

telegram.com

September 30, 2025

UVPM: 237,006

[Link](#)

Want to help raise the next generation of service dogs? NEADS needs volunteers



Sarah Barnacle

Worcester Telegram & Gazette

Sept. 30, 2025 | Updated Oct. 1, 2025, 10:44 a.m. ET



Kate Albertini, director of breeding & puppy development at NEADS, holds Blue in the center's puppy recreation room. *Allan Jung/Telegram & Gazette*

BRIDGEPORT, CT — The next generation of service dogs is being raised in a room full of toys and a window looking out onto a green landscape. Kate Albertini, director of breeding & puppy development at NEADS, holds Blue in the center's puppy recreation room. *Allan Jung/Telegram & Gazette*

PRINCETON — They might be cute and uncoordinated now, but this group of puppies is gearing up to become extraordinary service animals with skills to provide independence for those with physical disabilities or auditory impediments, to support individuals with autism or other developmental disabilities, and to assist professionals in hospitals, classrooms and more.

"To be a service dog, an individual dog has to be pretty top-notch, so just like in people, not every person is an Olympian, not every dog is cut out to be a service dog," said Kate Albertini, director of breeding and puppy development at NEADS.

Established in 1976, NEADS Inc. was formerly known as National Education for Assistance Dog Services, and Dogs for Deaf and Disabled Americans. It has trained more than 1,900 service-dog teams.

Students at Holliston Junior College first confirmed dogs could be trained to be the "ears" for people who are deaf or suffer from hearing loss. By 1987, the program had trained more than 400 hearing-dog teams and began training the first service dog on the East Coast.

By a decade later, NEADS had purchased 18 acres in Princeton and established the Prison PUP Program, which places service dogs in training into correctional centers across the region.

Before being placed, the dogs typically stay with volunteer full-time puppy raisers until they are anywhere from 12 to 16 months old.



A puppy in training takes a rare brake in the puppy recreation room. *Allan Jung/Telegram & Gazette*

"It's a very intense volunteer responsibility," said NEADS marketing director Audrey Trieschman of the puppy raisers, adding the organization is in desperate need of more volunteers. "The more puppy raisers we have, the more dogs we can put into the program, the more people we can help."

"We need someone who has time to raise a dog in their household, they need to be able to attend weekly classes, then biweekly, then once a month," said Albertini. "Also they'll take the dog places to socialize, like libraries, coffee shops, grocery stores. And this is all done under the guidance of NEADS staff and puppy-raising mentors."

These puppies will need to be introduced to a wide variety of obstacles and experiences during their training, including being exposed to traffic, alarms and other loud situations, sets of stairs and even different kinds of weather.

"Things like going outside in the grass in the morning are brand-new for these puppies, and essentially it builds from there," Albertini said. "We need to get the puppy to feel comfortable being outside when a car drives by to, at the end of their training, being comfortable walking into Logan Airport, with crowds of people around, noises over the loudspeakers, suitcases rolling by."

Volunteers come in all shapes, sizes and ages, as Meghan Witt, Assumption University student and volunteer puppy-raiser, is proving.

"Puppy raising with NEADS was by far the peak of my college experience," Witt said. She cared for Robert, an 8-month-old, while living at the school last year.

As a residential adviser on campus, Witt said it is a struggle to get people to come out of their rooms and get off their devices, but when the yellow Lab moved in, the hallway was often full of visitors to see Robert and Witt.



Supervisor of Retail & Community Fundraising Hannah Kump, right, and Creative Media Specialist Lori Barrett, with perpetual employee of the month Cash, 9., at work in the NEADS retail store. *Allan Jung/Telegram & Gazette*

"Once Robert came, a lot more of them came to speak to me about their days and came to me when they had problems," she said. "Robert created this strong sense of community in my dorm, which extended to beyond campus."

This semester, Witt is training a new puppy, Nutmeg, and Robert has moved on to the next step in his training with more difficult commands.

"Robert and Nutmeg's personalities are night and day," Witt said. "Robert was an extremely chill boy and often did not need a lot of free time to tire him out. Nutmeg on the other hand adores his toys and zoomies during free time."

Witt also said this time around has been a bit easier as she is more confident in the commands, and more people on campus "know how to act around a service dog."

In 2010, NEADS established the first-ever partnership with a prison that is solely dedicated to training service dogs for the deaf community.

"The dogs stay with the incarcerated individual during the week," said Trieschman, adding that volunteers outside the correctional system pick up the dogs every weekend and take them out into the world.

In fact, 95% of puppies are trained by incarcerated individuals, housed at five correctional facilities in Massachusetts and one in Rhode Island.

Not every dog is successful in the program, with about 50% of the dogs dropping out.

"If a dog is released from the training program, they get 'released' and they are adopted out," said Albertini, who had two dogs of her own. "They may be adopted by volunteers who were involved in raising the dogs or staff, or they can also be adopted out to the general public."

The dogs that are successful in the program go on to be matched with NEADS clients across the country.

"We match dogs with a variety of clients. We have hearing loss, or people who are deaf, we have clients with physical disabilities, veterans with PTSD, children with autism," Albertini said. "Then we also have a class of dogs called facility dogs, and these are dogs that are paired with professionals, either in a classroom, courthouse, hospital or therapy setting."

Since 2010, the campus in Princeton has expanded to house the Kathy Foreman Client House and Training Center, which welcomes prospective clients to "move in" for a couple of weeks, to get to know an animal and its abilities. Inside the facility, buttons of all shapes and sizes decorate doorways to mimic public settings, ropes hang from refrigerator doors, and furniture sits askew, all for training purposes.



Yellow is the one golden lab born to a mittle of black lab puppies at NEADS. Allan Jung/Telegram & Gazette

The organization also built a new state-of-the-art canine center and a breeding center, and is constructing a new veterinary facility.

The walls have gone up at the future site of the Richard Murray Veterinary Clinic and Early Learning Center, which will provide on-site veterinary services and a surgical suite instead of outsourcing some of the care, including emergency situations such as cesarean sections.

Inside the [NEADS retail store](#), Lori Barrett has been designing T-shirts for the organization for nearly a decade. Despite being a self-described "cat person," Barrett said it's easy to come up with ideas, adding "inspiration is all around," as she knods to Cash, the store's 10-year-old black Lab.

"He's been our longest-running employee of the month," said Hannah Kump, the supervisor of retail and community fundraising, with a chuckle.

Barrett, Kump and Cash can be found in the shop Monday through Friday, among the beautiful T-shirts, sweatshirts, dog toys and the best-seller, a service dog stuffy complete with training vest. All of the store's proceeds go directly to the organization in the hopes they'll remain for another 40 years to help raise these incredible animals.

