

## Lending a helping hand...or paw

By Ryan Blessing

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Left, Suzannah Dickinson works with dog-in-training Alice on turning on and off lights at Paws For Independence. Right, Christina Johnson trains German shepherd Carry to walk alongside of the wheelchair. JOHN KOULBANIS / THE SUN

**Richmond** – “Carry,” a German Shepherd, and “Alice,” a Yellow Labrador, are two remarkable dogs who can do much more than fetch a stick. In fact, they are opening doors – figuratively and literally – for disabled people.

Both dogs are being trained to help people with special needs perform everyday tasks that are taken for granted by most folks.

Although they just recently began their training, the energetic young dogs have no trouble pulling wheelchairs, turning light switches on and off and opening doors.

*Paws for Independence*, based in Richmond, trains dogs like Carry and Alice to act as helpers for people who have trouble with reaching high or low places, hearing loss and balance problems.

“We’re the first and only non-profit assistance dog center in the state,” said Christina Johnson who founded *Paws for Independence* with Suzannah Dickinson last November. Both women have about 15 years of experience in animal behavior and training and two years in assistance dog training.

The dogs in the program come from local animal shelters, pounds and animal rescue leagues.

“We like to rescue dogs,” Johnson said. “Alice was a stray from Pawtucket. Carry was left in front of the Exeter Animal Shelter.”

Johnson and Dickinson evaluate the skills and strengths of each dog in their care to determine what type of assistance dog it will become. Dogs are trained in one of three areas – hearing, balance, or wheelchair assistance.

“They can do things like pick up dropped objects, turn on high light switches and press elevator buttons,” Johnson said. Hearing ear dogs can alert their partners to important sounds such as fire alarms, telephones, and a baby’s cry.

Together, Johnson and Dickinson have trained four dogs at Delmyra Kennels in Exeter.

“Delmyra Kennels is very generous. They’ve donated the living space and training areas for the dogs,” Dickinson said.

The training process takes about six months for each dog, with Dickinson and Johnson holding training sessions several times a week.

“The dogs go through four months of basic training with us – learning the commands and the routines,” Dickinson said. “Then there’s another four to six weeks of partnership training between the dog and its new owner. The owner learns the handling techniques and how to care for the dog.

The dogs go through a rigorous evaluation process to be accepted into the program.

Likewise, potential owners are evaluated to make sure each team is a perfect fit. They are screened and interviewed to be sure they are healthy and can care for the dog.

“We have to properly match the recipient with the animal,” Johnson said.

As part of the training, the dogs are taken into public places like supermarkets, malls and restaurants, where they perform simulations of the skills they’ve learned.

After partnership training is completed, the trained service dog is given to the recipient free of charge. All dog graduates receive a special vest that identifies them as an assistance dog, a special identification card and a copy of the regulations put out by the American Disabilities Act. These items are the team’s ticket to public access.

“Most restaurants and supermarkets are very understanding about service dogs,” Dickinson said. By law, the dogs are allowed to accompany their owners wherever they go.

Currently, *Paws for Independence* trains about two dogs at a time. It costs about \$20,000 to train, care for and match each dog in the program and most of the money comes from fundraisers or private donations. The organization’s long-term goal is to establish a larger training facility to better serve Rhode Island’s disabled community.

“There aren’t many training facilities like this. Most have a three to five year waiting list,” Johnson said.

Both women said that dogs like Carry and Alice help people with special needs gain more independence and confidence, and break down social barriers others may have towards the disabled.

“The goal is to give the dogs a good home with a caring owner and to give the owner a partner for life,” Dickinson said.