- a nature walk with sniffing and foraging opportunities
- safe off-duty play,
- social interaction with trusted dogs and/or humans,
- swimming,
- hiking,
- or simply relaxing outdoors.

This period allows the dog to express normal canine behaviours outside of strict working expectations.

Welfare Domains Supported

- **Behaviour:** play, exploration, social interaction, movement
 - **Health:** physical conditioning and mobility
 - **Mental State:** joy, vitality, reduced frustration
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6:30 PM — Dinner & Evening Routine

The dog receives dinner and settles into the quieter evening routine with their handler. Gentle bonding activities such as grooming, massage, or calm companionship may occur.

Handlers also monitor for signs of discomfort, stress, injury, or illness.

Welfare Domains Supported

- **Nutrition:** evening meal and hydration
 - **Health:** daily wellness monitoring and grooming
 - **Mental State:** comfort, security, social bonding
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8:30 PM — Wind-Down & Sleep

The dog retires to a safe and comfortable sleeping area with adequate temperature control, quietness, and the ability to rest uninterrupted.

Welfare Domains Supported

- **Environment:** safe and comfortable sleeping conditions
 - **Health:** restorative sleep
 - **Mental State:** emotional security and recovery
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Key Takeaway

A well-supported assistance dog is not simply “working all day.” Ethical assistance dog care recognizes that working dogs require:

- rest,
- autonomy,
- enrichment,
- social connection,
- emotional recovery,
- physical wellness,
- and opportunities to engage in normal canine behaviour.

When the first four welfare domains (Nutrition, Environment, Health, and Behaviour) are thoughtfully supported, the fifth domain — the dog’s overall Mental State — is far more likely to remain positive, resilient, and emotionally healthy.

A successful assistance dog partnership should support *both* the human’s needs *and* the dog’s quality of life.