

# Senior Service or Facility Dog Information Packet



**Dear Canine Companions graduate,**

You have been provided with this packet because, as hard as it may be to believe, it's time to start thinking about the aging process for your service or facility dog. Starting this conversation does not necessarily mean that your dog is slowing down or showing signs of age, or anywhere close to retirement; it's just an opportunity to educate yourself on the aging canine and make plans well in advance of any actual changes taking place.

While it can be sad to contemplate your dog's aging, it is also a joyous occasion – a celebration of a job well done and the wonderful partnership you've had. The Canine Companions® Client Services Department is here to support you throughout this process – from changes in food and activity level, all the way through retirement itself. In this packet, we've provided some information that will help as you approach this next part of your journey with your canine partner.

Please review the materials in this packet and reach out to us if you have any questions.

Best wishes,  
The Canine Companions Client Services Department

## **Retirement packet contents:**

1. The Aging Canine
2. The Retirement Process
3. Frequently Asked Questions
4. A summary sheet with handy reminders



## The Aging Canine

The fact is the lifespan of a dog is much shorter than that of humans, as much as we wish this weren't the case. Relative to human aging, the canine aging process can frequently begin in a very gradual way, then suddenly accelerate as unexpected health issues arise. For this reason, it is important to monitor subtle changes that occur as the dog ages – all the more so because dogs will rarely exhibit signs of pain or discomfort until it becomes severe. This can lead to a false sense that all is well while there is in fact an underlying concern.

It's for this reason that we need to start thinking and talking about retirement.

As your dog ages, your veterinarian and Canine Companions staff will play a major role in helping you determine if your dog is comfortable in their working role and assisting you in keeping them healthy. Ask yourself these questions on a periodic basis as your service or facility dog grows older:

1. How is my dog's overall health and are there any current health concerns?
2. How has my dog's health or appearance changed in the past year?
3. Have I noticed any changes in the way my dog responds to cues or engages in play?
4. Does my dog ever seem in pain or hesitant with movement or exercise?
5. Am I making any changes to the way I live or go about my day due to my dog's advancing age?

As your canine grows older, their needs will change. We can't predict the exact course for each dog, but in general we can expect some of the following changes in an aging dog:

- Propensity to gain weight.
- Decreased stamina and strength necessitating decrease in exercise length or intensity.
- General slowing of responses.
- Arthritic changes.
- Focal or systemic medical conditions and diseases that may not be obvious externally but are more likely to be seen in dogs as they age.
- Other physical changes.

Let's take a closer look at each of these changes.

### **Propensity to gain weight:**

Many dogs can be prone to obesity if we do not carefully monitor their caloric intake and exercise. In an aging canine, this becomes all the more important as their metabolism changes and, simultaneously, they are less able to exercise for extended periods of time or at a high level of intensity.

Discuss your dog's nutritional needs with your veterinarian as they age. They may recommend the addition of supplements such as omega-3 fatty acids and joint supplements or a diet change to adjust ingredients that might impact the progression of disease as a dog ages. Work with your veterinarian to identify an appropriate food but ensure at all times that you are staying within Canine Companions' guidelines. Do not feed your service or facility dog grain-free, boutique or exotic ingredient foods, or a raw diet as these can all negatively impact their health.

### **Decreased stamina and strength:**

Exercise continues to be an extremely important part of the daily routine for dogs at all ages. For a senior dog, it is critical to continue to keep musculature strong and compensate for weakness that may develop in the joints. However, as your dog becomes more senior, the duration and intensity of exercise that they engage in will likely need to change. You may begin to observe that they can no longer keep up with the younger dogs while playing, lags behind on walks, or that your dog has trouble reacting to the oncoming pounce of another dog and falls or stumbles when trying to pivot quickly.

It's incumbent on you, the handler, to moderate intensity so that your dog does not overdo it and irritate their joints and bones. Consider limiting play to age-mates who are also moving more slowly and cutting out high-impact activities such as running in favor of slower walks around the neighborhood.

### **General slowing of responses:**

You may notice that your dog begins to respond more slowly to cues and may move more slowly in general. If you do notice this slowing, it's important to understand that while it may just represent a natural part of aging, it can also indicate the emergence or progression of a health problem, so you should consult your veterinarian for an evaluation. While the responsiveness may no longer be the same that you've been accustomed to, it is never appropriate to issue a correction for slow responsiveness due to age. Instead, with this in mind, you should plan to build a little bit of extra time into your daily routine, from getting up in the morning, toileting, exercise, loading into your vehicle and going about your day.

### **Arthritic changes:**

It is common for senior dogs, like humans, to experience arthritic changes to their joints and bones which may require medical attention. If you notice any pain or discomfort associated with getting up and down, activities such as jumping onto or off of elevated surfaces, lameness or a loss of muscle mass, consult your veterinarian for advice. Your veterinarian may recommend interventions such as weight loss, a modified exercise regime, supplements to support joint health and medications to reduce inflammation. Most senior dogs will benefit from joint supplements, so you should discuss with your veterinarian adding them into a dog's healthcare regime even before more significant signs of arthritis are noted.

Medical interventions aside, consider adaptations that you can make around your home to increase your senior dog's comfort level. For example, you can provide softer bedding in order to help cushion joints when laying down, add rugs to provide better traction on slippery floors or look into alternatives to avoid the dog jumping up and down from elevated surfaces, such as ramps or intermediate steps.

### **Focal or systemic medical conditions/diseases:**

As a dog ages, they are more susceptible to the development of diseases and chronic medical conditions. Some of these include cataracts, liver disease, kidney disease, diabetes, hypothyroidism and cancer. Conditions may emerge slowly over time and have minimal to no clinical signs in the early stages. Therefore, it is critical to identify these conditions as early as possible, through frequent veterinary exams and diagnostic screening tests. Early detection helps provide an opportunity for interventions to cure or slow the progression of disease and extend the health and working life of a service or facility dog.

### **Physical changes:**

Your dog's regular grooming routine – including monthly bathing and daily brushing of the coat and teeth – is even more important as they age. Extra attention should be given to oral care. In addition to daily tooth brushing, dogs require professional teeth cleaning on a regular basis throughout their lives, often as frequently as every one to two years.

An aging dog may also lose some acuity in their vision or hearing, which can be accelerated by medical conditions of the eyes or ear infections. They may require more frequent toileting opportunities. Masses can be quite common in aging dogs and while they may be of no concern, any new mass should be evaluated by a veterinarian and may require further testing to determine if it is cancerous and require further intervention such as removal. In some cases, even if it is benign, your veterinarian may recommend removal if it is in a location that is likely to bother the dog long-term.

For all of these reasons and more, make sure you are scheduling regular appointments with your veterinarian, and relaying any overall physical changes you're noticing. Senior dogs 8 years and older should have complete physical exams every 6 months with routine blood and urine screening tests at least annually, or more often if a health condition emerges or medical treatment requires frequent monitoring.

## The Retirement Process

Knowing that for the vast majority of our service or facility dog teams retirement is an inevitability, let's review the process. First and foremost, we recognize that retirement is most often bittersweet. There is both celebration and grief inherent to this event. We recognize that every situation is unique and we want to begin this ongoing conversation with you early. Please know that we are here for you along the way and will work collaboratively with you to find the best plan for you, your lifestyle and your retiring graduate dog. We have an additional Grief Resources document that offers resources such as books, websites and podcasts to help with the grieving process that can be associated with both retirement and end of life. Please contact your client services manager for a copy of this document.

### Timeline

While the specifics will vary from team to team, in general, the timeline below is what we will work off of when it comes to discussing and planning retirement. Please note that the dog could retire at any point within, or even prior to, these age milestones.

- **8 years of age:** At this time, we will send you the Senior Assistance Dog Information Packet and check in more regularly with you about your dog's aging process. Discuss your dog's nutritional needs with your veterinarian, and familiarize yourself with all of the information in this packet, including retirement information so that you can plan well ahead.
- **9 years of age:** At this time, the maximum recertification period shifts from every three years to annually. The Client Services Department will also work closely with you to form a retirement plan, if you don't already have one. This plan is not necessarily set in stone, but rather an evolving strategy you and your client services manager can discuss moving forward.
- **10 years of age:** At this time, you should have a defined retirement plan in place. Additionally, your veterinarian's annual written input is required in order for the dog to continue in a working role.

## Retirement home

Once the graduate dog has retired from their working role, they become a pet dog. The person who adopts the retiring graduate dog – whether that is you or somebody else – assumes ownership of the dog including all responsibility, financial and otherwise, for their care.

In many cases, graduate dogs will retire into the same home where they have been living and working. However, we recognize that caring for an aging or convalescing dog can be a challenge, and many older dogs have special needs. In some cases, graduates are unable to commit to this level of care. When this is the case, we will work with you to determine the best retirement home for your dog.

Let's review the options that are available for a retirement home for your graduate dog. These include, but are not limited to:

1. Graduate adopts the dog.
2. Family member or housemate in the graduate's home adopts the dog.
3. Family member or friend with a prior relationship to the dog adopts the dog.
4. Canine Companions volunteer puppy raiser who raised the dog adopts the dog.
5. A person or family on Canine Companions' pet dog adoption waiting list adopts the dog.

No matter the person, the adopter of a retiring dog needs to be prepared to meet the needs of an aging canine. If the dog is adopted to somebody other than the graduate, the new owner and the graduate can maintain contact if both parties agree to do so. Be sure to discuss your expectations in advance to ensure that the adoptive home you choose is comfortable with the level of contact you'd like to have.

### Housekeeping items

What does the actual retirement look like? From a legal standpoint, the person adopting the retiring dog – whether that is you or somebody else – is provided with an adoption contract to sign, which transfers ownership to that individual. Please note that we must have an up to date (dated within less than one year) veterinary report form on file in order to process retirement paperwork. Additionally, as required by our accrediting organization Assistance Dogs International, the Canine Companions graduate logo vest and ID tag must be returned in person or by mail to the regional Client Services Program Department at the time of retirement.

### Making a plan

We strongly encourage you to think about and discuss a plan for a retirement home and timeline *before* your dog's health necessitates it. Again, this can be an emotional process; and with that in mind, coming up with a plan well in advance can help minimize any extra unnecessary stress when the time for retirement finally comes. We strongly encourage you to put this plan in writing, so that you can easily share it with Canine Companions, and refer back to it as the plan evolves, especially since it may be several years between drafting the plan and actually implementing it.

A plan should include several elements. You can use the blank spaces below to jot down your thoughts on each of these questions, or create your own document.

- Based on your dog's health and responsiveness, what is the right timing for retirement?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
- Who will be adopting the dog once retired?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
- What does the transition period look like?

- Will you be applying for a successor graduate dog and if yes, what is the timing of that application?

You can read more about these in the Retirement FAQ on the next page.

## Frequently Asked Questions About Retirement

### **When should I begin thinking about retirement planning for my service or facility dog?**

Very much like for humans, it is never too soon to start the process of thinking about retirement planning. Both you and your dog deserve the benefits of a well thought out retirement. Planning includes thinking about arrangements for where the dog will live when it is retired.

### **I rely on my dog for my (or my child/client's) independence. The thought of retiring them is overwhelming and a topic I don't want to think about or discuss. Is this typical?**

Yes, this is very common. It is normal to experience a range of conflicting thoughts and feelings around the issue of retirement of a service or facility dog.

One of the hardest parts of this process can be to navigate the balance between your needs (or that of the recipient or your clients) and the needs of the dog. While we never want these needs to be in conflict, at times it may feel as though they are, and when this happens, it can be difficult to step back and remain detached.

For this reason, we ask our graduates to start the conversation about retirement well before the need begins to arise. The more information you have, the better able you will be to create the ideal retirement process for you and your dog.

### **My dog is slowing down with age but is working well. Should I start the retirement process now?**

A dog's desire to work is not necessarily a good way to judge when it is time to retire them. A dog will continue to perform tasks even if they are beginning to experience pain, and we want to catch these signs of difficulty and retire them before they are really suffering. This can be gradual and can often go unnoticed or attributed to age alone. This is the time to begin monitoring your dog closely, and to act as a voice and advocate for them knowing that they do not have the ability to speak for themselves. Please keep in touch with your veterinarian and your Canine Companions Client Services Department.

### **My dog has had a full and active life of working. How will they adjust to the slower pace of retirement?**

Dogs, particularly the breeds we use at Canine Companions, are truly remarkable in their ability to accommodate to different situations. It is likely that the older dog will welcome the slower pace of life during retirement. If anything, the transition is probably more difficult on us, the humans, than it is on the dog!

Even though most dogs adjust to the transition well, separation anxiety can be a challenge. There are some things you can do to make the transition as smooth and stress-free as possible:

- Gradually decreasing the dog's working role, rather than stopping suddenly from one day to the next, is one thing to consider if it is feasible for you. Bring the dog with you for half days instead of full days, or every other day rather than daily.
- If they are being adopted by a family member or friend in the area, start having them spend some bonding time together – going on walks, or spending the occasional overnight at their house (if different from the dog's current home).
- Finally, start getting the dog used to being home alone, if they aren't already used to this. Start with small periods of time (5-10 minutes), leaving them in their crate or in another secure area, and build up to longer durations gradually.

Just as much as all of this will help the dog, it will also help you gradually adjust to the change. If your dog seems to struggle with the transition, or is experiencing serious separation anxiety, please contact your regional Client Services Program Department for support.

### **How might this transition affect me (or my clients/the recipient) personally?**

You are right to think in advance about your own adjustment to retiring your dog, and/or that of your clients or the recipient. While each person's experience is different, we hear from other graduates that they experience feelings of anxiety, grief and loss when facing the question of retirement. It is very normal to feel this way when faced with a big life change and you should allow yourself the time and space to grieve. Refer to our Grief Resources document for additional tools to help you during this time. Don't hesitate to reach out to staff or fellow graduates for support. A great resource is our community message board ([community.canine.org](http://community.canine.org)), a private online forum where you can connect with other Canine Companions community members virtually.

### **Should I keep my retired graduate dog and get a successor dog?**

There is no single answer to this question that will be right for every graduate. While some are able to make this work, others find it challenging and confusing for both dogs, and discover that it is too much to manage. Please reach out to your regional Client Services Department - our staff can provide guidance and support to help you select the retirement option that is optimal for your lifestyle and the needs of the retiring dog.

If you do choose to keep both your retired graduate dog and get a successor dog, you'll want to be prepared with a transition plan. There are a few strategies you can employ to make this process easier on human and dog alike. For example:

- Start leaving the retiring dog home for increasing periods of time. When coming and going, avoid making a big deal of it, as this can create or worsen separation anxiety. Enter and exit with minimal emotion or fuss, saying hello after you've settled in from getting home.
- Make time to just "be" with the retiring dog, that doesn't require work.
- Go for walks around the neighborhood without the vest on, and without working (unless totally necessary).
- Get the dog used to sleepovers with a friend or family member, in case you will need them to spend time with a sitter.
- After the successor arrives, make sure you create dedicated one-on-one time with each dog separately. And, resist the urge to compare the two. Remember, no two dogs are alike.

You'll also need to consider logistics, such as the toileting and exercise routine for a dog that will no longer be by your side all day. Finally, for more ideas specific to your team, for example how to handle it if the "wrong" dog responds to your cue, you should work directly with the regional Client Services Department.

### **What can I expect from the successor application and placement process?**

If you are interested in a successor dog, please know that this does require going through the same application process as first-time applicants. It has likely been many years, possibly even a decade, since you last went through the application process - things will have changed, both in your life and with Canine Companions! Going through the application process ensures that we have all the most current information to understand how our program can best support you and your goals.



Successor candidates on our waitlists are prioritized for potential placements; however, there will still be a wait time in order for us to identify the right dog for you. As you contemplate this process, it's important to bear in mind that the successor placement process can have grief in its own right – both around the retirement of the dog and the potential impact the retirement can have on your day-to-day independence.

While a new placement is certainly exciting and worth celebrating, it's inherently tied to the end of your working relationship with your retiring dog. Your relationship with the new dog will be just that – new – and the bond will take time to form. You and the successor dog are starting from a different point in “customization” for your needs as well. Teaching the successor dog cues that were beneficial with your retired dog will take time and patience. We will touch on all of this throughout the successor application and placement process; for now, just keep it in mind.

### **Can I get on the waiting list now and retire my dog when I get placed with a successor dog?**

The successor application process is different for everyone. Some graduates choose to apply early in anticipation of their dog retiring closer to the new placement, while others prefer to have a period of time between placements to allow themselves processing time. We will work with you on a case-by-case basis to determine the best option for your team.

### **What resources are there to support me through this process?**

The client services staff are here to support you through the process of retirement. It can also be useful to contact other graduates who have gone through this process and can share their experiences with you and be a sounding board for you as you navigate this transition. Finally, it may be helpful to begin the successor application process for a Canine Companions successor dog. This is something that you do not have to go through alone, and we want to be here for you.