

Dog Lovers Unite, Support A Good Cause

Next month's Dining with Dogs event raises funds for more than 98,000 people with mobility disabilities.

By Allyson Pang

Sitting quietly in restaurants or walking calmly through malls are important members of the community: service dogs.

These animals are highly trained to suit the needs of the people they assist, ranging from detecting seizures to guiding those who are sight-impaired.

For local nonprofit Hawai'i Fi-Do Service Dogs, the focus is on serving those with mobility disabilities.

This year's Dining with Dogs fundraiser is scheduled for April 12, and marks more than 25 years of serving a population of 98,000-plus people on O'ahu with mobility disabilities, according to United For ALICE.

"We give those with mobility disabilities independence," says Katelyn Taua'a, executive director of Hawai'i Fi-Do. "Without service dogs, some people cannot have that independence, and that's one of the biggest things we offer."

Dogs are trained to retrieve and pick up items, open and close doors, turn on lights and more.

Over the last decade, more than 30 certified service dogs

have passed through Hawai'i Fi-Do. Taua'a describes volunteers as the lifeline and backbone to this achievement.

Puppy raisers take care of the dogs 24/7 in their homes and outside of them, too.

"(The) client we're passing (the dog) off to (is) going to be in a home as well; they're going to be going to doctors appointments ... to grocery stores — and that's why it's the best type of training, rather than just having a dog in a facility looking at the same walls and training in there," Taua'a says.

Anyone can volunteer, but they need to be prepared for the 24/7 commitment and, as Taua'a emphasizes, must love dogs.

The nonprofit is in constant need of volunteers to train these animals, especially since it takes two years to train a service dog.

Some service dogs can have a "career change" into program dogs. These work within therapeutic assistance programs in various centers for youth, senior homes and public schools like Princess Ruth Ke'elikōlani Middle School.

The Therapeutic Assistance Dogs for Youth Program also



Client Karen Spencer (left) interacts with a service dog at a Hawai'i Fi-Do training session with program director and trainer Mary-Ann Fernandes. For clients, the wait list for a dog is about two to three years.

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supports children in domestic violence recovery homes, children in special education, nonverbal students and more.

Taua'a hopes to raise awareness on the difference between service dogs and pets or emotional support animals.

She adds some clients and their service dogs have been turned away from establishments due to misunderstandings — despite the animals being both American with Disabilities Act compliant and "legally allowed to go in almost any establishment."

As for the nonprofit's future, Taua'a hopes to one day have a facility to host its weekly trainings, and open more programs in schools islandwide.

She encourages dog lovers to get "lots of hands-on dog snuggles and cuddles" at its Dining with Dogs fundraiser at 5:30 p.m. on April 12 at Honolulu Country Club. Attendees can meet puppies and enjoy dog training demonstrations and a silent auction.

Purchase tickets at bit.ly/4dxdb7W.