

Getting a lift with D-Uber

Helping Paws in Eden Prairie offers a pickup service for those who can't take service dogs to training.



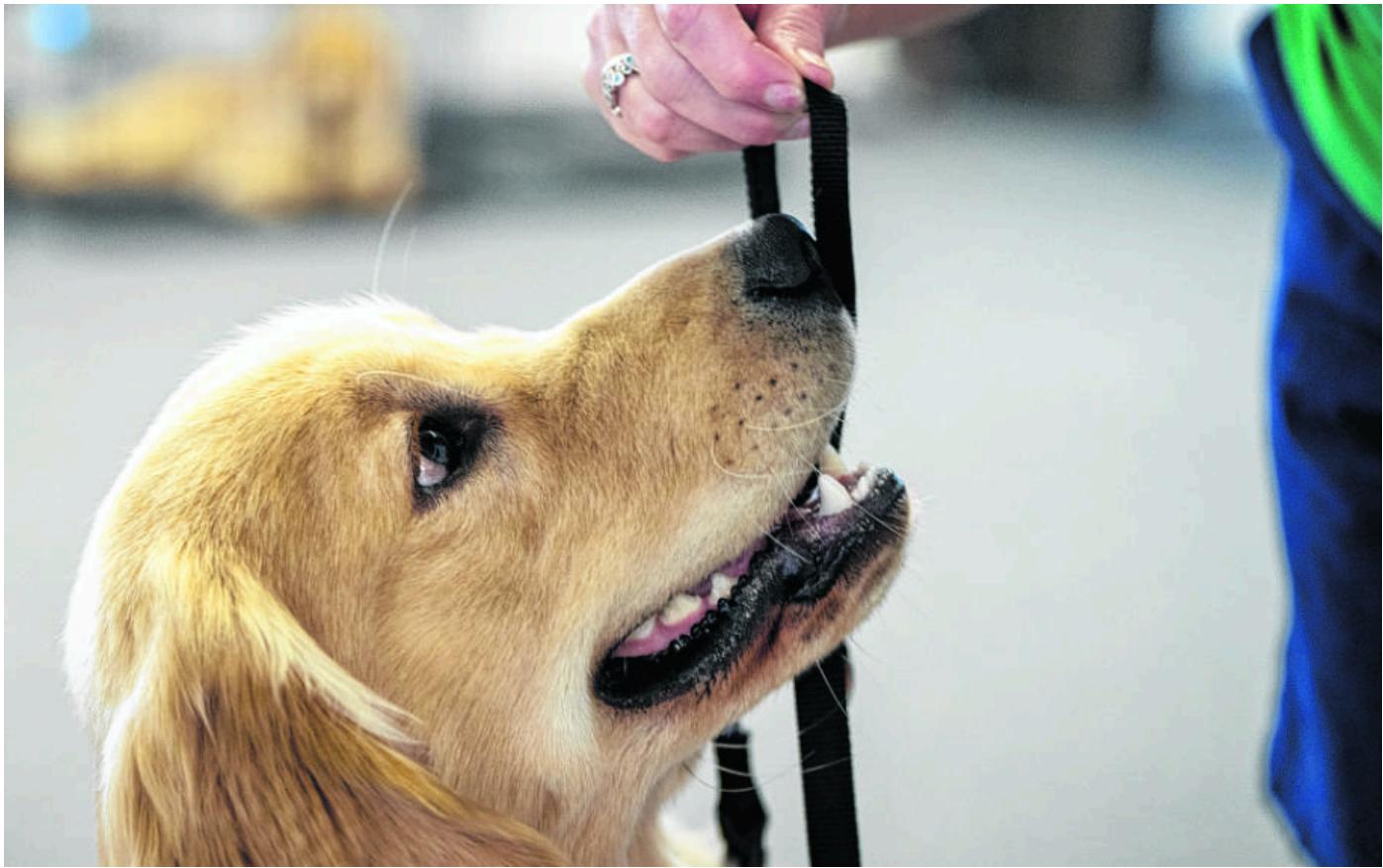
RIDING IN STYLE: Assistance-dogs-in-training Bowie, left, and Akiro are transported in the “D-Uber” van by volunteer driver Jordy Stradtman .



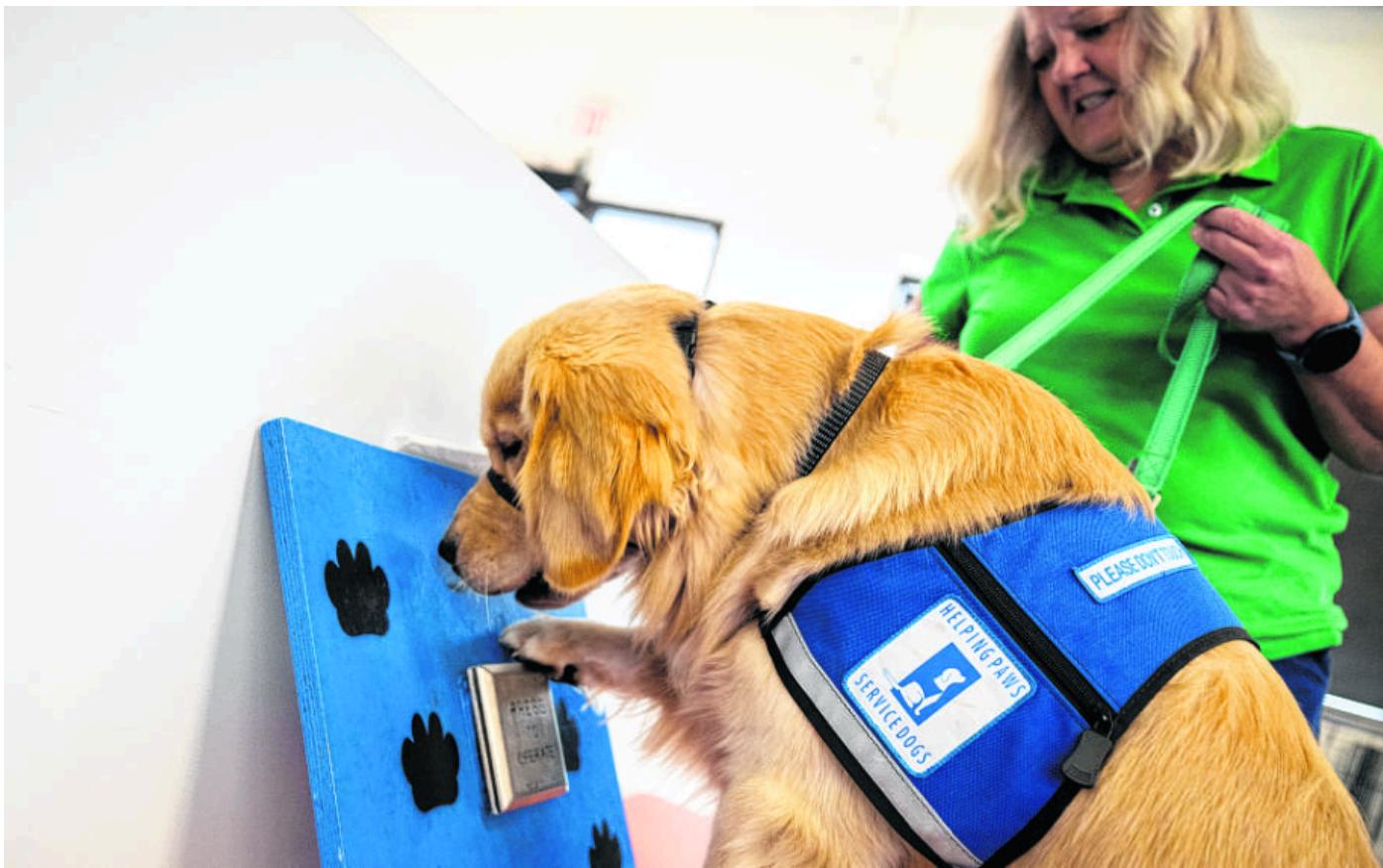
The van drives assistance dogs from host homes to their Blue Coat Academy classes.



Jordy Stradtman drops off Ace at the Herman Puppy Enrichment Center at Helping Paws headquarters in Eden Prairie, while Apollo trains with instructor Kristie Niemi.



Jordy Stradtman drops off Ace at the Herman Puppy Enrichment Center at Helping Paws headquarters in Eden Prairie, while Apollo trains with instructor Kristie Niemi.



Jordy Stradtman drops off Ace at the Herman Puppy Enrichment Center at Helping Paws headquarters in Eden Prairie, while Apollo trains with instructor Kristie Niemi.

BY ALEXIS LETANG • FOR THE MINNESOTA STAR TRIBUNE

Every day a volunteer for Helping Paws wakes up early and becomes an Uber driver for some of the cutest and most helpful clients ever — service dogs in training.

Helping Paws breeds, trains and places assistance dogs. The nonprofit began placing dogs in host homes in June as part of its “Four Paws Forward” campaign, and now offers dog Ubers or “D-Uber” (pronounced doober) for volunteers who can’t take their host dogs to training.

One of those D-Uber passengers is Bea, a spunky 9-month-old golden retriever, hosted by Lynn Walker.

In the morning, Walker feeds Bea, walks her and then goes to work. She said having her host dog in training is similar to having a preschooler.

“You drop the dog off, or the dog gets picked up,” Walker said. “They spend the entire day with the expert trainers, and then I get to pick up Bea and take her home after work.”

D-Uber picks up Bea three times during the week for her classes. The other two weekdays, Walker works from home so Bea can move around instead of being inside a kennel.

“And then the weekends are for playtime,” Walker said.

People like Walker who only host don’t have to attend training, unlike dog training volunteers.

“It was important for us to expand our program to include this new host home that would allow folks that might have limited financial means or time or kids or any type of limitations that would hinder them from training a dog to become this host home,” said Jonathan Kramer, Helping Paws marketing manager.

D-Uber relies on volunteers to coordinate, pick up, buckle up and drive the dogs to training at Blue Coat Academy for their classes. Right now, one van helps 10 host families get their dogs to and from training.

Kramer said depending on the day, two to 10 dogs need to be shuttled. With a four-dog capacity in the van, volunteers sometimes take several trips to get the dogs to training by 10 a.m.

While at Blue Coat Academy, dogs learn tricks and skills, also referred to as cues, that will help them once they are placed with someone.

“The onus of the training is really primarily with the expert trainers at Helping Paws, which alleviates a lot of stress,” Walker said, who was initially worried about her ability to properly train a dog to be able to graduate.

The training does not stop at a host home’s front porch. Walker said people who choose to host a dog have to commit to one day of training to learn what

the dogs learn, so the skills can be reinforced at home. Separation of work and play is indicated to the dogs by blue service dog packs.

“When they are wearing their blue packs, their service dog packs, they know they’re working, or they’re training,” Kramer said.

“And when they take those packs off, they get to be dogs. They get to have fun.”

As more litters of puppies are born through Helping Paws, the need for host homes will increase, Kramer said, and having more host homes means dogs can be trained more quickly and placed with people who need them.

Helping Paws has a two- to three-year waiting list for those requesting a service dog.

“That’s for individuals with physical disabilities, that’s veterans with servicelated PTSD, that’s therapists or school social workers that want to have facility dogs,” Kramer said.

The dogs live in their host homes for about 2½ years, until they graduate from training. Walker said people have asked how she can give up a dog she’s hosted, but she realizes she is part of helping someone who needs a service dog to have a better life.

The goal is to have many D-Ubers, Kramer said, but that depends on how many people want to become host homes.

“I would love to have a fleet of white vans driving around the Twin Cities with a service dog [in] the back of it,” he said.

Alexis.letang@startribune.com