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## **First-Time Experience in Owning a Dog Guide by Older Adults with Vision Loss**

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First-Time Experience in Owning a Dog Guide

Li, K., Kou, J., Lam, Y., Lyons, P., & Nguyen, S.

**Abstract**

*Introduction:* Dog guides were found to be effective in helping adults with vision loss navigate in the community and improve overall well-being. In spite of the vast amount of literature on pet therapy and dog companionship, limited study exists on older adult with vision loss experience of owning a dog guide. The purpose of this study is to explore the facilitators and barriers of first time owning and using a dog guide as experienced by older adults with vision loss.

*Methods:* Data were gathered among seven participants using open-ended semi-structured telephone interviews. Participants were asked to describe their experiences related to owning a dog guide. Data analysis was carried out using phenomenological analysis and themes were extracted from verbatim transcriptions.

*Results:* Through constant comparison methods, five themes emerged: increased responsibilities for new guide dog owners, changes in habits and routines, quick human-dog guide bonding, increase in community integration, and enhancement of autonomy through dog guide ownership.

*Discussion:* The study results suggest that obtaining a dog guide increased the older adults with vision loss everyday engagement in outside of home activities. The increased confidence in community mobility may have led participants to engage in activities in unfamiliar environments, thus improving their autonomy, self-esteem, and physical abilities. These changes resulted in increased feelings of independence and freedom for the older adults with vision loss. Participants also revealed positive changes in their daily habits. Due to the increased physical ability and motivation needed to complete activities, making adjustments to owning a dog guide became easier. Furthermore, a human-dog guide bond was prevalent among all seven participants.

*Implications for Practitioners:* Themes extracted provide health practitioners and dog guide organizations insight into how owning dog guides may empower older adults with vision loss.

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### BACKGROUND

In 2016, 7% of older adults over the age of 65 in America lived with visual difficulty (Administration for Community Living, 2018). Low vision, which is defined as “visual acuity that is 20/70 or poorer in the better-seeing eye and cannot be corrected or improved with eyeglasses,” affects 1 in 28 Americans over the age of 40 years old (The Vision Council, 2015). Together with other conditions that impaired vision, vision loss amongst older adults will continue to rise with increases in life expectancy (Berger & Porell, 2008; Blaylock, Barstow, Vogtle, & Bennett, 2015). Having vision loss, such as partial sight, blurred vision, blind spots, or tunnel vision, can cause an individual to have difficulty distinguishing fine details, making it challenging to complete everyday tasks especially in unfamiliar and uncontrollable environments such as in the community (The Vision Council, 2015).

Literature showed that many older adults with vision loss often experience physical and psychological challenges within their home and community (Berger and Porell, 2008; Blaylock et al., 2015; Rudman, Huot, Klinger, Leipert, and Spafford, 2010). The physical challenges at home may include everyday tasks such as self-feeding, grooming, and dressing, which can be made more difficult when there is low illumination and poor color contrast (Berger and Porell, 2008; Blaylock et al., 2015). Outside of the home, other physical challenges are maintaining safety and confidence during community mobility, which is defined as moving in the community by walking, driving, bicycling, or accessing transportation systems (American Occupational Therapy Association, 2015). Rudman et al. (2010) found that many older adults with vision loss may be unwilling to explore the community due to fear of physical risks and an inability to maintain constant vigilance in the unfamiliar surroundings. The unpredictability of public settings, such as an inability to spot a fast approaching car, also poses additional risk to older

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adults with vision loss (Berger, 2012; MacLachlan, Rudman, & Klinger, 2007). In addition, literature showed that while many older adults with vision loss attempted to use a long cane to improve their community mobility, many had refrained from incorporating these canes into their daily lives or had abandoned the device altogether due to fear of stigmatization and embarrassment (Fok, Polgar, Shaw, & Jutai, 2011; Hersh, 2015; Horowitz, Brennan, Reinhardt, & Macmillan, 2006). Furthermore, Cimarolli, Boerner, Brennan-Ing, Reinhardt, and Horowitz (2012) found that adults 65 years old and older with vision loss often had negative thoughts associated with their visual impairment such as feelings of sadness, loss of independence, and fears about worsening vision. Altogether, these challenges may lead to physical inactivity, and decrease in social participation in and outside the home, which may decrease quality of life for older adults with vision loss.

Due to the growing population of older adults with vision loss, addressing the many challenges that these older adults face, both psychosocial and occupational challenges, is important (Berger, 2012; Blaylock et al., 2015; Christ et al., 2014; Cimarolli et al., 2012). The benefits of dog guides as an assistive device are well documented. Current literature shows that dog guides can help older adults with vision loss both physically, with improved community mobility, and psychologically, with increased companionship (Hersh, 2013; Whitmarsh, 2005; Wiggett-Barnard & Steel, 2008). Guide Dogs for the Blind ([GDB] San Rafael, CA) is a non-profit organization that provides highly-qualified dog guides to enhance confidence, mobility, and independence for individuals in North America who are blind or have low vision (GDB, 2016). To qualify for a dog guide, the individual must be legally blind, and must possess competence skills in orientation and mobility, including the use of a long cane, in the community (GDB, 2016). Despite vast amount of literature on pet therapy and dog companionship, there is

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limited research regarding the impacts on first time owners of dog guides in older adults with vision loss. Moreover, while past literature may have included adult participants, it did not specifically include older adults who are in the age range of 55+. To date, there is not sufficient evidence on whether the older adult population can adapt to the responsibilities of owning a dog guide or enjoy the benefits of using a dog guide in the community. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to explore the facilitators and barriers of owning a dog guide among older adults with vision loss as first-time dog guide owners.

## METHODOLOGY

### Design

A phenomenological study provided insight into the perspective of the first-time dog guide older owners' experiences during their first year of ownership. The Dominican University of California Institutional Review Board for Human Subjects approved this qualitative phenomenological study.

### Participants

Older adults were recruited from the GDB organization. The inclusion criteria included English-speakers who are 55 years old and older, have a primary diagnosis that contributes to vision loss, and are first time dog guide owners who have owned a dog guide between three months to one year at the time of the study. Participants who had diagnoses of progressive conditions, such as Parkinson's disease or Alzheimer's dementia, were excluded from the study.

### Procedure

Participants were recruited using purposive and snowballing methods through a GDB representative who emailed information to potential participants. Interested participants contacted the GDB organization and participants' information was then forwarded to the

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investigation team. The investigation team telephoned each qualified participant to explain the nature of the study and emailed each participant to obtain informed consent prior to conducting the interviews.

### **Data Collection**

Participants were interviewed using 15 semi-structured questions via telephone and the interviews were recorded using a smartphone application. The semi-structured interviews included general questions about the participants' current eye conditions and health. Additional questions investigated the older adults with vision loss interest in acquiring a dog guide, the impact dog guides had on participants' daily habits, and participants' performance in community activities. Examples of interview questions are listed in table 1. Follow-up questions sought clarification and expanded on responses.

### **Data Analysis**

Recorded interviews were transcribed verbatim. All transcripts were audited for accuracy by more than one investigator. Open coding sessions were conducted using a qualitative phenomenological approach which involved each investigator reading chosen transcripts to identify recurring key phrases related to the experience of dog guide ownership. Recurring key phrases were scrutinized, sorted into broader categories, and re-organized until saturation and 100 percent consensus was reached by the investigation team. Two transcripts were randomly chosen to be open-coded in order to create inter-rater reliability. Open coding also served to establish a set of operational definitions as defined and agreed upon by the investigation team. Each theme was operationalized to define its meaning for consistency and objectivity of codes pertaining to the respective theme. After open coding the two transcripts, Dedoose software (Los Angeles, CA), an online data management, was used to complete coding all seven verbatim

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transcripts based on the operational definitions. Significant excerpts from the transcripts were tagged to a theme library related to dog guide ownership. The final themes were developed using Dedoose's analysis tool which sorted data by the most reoccurring key phrases from each participant.

This study ensured rigor in data collection, results, and analysis primarily through triangulation. Triangulation of investigators was established by having at least one additional investigator audit the data integrity of the interviews and codes. Data triangulation was achieved by finding themes that appeared in all seven interviews using constant comparison among the team of investigators. Data analysis involved all investigators until 100 percent consensus of themes was reached.

## RESULTS

Each of the seven participants recruited from GDB participated in a semi-structured telephone interview lasting 60-75 minutes with the same two investigators to ensure consistency throughout interviews. Three males and four females between the ages of 61 and 71, with a mean age of 65 years old ( $SD = 3.9$ ) were interviewed. The average length of having a dog guide was 6.2 months ( $SD = 2.7$ ). Among the seven participants, five had retinitis pigmentosa, one had glaucoma, and one had Sorsby Fundus Dystrophy. Through constant comparison methods, five themes emerged: (1) increased responsibilities for new owner of a dog guide, (2) changes in habits and routine, (3) quick human-dog guide bonding, (4) increase in community integration, and (5) dog guides enhance autonomy.

### **Increased Responsibilities for New Owner of a Dog Guide**

Being a dog guide owner requires acquiring new skills and behaviors to physically care for and handle the dog guide. All seven participants reported being the sole person to care for the

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dog guides, and all reported increased physical responsibilities in feeding, grooming, and walking the dog guide. Although a few participants stated that they were aware of the added responsibilities prior to obtaining the dog guide, certain responsibilities still came as a surprise. For instance, one participant reported having to learn to brush the dog's teeth.

Training the dog guide and learning the responsibility of dog handling was also a part of being a dog guide owner. Two participants reported the need to learn new techniques to physically restrain the dog when it became overly excited or distracted in the presence of other people or dogs. One participant expressed concern over this kind of unexpected and alarming behavior. As new dog guide owners, all participants also reported needing to consider restrictions of the dogs in some uncontrollable community environments. In addition to the undesirable dog guide behaviors, two participants also stated that it was difficult to bring their dog guide to certain locations, such as noisy areas, because of being afraid of the possibility of the dog reacting to the environmental stimuli with improper behavior. In general, several participants felt that more training in how to handle misbehaved dog guide may be beneficial.

### **Changes in Habits and Routines**

Changes in habits and routines is defined by the investigators as a change in patterns of behavior from previously practiced ways of carrying out repetitive tasks and situations. Changes in habits and routines were apparent after acquiring a dog guide. Primarily, changes in habits and routines with new physical responsibilities as a first-time dog guide owner were evident, such as walking, feeding, and grooming the dog guide. Several participants reported that the needs of the dog guide structured their daily schedule. On the other hand, participants also identified that having a more consistent schedule helped with incorporating the responsibilities of owning a dog guide.



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While some participants reported initially feeling overwhelmed with the adjustment in new responsibilities, participants were able to quickly become accustomed to the new routine. One participant stated that having a consistent schedule provided him with more daily structure. Additionally, many participants expressed that this type of structure allowed them to feel more independent in contrast to feeling a loss of independence from the loss of vision.

### **Quick Human-Dog Guide Bonding**

The investigators defined human-dog guide bonding as a psychological connection between the participant and the dog guide. All seven participants revealed that they developed a strong bond, trust, and support from their dog guide almost immediately. One participant stated she felt “completely bonded” with her dog guide, who learned to slow its pace to accommodate her during walks. Another participant stated being “great friends from the beginning” and similarly, another participant had “grown attached” to his dog guide. Furthermore, having a dog guide provided a sense of companionship and partnership for all participants. Over time, participants developed a total trusting relationship and non-verbal communication with their dog guide. One participant stated, “we were able to bond and figure things out. We’re one now.” In fact, all participants were able to form a bond with their dog guide that was so strong that all participants felt safe walking in the community with their dog guide.

### **Increase in Community Integration**

The theme of increase in community integration is defined by the investigators as an increased ability to move around and perform activities outside of the home. The sub-themes in this category include increased physical activity, increased independence and safety, and increased socialization, all within the context of community.

*Increased Physical Activity.* All participants reported an increase in exploring their

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community through walking and using public transportation after obtaining their dog guide. One participant stated he was able to ride the bus and take a taxi and train, while another participant's airplane travel increased after ownership of his dog guide. Three participants reported that their dog guide increased their overall physical activity as they were obliged to go outside with the dog guide daily.

*Increased Independence and Safety.* Four participants reported increased independence with their dog guide while in their community compared to their experience with their long cane. One participant who reported having trouble with obstacles and stairs in public with his cane, stated “[dog guide] allows me to be free-er and move about without fear of getting hurt, or killed, or run over.” Several participants reported that they would run into obstacles that were not detected by the long cane and therefore, faced greater safety risks previously. One participant reported, “[the long cane] always gets stuck in the cracks in the street.” Another participant expressed the ability to complete more tasks by himself with his dog guide, “If I had a cane, I would be less secure with that. I would probably avoid many things without some other person with me. I feel so comfortable with her [dog guide]. I trust her to be able to keep me safe whether it be San Francisco or downtown.” This sentiment was shared by several other participants who reported having lower self-esteem or feeling awkward using the long cane.

In addition, using a dog guide in the community may have other psychosocial benefits. One participant felt that he was treated more like an adult with his dog guide than when he used his long cane. He expressed, “The cane, it's a good tool, but [the cane] is one where people felt sorry for me when they saw me with it. More people would come up to me and ask me if they could help me across the street. Could I find the chair for you? I would hear people talking in the distance and they would be saying things like we're ten feet in front of you. With [dog guide],

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they just watched and generally what they say is you have a beautiful dog. That's the number one thing that's stated to me every day. So there's a huge difference. The difference is I'm not treated like a child. I'm an actual adult in the community."

Increased night time activity also stemmed from participants' feeling safer with the dog guide as compared to the long cane. Three participants reported increased nighttime activity, which they tended to avoid previously before owning the dog guide.

"[Dog guide] does really well at night. I was shut in at night and now I am able to do a whole bunch of stuff at night."

"I get out now later in the day but before when it was getting dark, I wouldn't get out at all and I would stay in the house or even out in the yard."

"She makes up for the things I don't see and is trained to see. Sometimes it's just the blending of blacks and white or if it's a night-time thing and a black sign, I won't see it. If it's a white sign, I might see it, but she knows to go around."

*Increased Socialization Participation.* Most of the participants reported that more people approached and greeted them with their dog guide. Thus, being in the community with their dog guide allowed them to engage in new social interactions. Five participants expressed an increase in being approached by people, with one participant describing the dog guide as the "center of attention" and often received positive comments from people. One participant who felt ignored before having her dog guide expressed, "I've met more people in the last six months than I've met in my whole life." Although more people greeted them in the community, three participants reported that their circle of friends remained the same. Overall, all participants reported that the dog guides provided increased feelings of security and allowed them to be more social outside of their home. This led to an increased sense of independence and confidence, which may lead to

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better integration in their communities.

### **Enhancement of Autonomy through Dog Guide Ownership**

Autonomy is defined by the investigators as an increase in one's independence and freedom from external control. While participants reported negative psychological aspects of using the long cane, such as feelings of awkwardness, embarrassment, inadequacy, and low self-esteem, having a dog guide created positive internal feelings. Feelings of increased confidence and self-esteem were strongly associated with ownership of dog guide. Overwhelmingly, participants revealed feeling positive and having a greater sense of wellbeing with their dog guide. Several participants expressed having a dog guide made their life more fulfilling and their lifestyle more independent. Several participants reported feeling proud and motivated after obtaining the dog guide. Another participant who felt negative impacts of his vision loss on his work and leisure tasks, became more autonomous after obtaining a dog guide.

“Over the 35 years that I have been diagnosed with glaucoma, I have basically been losing, always being a negative impact on me in the sense of not being able to do the work of my professional career, not being able to drive, not being able to see television, not being able to go to the places where I needed vision, not being able to travel in the same way that I once did, not being able to do the recreational things or work I once did. All of those things negatively impacted me greatly in the way in which you deal with everyday living things. But, my dog guide made such an [positive] impact on me.”

## **DISCUSSION**

This qualitative phenomenological study examined the perceived facilitators and barriers of owning a dog guide for the first time among seven older adults with vision loss, who obtained their dog guides from GDB. Participants owned their dog guides for less than a year at the time

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of the study. The five themes established in this study provide implications for practitioners and pertinent information for older adults with vision loss who are considering a dog guide.

The results of this study bring into perspective the amount of time one must dedicate to the dog as well as the need to train, exercise, and perform daily dog care. Though learning new tasks and taking on more responsibilities may be a barrier for some older adults and adapting to changes in the home and daily patterns may be more difficult for older adults due to years of longstanding habits and routines, this was not the case for our participants. The consistent theme from our participants indicated that the benefits of having a dog guide outweighed the barriers of having to learn new skills and adopt new routines. All seven participants in this study indicated they were able to quickly make adjustment in their lives to care for their dog guide. These findings are consistent with current literature of how dog guides change a person's lifestyle (Camp, 2001; Hersh, 2013; Rintala, Matamoros, & Sietz; 2008; Wiggett-Barnard & Steel, 2008). In fact, adhering to a new schedule as dictated by the needs of a dog guide's feeding schedule and daily walks, served as a major contributing factor to positive adjustment when owning a dog guide.

On the other hand, limitations of using a dog guide as an assistive device included other physical challenges such as keeping the dog guide in control during walks, countering the dog guide's distractibility, and restraining it from jumping on others. While the physical challenges and added responsibilities associated with care of the dog guides can be quickly overcome, the physical handling of a dog guide when misbehaving in public environments continues to be challenging for the first time guide dog owners among older adults with vision loss. This finding supports previous research outlining the physical responsibilities of dog guide ownership (Camp, 2001; Craigon et al., 2017). In fact, Craigon et al. (2017) surveyed 63 adults with dog guide

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using open ended and closed questions and discovered that the uncontrollable pulling on the lead or harness was the most frequently reported negative behavior by the dog guide owners. Such limitations could have negative implications on one's daily life or dictate how and where the older adult interacts with the community. Thus, more preparation in the initial training and ongoing consultation with the dog guide organizations will be needed to ensure successful transition to satisfying dog guide ownership.

This study's findings also show that among seven older adults with vision loss using a dog guide for the first time, the facilitators greatly outweighed the barriers. Positive experiences of dog guide ownership included an increase in community integration, a strong and lasting human-dog guide bond, and overall enhancement in participants' autonomy. Our participants' responses revealed that older adults who own a dog guide could benefit from having access to public transportation and night time activities. Although it was not the aim of this study to compare a dog guide to a long cane, many participants did not feel safe with their long cane on public transportation and would refrain from going out at night prior to obtaining a dog guide. Current literature found that adults with vision loss avoided unfamiliar settings and preferred familiar routes (MacLachlan, et al., 2007). While this may be true for some of the participants, a majority of the participants stated they had increased their evening walks after obtaining a dog guide. In fact, our participants' responses revealed that they felt safer with the dog guide and explored the community more, leading to increased opportunities for leisure activities, socialization, and travel. Moreover, though not explicitly stated by the participants, since a dog guide can lead its owner away from obstacles and hazards in the community, therefore the trust that the older adults with vision loss have with their dog guide may alleviate some of the concerns of falls in the community. Thus, dog guide ownership can facilitate more and better

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community integration for older adults with vision loss.

Similar to findings from Lane, McNicholas, & Collis (1998), which reported individuals forming new friendships after obtaining assistive dogs, increased community integration can also result in interactions and socialization between the dog guide owner and a person they would not have regularly interacted with prior to obtaining the dog guide. As current literature reported the risk of depression and social isolation in older adults who have lost their vision (Cimarolli et al., 2012; Kempen, Ballemans, Ranchor, Rens, & Zijlstra, 2012), the increase in physical activity accompanying the increased chances for socialization in the community are added benefits of owning a dog guide.

In addition to social benefits, owning a dog guide also has other significant psychological and psychosocial benefits. The exceptional human-dog guide bond highlights how a dog guide can increase companionship, be an equal partner with the owner in terms of functionality, and provide affection. Participants of this study revealed how their bond with the dog guides created a great sense of support and trust at a time when there was imposed limitation in daily life because of declined vision. Moreover, the participants described their relationship with the dog guides as interdependent and as a partnership. The reported experience of having an intimate and reciprocal bond with the dog guides was not something experienced with the long cane. In the community, the dog guide serves as an assistive device, but inside the participants' homes, the dog guides were more of a canine companion. Some participants even discussed how the dog guide's presence facilitated a calmer mood.

Additionally, the dog guide appears to change owners' perception of quality of life with more positive thinking towards oneself and others and a better outlook on life. Our new dog guide owners reported feeling happier, motivated, and proud. After obtaining the dog guides, the

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older adults felt more autonomous, free, confident, and independent in their daily living choices. Overall, most participants felt the bond with their dog guide to be overwhelmingly positive. Therefore, these increased feelings of independence and freedom, together with a sense of companionship and increased positive mood may be a strong motivator for older adults to continue with dog guide ownership.

## LIMITATIONS

Although efforts were made to address the quality of the study, some limitations exist. Since the participants were recruited solely from GDB and through snowball sampling, the results may not represent the entire population of older adults with vision loss who are first time dog guide owners. Two interviewers were used and their variations in interviewing skills could have affected the participants' responses. By the nature of interviewing through a telephone call, the participants' social cues such as nonverbal expressions could not be extracted. Although all seven transcripts were analyzed with a constant comparison method until 100 percent consensus was reached, member checking was not completed after the interview. Therefore, this may have affected the objectivity and neutrality of the data.

## IMPLICATIONS OF FINDINGS AND CONCLUSION

Previous literature focusing on the experience of dog guide ownership among older adults is greatly limited. This study has provided a greater understanding of first time dog guide ownership among the older adult population, especially those with acquired low vision and vision loss. Five themes emerged from this qualitative phenomenological study and several conclusions can be drawn. Owning a dog guide for the first time required development of new habits, roles, routines, and physical responsibilities, leading to major lifestyle adjustments. While older adults felt the need for adjustment in the initial period, the overall experience proved to be



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worthwhile. Extracted themes support that dog guides are not only beneficial for improving community mobility for older adults with vision loss, but also make excellent companions that instill trust and support to their owners which further leads to freedom and independence in community mobility and better chance for socialization in the community. This improvement in autonomy further enhances a positive outlook on self and others in the older adults whose daily life activities are challenged by the acquired low vision or loss of vision altogether.

Applying the five themes in this study may help guide practitioners in their interactions with older adults with vision loss to promote participation in meaningful activities and improve quality of life. Practitioners can educate older adults about the changes in habits and routines as well as responsibilities prior to obtaining dog guides. Dog guide organizations can provide more support and training to first time dog guide owners in handling “difficult” situations in the community. Moreover, professionals working with older adults with vision loss can make clients aware of the many benefits of dog guide ownership, including healthy habits with daily walks, emotional support, companionship, and contribution to a positive outlook on life.

## RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE NEXT STEP

To our knowledge, this is the first study investigating first time dog guide ownership in older adults with vision loss. Different directions for follow up studies to further investigate the benefits for and needs of the older adults with vision loss, a growing population, are many. A longitudinal study could be beneficial to focus on additional changes in habits and routines that may not been captured in this study. Interviewing the participants after two years or more of owning a dog guide may provide additional perspectives of the older adults after the adjustment period and the long term benefits and challenges as dog guide owners. In particular, another phenomenological study to investigate the adjustment that older adults with vision loss need to

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make with retiring dog guides can shed more light on the continuous adjustment to be made by dog guide owners. Lastly, our sample from the study solely consisted of participants from one organization, GDB. Future study may also include participants who have obtained their dog guide from other organizations.

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