



Hi, I am Iain Gordon, a freelance writer who is hoping to gain some long-term employment with the assistance of the Centre for Disability Employment, Research and Practice (CDERP). I have been truly fortunate to have been to many organizations with my employment consultant, Ms Jenny Argæet.

I am in the Discovery Phase of the program at CDERP. I am involved with the Special Olympics where I have done some media coverage for Basketball, Athletics and Ten Pin Bowling Events. I have authored articles about these events, the athletes who participate and the volunteers who make it happen.

On 23 May 2024 Jenny and I went to Guide Dogs Victoria (GDV) Head Office in Fairfield. Guide Dogs Victoria has been in operation since 1954. The organization provides services to assist with mobility for visually impaired people.

We met with Russell Harrison at the GDV Head Office. Russell has had an extensive career in the disability sector and has been working at GDV for the past year. Previously, he worked for Melba, Scope and Wallara as well as the Lort Smith Animal Hospital. His qualification in veterinary science along with his interest and expertise in the disability sector, seems to be a great combination of qualities and qualifications to work with dogs to support people with disabilities.

The Tour.

Russell showed us around the facility and talked about all the renovations and new facilities being built. Special facilities are required for safety and mobility, and he showed us how the corridors are lit up to help those who work there find their way around. The windows face outwards to help with navigation. Flooring is important, and he demonstrated different surfaces to help people who use a cane to assist mobility.

We next visited the dog kennels, where we met with some prospective Guide Dogs. Russell showed us their sleeping areas. Socialisation is important, and they have a dedicated playground area. There were adorable puppies aged 7 and a half weeks in the nurseries. We were able to hold them and pat them.

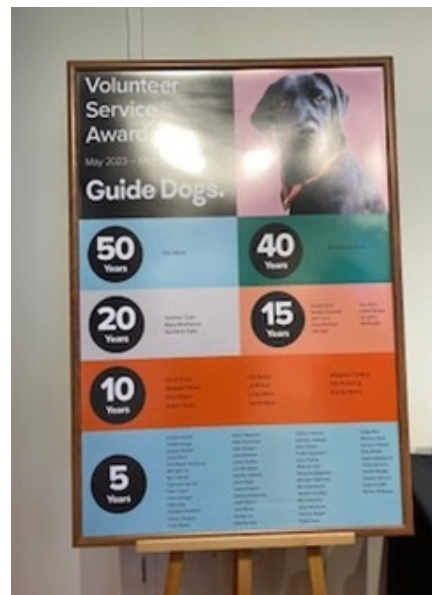
GDV operates a state-of-the-art Veterinary Clinic. The health and wellbeing of prospective Guide Dogs is an essential part of their journey towards being service animals for the disability sector. The clinic consists of consulting rooms and an operating theatre. Facilities for investigations of health problems include a CT Scanner as well as equipment to undertake a range of pathology investigations.

The Breeding Programme.

We spoke about what is involved in breeding guide dogs. This information made sense to me, as my uncle in England has bred labradors for many years. The breeding team at GDV considers a range of desirable characteristics in both breeding parents, including general good health, behaviour, temperament and compatibility. Male and female Labradors who have bred successful guide dogs are more likely to be chosen again.

Guide Dog Training.

The puppies go to host homes at eight weeks of age. At this stage, they socialise and undertake the required training for 16 months. At 20 weeks of training, the puppies are matched with a potential client, and there is a programme of on-site training with the client and puppy together, with no distractions or obstacles, lasting two weeks. This is the time when the relationship is created between a Guide Dog and a person who is visually impaired.



What Happens to Dogs Not Suitable for Guide Dogs?

Not all the dogs bred in the service are suitable for assisting the visually impaired community. If a dog has gone through the training programme and is considered unsuitable, there are other service options available. Some of these dogs become Therapy Dogs for people with other disabilities or who are alone, socially isolated, or confined to their homes. These dogs are provided in conjunction with the support and advice of psychologists.

There are also court dogs, whose role is to support young children in the court system, particularly those who must testify in open court cases. Alternatively, a dog who is not able to provide a service in this way can be sold to the public for the price of \$3,000.00.

Staff and Volunteers

Russell introduced us to Lucy. Lucy is vision impaired and graduated with her Bachelors' Degree studying Media and Marketing Management at RMIT University in December 2023. As someone with expertise in media, she has been authoring articles for Guide Dogs Victoria for 3 months.

Russell explained that altogether they have close to 500 volunteers that help Guide Dogs Victoria. We met with some of these volunteers in the office area on our tour, who were working in happy and positive environment.

A volunteer's acknowledgement event was in planning held in their function room after work hours as part of the recognition in Volunteers Week. There is an anniversary event planned for 31st May 2024.

Conclusion

It was helpful for me to see how Guide Dogs Victoria operates and how media is handled within the organisation. The organisation is very well run and organised. It was good to see the caring, inclusive nature of the people who work at Guide Dogs Victoria.



Iain is a great example of the capacity-building process that underpins Discovery and its effectiveness in exploring and creating employment that matches the participant's strengths and interests. We all want a job that interests us, and Discovery delivered through our Work First Customised Employment program is part of that journey. It is a journey, not a quick fix bang on doors, hand out dozens of resumes, start tomorrow process.

Discovery and Customised Employment is about meaningful employment.