

Bridging Access: Expanding Service Dog Integration in Japan and the United States

Emi Saegusa-Beecroft, M.D., Ph.D.^{1,2}, Tomoko Takayanagi, M.D., Ph.D.³, Junji B. Machi, M.D., Ph.D., FACS^{1,2}

- Office of Global Health and International Medicine, John A. Burns School of Medicine, University of Hawai'i at Manoa
- Department of Surgery, John A. Burns School of Medicine, University of Hawai'i at Manoa
- Chairperson, Japan Service Dog Association, Kanagawa, Japan

Introduction

Since 2016, the Office of Global Health and International Medicine (OGHIM) at the University of Hawai'i (UH) John A. Burns School of Medicine (JABSOM) has offered an in-person and virtual lecture series named "Hawaii Medical Education Program Open Cross Class (HMEP OCC)", to approximately 1900 medical students representing 17 of the 82 medical schools in Japan [1]. Every year, the Japan Service Dog Association (JSDA) offers live demonstrations of service dog training and an interactive live interview session with a volunteer service dog user. While these lectures have received extremely positive feedback, they also revealed a startling fact: **none of the medical students have seen service dogs in action in real life outside the lecture, regardless of their geographic location in Japan.**

This comparative study aims to raise awareness of the necessity for service dog integration in society and to highlight the differences in service animal integration for individuals with disabilities in both Japan and the United States.

Objectives

- To evaluate the current state of service animal integration and public awareness in Japan and the U.S.
- To identify barriers to access for service animals in Japan and the U.S.
- To advocate for a policy reform to enhance inclusivity and utilization of service dogs in Japan.



Methods

A comprehensive online search of public data was performed for comparative analysis, focusing on legislation, service dog team statistics, training organizations, and utilization in both Japan and the United States. Interviews with service dog trainers were conducted in both countries for qualitative assessment to identify common traits and differences.

Results

In the U.S., the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) advocates for a wide range of disabilities, allowing service animals, including those for physical, Post-traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), autism, epilepsy, and mental illnesses, provided they perform specific tasks [2].

This contrasts with Japan's limited recognition, which, **despite the "Act on Assistance Dogs for Physically Disabled Persons (2002)," acknowledges only Guide Dogs, Mobility Service Dogs, and Hearing Dogs as Assistance Dogs [3].**

[Table 1] Comparative Overview of Service Dogs in Japan and the United States

Aspect	Japan	United States
Legal Recognition	Recognized since 2002	Recognized since the 1920s
Types of Service Dogs	Guide dogs for the blind, hearing dogs, service dogs for physical disabilities with mobility issues.	Guide dogs, hearing dogs, service dogs for various physical and mental disabilities, not limited to mobility issues.
Training Standards	Strict regulations set by Japan Guide Dog Association and other organizations. 2 facilities are ADI-certified.	Governed by organizations such as Assistance Dogs International (ADI), with varying state regulations.
Public Access Rights	Generally allowed in public spaces, but specific regulations vary by region.	Protected under the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) for access to public spaces.
Funding and Support	Supported by donations, sponsorships, and government subsidies.	Funded by a combination of government grants, private donations, and sponsorships.
Cultural Attitudes	Increasing acceptance, but stigma still exists.	Widely accepted, with established awareness campaigns and advocacy groups.
Role in Society	Increasing role in providing independence and mobility for individuals with disabilities.	Integral part of enhancing quality of life for individuals with disabilities, providing aid in various tasks.

Results

[Table 2] Comparison of Service Dog Utilization in Japan and the United States(2022) [4,5,6]

Category	Japan (MHLW, JSDRC, 2022)	United States (Census, ADI, 2022)
Population	125 Million	336 Million
Percentage of population with disability	4.04%	12.65%
Percentage of disability population with service dog	0.02%	0.07%
Total Active Service Dog Teams	946	28,372
Guide Dogs	836 (88% of service dogs)	12,753 (45% of service dogs)
Hearing Dogs	52 (5.5% of service dogs)	2,268 (8% of service dogs)
Mobility Service Dogs	58 (6.1% of service dogs)	6,408 (48% of service dogs)
PTSD (Veterans)	N/A	2,403 (18% of service dogs)
Autism	N/A	2,403 (18% of service dogs)
Diabetic	N/A	401 (3% of service dogs)
Seizure	N/A	267 (2% of service dogs)
Psychiatric	N/A	668 (5% of service dogs)
Medical Alert	N/A	< 134 (<1% of service dogs)

Chi-squared test comparing the proportion of the disability population with service dogs between Japan and the United States yielded a p-value < 0.001, indicating a statistically significant difference. This indicates that **the prevalence of service dog ownership among individuals with disabilities is significantly different between Japan and the U.S.** Although the U.S. has greater awareness and acceptance of service dogs, these results revealed a significant gap between the number of service dogs available and the growing needs of individuals with disabilities in both countries.

JSDA Training Facility: Cynthia's Hill

[Figure 1] Japan Service Dog Association (JSDA) Cynthia's Hill



In Japan, only 58 mobility service dogs exist for fewer than 0.4% of an estimated 15,000 potential beneficiaries. **The JSDA and "Cynthia's Hill," mark strides in addressing this gap, bolstered by JSDA's recent Assistance Dogs International (ADI) accreditation in 2023, and Cynthia's Hill's dedicated matching and follow-up care.** They offer a unique service dog training, tailored for those with mobility impairments. Through the matching process, users stay in accessible rooms for 2 to 3 weeks, learning daily dog care and training with the dogs to perform specific assistance tasks. The **"Dog Intervention"** program enhances hospital care with animal-assisted therapy, while the **"With You"** Project focuses on matching dogs, including those unsuitable as service animals, with families that have members with disabilities or children with disabilities, ensuring a personal fit. The canines who do not become service dogs, referred to as **"care-change dogs,"** are given a new purpose, enriching lives as companion pets. [7]

Service Dog Training in Hawai'i

In Hawaii, there are several non-profit organizations involved in training service dogs. Since 2000, **Hawaii Fi-Do (ADI-accredited)**, have specialized in providing service dogs, especially for mobility disabilities, offering them to clients regardless of payment capabilities [8]. From our interviews with volunteer trainers, we learned that breeds like Labradoodles take around 18 months to train, while Labrador Retrievers might need 24 months. Some dogs, due to their unique personalities, transition into roles as comfort animals if they're not suited for service duties. Hawaii Fi-Do's placements include Veterans with mobility issues, therapy dogs in medical facilities and schools, a diabetic therapy dog for a child, and memory care dogs, trained to assist and evoke memories for dementia patients, reconnecting them with the joy of past pet ownership.

[Figure 2] Hawaii Fi-Do Service Dogs in training

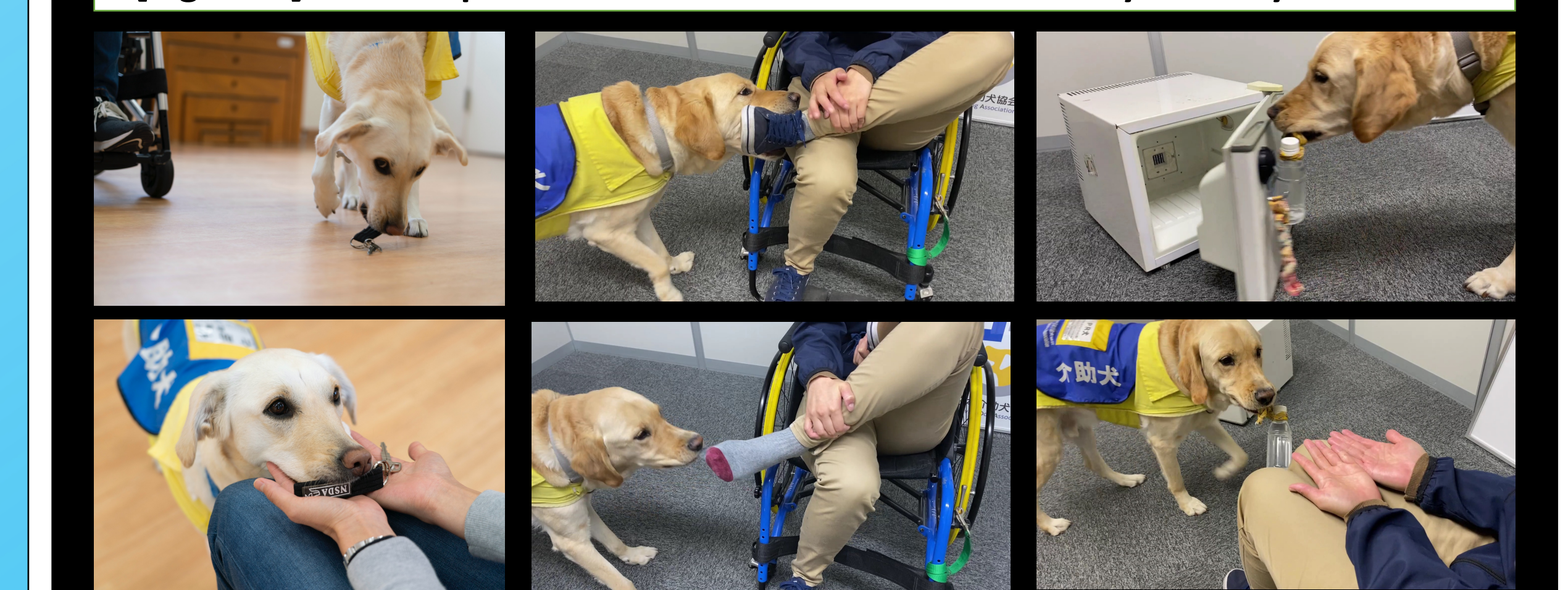


Other organizations in Hawaii are: **Assistance Dogs of Hawaii (ADI-accredited)**, **Balanced Obedience**, and **Canine Coalition**: aiding individuals with PTSD, TBI, fibromyalgia, anxiety, sexual trauma, and balance issues. All are 501(c)3 non-profit organizations, funded by donations. [9, 10, 11]

Medical Student Education in Japan

Approximately 1,900 medical students from 17 medical schools in Japan participate in the HMEP Open Cross Class offered by JABSOM OGHIM, which includes live service dog demonstration classes by JSDA (Dr. Takayanagi) and access to on-demand recordings. During these sessions, medical students witness service dogs in action, aiding in the independence of their users. They have a rare opportunity to engage in interactive discussions with service dog users, including individuals with paraplegia and tetraplegia, who volunteer to share their experiences and foster understanding of the social acceptance and societal integration of service dogs. Students express shock at the scarcity of service dogs in Japan, with some inspired to volunteer at the training facility, while **many are determined to raise awareness as aspiring physicians.** The shortage of service dogs is due to a lack of trainers, insufficient donations, and challenges in the breeding process.

[Figure 3] HMEP Open Cross Class Live Demonstration by JSDA Cynthia's Hill



The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) requires that a service dog must be trained to **perform at least one task that is directly related to the person's disability.** Two to three dogs out of every 10 successfully graduate as service dogs at Cynthia's Hill in Japan.

Conclusions

The study calls for a global dialogue for reevaluating Japan's policies to parallel the more inclusive ADA standards of the U.S.

Promoting understanding and acceptance of assistance dogs aims to build an empathetic, inclusive, and equitable society. By aligning policies with the intricate needs of people living with disabilities, the goal is to integrate assistance dogs fully into public life, enhancing independence and dignity for all.



Future Directions

The necessity for more service dogs and their acceptance in society is recognized in both Japan and the United States. Japan, though not heavily populated by veterans with PTSD, faces frequent natural disasters and a high suicide incidence, suggesting a need for service dogs in diverse roles.

Legal recognition of service dogs for an array of conditions, including PTSD, seizures, diabetes, and more, could be a step forward. This would not only cater to those with mobility impairments but also offer therapeutic benefits and improve quality of life for a broader segment of the population. This approach would align with global trends in acknowledging the multifaceted contributions of service animals.



Desired Impact

To catalyze policy advancements in Japan towards a more inclusive service dog system, mirroring the ADA's broader recognition of disabilities, thereby ensuring service dogs are accessible to all who need them, enhancing the quality of life for people living with disabilities globally.

"Dogs, who have been partners of humankind since ancient times, are the ultimate optimists, always thinking only of delicious and enjoyable things, and are the bearers of barrier-free hearts: open, accepting, and accessible to all. Dogs bring smiles, a sense of purpose, and warm feelings to those facing difficulties. I hope that medical professionals will come to understand the significant potential of harnessing the power of dogs in healthcare and welfare."
-Tomoko Takayanagi, M.D., Ph.D.-

[Figure 4] Assistance Dog Awareness Sticker



References and Acknowledgments

- [1] Saegusa-Beecroft E, Takagaki K, Machi JB. "Assessing Interest and Awareness Among Japanese Medical Students in International Standardized Testing: The Introduction of the National Board of Medical Examiners (NBME) Comprehensive Basic Science Examination (CBSE) in Japan." *ScholarSpace, University of Hawai'i at Manoa*, 2024. [doi:10.21203/rs.3.rs-3977248]. [2] U.S. Department of Justice, Civil Rights Division, Disability Rights Section. "Service Animals and Emotional Support Animals." ADA.gov, U.S. Department of Justice. [www.ada.gov/resources/service-animals-2010-requirements/]. [3] "Act on Assistance Dogs for Physically Disabled Persons." Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare, 2002. [www.mhlw.go.jp]. [4] Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare. [www.mhlw.go.jp]. [5] Japanese Service Dog Resource Center. [www.jsdrc.jp]. [6] "United States Census 2022." U.S. Census Bureau, [data.census.gov]. [7] Japan Service Dog Association. [s-dog.jp]. [8] Hawaii Fi-Do. [www.hawaiifido.org]. [9] Assistance Dogs of Hawaii. [www.assistancedogshawaii.org]. [10] Balanced Obedience. [balancedobedience.com]. [11] Canine Coalition. [caninecoalition.org]

Acknowledgments

We express our gratitude to JSDA Cynthia's Hill, specifically Ms. Yuka Goto, Ms. Kaori Yamamoto, and their team, as well as Pastor Mitch & Mrs. Nancy Gowen, devoted volunteer service dog trainers at Hawaii Fi-Do. We are deeply thankful to all service dogs across the globe whose tireless service enriches and empowers lives.

