

Service Dogs for Kids with Autism

1.0 Mission and Objectives

Project Chance has a mission to provide clinically prescribed and professionally trained service and therapy dogs with the specific skill sets needed to aid children diagnosed with autism and other developmental disabilities. These dogs help children achieve maximum potential and independence in executing therapeutic, social, and physical tasks at a higher rate of success throughout their lives. Our placements include service dogs for individual children on the autism spectrum and therapy dogs for classrooms serving those with autism or other developmental disabilities.



We now have 36 dogs working full-time with their children, including five in classroom or hospital settings. (Sullivan, Ozlow, Phoenix, Thule, Nova) In addition, we have just added 6 puppies to our program and have placements lined up for all of them.

2.0 Project Description

2.1 Need

The American with Disabilities Act states simply that a person with a disability that substantially limits one or more major life activities and can benefit from a service dog trained to perform tasks to mitigate those disabilities, has the right to use a service dog for social and emotional assistance.



Autism is a developmental disability that typically appears during the first three years of life. The result of a neurological disorder that affects functioning of the brain. Autism and its associated behaviors occur in approximately one in 68 individuals. It is 5 times more prevalent in boys than girls. These numbers are from the US Centers for Disease and Control and Prevention.

Project Chance relies totally on donations, grants, and fundraisers to support its activities. The cost of raising one assistance dog is approximately 20,500, not including any of the volunteers' time.

2.2 Population Served

Project Chance provides assistance dogs to families with children diagnosed with autism. Autism assistance dogs are unique to the world of dogs helping people. Unlike the guide dog that helps with physical tasks, the autism assistance dog is there more for emotional support. By simply being there, a solid, sound and reassuring companion can help ease sensory overload, which is a common challenge for those with autism. People with autism are often unable to filter out sensory input – they tend to hear, feel and smell everything all at once – and are usually unable to ignore or redirect those stimuli. An autism assistance dog can help by giving them a focal point, or a way to ground their random, unceasing environmental experiences.

Most children with autism have no concept of personal safety, and can wander outdoors and into traffic. Autism assistance dogs have a very special ability to help with this. A child can be tethered from his/her harness to the dog's harness to prevent the child from bolting in public. This is a trained ability that starts with the dog and the child acclimating to wearing harnesses and vests and ultimately, the child holds a handle from the dog's harness and an adult is always holding another leash to the dog. It is very difficult for us to quantify our constituents, as the dogs touch so many lives. Having said that, our "main" constituents are:

- The 31 children who have our service dogs and their families, schools, therapists and friends
- The 1,000 students and 120 faculty at the 3 elementary schools with therapy dogs
- The 120 students at the film school in Los Angeles with a therapy dog, and
- The numerous hospitalized children who benefit from visits by Thule, one of our therapy dogs.

Of the children that have dogs, 75% are boys. The schools that have Project Chance therapy dogs are Janie Howard Wilson Elementary School in Lake Wales, FL, Memorial Drive Elementary School in Waycross, GA, and Henderson Haven in Orange Park, FL. Inclusion Films in Burbank, California, run by Joey Travolta (John Travolta's older brother), has approximately 120 students each year ranging from 18-25 years of age. In addition, they have approximately 500 summer camp students in the 9-18 year old range with some 250 volunteers. These dogs come in contact with countless people every day. Thule passed the American Kennel Club's 'Canine Good Citizen Test' and is allowed to visit children at Wolfson's Children's Hospital in Jacksonville, FL.



2.3 Geographic Area

Project Chance primarily serves northeast Florida and southeast Georgia, and is the ONLY provider of assistance dogs for families with children with autism in this region. We have also placed dogs in other geographic locations, including Los Angeles, California and southern Florida. The headquarters for Project Chance is located in Fernandina Beach, Florida, and most of the volunteers reside in the surrounding area or in greater Jacksonville, Florida.

2.4 Volunteer Support

Project Chance is a fully volunteer organization dedicated to providing assistance dogs to children with special needs. We use a network of 25 volunteers who help with the following tasks:

- Raising the puppies for 14 months and working directly with the child in the chosen family

- Walking the puppies to get them used to the public access areas
- Assisting with speaking engagements at civic and education programs in the community
- Assisting with fundraisers and grant preparation.

2.5 Specific Activities

All the puppies come to the training kennel, Dog Leg Productions, where they stay until four months of age to learn leash skills and social manners. They are also taken out into the community to get them used to public facilities and de-sensitize them to sounds and crowds.

2.6 Timeline

It takes 16 to 18 months to train a puppy for a desired and individualized skill set for each child. This timeline is shown below:

- To 2 Months: Puppy at breeder
- 2 Months: Puppy delivered to training facility
- 2 – 4 Months: Puppy learns leash skills, social manners and obedience at training facility
- 4 – 18 Months: In puppy raiser's home for training and socialization while receiving weekly professional, task-specific training, including with the child and family
- 18 Months: Dog placed with family
- 18+ Months: On-going training and support, as needed

3.0 Long-Term Strategy

Project Chance is an organization dedicated to helping children with autism achieve maximum potential and independence. The organization has four primary goals:

1. **Obtain, train, and place service and therapy dogs to support children with autism or other developmental disabilities.**

- **Service dogs:** Service dogs are placed in families with children with autism. We currently have 31 dogs in active service, primarily in Florida and Georgia.
- **Therapy dogs:** Therapy dogs are placed with educational or other institutional environments that serve children with autism and other developmental disabilities.



These dogs will work as social companions to the children served by the institutions. We currently have five dogs who are working classrooms for children with autism and other developmental disabilities. We also have one dog who works as a therapy dog at Wolfson's Children's Hospital.

2. Move Project Chance headquarters into a new facility.
3. Find sources of sustainable income for families living outside the 5 county endowment area (Nassau, Duval, St. Johns, Clay, and Baker).

4. Increase number of schools using our therapy dogs.

4.0 Founder/Director Biography

Project Chance is a fully volunteer organization dedicated to providing service dogs to children with special needs.

Founder/Director BJ Szwedzinski has been professionally training dogs since 1978, with an impressive resume spanning the dog industry. Her spectrum of knowledge encompasses a wide array of disciplines and is drawn from her work as a humane society educational program administrator, her hands-on duties in animal control management and operations, as well as her expertise as a professional trainer and animal behaviorist.

She is also a credentialed special education teacher in varying categories of mental health disorders, dually diagnosed disability, autism, gifted, and bipolar disorder. Her diversity in educating special needs kids correlated nicely with her behavior training style for dogs.

During her tenure as a teacher, she would bring a dog into the classroom and she noticed the natural peace that prevailed over the classroom. The idea of pairing children and dogs together to affect positive, personal behavioral change was germinated then and has been with her since 1991. That concept was the impetus for the formation of Project Chance.

In 2006, BJ started the pilot program of training dogs to help children with autism. After two successful years, the program went full-time in 2008.

Our Board



BJ Szwedzinski, President & Founder

Originating in 2008 with a litter of puppies from our beloved golden retriever named Poe, seven years later we have a total of 36 dogs. Thirty-one of our golden retrievers are paired with kids with autism between the ages of 4 to 19 and five are classroom facilitators in ASD classrooms around Florida and southeast Georgia.

BJ is passionate about making a difference in kids with disabilities lives by integrating service dogs into everyday living. She is an advocate in the community for service dogs and families with kids with disabilities. BJ and Project Chance have been featured in local print and television media. BJ has worked alongside many local and regional non-profit agencies to further advocacy for children and their families, focusing mainly on accessibility to resources and integration into the communities in which these kids live.



KCJ Szwedzinski, Executive Director and Co-Founder

After graduating from the University of North Florida, KCJ worked alongside biomedical autism pediatrician Dr. Julie Buckley as a home school proctor, service dog trainer and autism life skills coach to her daughter Dani and Dani's service dog Flux. While working in this unique environment KCJ was able to integrate her knowledge of autism's behavioral presentation with a newly learned medical understanding. With this dual comprehension KCJ has

been able to better serve the autism community with how a service dog can best be used in a family.



Nikki Szwedzinski, Secretary and Developmental Director

Nikki spent 15 years in corporate training and development positions with large companies such as Blackberry and Google. These positions offered her the opportunity to travel as well as hone her skills in working with people with different learning styles and abilities. She recently relocated from Austin, TX, to pursue her Masters in Special Education. Nikki is passionate about volunteering, especially programs that enhance the quality of life for individuals with disabilities. This has led to a passion for facilitated communication and plans to become a lead trainer. During this school year she is working as a teacher in a

Special Education classroom for children at the primary level as well as volunteering with Project Chance.



Susan Sinor, *Business Manager*

Before retiring, Sue worked in the defense industry for almost 30 years. Her experience included both engineering tasks and program management. Her experience also includes over 14 years as a high school teacher. She is both a volunteer and a member of the Board of Directors for Project Chance. As part of her volunteer activities, she started writing books about the 'red vest service dogs' to help families better understand

and enjoy their new four-legged family member. She and her husband, Buddy, live in Fernandina Beach, FL, with their dog, 2 cats, and a variety of rotating Project Chance puppies.



Joy Mack

Joy received her Bachelor's degree in Communication Disorders from Auburn University and her MS in Speech-Language Pathology from the University of Montevallo. Joy has spent 28 years serving children as a Speech-Language Pathologist in Duval County Schools. Currently she is a diagnostician with DCPS' Pre-kindergarten Disabilities office. Joy is a member of the pet therapy team at Wolfson Children's Hospital. She has also served on pet therapy teams at Community Hospice of NE Florida and Beaches Baptist Hospital. Joy is a proud 'mama' to three Golden

Retrievers; George (a therapy dog at Wolfson Children's Hospital), Truman and Thule (a Project CHANCE Autism Assistance Dog and also a therapy dog at Wolfson Children's Hospital).



Deanne Miller, *Operations Instructor*

Deanne Miller starting working with dogs in the early 2000's as a veterinary technician. While working her way through college she made the decision to leave a corporate life to fulfil her dream of training guide dogs for visually impaired people at Leader Dogs for the Blind in Rochester, MI. Later she went on to train dogs for people with hearing and mobility issues. She then had the opportunity to travel and work overseas. Upon her return to the US she trained various types of assistance

and guide dogs. As she was searching for the right position for herself, she emailed various organizations to inquire about their autism program and was fortunate to find BJ and Project Chance. She has since moved to Florida with her two labs, Daisy and Sparrow.



Eileen Metz, *Volunteer Coordinator*

Eileen recently retired from a rewarding career as a dental office manager in Vermont. Eileen was responsible for overseeing all aspects of the office: managing office personnel; scheduling; inventory management, and; ensuring high quality patient care. Eileen held an equally demanding full time position as wife and mother. During their time in Vermont, Eileen and her husband raised two wonderful children and five golden retrievers. It's Eileen's dedication to her children and her love of Goldens which led her to Project Chance.



Nancy Hickman

Nancy Hickman is a native of Murray, Kentucky. She graduated with a BS from Murray State University in 1967. She became an employee of Girl Scouts of Shagbark Council in Southern Illinois shortly after graduation. Her entire career was spent there until she retired on December 31, 1999. She served in the position of executive director for the last 18 years of her 33 years there. She obtained certification in Nonprofit Management from the Mandel Center for Nonprofit Organizations from Case Western Reserve University. She joined Project Chance as a volunteer in 2007. Apple is one of the Poe Puppies and lives with Nancy in Fernandina Beach.

The Cost of a Project Chance Dog

Project Chance assistance dogs are raised, trained, coached, transported in public venues, and loved with thousands of accumulated volunteer hours. In order to prepare a dog for placement, we utilize the help of volunteers, private donors, corporate sponsors, and families. Project Chance values the donors committed to help support our training, and we respect the commitment shown by a family acquiring a service dog.



We have 2 different opportunities for obtaining a Project Chance assistance dog:

1) Endowment Area: For families living in Nassau, Duval, Baker, St. Johns, and Clay Counties: An endowment, graciously provided by Ms. Eleanor Blanchard, provides scholarships for families living in these five counties. In addition, scholarships are also available for ASD teachers who teach in these five counties. The endowment covers all but \$2,500 of the cost of an assistance dog, which the receiving families or schools are required to pay.

2) Non-Endowment Area: For families and teachers outside this five county area, we charge \$12,500 per dog. It costs Project Chance over \$20,500 to obtain and train an assistance dog. We assume that we will receive donations and grants for each dog of \$8,000, which reduces the cost of a dog to \$12,500 for the receiving family or school. A breakdown of this cost is shown below.

	Per 14 mo's
Boarding	\$ 10,500
Training	\$ 3,939
Dog Food	
Grooming	
Purchase of Puppy	\$ 1,500
Crate, Harness, Vests & Other Supplies	\$ 600
Kennel weekend care & Puppy Training (3rd party)	\$ 1,601
Kennel vacation care (3rd party)	\$ 1,027
Veterinary Care	\$ 1,500
Totals	\$ 20,666