

## Report on the first European Meeting 2000

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### Introduction

The First Annual Conference of European Assistance Dogs Organisations was held on the first three days of October 2000 in the Netherlands. 24 People of 12 organisations from 7 different European countries participated at this meeting. In an informal atmosphere the meeting started on Sunday-afternoon the 1<sup>st</sup> of October, to give every attendee the opportunity to get acquainted to the others and to introduce their own organisation in quiet and relaxed setting. The organisation Soho in Herpen was so kind to host this first encounter in their friendly home-institute in the southern part of the Netherlands. All the organisations introduced themselves shortly, gave an overview how they are working until now and about what they have already accomplished and which problems they still face.

It is very clear that all organisations have the same goal: to provide persons with a disability with a well-raised, well-trained dog that can perform several tasks for its owner, can help them to gain more self-esteem and can act as a social ice-breaker.

The ways to reach this goal are essentially the same for all organisations.

Puppies are bought, or being bred in breeding-programs, mostly Golden and Labrador Retrievers, or a mix of them. The puppies stay with foster families for one or one and half year. During this foster time the foster family will be provided with support and instructions on a regular basis by professional trainers. After this foster year the dog goes back to the institute where it is prepared to be a real service dog. Most organisations invite their clients for a training-session of several weeks at their institute to instruct them theoretically and practically to handle the service dog, and to match them with a partner dog. The clients have to file an application, and when they get a dog, it is free of charge.

All organisations are sponsored by business or private donations, and work with big groups of volunteers. All organisations are growing, because there is a big demand.

Some of the differences are among others:

- Hunde für Handicaps in Germany emphasises education of the dogs by the owners themselves, when the handicap allows to do this;
- SAM in the Netherlands instructs their clients at home in their own surrounding;
- several organisations also provide dogs to children;
- several organisations can provide hearing-, therapy or alert dogs as well;
- some organisations are already rather big and have a good size professional staff; others are very small and have only one (or not even one) paid employee.

The present organisations have been operating now from 3 to as much as 15 years and have built up quite some knowledge and experience, but things can always improve.

The organisations all encounter to a greater or lesser extent the same kind of problems and difficulties, and want to accomplish the same goals.

“Dogs for the Blinds” is already a well-known phenomenon in western society, with all the advantages connected to this position; the attendees want to reach the same:

- acceptance and recognition in society;
- admittance to public buildings, shops, stores, hospitals and the like;
- being a welfare facility;
- grants from local, national and international governments.

Some information concerning these points:

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- In Italy for example there is still a very poor acceptance and recognition; disabled persons are there still “poor things” more or less, and are not yet “allowed” to be independent;
- in Germany admittance to public buildings can give problems;
- in England “Dogs for the Disabled” has already a charity number for a long time and as a result they have received an important grant with which they could build a brand new training-centre;
- in the Netherlands “Hulphond Nederland” (condition was co-operation of three Dutch organisation) just has started to receive governmental funding;
- in Austria two counties already give financial support.

All organisations are working hard to establish the goals mentioned above. We think that when we combine our efforts and exchange knowledge, we can help each other to achieve the things we want. We can work harder and more efficiently, and we can gain a better profile. This will help us to reach our goals quicker and better without losing our own identity.

### A European Assistance Dog Organisation

There was an animated discussion concerning a European Assistance Dog Organisation. The goal that all organisations share is, to provide clients with well-trained dogs. The dog is the product.

There are some differences in point of view, but it is helpful for us all to put aside differences and focus on similarities.

The attendees at the meeting considered what they could gain by co-operation on a European basis.

It should be easier or possible to:

- get social recognition by society and government;
- remove all kinds of frontiers;
- describe legal rights for clients and organisations;
- get financial support from sponsors
- private and business sponsors
- governmental funding
- trans-national funding via EC;
- exchange experience and knowledge about training techniques and attitude to
- puppies
- clients
- foster-families
- trainers
- exchange dogs
- exchange personnel
- start a European breeding-program
- start a European trainings school to educate trainers
- exchange ideas about management
- make standards for
  - dogs
  - training centres
  - trainers
- and control these standards.

Should the organisation generalise, all kind of assistance dogs, or specialise, only service dogs? Or be a European branch of Assistance Dog International, US?

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### Other Issues

- A European-wide P.R. can make things different;
- accessibility of buildings should improve in all countries;
- money is always the issue, so good ideas for proposals towards governments should be made; the bulk of the funding has to come from the member states themselves, European funding can help to establish a European network or organisation;
- new methods are not necessarily better, but reflecting upon it and exchanging experience and knowledge always leads to improvement;
- exchange of trainers can lead to better training techniques and to more self esteem;
- exchange of dogs can lead to a better product for the client;
- with standards and qualification you can guarantee better results, better service, consistently high quality for our clients;
- Helen McCain read a letter from Assistance Dog International; they wish us good luck and hope we will co-operate with them in future.

### TO BE DONE

Every representative at the meeting will defend the idea of collaboration at her or his organisation;

- every representative will send a statement of support to one of the contact persons before the end of the year 2000 (preferable);
- go on with the discussion, because then the money for coming to the meeting of 1-2-3 October 2000 is well spent;
- a yearly meeting seems realisable; every organisation has to send a representative or at least someone from the same country who can represent their organisation; in this scope it is important to look how we can support small organisations to enable them to send representatives;
- frequent communication by e-mail to stimulate the exchange;
- discuss all the different ideas of interest concerning training, organisation, etc;
- get together working groups that should survey training techniques, how to get funding from Brussels, how to set standards for dogs and for training centres, etc;
- make a choice what the European colours for the Service Dog will be! Blue and Yellow or Yellow and Blue!
- work together for better P.R.;
- use all possible resources in your organisation; volunteers, clients, employees, they all have talents, and will get recognition for that as well;
- make a survey of structures and working methods of all organisations;
- the contact persons will communicate the outcome of all answers and inquests to all participating organisations.

### Contact persons

- Helen McCain, Dogs for the Disabled, UK
- Debra Buttram, AIUCA, Italy
- Elma Burg, The Netherlands