

# CANINE CORNER

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[www.balanceddog.co.nz](http://www.balanceddog.co.nz) / [www.doggymom.com](http://www.doggymom.com)



## Training service dogs

Smoky Mountain Service Dogs (SMSD) trains mobility assistance service dogs for veterans with physical disabilities. Their program is the only accredited program by Assistance Dogs International (ADI, [assistancedogsinternational.org](http://assistancedogsinternational.org)) in the state of Tennessee, and one of only 125 in the USA. (Mobility Dogs, [mobilitydogs.co.nz](http://mobilitydogs.co.nz), is New Zealand's ADI affiliate.)

I recently toured the Smoky Mountain facility and spoke with Heather Wilkerson, Program Manager.

"It takes two years and \$22,000 to train a single service dog, involving 1,800 hours of professional dog training. For this reason, we aim to invest 95 cents of every dollar into the care and training of the dogs. We do not employ administrative staff; our volunteers and supporters are essential to our success."

Labrador and Golden Retrievers are the breeds of choice, sourced primarily from a network of reputable breeders.

Founded in 2011 with a business plan created for them by the University of Tennessee, SMSD custom trains mobility assistance service dogs specific to a veteran's needs. The dogs are provided entirely free of charge to the veteran with even food provided at no cost for the life of the dog.

SMSD accepts applications from veterans who live within a 350-mile



radius of its facility; veterans that are matched with a service dog must return each year for an annual re-assessment and catch-up. SMSD serves the entire state of Tennessee and portions of Alabama, Georgia, North Carolina, South Carolina, West Virginia, and Virginia. The distinctive green coat of a Smoky Mountain Service Dog is well-recognised in these areas.

A regional service area allows trainers to work extensively with the veteran/canine teams throughout the training process with additional support provided after the team goes home. Trainers will undertake home visits and meet-and-greets as part of the matching process.

Assistance Dogs International accreditation serves as endorsement of, and commitment to, high standards. The accreditation process evaluates a range of criteria including:

- Administration of all program operations
- Fair and ethical treatment of clients
- Humane training methods for the dogs
- Proper healthcare for the dogs
- Safety and cleanliness of the training facility
- Criteria for screening suitability of both dogs and clients
- Criteria for matching dogs and clients
- Compliance with all legal regulations
- Proper training and evaluation of owner-trained assistance dog teams

Like most animal charities, SMSD started with a small facility. It took ten years to raise the funds for its current 18-kennel facility with impressive dedicated areas for grooming and training.

When a veteran dies, their family have a say in what happens to the service dog. Within the past year, the program lost two of its veterans. In one case, the dog was reaching its retirement age and so it remained with the family. In the other case, the dog was re-deployed with the full support of the deceased veteran's family. 🐾

