

End of Placement Resources



For many graduates, the most difficult part of having a service or facility dog is transitioning into retirement and approaching the dog's end of life. This often brings strong emotions and can impact all areas of life. Some graduates feel guilty that they are leaving the dog at home more, some feel guilty even thinking about a successor dog or retirement after all the dog has provided to them—these are normal feelings and are felt by others in your situation. While it is important to process and acknowledge these feelings we do not want those to get in the way of you making the best decision for you and the dog. Some graduates feel overwhelmed by their grief, some fear the loss of their independence, some avoid their family, friends, or community because they do not want to discuss what happened, and some wonder if they will ever be able to move forward after such a loss. It can be helpful to talk with someone who has been through this and understands the significance of your loss.

C.S. Lewis described grief this way: "Grief is like a long, winding valley, where any bend may reveal a totally new landscape." These experiences impact everyone differently and your unique grief will be affected by the nature of your relationship to your dog, your personality, your support systems, and the circumstances of your dog's retirement or death.

We've compiled a list of resources that specifically speak to this experience and we hope that they are helpful and provide comfort as you navigate your loss. Please reach out to your Client Services program manager with questions, concerns, or for support. We are here for you!

End of Placement: Preparing for your dog's retirement

The Retirement Process

Knowing that retirement is inevitable for the vast majority of our service and facility dog teams, 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. 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.

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. This can be an emotional process, and creating a plan well in advance can help minimize any undue stress when the time for retirement comes. We strongly encourage you to put this plan in writing so you can easily share it with Canine Companions and refer back to it as circumstances evolve, especially since it may be several years between first drafting the plan and implementing it.

Timeline

While the specifics vary from team to team, in general, the timeline below is what we work from when discussing and planning retirement. Please note that there is no set retirement age and that the dog could retire at any point within, or even prior to, these age and behavior milestones if their health necessitates it.

8 years of age: we will send you the Senior Service and Facility Dog Information Packet and check in more frequently with you about your dog's aging process. You should discuss your dog's physical and nutritional needs with your veterinarian and familiarize yourself with all the information in this packet, including retirement information, so you can plan well ahead.

9 years of age: the maximum recertification period shifts from every three years to annually. The Client Services Department will also work closely with you to evaluate your retirement plan if you don't already have one. This plan is not set in stone, but rather an evolving strategy you and your Client Services Department can discuss moving forward.

10+ years of age: by this time you should have a retirement plan in place. Additionally, your veterinarian's annual written input is required in order for the dog to be considered to continue in a working role. As the dog begins to exhibit signs of aging, you may need to make the decision to leave the dog home from outings that are likely to be overly taxing for the dog.

Consider these questions:

- On outings does your dog start out normally, then begin to lag behind?
- Does it seem that your dog needs a little longer to think about a cue before following through?
- Is your dog starting to have a hard time getting up, or seem stiff when they lie down?

Retirement home

Once your graduate dog has retired from their working role, they become a pet dog. The person who adopts your retiring graduate dog – whether that is you or someone 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, you might not be able 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. Choosing to place the dog in another home can result in feelings of guilt for some people. This is normal and we have resources to help with these feelings.

Successor Dogs

The decision of whether or not to apply for a successor dog is very personal, and our Client Services team is here to support you. If you decide to apply, successor applicants will complete an application process to update Canine Companions on any changes to their lifestyle, disability, or needs. If accepted, successor candidates receive priority on the waitlist over first-time candidates and often have a shorter wait time before being invited to attend Team Training. It is helpful to reflect on the first days, weeks and months of your previous service dog placement. Comparing a two year old dog to a dog you have had in your life for years can be an unfair and unequal comparison. It's important to anticipate that it will take some time to develop a relationship with a new dog, and to be open to appreciating their unique temperament and strengths.

Peer support

If you would like to speak with a fellow Canine Companions graduate about the retirement of your dog, please contact your Client Services manager and they will provide the names and contact information of people who can walk alongside you during this process. These peers can be a listening ear, offer support and advice from their experiences, and help as much or as little as you need. The Canine Community website <http://community.canine.org> is also a convenient way to connect with other graduates and to access resources. There are also a variety of online based support groups and counselors in the pet community that you may find helpful. You will find some examples listed in the resources below.

End of partnership: Grieving your dog's death

Every graduate is different and entitled to their own thoughts and beliefs about end-of-life care. You know

your service or facility dog better than anyone. Canine Companions will support you whether you choose further medical treatment or euthanasia. We understand this is a difficult decision that is made harder when it is unexpected, such as with a diagnosis of cancer or another serious health condition. It's important to remember that it is your veterinarian's job to ensure that you understand all of the possible treatment options, but that does not mean that you must pursue every possible option. We encourage you to talk to your veterinarian to make the best decision for your dog's quality of life.

There are many resources to support you as you evaluate the dog's quality of life and through the dog's end-of-life care. One such resource is Lap of Love, an organization that provides veterinary hospice and in-home euthanasia services.

Taken from the Lap of Love website <https://www.lapoflove.com/>:

"You have probably heard the term "quality of life" in conversations with your family veterinarian or people close to you. Assessing your pet's quality of life, which is subjective, and highly dependent on your dog's disease process, their personality, and your personal beliefs, is difficult. Like humans, every pet will experience and react to changes in their body differently. Their response is also highly dependent on the disease process at hand, making in-depth discussions with your regular veterinarian an important part of the process." Lap of Love offers a tool to evaluate your dog's quality of life: <https://www.lapoflove.com/how-will-i-know-it-is-time>.

Many graduates find it helpful to write out their thoughts as they consider the end of their placement. Here are a few prompts from "When Your Pet Dies" from Alan D. Wolfelt to get you started. You may want to reflect on your answers privately or share with your support system. You are also welcome to share with the Client Services staff, who can be a witness to your experience and remember with you:

- Write about the first time you met your dog and what happened next.
- What did your dog look like? How will you remember their coloring, coat, or special markings?
- What was your dog's personality? Write about special behaviors, quirks, facial expressions, and habits.
- How did you spend time with your dog? Write about your daily rituals.
- Write out a funny or meaningful story about your dog.
- Make a list of all the things you learned from your dog
- What do you miss the very most about your dog?
- What other things will you always remember about your dog?
- Write a letter to your dog, telling them what is in your head and your heart.

Resources for coping with the loss of a Service or Facility Dog

We recognize that the death of a service or facility dog is not only deeply personal, but also a unique type of loss that is vastly different than the loss of a pet. As you explore these resources, please note that some are specific to service dogs while others offer general information about loss and grief.

Online resources

Grieving the Loss of a Service Dog

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0cgBjmMU6sk>

Center for Pet Loss Grief: Mourning the Loss of Your Service Dog:

<https://tinyurl.com/2uadyz98>

New Mobility: Grieving the Loss of a Service Dog:

<https://tinyurl.com/35m774aw>

Grief Healing blog: Pet Loss and the Death of a Service Dog

<https://tinyurl.com/3h9wp92a>

What's Your Grief website: 5 Considerations for Grieving the Loss of a Pet:

<https://tinyurl.com/y9cxzcm9>

AKC website: Guide for helping other pets through this loss:

<https://tinyurl.com/bddp8fmb>

Association for Pet Loss and Bereavement

<https://www.aplb.org/>

Rainbow Bridge Pet Loss Grief Center

<https://tinyurl.com/3bv3p6f5>

Lap of Love Pet Loss Support Groups

<https://tinyurl.com/4xp9s4vw>

Books:

When a pet dies – by Fred Rogers (Mr. Rogers Neighborhood)

<https://tinyurl.com/2mxnf3ch>

When Your Pet Dies: A Guide to Mourning, Remembering and Healing – by Alan D. Wolfelt

<https://tinyurl.com/3cxmsh42>

The Rainbow Bridge – A visit to pet paradise – by Adrian Raeside

<https://tinyurl.com/4db8rj4x>

The Invisible Leash: A story celebrating love after the loss of a pet – by Patrice Karst

<https://tinyurl.com/2s42bj68>

Losing My Best Friend: Thoughtful support for those affected by dog bereavement or pet loss

<https://tinyurl.com/3c2kbwpx>

My Dog Has Died: What Do I Do? Making Decisions and Healing the Trauma of Pet Loss

<https://tinyurl.com/bdcpe4he>

Remember, It's Okay: Loss of a Pet – by Marina Reed and Marian Grace Boyd

<https://tinyurl.com/37bz96tk>

Podcasts:

- Working Like Dogs
<https://workinglikedogs.com/>
- Marcie Davis – Working Like Dogs Podcast. Marcie had a Canine Companion Service Dog, Ramona.
- Marcie Davis – Working Like Dogs – Episode 103 Grieving the Loss of a Service Dog
- Marcie Davis – Working Like Dogs – Episode 75 The Winding Valley of Grief
- Mindfulness & Grief Podcast – Surviving the Death of Our Beloved Cats & Dogs.
Discussion centers on feelings of guilt surrounding euthanasia, wondering how you will survive without your best friend, and even navigating the decision to welcome another animal into the house. Also discusses constructive rituals and memorial spaces you can set up to remember your companion animal. <https://mindfulnessandgrief.com/surviving-the-death-of-our-beloved-cats-dogs>
- The Pet Loss Companion
Healing advice from family therapists who lead pet loss groups, this podcast shares experiences, recommendations, and reflections that help listeners with the loss of their animal companions.
<https://podcasts.apple.com/us/podcast/the-pet-loss-companion/id1551842408>
- Grief, Dogs, & Storytelling: How Relatable Characters Help Children & Adults Cope With Loss with Sally Hill Mills – <https://heatherstang.com/38-grief-dogs-and-storytelling/>

Support group:

We offer a dog loss grief support group exclusively for the Canine Companions community.

This is an online, monthly support group hosted by Canine Companions staff members Melinda Sowers, LMHC and Jessica Reiss-Cardinali MSW. Email Melinda at msowers@canine.org to sign up. We hope you'll take advantage of this resource.