

# Accelerated Cure Project for MS

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*Accelerating research towards a cure for multiple sclerosis*

## A Helping Hand, or a Helping Paw?

There are many reasons why a dog is called “man’s best friend”. Dogs not only offer steadfast, unconditional love and companionship, they also encourage us to be more active, help us to feel less stressed (most of the time) and help us to be more social. In addition, a dog can be a care partner for a person with disabilities. Assistance dogs are specifically trained to perform tasks to assist individuals living with physical challenges, including people with multiple sclerosis. An assistance dog can improve the independence and well being of their partner, as well as relieve any feelings of isolation and depression, which often accompany disabilities.

There are many different types of assistance dogs. To name a few, [guide dogs](#) assist visually impaired people by leading them around obstacles, stopping at curbs and steps, and negotiating traffic. [Hearing dogs](#) help people who are deaf or hearing impaired. Hearing dogs can alert their partner to noises such as alarms, doorbells or a baby crying. Upon hearing the sound, hearing dogs will touch their partner and lead them toward the noise. [Service dogs](#) assist people with a physical disability by performing tasks that their partner cannot do or has trouble doing (for example, picking up or retrieving objects, turning light switches on and off, pushing automatic door buttons, tugging doors and cabinets open, etc.). [Mobility assistance dogs](#) help people with mobility or balance issues walk safely or regain their footing after a fall. These are usually larger dogs. They are frequently also trained to help their partner with everyday duties they have difficulty performing because of their disability.



Assistance dogs accompany their partner wherever they go, including the work place, shopping and traveling. They are trained to concentrate amid many distractions, such as lively children, meat counters, squirrels and many other daily encounters.



[Assistance Dogs International](#) (ADI) is a nonprofit organization that sets and promotes standards and ethics for assistance dog training organizations around the world. Their comprehensive accreditation program ensures that dogs are treated humanely, clients are treated with respect and training is delivered in a professional manner at all times. On-site inspections are performed, during which an assessor interviews staff, clients and volunteers, in addition to reviewing paperwork and files to verify that all of ADI's standards are being met. Assistance dog organizations that pass this accreditation become ADI member programs. Member programs are regularly assessed to ensure they continue to meet these high standards. Members of ADI meet regularly to share ideas and discuss ways to educate the public about assistance dogs, advocate for the legal rights of people with disabilities partnered with assistance dogs, and set standards and establish guidelines and ethics for the training of these dogs. Two ADI members in Massachusetts are the National Education for Assistance Dog Services (NEADS) and the Service Dog Project, Inc. (SDP)

[NEADS](#) (also known as Dogs for Deaf and Disabled Americans) is a non-profit organization, located in Princeton, MA, that has trained over 1,700 service dog teams since its inception in 1976. The NEADS program strives to raise and train the perfect working partner for each of their clients.



NEADS offers a wide spectrum of assistance dog services, including hearing dogs and service dogs. NEADS trains service dogs for partnership with individuals struggling with disabilities, and also for partnership with teachers, therapists, those who perform religious ministry and those who work in courthouse settings. NEADS places service dogs with children age 12 and up with the partnership of a parent or guardian (also known as a facilitator). This facilitator must live with the child and accompany him or her in all public places whenever the dog is present. Ultimately, the facilitator's responsibility is to make sure that the dog's needs are being met and that all training criteria are followed. After the age of 15, children may be retested and recertified to use their dog without the use of a facilitator.

NEADS does not have a breeding program of its own. Almost all of the dogs that NEADS trains to be hearing dogs are acquired from animal shelters and rescue groups throughout New England. NEADS trainers routinely visit area shelters to find dogs that are not only alert to noises, but also have a keen ability to localize sounds. They specifically look for smaller (usually under 50 pounds), high-energy dogs that are alert, attentive and engaged. In 1998, NEADS began the first partnership with a prison solely dedicated to the training of hearing dogs. Today, inmates at 7 New England prisons help to train the majority of NEADS hearing dogs through their [Prison PUP Program](#). There are usually six to eight puppies in every facility.



Most facilities designate a section of housing for the program where inmates are given single rooms to accommodate them and the puppy. The influence of the Prison PUP partnership on the men and women in prison is tremendous. Even the officers and inmates who do not participate in the program report that the presence of NEADS dogs changes the atmosphere for everyone.

In contrast to hearing dogs, service dogs are laid back, eager to please and wait until they receive a command before they perform a skill. Because much of the work of a service dog involves retrieving or a retrieving-related skill, most are Labrador or Golden Retrievers. Most NEADS service dogs are obtained from purebred breeders. NEADS provides a detailed educational program for breeders, which helps to ensure that their puppies are well socialized and accustomed to different environments and stimuli at a very young age. Service puppies are brought to NEADS to officially begin their [training](#) at about 8 weeks of age. NEADS service dogs are taught a list of core commands and they follow a basic training schedule throughout puppyhood. Once a dog is nearing completion of the program and is matched with a specific partner, the dog's training is tailored to the partner's unique needs. People who receive a NEADS



service dog are fully immersed in the training program. For the first 5-10 days, they live on the NEADS campus with their new canine partner. Their [training](#), which includes classes, hands-on exercises and off campus trips to local restaurants and malls, teaches clients how to live and work with a service dog. Each client must successfully complete the training and also pass a public access test to graduate and leave campus with the service dog.

[The Service Dog Project](#) (SDP) is a nonprofit organization, located on a 12-acre farm in Ipswich, MA, whose mission is to breed, raise, train and donate Great Danes as mobility assistance dogs. Founded in 2003 by Carlene White, SDP has trained and donated 120 fully certified Great Dane mobility assistance dogs to veterans, children and other individuals who have balance and mobility issues due to multiple sclerosis, Parkinson's disease, cerebral palsy, and other conditions. Great Danes' height and weight enable them to provide stability and assistance to those who have difficulty walking. As balance or walker dogs, they are trained to be steady while wearing a harness, and match their gait to



their human partner's gait (which can vary). The dogs are taught to halt and brace if the handler should fall. By standing still and bracing, they are available for their handler to use the harness to pull themselves up. The dogs are also trained to turn right and left and to ease themselves through doorways, into elevators, and around various obstacles (aisles, checkout counters, restaurant tables, etc.). This allows them to assist their human partner easily at home and in public.

SDP has its own [breeding program](#). All of their breeding dogs are obedience trained and many are used in therapy work. All SDP Great Danes are born, raised and trained on the farm. Interestingly, puppies are spoon fed in order to learn their names and manners. Adults are fed at tables, which allows evaluation of their body structure for their future service as mobility assistance dogs. This also helps with training manners around food and other dogs. Once the dogs are fully trained (usually around age one) they are matched with a partner and are then trained to meet the individual's exact needs.



If you're interested in getting a service dog, there are a number of important things to consider. Adopting a dog is a commitment that will last for many years, and you must be ready and willing to take on that responsibility. Discuss your needs and limitations with your doctor and ask him or her to help you assess how you can care for and benefit from a service dog. Planning is required for the cost of a service dog. In addition to food and veterinary care, some organizations require significant fundraising or payment for service dogs. ADI offers a worldwide [programs search](#) feature on their website for those looking for accredited member programs that provide assistance dogs in their area. When exploring different service dog provider organizations, ask what the timeline looks like for receiving your dog and whether they have a waitlist. While dogs are not for everyone, individuals that partner and click with an assistance dog are often richly rewarded with one of the most satisfying, loving, and active relationships they will ever experience.

