

Paws and reflect: Defining an assistance dog task

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Definitions of assistance dogs rest on the performance of tasks that mitigate a human's disabilities. However, the specific elements that constitute assistance dog tasks – those that effectively and consistently mitigate disabilities – remain undefined. As the assistance dog concept expands into new domains, the lack of a clear definition for an assistance dog task poses significant challenges for multispecies stakeholders. Based on the author's professional experience educating and assessing assistance dog teams, as well as exchanges from a workshop with assistance dog professionals and individuals living with qualified assistance dogs, this article proposes nine criteria to address the question: what needs to be established to define an assistance dog task that considers the well-being, welfare, and working success of dog and human? The aim is for this definition to act as i) a guideline to further refine the assistance dog concept, ii) a resource for assistance dog professionals and their clients when developing a novel task, and iii) a framework for stakeholders to assess an individual's need for an assistance dog task. In so doing, it situates assistance dog tasks as interdependent, caring acts on behalf of both dog and human that have been designed with the interests, well-being, and welfare of both at the forefront. Ultimately, this paper was written with an intention to support meaningful change within the assistance dog sector that can benefit assistance dogs, humans, the public, and further stakeholders.

KEYWORDS: assistance dog; task; animal organization; interspecies work; definition; public access

Introduction

Much of the ambiguity in the assistance dog sector can be traced to an abundance of differing understandings and definitions of an assistance dog. Existing literature, standards, and legislation formulate a definition, with only slight variations, as follows: An assistance dog is specifically and extensively educated to live and work with an individual who has one or more disabilities to *perform tasks* that mitigate these disabilities (e.g. Bremhorst et al., 2018; Howell et al., 2022, p. 11). Even the recently published European norm CEN/TC 452-1 “Assistance Dogs” has not refined this definition much further:

Assistance dog [...] is the umbrella term for a wide variety of dogs that are specifically trained to *perform tasks* to increase independence and to mitigate limitations of a person with a disability. In order to qualify as an assistance dog, the dog is permanently paired with a person with a disability to *perform tasks* on a one-to-one basis or to *perform these tasks* under the guidance of an additional support person (‘CEN/TC 452’, 2024, pp. 4, Part 1, “Terminology” emphasis added).

The definition of an assistance dog rests wholly on the performance of tasks. Yet, how is an assistance dog task defined?

To date, a clear definition of what constitutes a task is missing, despite its centrality to the definition of an assistance dog. Some literature lists examples of actual tasks¹ and mentions that they can vary greatly. Particularly when considering the work of assistance dogs expanding into new domains (Patterson-Kane, Yamamoto and Hart, 2020; Hall et al., 2021), this does not suffice. Solely stating that a task “mitigates a disability” sidesteps significant considerations for assistance dog professionals – and those living with an assistance dog – to figure out by themselves. This article presents nine criteria to answer the question: what needs to be established to define an assistance dog task that considers the well-being, welfare, and working success of dog and human?

Carrying out tasks justifies an assistance dog’s access rights to public spaces where companion dogs and emotional support animals² are not admitted (*ADI Terms &*

1 For example, a recent publication (Howell et al., 2022, p. 7) concerned with defining terms presented examples of existing tasks, rather than defining what elements should be in place for a legitimate assistance dog task: “Examples of assistance-animal tasks or behaviors are as follows: A guide animal for a person with a vision impairment helps its handler navigate around the neighborhood, avoiding stepping onto the street and into oncoming traffic, and avoiding potholes and other hazards on the walking path”.

2 Emotional support animals are not taught specific tasks and are therefore not guaranteed

Definitions, no date). Universal access rights ensure their ability to perform these tasks when and where needed, hence their common classification as an aide.³ Assistance dogs only qualify for public access rights when accompanying their human partner, and so tasks do not exist in isolation. Both assistance dogs and humans require extensive education and assessment of their ability to carry out tasks *together* in varying environments and scenarios to warrant public access rights as a *team*.

The number of required tasks to qualify a dog as an *assistance* dog can vary greatly between frameworks, depending on the assistance dog type and diverging requirements of the assessing body. For example, guide dogs learn around 50 tasks. *Assistance Dogs International* (ADI) suggests “three or more tasks” for other types of assistance dogs (*ADI Terms & Definitions*, no date). The German “Assistenzhundeverordnung”⁴ (AHundV) states that assistance dogs must perform five tasks (BMAS, 2024). Yet, some individuals may only require one or two, yet life-saving, tasks. Needing to fulfil the minimum requirements of three to five tasks can often result in tasks that do not align with the definition presented in this article⁵ and, often, do not actually mitigate an individual’s disability. Put bluntly, it asks individuals and their assistance dogs to perform tricks to justify their (potential) funding, qualification, and access rights. This article proposes that even one essential task that fully aligns with the nine criteria outlined below, is full justification of assistance dog *team* status. This shifts the priority away from quantities and, rather, toward relevance and quality of tasks.

This article is based on my background as an assistance dog professional. For almost a decade, I operated a guide dog school and worked as a guide dog instructor. Following this, I worked as an assistance dog exam supervisor for the *Assistance Dog Foundation* – an independent German organization that qualifies assistance dog teams per its own standards (Assistance Dog Foundation, 2024), and at times including required external guidelines. As an anthrozoologist conducting research in the field of Animal Organization Studies with a focus on dog-human working relationships, in particular assistance dog work, this article is further based on an extensive knowledge and review of existing literature. The definition and most of the concepts presented throughout stem from a workshop held in Germany in 2024, where different stakeholders came together

public access (Howell et al., 2022, p. 11).

3 For example, in Germany, health insurance providers will often finance guide dogs (e.g. AOK – Die Gesundheitskasse, 2020) due to their placement on the official list of medical aides (GKV-Spitzenverbandes, 2007).

4 Can be translated from German to English as: “Assistance Dog Ordinance” (own translation).

5 An example of this would be an individual with diabetes, requiring only two tasks, teaching their dog to pick up socks for them, solely to meet examination criteria.

to define the assistance dog team standards for the *Assistance Dog Foundation's* (2024) Public Access Test. This workshop involved assistance dog professionals as well as individuals with different disabilities living with an assistance dog as qualified teams. Therefore, diverse opinions and experiences informed and shaped the concepts this article presents, and these individuals are anonymously credited for co-constructing this definition. These assistance dog professionals and individuals in qualified assistance dog teams were then also invited to review this article prior to submission.

Article overview

In the following discussion, nine criteria for defining an assistance dog task are presented and, for clarity, are each addressed in a separate sub-section. These criteria are not listed in order of importance. Each criterion opens with examples that align with or contradict it to offer insight for the discussion in that sub-section. Criterion One unpacks the concept of a task mitigating a disability. Disabilities are increasingly mitigated through technology and, therefore, Criterion Two questions what this can mean for current and future assistance dog tasks. Criterion Three presents an alignment with current dog welfare standards as a central element of a task. Criterion Four explains the importance of conditioning, while Criterion Five expands on this and defines a task as reliably performed amidst various environments and interactions. Criterion Six underlines that tasks should not cause harm to the team or public, and allow for public access by minimizing unnecessary inconveniences. Criterion Seven argues that a task should not have a detrimental impact on the therapy, treatment, or recovery of the *human* resulting from the task's performance. Criterion Eight situates an assistance dog task definition within the concept of a humane job (e.g. Coulter, 2016a). Finally, Criterion Nine concludes by presenting a task as co-constructed by humans and dogs. This final element is critical for this article's definition that eschews existing ableist definitions of tasks that frame humans as passive *receivers*, rather than active and able participants.

Assistance dog task criteria

Criterion One: Mitigates a relevant disability

An assistance dog alerts their hearing impaired human to someone calling their name (Martellucci et al., 2019, p. 27).

An individual with epilepsy has a medical alert assistance dog who alerts to oncoming seizures around 20–30 minutes before onset (Martinez-Caja et al., 2019, p. 110).

As presented in the introduction, the majority of definitions of assistance dogs state that they *mitigate* a *disability*. What does this effectively mean, and what is ultimately expected of assistance dog tasks as a result? After all, a task that mitigates a disability for one person may not do so for another with the same disability. In what follows, I refer to the symptoms of disability that can benefit from being mitigated by an *assistance dog task*. To fit this criterion, a task is a) relevant to the individual's disability/disabilities, and b) clearly improves the safety and/or autonomy and mobility of the individual. Whether a task is “relevant” to someone's disability can be outlined by the example of being guided around an obstacle: it does not mitigate someone's *diabetes*, but it does mitigate someone's *vision impairment*.⁶

“Disability” has differing definitions internationally within the assistance dog sector. Some could say that every individual should have an assistance dog because, “in some sense, all people have disabilities: none of us is perfect” (Malamud, 2013, p. 34). Where, then, do hospitals, schools, and grocery stores draw the line between assistance and companion dogs? It cannot be expected that all institutions open their doors to *all* dogs.⁷ The thought of dogs accompanying humans everywhere is a wonderful one. However, while paws do not compromise hygiene more than the soles of shoes do (Jasmijn Vos, Wijnker and Overgaauw, 2021), admitting *all* dogs into places such as hospitals, for example, is not feasible. This should be reserved for assistance dogs, because their presence is of *critical* importance.

A disability is considered by doctors and the responsible assistance dog professionals to benefit from mitigation through an assistance dog task, if it is, or is directly

⁶ While this might seem like a silly example, through my work as an assistance dog exam supervisor, I have been confronted with many tasks that are not relevant to an individual's disability in a comparable severity.

⁷ This problem is most acute in the United States with the increasing popularity of emotional support animals. The reason for this and the serious negative implications it has for assistance dog team public access, is discussed elsewhere (e.g. Włodarczyk, 2019; Carroll et al., 2020).

comparable to, one or more of the following disabilities that assistance dogs currently work to mitigate:⁸ vision impairments (Gravrok et al., 2018; Glenk et al., 2019); hearing impairments (Hall et al., 2017; Lalancette, Tremblay and Hotton, 2023); neurological, metabolic or systemic seizures or crises (Martinez-Caja et al., 2019; Wester et al., 2020); mobility impairments (Blanchet et al., 2013; Crowe et al., 2014); neurological impairments such as Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder (FASD), autism, or dementia (Wilkinson, 2010; Appleby et al., 2022); as well as Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD)⁹ acquired during adulthood.¹⁰ At times, it can be challenging for assistance dog professionals and doctors to determine whether a) an individual's disability could be effectively and consistently *mitigated* by an *assistance dog task* and/or b) a specific team can align with the criteria that define and allow for the reliable performance of a task. Assistance dog professionals should therefore involve a medical specialist *familiar* with the handler's personal history over multiple years to find the most beneficial solution for *all* multispecies stakeholders.¹¹

The examples at the start of this section present two disabilities that are mitigated by a conditioned task (Criterion Four) relevant to the disability. "Mitigating a disability" by performing a task remains distinct from providing emotional support (as is the case with emotional support animals) in that doing so aligns with the criteria presented in this definition, as well. Whether, or to what extent, providing emotional support should be considered an *assistance dog task* is widely contested (i.e. Foster, 2018), but it is not recognized as one in existing standards ('CEN/TC 452', 2024; *ADI Terms & Definitions*, no date).

8 This can expand in the future, as further assistance dog types are established slowly and intentionally - accompanied by critical, reflective research using interdisciplinary, multi-professional approaches.

9 Most literature concerning PTSD assistance dog teams is concerned with military PTSD (e.g. Crowe et al., 2018; O'Haire and Rodriguez, 2018; LaFollette et al., 2019; Rodriguez et al., 2020; Kendra Thorne and Dingess, no date). Until extensive research is done on other PTSD assistance dogs, and for the sake of bringing more clarity into the concept of a task, I refer here to PTSD that has a) been confirmed by the individual's medical specialist, b) involves an A1 criterion in accordance with the DSM, and c) is acquired during adulthood. The A1 criterion in accordance with the DSM means that "the person was exposed to: death, threatened death, actual or threatened serious injury, or actual or threatened sexual violence" (Bedard-Gilligan and Zoellner, 2008; U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, 2023).

10 There are no existing comprehensive studies, to my knowledge at the time of publishing this, concerned with assistance dogs for individuals who have developed PTSD in childhood or adolescence. Until further studies are conducted, I refer to assistance dogs for individuals who acquired PTSD during adulthood.

11 "Multiple years" may not be needed in all cases. This comment refers to the importance of a patient not visiting a doctor only to acquire a "prescription" for an assistance dog, without having acquired treatment and/or lacking a history and strong doctor-patient relationship.

As an assistance dog exam supervisor, I have encountered individuals wanting the following (anonymized, summarized) behaviors to be recognized as tasks:

When feeling anxious walking alone at night, the dog's "task" is to walk with someone to ease anxiety.

An individual has trouble getting up to leave their house. Their dog's "task" is to whine and bark at the door every morning, asking to be let out, which results in the individual getting up to do so.

Feeling anxious or unable to get up can be linked to a disability. The dogs' behaviors could be presented as "mitigating" because they produce the desired result and, concerning the second example, go beyond solely providing emotional support. However, they do not directly warrant public access and will generally not align with all the nine criteria presented here. Such behaviors also have a higher likelihood of conflicting with Criterion Seven, whereby a task should not be detrimental to therapy or treatment.

Criterion Two: Offers utility not available through other means

An assistance dog turns on lights home on verbal cue. Currently, many affordable¹² options of automated lights can be activated remotely.

While there are diabetes assistance dogs, there are also blood sugar implants that send notifications to a smartphone (Joseph, 2021; Boscarri et al., 2022).

These examples illustrate where technology can be utilized to mitigate a disability and may make a task dispensable. This is not to suggest that other tasks would not provide critical support in other areas of an individual's life. For example, Robinson and colleagues (2020, p. 4) examine the use of assistive technology *and* mobility assistance dog tasks:

[S]ome daily task functionality, that they had previously relied on their assistance dog for, was recently "taken over" by a voice-activation home assistance instead. This was usually related to environmental light control, and the participants still relied on their dogs to open and close doors, cupboards, and drawers.¹³

12 Affordable when compared to the cost of an assistance dog.

13 Barriers remain in a hotel room or friend's home (Robinson et al., 2020, p. 4). Here too, technology is developing rapidly.

Even guide dogs are at risk of being replaced by technology, as guide “dog” robots are developed (e.g. Hwang et al., 2023). Technology could not replace a guide *dog* or the symbiotic *relationship* between dog and human. Further, tasks can be replaced while an individual nevertheless lives happily with a dog. Rather, assistance dog *tasks* being carried out by technology – effectively, affordably, and reliably – is a growing reality to be considered.

There are three overarching reasons for this. Firstly, assistance dogs are expensive to acquire *and* support throughout their lifetime, especially if individuals are self-financing a dog, when accounting for their cost, education, veterinary bills, and food. It is also often a tedious and complicated task to get approval for an assistance dog and/or their funding. If someone is wanting an assistance dog for tasks that can *easily* be done by technology that is exceptionally more *affordable*, then the reason for *needing* an assistance dog is weakened. This leads into the second reason: if all assistance dog tasks *cannot* (affordably – in comparison to an assistance dog – and easily) be replaced by accessible technology (i.e. smart home technology or blood sugar implants), then this might arguably lead to external financiers of assistance dogs more readily providing funding. Thirdly, in a similar vein, matters of public access may benefit from this criterion, due to its assurance, to a greater extent than is currently the case, that assistance dogs are accompanying their humans because this is the best option available for the human.

Criterion Three: Aligns with current dog welfare standards

A mobility assistance dog provides physical support to maintain a human’s balance and navigate stairs (Blanchet et al., 2013).

A mother reflects on an assistance dog’s task to restrain and calm an overstimulated autistic child: “Not that long ago we went up to the playground... Liam just got so impatient we just arrived and I hadn’t detached¹⁴ him so he could have a play and he literally just kicked her¹⁵ in the chop¹⁶... those moments really stand out for me because whenever she gets hurt I feel quite sick really” (Appleby et al., 2022, p. e4118).

An assistance dog pulls a wheelchair under certain circumstances.

14 Detaching the harness attaching them to the assistance dog to “restrain” the child from running away (Appleby et al., 2022, p. e4116).

15 “Her” refers to the assistance dog.

16 “Chop” is slang for mouth or jaw.

A task should never negatively impact a dog's welfare: whether acutely (second example) or over time (first and third examples). Disappointingly, literature on assistance dog task-related welfare is alarmingly sparse (exceptions: Coppinger, Coppinger and Skillings, 1998; Serpell et al., 2010; Bremhorst et al., 2018). To ensure current welfare standards, a task needs to align with the Five Domains Model of Animal Welfare (Mellor et al., 2020), which originates from the Five Freedoms model (Webster, 1994).

The Five Domains Model of Animal Welfare provides a structured approach to assessing welfare in a holistic, coherent manner (Mellor, 2017). It considers external and internal states and circumstances, which are assessed systematically through an evaluation of environment, nutrition, behavior, health and, as an outcome of these four, mental state (Mellor, 2017; Hampton et al., 2023). Understandings of how tasks might impact an assistance dog's welfare must continue to evolve with updates to this model and emerging developments in animal welfare. Ensuring that a task performance does not conflict with this model is a critical, disregarded element when defining an assistance dog task.

The above examples present relatively common tasks that can, nevertheless, present acute or long-term welfare concerns. Serpell and colleagues (2010, p. 495) noted, regarding the third example, that "pulling a wheelchair [...] may impose excessive physical strains on a dog that could result in physical injury over time". While mitigating a disability, it risks detrimentally impacting a dog's health. Of note here is also the importance of an appropriate, well-fitting harness worn for balancing or orienting type tasks (Coppinger, Coppinger and Skillings, 1998, pp. 134–135) or when guiding a vision-impaired individual (Peham et al., 2013) to prevent any additional detrimental impact.

A task is absent of acute welfare implications inherent in or consistently resulting from performing it. The second case presented above acts as an unfortunate example. The parent shared that "those moments really stand out for me because whenever she gets hurt I feel quite sick really" (Appleby et al., 2022, p. e4118). This suggests that the dog experiences this fairly consistently ("moments"), the parent recognizes their pain and feels sick about it. Despite the benefit that the assistance dog brings to the life of the child and the likely existing caring, positive relationship between child and dog, tasks should not be expected that could present acute welfare concerns for *either*. To put it simply, just as a human providing a service should not be expected to carry out tasks that could result in being kicked in the face, or any other welfare concern, despite the mitigating effects of these tasks or the potential lack of ill-intention on behalf of the individual causing this pain, neither should an individual of any other species.

Criterion Four: Is a performance of a conditioned behavior

An assistance dog responds to a phone ringing by leading their hearing impaired human partner to it (or bringing it to them) (Lalancette, Tremblay and Hotton, 2023).

A guide dog changes direction when hearing the word “left” or “right” (Hauser, Wakkary and Neustaedter, 2014, p. 2).

ADI defines a task as performed in response to a cue,¹⁷ making clear that the nature of the cue can be quite broad (*ADI Terms & Definitions*, no date). In some cases, an individual has no control over presenting the cue – as is the case with an oncoming seizure. The task is, however, a conditioned response to a clear, recognizable cue that an assistance dog has been educated to respond to through positive reinforcement (Harvey et al., 2023). This includes behaviors that a dog initially presents voluntarily, later being reinforced through conditioning (Kirton et al., 2008, p. 502).

Indeed, dogs often spontaneously present behaviors that benefit humans, and are a testament to the interspecies care and communication that can develop. They are not to be underappreciated or disregarded in light of this criterion. Rather, an assistance dog task being conditioned ensures, to the greatest extent possible, consistent, effective outcomes that can be demonstrated and performed reliably in myriad environments and interactions (Criterion Five).

For the sake of brevity, I focus on two reasons why this is important: a) a task’s reliability warrants public access, and b) the education and, therefore, predictable work responsibilities resulting from a conditioned task can reduce anxiety and stress for the assistance dog. If a dog can only perform a task in a true emergency, this behavior is often not a conditioned response, but rather an improvised reaction offered under high stress to perform. If the task is *not* properly conditioned and cannot be reliably reproduced, this puts the human relying on this task in a potentially life-threatening situation.

Further, a task not being conditioned and demonstrable prevents this behavior from being presented (live or over film – e.g. for alerting behaviours) during a public access test to assess whether it aligns with criteria presented here. If assistance dogs are recognized and treated as stakeholders and workers providing a service (Kandel,

¹⁷ “Task: this is a trained behavior that the dog does on cue (or command) to mitigate its partner’s disability. The cue can be verbal, a hand signal, something in the environment and/or some behavior exhibited by the partner or another person” (*ADI Terms & Definitions*, no date).

Dlouhy and Schmitt, 2023), it is their right to clear education and work processes.¹⁸ The expectation to consistently, possibly at high intervals, assess their human's needs intuitively, and then work to figure out what might be the desired behavior in a particular situation, can leave the dog with significant ambiguity. This makes their work much more challenging than executing a clearly conditioned task. As a result, a dog may not fully be able to relax in knowing what is specifically expected of them following a clear cue, which my colleagues in the assistance dog sector and I have unfortunately observed countless times.

Criterion Five: Reliably performed amidst various environments and interactions

A medical alert assistance dog retrieves medication. Regardless of where it has been placed, they search for and find it.

A mobility assistance dog stays calm and retrieves dropped keys, despite an unexpected loud crowd cheering for a street musician.

To mitigate a disability (Criterion One) at all times and justify public access rights, an assistance dog *team* must be able to perform a task in various environments and interactions. Retrieving fallen keys is not a task, if the dog can only perform it in calm environments, under ideal conditions, but is unable to amidst common stressors. Therefore, a qualified assistance dog team has to be educated to perform a task and be able to mitigate a disability reliably in all realms of daily life. This is not only important for the reliability of a task, but for the dog's well-being, due to an education with positive reinforcement that appropriately prepares them for any predictable stressors that they may encounter during their work-lives. In alignment with Criteria Three, Eight, and Nine, it is the responsibility of an assistance dog's human to evaluate whether an environment or scenario would distress, scare, or otherwise harm their assistance dog beyond routine and everyday stressors to make adjustments accordingly (e.g. not going grocery shopping on New Year's Eve and, as an exception, having groceries delivered on that day).

¹⁸ Blattner (2019, p. 75 emphasis in original) wrote that, "recognizing animals as workers does not mean endorsing their exploitation or stripping them of rights at work or rights to refuse work. Rather, we should recognize animals as exploited workers and establish the sorts of legal rights, institutions, and practices that protect animal workers from degradation and oppression and that allow them to flourish. In other words, recognizing animal labor brings with it a strong normative component that can change how we view and, ultimately, how we treat others".

Further, what is expected of an assistance dog while carrying out a task can change. This requires an assistance dog to not only learn the task amidst varied environments and interactions, but to adapt *how* they perform the task within these. How an emergency kit is retrieved, for example, will differ, depending on where it is at a given moment. If usually found next to the front door, but a visitor placed their bag on it or their human forgot it on the kitchen table, the task also involves *searching* for the pouch and developing a strategy to retrieve it. Should the dog not be taught this, the task of retrieving medication fails to be effective at potentially saving a life.

Criterion Six: Allows for public access without harming or unnecessarily inconveniencing others (humans and animals)

A guide dog stops at street curbs – crossing only when no cars are approaching (Pemberton, 2019, p. 96; von der Weid, 2019, p. 13).

The dog of an individual with PTSD shows guarding behaviors – growling and barking at people approaching – to create a perceived “safe zone” that momentarily eases symptoms.

The performance of tasks grants assistance dog teams access to areas where dogs, generally, are not permitted. Therefore, the execution of a task must not harm – but ideally, prevent the harm of – any humans or individuals of other species. Halting at a curb, so that a handler can orient themselves and safely cross the street, significantly increases the safety of humans and the dog. It is considered a task because it consistently and effectively prevents harm.

In the second example, the assistance dog has learned to cause harm – potentially inducing fear in others. Aggressive behaviors – even if momentarily *appearing to* mitigate a disability – must be eliminated from assistance dog education and will result in an immediate fail in a Public Access Test. ADI states in their standard that they do “not encourage” tasks that involve guarding or otherwise aggressive behaviors (*ADI Summary of Standards*, 2022). A task that mitigates an individual’s disability, but threatens the public, can cause emotional and physical harm, lowers receptiveness to offering assistance dogs special access rights, and can negatively impact efforts in the therapy and treatment of the human (Criterion Seven).

Receptiveness can also be lowered when others are *unnecessarily* inconvenienced by the nature of a task (not the presence of a team):

An individual with PTSD uses their assistance dog to create a barrier while shopping. Instead of blocking others from getting too close by standing directly next to the individual, the dog is asked to stand at the end of an aisle to prevent anyone from entering it, while their human partner shops there alone.¹⁹

A mobility assistance dog retrieves items from grocery store shelves, picking unpackaged potatoes from a bin and handing each potato individually to their human partner.

These examples present “tasks” that can align with *most* of the criteria but inconvenience the public. There is a considerable spectrum of what is perceived as “acceptable”, so there should be careful reflection on the impact on others when designing a task. There is a possibility that a member of the public may feel inconvenienced by a *legitimate* task, or even the mere presence of an assistance dog team. This alone is *not* what is referred to in this criterion. For example, a common task is an assistance dog barking as an alerting behaviour or to draw attention to their human for external support. While this might disrupt or even scare members of the public, it aligns with all other criteria presented here, and the beneficial (potentially life-saving) impact it has on their human outweighs most momentary inconveniences to the public. However, blocking other shoppers from an entire area of the shop significantly impacts *their* access rights, in addition to possibly being detrimental to the therapy, treatment, or recovery of the individual with an assistance dog (Criterion Seven).

Asking an assistance dog to retrieve *unpackaged* items, or placing wrongly retrieved packages back on the shelf, increases hygiene concerns for others beyond what would seem acceptable. Such task design may negatively impact the shop if a product needs to be thrown out as a consequence, resulting in a financial loss and food waste. This criterion should not be construed to restrict assistance dog team access to places such as grocery stores or restaurants, and an assistance dog team should be able to rely on the tolerance of others, even during the occasional faux pas. This criterion speaks to the *design* of a task and refers to *minimizing* rather than *eliminating* inconvenience.

19 This is (in a highly anonymized, summarized manner) based on what individuals have (increasingly) presented as a task when applying to take a public access exam where I supervise exams.

Criterion Seven: Not detrimental to the therapy, treatment, or other recovery of the human

Some individuals ask assistance dogs to enter their home first, search the premises, and then signal that the home is safe.

An adult who became vision-impaired and developed depression rarely left home due to limited mobility skills.²⁰ Acquiring a guide dog enhanced mobility and, coupled with therapy, significantly improved their recovery (e.g. Warda, 2023, pp. 11–12).

In the first example, the task, which was commonly recommended during the first years of assistance dogs for PTSD, later came under critical review because it can have a detrimental impact on the individual's treatment and management of PTSD (specifically mentioned as a task for ADI accredited assistance dog schools not to educate – see *ADI Summary of Standards, 2022*). Asking an assistance dog to search a home or alert someone outside (Tedeschi, Fine and Helgeson, 2010, p. 427) can enforce perception of imminent danger. This creates a high risk of contradicting trauma therapy, which aims to restore the individual's sense of safety in daily life. The task can appear helpful or provide momentary reassurance and therefore mitigate a disability (Criterion One). However, its outcome can have a detrimental impact.

A task can also support an individual's therapy efforts – either intentionally or as a side effect. This is not to imply that a task can or should *replace* therapy or other treatment. Rather, I propose that a task should not impact any therapy and treatment of an individual negatively, but rather, ideally, benefit these efforts. In the second example, the tasks that a guide dog carries out effectively improve the individual's *ability* to socialize, ensuring a positive impact on their therapeutic efforts (Kohl, 2010; Warda, 2023, pp. 11–12).

Criterion Eight: Only taught if a dog is interested in and suitable for it

An individual with PTSD relies on their Whippet to prevent them from walking into the street during flashbacks by blocking them until signalled to cross.

An assistance dog has learned to detect and signal oncoming seizures (Catala et al., 2019; Martinez-Caja et al., 2019), but shows no interest in scent detection.

²⁰ Depression among vision impaired individuals, particularly those developing the impairment in adulthood, is common. As Binder and colleagues (2020, p. 284) wrote, it is estimated that half of the vision impaired population has some form of depression and/or anxiety, while only 4–6% are diagnosed.

An assistance dog task should be one that a dog is both interested in and suitable for and which is mutually beneficial – in alignment with the concept of humane work (Coulter, 2016b, 2020). The first example presents a life-saving task that has the potential to fulfil the criteria presented in this article. However, while the Whippet might be *interested* in this task, they are not physically suited for it, due to their higher body sensitivity and size in comparison to other breeds. Regardless of how well educated and cared for they might be, they would not be the most suited individual to block someone who is, for example, experiencing a flashback and, as a result, walks into them – bringing both into oncoming traffic (conflicting with Criterion Three).

Being “suitable” to perform a task, however, is not limited by physique. On average, globally, around 50% of assistance dogs do not complete their education due to presenting behaviors that do not align with the exceptional level of professionalism expected while they carry out tasks (Bray et al., 2019, p. 2; Ando et al., 2020, p. 4; Mealin et al., 2020, p. 10; Mai et al., 2023, p. 2). Not fulfilling the guidelines of professionalism can result in a dog’s inability to perform a task at all or in a safe, reliable manner (Criterion Five). Other times, a dog learns to perform a task successfully, but it speaks against their temperament and personality—or even their age. Requiring them to nevertheless perform it throughout their career would result in it not being humane.

Further, an assistance dog might be suited for a task but not interested in it. High-value rewards can be used throughout their education as motivation (Zeligs, 2014; LaFollette et al., 2019). However, ultimately, without an intrinsic interest in carrying out a task throughout their career, assistance dogs simply will not. Particularly when placed in a position of exceptional responsibility, such as guiding a vision-impaired individual or alerting to or assisting during crises, a lack of interest could result in fatal consequences for *both*. It is not in the nature of a symbiotic assistance dog task to expect anyone to do something (especially regularly) that they are not interested in and suited for doing (for discourse on symbiotic assistance dog teams, see Eason, 2020).

Emotional labor is the act of managing emotions to present emotion displays that align with the professional demeanor expected in a particular role, such as working as an assistance dog (regarding interspecies emotional labor: Warda, 2022; Dashper, 2019). An assistance dog task needs to align with a dog’s emotional labor *ability*. This is distinct from their interest in and suitability for carrying out the task itself. It refers to their ability to present the professional demeanor expected of them, either through the expression of genuine emotional alignment or through managing the expression of underlying emotional misalignment, while carrying out the task. While interest in and suitability for learning or performing a task cannot always be taught successfully, performing emotional labor can be (Dashper, 2019; Warda, 2022, 2023).

Criterion Nine: Co-constructed, not merely received

This article eschews traditional ableist definitions that present assistance dogs as mere aides and their human partners as passive receivers of task performance outcomes. It fully acknowledges the human's role in the success and well-being of *both* members in an assistance dog team. A task is to be understood as performed within its dynamic, complex, yet ideally secure and safe partnership. Assistance dog teams are made up of a well-educated and cared-for assistance dog and well-educated, responsible, caring human, who plays a central role in any task's effectiveness. Macpherson-Mayor (2020, p. 73) articulated this beautifully, regarding an assistance dog named Barkley:

The day I met Barkley, I was excited but also felt a sense of responsibility. Although everyone said that he'd be 'good for me' and 'help me', from the very beginning I was concerned about him. Was this fair to him? Did he want to be a service-dog? Would it be fulfilling or would he hate it? I have spent every day since, thinking about his welfare and making sure that his role as 'my' service-dog didn't become his sole reason for existence. For above all else, my relationship with Barkley is about shared responsibility, needs, and love. Deep, deep love.

Indeed, a task is an interdependent act. It needs to rest on appreciation, care, humane working conditions, and love ("deep, deep love") between a human and dog. This also speaks to broader disability studies discourse, which recognises that "disabled people [...] declare that they prize not [...] independence but interdependence, not functional separateness but personal connection" (Longmore, 2003, p. 222). This article embraces this holistic lens in the definition of an assistance dog task as an interdependent effort within a symbiotic relationship.

Humans need to learn *their* role in an assistance dog task. Yet, in some cases, doing so can result in heightened levels of overwhelm, stress, and frustration (see Putnam, 1952; Kohl, 2010; Warda, 2023). Some individuals are unable, for various reasons, to learn to effectively work and responsibly live with their assistance dog throughout or merely in certain phases of their life. They may struggle to cooperate with an assistance dog and support *them* in performing tasks. While this refers to the human partner rewarding an assistance dog appropriately, practicing their tasks with them, and learning and caring about their own role in a task, it also speaks to an existing and well-maintained relationship and bond between human and dog (see Eason, 2020). For others still, this may be possible, but will nevertheless take time to develop. Lloyd and colleagues (2021, p. 6) shared that "guide dog instructors should inform handlers who may be

frustrated with a new partnership that the relationship might take from 6 months up to a year to improve”. Hence, just as it can be challenging for an assistance dog to perform a task amidst varied stressors (Criterion Five), it can be difficult for their human partner to perform their role in the task in the presence of certain stressors or other challenges.

Conclusion: Defining an assistance dog task

This paper speaks to a significant, critical gap in existing literature and standards by presenting a comprehensive definition of an assistance dog task with nine criteria. As such, it can act as a resource for assistance dog professionals, individuals considering or living with an assistance dog, legislators, and other stakeholders to draw from and on which to continue to expand and refine the assistance dog concept. An assistance dog task can be defined as a conditioned behavior, performed in response to a specific cue, to effectively mitigate their human partner’s disabilities in alignment with *all nine* concepts presented in this article.

However a task is defined, instances are common where an *assistance dog* (regardless of the task/s they may perform) is not the right choice for an individual at a certain time in their life. Timing is key in a task’s ability to mitigate a disability. It can be a challenging reality when an assistance dog may not be the right choice, at a specific time, due to an individual’s current or future inability to fully provide an *optimal* work-life for an assistance dog. An individual with PTSD reflected on being denied an assistance dog due to their inability, at the time, to properly care for one, saying that there was “a lot of anger, a lot of frustration” (Yarborough et al., 2018, p. 122). However, one individual with a PTSD assistance dog shared their thoughts:

It could take years to be ready for a dog. If you cannot take care of yourself, you cannot take care of a dog. That’s the bottom line. [After seven years] I was strong enough to be able to care for the dog and myself, and my family... I think a lot of vets could go through this and figure out that they’re not ready mentally yet (Yarborough et al., 2018, p. 122).

A task should only mitigate a disability to the extent that it is effective, reasonable, safe, and symbiotic (between human and dog). If expected to mitigate a disability that, at the time, results in an individual unable to care for themselves and, by extension, an assistance dog, it is not defined as a task that is *mutually beneficial*.²¹

21 An exception can be made here, in an appropriate context, as part of a three-person team, e.g. with assistance dogs for children with autism (e.g. Appleby et al., 2022).

In constructing what is or is not a task, assistance dogs should, together with their human partners, be considered stakeholders in their own right (Tallberg, García-Rosell and Haanpää, 2021). Neither should be presented or treated as passive or irrelevant in the need for or performance of a task. Doing so acknowledges and acts upon the right of all individuals involved to have humane working conditions and co-constructed (work-)lives that are mutually beneficial to the greatest extent possible (Coulter, 2016a, 2020; Blattner, 2020, 2021). It is on this basis and interest that the criteria for this assistance dog definition were formulated.

Yet, this definition is meaningless if not applied in practice. Held up to the criteria presented here, some existing assistance dog tasks may not fulfil all or any of them. These need to be adjusted or no longer regarded as a task in general or for a specific assistance dog team. However, much of the tasks that assistance dogs do with and for their human partners do or *can* align with all criteria. In particular, disabilities nodded to in Criterion one, are generally effectively mitigated by at least one assistance dog task. To expand past the potentially obvious example of guide dog tasks, we can take the perhaps under-represented example of assistance dogs mitigating hearing impairments: alerting a human to a sound (e.g. their name being called) clearly mitigates their disability (Criterion One), is not a utility available (currently) through other means (Criterion Two), its definition does not speak against current dog welfare standards (Criterion Three—exceptions apply if a dog’s treatment or education method conflict with this), and it is a conditioned behaviour (Criterion Four) that can be reliably performed in daily environments or interactions (Criterion Five). Further, it does not negatively impact public access (Criterion Six – in fact, it clearly improves it), is not detrimental for the human’s therapy, treatment, or recovery (Criterion Seven), can be something that a dog is interested in and suitable for (Criterion Eight), and, finally, is co-constructed (Criterion Nine).

This definition offers assistance dog professionals a guideline to hopefully expand upon and refine. In daily practice, it acts as a resource when assessing an individual’s need for an assistance dog task. Further, when working *together* with a client to develop a task that is not yet common or acts as a new concept, assistance dog professionals and clients (and other relevant decision makers) can turn to these criteria to ensure a comprehensive consideration of the various elements that constitute a task to improve chances of reliable and effective tasks that consider both primary stakeholders (client and assistance dog). In so doing, this paper aims to support efforts toward meaningful change in the assistance dog sector for the benefit of the human, assistance dog, public, and further stakeholders.

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