



BLOG

A New Path for Helping Hooves

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“Small yet mighty.” That is how some horse lovers describe miniature horses. Minis were bred around the world over the centuries to be smaller yet still have the positive attributes of a horse. Miniature horses tend to be hardy animals with a gentle spirit.



Jett

Miniature horses are not new to West Virginia. At one time, these animals were used to pull heavy carts in the coal mines of the Mountain State. More recently, some have worked in Equine Assisted Therapy. Minis are too small to ride, so Equine Assisted Therapy gives people a chance to handle, brush, pet and bond with these horses.

Now, these helping hooves are shaping a new path. Some miniature horses are being trained to provide an alternative to service dogs for people with disabilities. Miniature horses tend to have a long life span and a natural guide instinct. For a person with a disability who is thinking about getting a service animal to help perform tasks, these can be important factors to

consider. Tasks may include things like guiding a person who has low or no vision, helping steady a person who has with trouble walking or pushing a button to get help in an emergency.



*Trainer
Dolores Arste*

“Imagine the possibilities,” says Dolores Arste. Arste is an experienced breeder, handler and trainer of dogs and horses from Middle Grove, New York. She recently presented a training in West Virginia about how a miniature horse can be a good alternative to using a dog as a service animal.

West Virginia, training a miniature horse may be a good choice for assisting farmers with disabilities. This is because a farmer or rancher would likely already have plenty of land, a barn and hay to provide a positive environment where the horse will be well cared for.

Figuring out how to train a miniature horse for service can raise a lot of questions. Arste was invited to share her knowledge at a free workshop sponsored by the non-profit organization, Partnerships in Assistive TecHnologieS (PATHS). PATHS is “dedicated to increasing awareness about and access to assistive technology (AT)”. The audience included trainers, therapists, breeders, ADA professionals, members of the disability community and the general public. Attendees were pleased to have a chance to meet a local miniature horse named Jett. The event was held on October 18, 2014 at Holly Gray Park in Sutton, WV.

Regina Mayolo of West Virginia Assistive Technology System (WVATS) hosted the event. Mayolo talked about how the topic of the workshop reflected a shift in regulations about service animals under the Americans in Disabilities Act (ADA). In 2010, the Department of Justice (DOJ) revised its regulations for Titles II and III of the ADA. Title II covers state and local government services and Title III covers public accommodations and commercial facilities.

Under DOJ's ADA regulations, a service animal is defined as a dog "that is individually trained to do work or perform tasks for a person with a disability". DOJ also includes a new, separate provision for miniature horses that have been individually trained to do work or perform tasks for people with disabilities. The revisions took effect on March 15, 2011. Click [here](#) to access DOJ's fact sheet on Service Animals.

According to PATHS, "The specific inclusion of miniature horses presents an opportunity for the establishment of new industries in agricultural states like West Virginia. But before this can happen, we need more information and education."

Arste was happy to provide information. She shared her experiences in training a miniature horse named Cali to work with her owner, Mona Ramouni. Ramouni, who was born blind, lives in Dearborn, Michigan. With Mona and Cali, training took about nine months — though Arste noted that each case is different.

One important behavior Cali needed to learn about was "intelligent disobedience". This is a kind of a "Black Beauty moment" when a horse chooses not to obey a command that

would put the owner in danger. For example, Cali would choose not to walk forward when an obstacle was in Mona's way or a car was coming.

Arste explained to the audience how she uses clicker training, a method focusing on positive reinforcement, to train horses. "A click is a marker to say a food reward is coming," said Arste. "Clicker training is kind of a nice conversation between a horse and the person."

Click [here](#) to read more about Dolores Arste and her method of training miniature horses.

To learn more, call [WVATS](#) at 800-841-8436.

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