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The Positive Impacts of Service Dogs on Individuals with Disabilities

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Abstract

This poster presentation examines multiple research studies justifying beneficial effects of service dogs on persons with physical and mental disabilities. To better understand the positive effects of service dogs and their capabilities, a comprehensive literature review was conducted to recount firsthand validation where their assistance has been valuable to these individuals. With over fifty million people in the United States currently living with a disability and that number rapidly increasing, the need for assistance with daily tasks can be achieved with the intervention of a service dog (Iezzoni, 2011). Existing research supports the benefits of service dogs for individuals with a disability. To further investigate this topic and the significant impact that service dogs have on the life and welfare of those with a disability, a survey will be conducted to evaluate the impact of service dogs on persons with disabilities in Iowa.

Anticipated Method

- Longitudinal study: monitor the progress made in the lives of the same participants before and one year following the addition of a service dog.
- Survey: will conduct a survey at the beginning and end of the study to assess the impacts the service dog had on the individual.
- Sample size: fifteen voluntary individuals with a medically diagnosed physical and/or mental disability, currently on the waitlist for a service dog, or interested in being assisted by one.
- Independent variable: specific type of disability each participant has been diagnosed with.
- Dependent variable: how beneficial the participant's service dog is to them in their everyday activities and well-being, while living with a physical and/or mental disability.
- Limitation of study:
 - Differences in the age of each individual
 - Age of the service dog
 - Length of time these service dogs have been assisting people
 - External factors such as a significant event that may have taken place in the participant's life outside of the research may impact their disability and/or life activities

Literature Review

Service dogs have been roughly defined by the Department of Justice as any dog matched with one person diagnosed with a physical and/or mental disability that has been trained to assist them and conform to their specific needs (Ensminger, 2010).

A disability can take many forms, from mental and physical impairments, to mobility and communicative difficulties (Hall, MacMichael, Turner, & Mills, 2017). People living with these conditions are more susceptible to poor health and restricted lifestyles. Increasing awareness of the value of animal companionship, specifically service dogs, could be a solution to assisting those living with limitations and poor health conditions in the growing rate of individuals with disabilities.

A study administered by Harris and Sholtis (2016) aimed to identify the impact of service dogs in the classroom, specifically regarding children with autism. In their research, they concluded that anxiousness and feeling worried diminished when the child had a service dog in close proximity. In addition, service dogs increase independence in children with autism, something that can be carried on throughout the child's life.

Tew and Taicher (2016) studied the effects that a service dog had on a six-year-old girl who had frequent mast cell mediator release along with hypersensitivity. The study took place while the young girl was undergoing anesthesia for surgery. JJ, her service dog, alerted the medical staff of the mast cell mediator release in the girl's body by pacing in a circle.

A study was designed to specifically evaluate the effects of these dogs on walking speed in individuals with Multiple Sclerosis. Forty-four participants were asked to complete two *Timed 25-Foot Walking tests*. One test consisted of the individual walking alone, while the other had the dog walking alongside them. Results from the study concluded that when completing a 25-foot timed walking test, individuals walked faster with the assistance of a service dog rather than independently (Fjeldstad & Pardo, 2017). Due to the severe gait impairments deriving from this disease, the aid of a service dog proves to assist and enhance the individual's ability to walk.

One group of participants in a study carried out by Hall, MacMichael, Turner, and Mills (2017) received a service dog, either for a physical or a hearing disability. Another group was on a wait list to receive a service dog. Different analyses were conducted regarding whether the animal was trained for a physical or hearing disability. However, the individuals who received assistance from a service dog had prominent physical mobility, recreational skills, health, and social skills in comparison to those on the waitlist. In addition, the individuals with a service dog had a higher degree of self-reflection. Although the people with hearing disabilities and a service dog did not have as high of a social activity score, the benefits of the participants who had acquired a service dog outweighed those waiting for one.

Usage of the Results & Future Recommendations

After analyzing the data collected from the study, the initial premise can be confirmed that service dogs have beneficial effects on those with disabilities. Taking the existing research combined with the results of the longitudinal study, knowledge and awareness has increased on the capabilities of service dogs. Aspirations would include informing the larger public and community in Iowa to enhance their understanding of the beneficial effects of service dogs for those individuals with physical and/or mental disabilities. By bringing light to the significance of service dogs, the future can rely less on mobility devices and more on the voices of advocates for these animals.

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