



UPDATE

LEADERDOG.ORG | ISSUE 2 | 2025

LEADER DOGS FOR THE BLIND



Partnerships—Stronger Together

Finding Freedom—A Journey from Spain to Leader Dog

Sharing Knowledge, Advancing Programs Worldwide

MESSAGE FROM THE PRESIDENT



Dear Friends,

This issue of Update celebrates the many collaborations and partnerships that make the Leader Dog mission possible. Each one is a testament to the scope and reach of the Leader Dog community.

The Leader Dog story began with a partnership as we were founded by members of Lions Clubs International. The support of Lions clubs continues to be a cornerstone of the mission and Lions are deeply woven into the fabric of the organization to this day.

We have longstanding relationships with universities like Oakland University, where dedicated students serve as puppy raisers and give Future Leader Dogs vital experiences on their path to becoming highly trained guide dogs. For over 20 years we have partnered with the Department of Corrections in three states where people who are incarcerated raise Leader Dog puppies. These partnerships are built on trust, purpose, and mutual growth.

This fall we were honored to host the joint board meeting of the International Guide Dog Federation and Assistance Dogs International on the Leader Dog campus. We are a proud member of the international guide dog and service dog community and partner closely to share new methodologies and best practices. We're honored to collaborate with organizations like the International Working Dog Registry, whose global standards and data systems help us deliver the highest quality guide dog services. And when a Leader Dog's path shifts, our alternative career partnerships ensure that these incredible dogs continue to make a difference, whether in therapy, search and rescue, or other service roles.

We partner with agencies serving people who are blind nationwide to reach new clients and support the blindness and low vision community. Our alumni board enables us to build connections and community with clients around the world. We invite you to explore and learn about the many partnerships that support the Leader Dog mission in the pages of this issue.

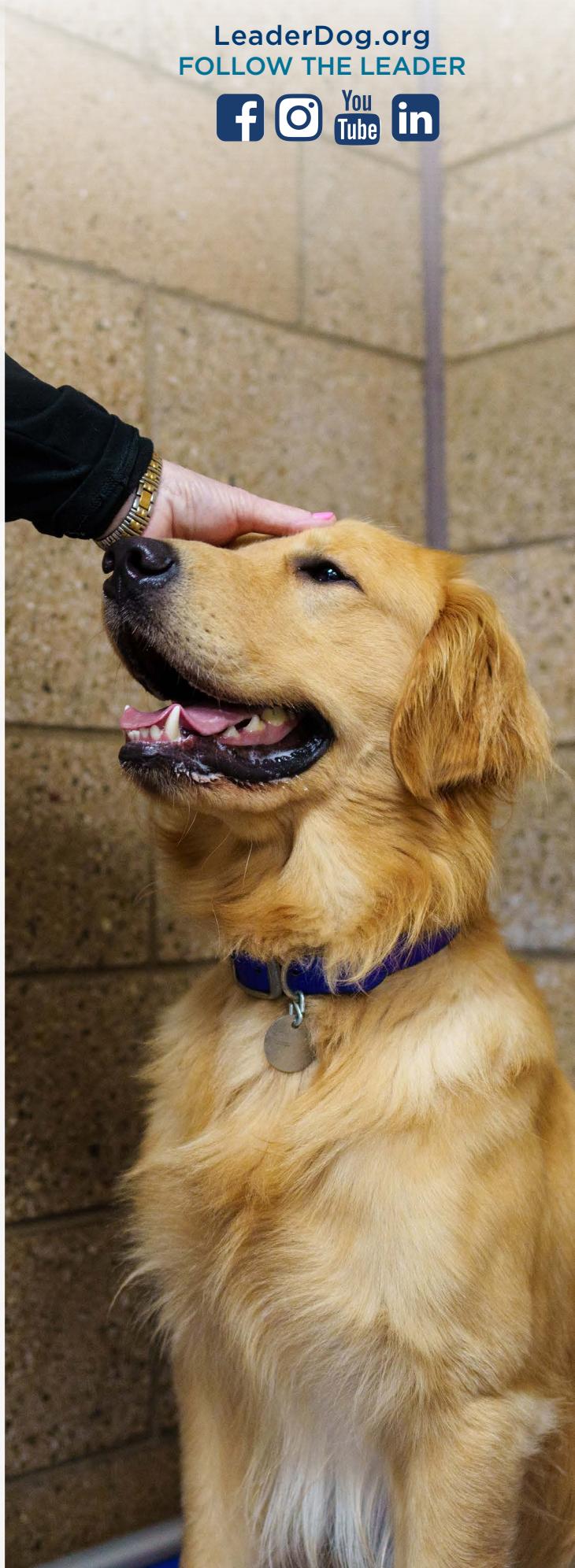
Together, we are stronger. Thank you for being part of this journey with us.

With gratitude,

Melissa Weisse
President & CEO

Cover photo (L to R) - Nichols, Itxaso, and MacKenzie's parents, Ronald and Lynnette Nichols, at an event where puppy raisers meet the client who received the dog they raised.

LeaderDog.org
FOLLOW THE LEADER



Finding Freedom—A Journey from Spain to Leader Dog



CLIENT SPOTLIGHT

For Itxaso, a 25-year-old from Madrid, Spain, running has always been her escape—a way to set aside her worries and feel completely free. Born with a rare eye condition that led to complete vision loss by age 12, she learned to navigate her world with determination and independence, relying on a cane to get around. Still, she longed for that same sense of freedom in every part of her life. When she received her first guide dog through the partnership between Leader Dogs for the Blind and ONCE—Spain's national organization supporting people who are blind or visually impaired—that wish became reality.

"I was filled with joy and excitement when I learned I would be receiving a guide dog," Itxaso recalls. Traveling to Leader Dog's campus was both thrilling and a little nerve-wracking. "The day I met Benelli was one of the best days of my life," she says. "I remember feeling an instant connection, as if we had known each other forever."

Over three weeks of intensive instruction, Itxaso and Benelli (who she's nicknamed "Beny") learned to work together as a team. "Before, navigating around café terraces, construction sites, or cars blocking crossings was truly challenging," she explains. "Now, Beny handles all of that for me, allowing me to move with much more ease and speed."

Beny, full of energy and enthusiasm, quickly adapted to her pace and has become not only a capable guide but a loyal companion. One cherished memory is taking Beny to the beach last summer, tossing his toy into the waves as he swam to retrieve it. "Watching him enjoy himself brings me immense joy," she says.

Reflecting on her experience, Itxaso emphasizes the dedication behind her guide dog's training and the importance of the partnership that made it possible. "The Leader Dog team is professional, attentive, and committed to quality. I am grateful for this opportunity and for the collaboration with ONCE," she says. "Beny has changed my life—he's not just my guide, but my eyes, my companion, and a constant source of happiness."

CLASS PHOTO OF ITXASO WITH LD BENELLI (TOP) AND AT THE BEACH (BOTTOM) IN SPAIN. ►





Big shoutout to everyone at Leader Dogs for the Blind for turning me from “mildly lost” into a professional cane-wielding, guide-dog-handling navigation ninja. Special thanks to my O&M instructor—personal GPS, and part-time comedian—who expertly “misplaced” me in the middle of nowhere on purpose, then told me to find my way back like it was a casual Tuesday. She made me walk more than a marathon. I demanded pineapple rewards and received... life lessons instead. I would not change anything!!

Thanks for the laughs, the guidance (literal and figurative), and for helping me launch into this new journey—no detours, just good company.

Leader Dog—you are classic and perfection. My experience was on every level off the charts! Thank you to the entire team at Leader, I can’t wait to continue my journey!

To the resident assistants, the kitchen crew, the volunteers, instructors, the doggies and everyone in between. Thank you will never be enough to encapsulate what this past week meant and did for me.

Ana M.

Letter from a client to all those puppy raisers who spent time and effort to raise a Future Leader Dog and the dog was career changed:

As a client and obvious recipient of a Leader Dog, I am forever grateful for the support and dedication of our puppy raisers. You all hold a special place in my heart. Puppy raising is the foundation for so many clients' ability to gain our independence.

Whether the puppy becomes a Leader Dog, chooses another career, or becomes a pet, the only thing that matters is that you tried. You did what was needed. You loved and cared for the puppy like he was your own, taught him the skills he needed to begin the process of learning to be a guide dog, and provided him the love and care that he deserves.

Thank you for trying. We need more people to just try. Just trying is more than so many people are willing to do. So again, thank you for trying to give someone their life-changing dog.

Joey J. and LD Tucker

A thank you message to puppy raisers.



My daughter Ellen was diagnosed with Retinitis Pigmentosa at age 10. We were never given any specific numbers in terms of degrees of vision and never told how close she was to being legally blind. So, we moved forward as if Ellen was fully sighted.

After a doctor at University of Michigan informed us Ellen was legally blind, we sought services at Leader Dog since we lived locally and were familiar. An exceptional O&M specialist at Leader came to us for a couple days for some intensive training. After the pandemic, Ellen attended full O&M training on campus and enjoyed meeting other people who were having similar experiences.

After taking a job as a graphic designer in North Carolina, Ellen immediately applied for a guide dog at Leader. We were delighted when she received approval quickly—and a match! This led to some tough conversations with her employer, as they were not aware of her RP. It was a great opportunity to educate her employers in accessible design.

Having a guide dog has been life-changing for all of us. Ellen and Leader Dog Windom confidently travel in Washington DC where they attend Georgetown Law. Ellen and I have many opportunities to educate others about the spectrum of low vision, guide dog etiquette and Leader Dog.

Leader Dog has provided Ellen with the skills and means to travel independently. The opportunities to connect with others who are experiencing low vision have been just as impactful. We both look forward to supporting Leader Dog in the future!

Kristin H.



Back in August, I took a trip of a lifetime with my family, on a Mediterranean cruise! We started off in Rome for a few days, then set sail to Greece, Malta and Italy.

Earlier this year, I took a huge leap, put my pride aside and went for cane training at Leader Dog—staying five days on Leader's campus, learning how to use a cane indoors, on busy streets and in neighborhoods.

This was the BEST thing I've ever done in my life. I was very hesitant for many years because I was in denial. I thought I can get around on my own or depend on people to help me. I got tired of doing that... it wasn't fair to me or the other person I'm with.

Ever since I've done cane training, I feel more confident and liberated. People have a better understanding because they can see I'm visually impaired. Some people are helpful and respectful.

Using a cane had many advantages—I didn't wait in any lines, whenever airport staff or cruise staff would see me with my cane they did everything they could to help me make my travels easier.

I'm not saying it's an easy thing to do; you'll get there when you're ready. But once you do, it is the best feeling EVER!!

Rose S.

Oakland University Partnership: Learning and Serving Together



For over a decade, Oakland University and Leader Dogs for the Blind have collaborated to provide students with hands-on learning experiences while supporting life-changing services for people who are blind or low vision. From raising puppies to developing innovative solutions and advocacy programs, the partnership continues to grow, strengthening both student learning and Leader Dog's mission.



Real-World Learning

The Future Leader Dogs at Oakland University student group was founded in 2019 through the combined efforts of The Honors College and Leader Dog. The club's mission is twofold: raise puppies for Leader Dog and educate the campus community about the importance of guide dogs and inclusivity for people who are blind or low vision.

"During my time at OU, I raised four Future Leader Dogs," says Mackenzie Reese Nichols, an Honors College graduate and former president of Future Leader Dogs at OU. "The ability to travel safely and independently is something I've taken for granted in my life, and I wanted to ensure that this ability was available for other people, including students, around the world."

The student group has grown steadily, now boasting 272 members, including puppy raisers and trained campus "buddies" who step in to care for the dogs when needed. Since its inception, OU students have helped raise 30 puppies. While about a third of these puppies go on to become Leader Dogs, all of them benefit from structured care and socialization, laying the foundation for future service or adoption into loving homes.

Beyond caring for the puppies, students engage the campus community through awareness campaigns, presentations, and volunteer events that educate peers about accessibility, inclusion and the guide dog program. These activities allow them to put leadership and organizational skills into practice while fostering a culture of empathy and service. They also provide practical experience that strengthens resumes and prepares students for future careers and civic engagement.

Honors College Leadership

The Honors College has played a pivotal role in sustaining and enhancing the partnership between OU and Leader Dog. Under the leadership of Dean Graeme Harper, Ph.D., and with support from senior administrators, the college has facilitated on-campus housing for puppies, coordinated educational initiatives, and encouraged student involvement across programs.

"The Honors College-Leader Dog partnership shows what OU students can do as responsible and empathetic citizens," said Dr. Harper. "It brings academic learning to life, while supporting an organization that empowers people who are blind or visually impaired."

Through the Honors College, students gain structured mentorship, opportunities to apply academic concepts to real-world challenges, and guidance that strengthens both their personal growth and the effectiveness of Leader Dog programs. This combination of academic support and practical experience ensures that students' contributions have lasting impact while deepening their understanding of community service.





Applying Skills to Strengthen Leader Dog

The OU partnership has taken other innovative turns. The School of Engineering and Computer Science has partnered with Leader Dog on senior design projects, creating solutions that improve the care and transportation of puppies. Students designed puppy transport units (pictured top right) to maintain safe temperatures for young puppies, as well as surgical tables and navigational tools for our veterinary clinic.

The Pawley Lean Institute also partners with Leader Dog through its Community Service Internship program. Student teams apply lean management principles to improve organizational processes, such as developing user-friendly puppy raising applications, implementing efficient cart systems for our veterinary team (pictured bottom right), and enhancing workflow in the veterinary clinic. These student-led projects have led to tangible improvements in daily operations.

“Projects from the Pawley Lean Institute have provided valuable improvements to our processes and service delivery,” said Melissa Weisse, President and CEO of Leader Dogs for the Blind. “It has been a rewarding collaboration with lasting impact, and the students gain real-world experience while contributing to meaningful change.”

A Lasting Connection

The partnership extends beyond current students. Many OU alumni have joined Leader Dog’s staff or serve on the Board of Trustees, bringing their experience and values to support the organization’s mission.

“Leader Dogs for the Blind and Oakland University have built a strong, enduring partnership grounded in shared values of service, education and inclusion,” said Leader Dog President and CEO Melissa Weisse.

This lasting connection demonstrates how combining expertise and commitment can create meaningful, long-term impact for both students and the people Leader Dog serves.

Continuing the Journey

Leader Dog and Oakland University continue to expand this longstanding collaboration. By combining expertise and a commitment to service, the partnership strengthens both student learning and Leader Dog’s ability to empower people with skills for safe and independent daily travel—a true example of being stronger together.



Mackenzie & Benelli

One of the puppies Mackenzie Reese Nichols (pictured left) raised, Benelli, was matched with Client Itxaso (pictured right) who traveled to LDB from Spain for our Guide Dog program, illustrating the global reach of Leader Dog’s programs and the lasting impact of student puppy raisers.

Leader Dogs for the Blind is proud to partner with leading international organizations that share our commitment to excellence in serving individuals who are blind or have low vision. By sharing data and expertise, these relationships strengthen both Leader Dog, and the global community of professionals dedicated to this work.

Through the Association for Education and Rehabilitation of the Blind and Visually Impaired Accreditation Council (AERAC), Leader Dog upholds internationally recognized standards of excellence. Our organization as a whole—and specifically our Orientation and Mobility (O&M) program—are accredited by AERAC, meeting or exceeding its rigorous standards. In addition, Leader Dog is approved by the Academy for Certification of Vision Rehabilitation and Education Professionals (ACVREP) as an RPPE Category 1 Continuing Education Provider for our Blind Rehabilitation Professionals Virtual Learning Series and O&M Professional Seminar.

Leader Dog's Certified Orientation and Mobility Specialists (COMS) are also individual AER members, contributing to the advancement of best practices across the field. For its work in vision rehabilitation, Leader is an Organizational Member of VisionServe Alliance.

Leader's global collaborations also extend to partnerships that advance service dog programs. The International Working Dog Registry (IWDR) enables organizations around the world to share and access data related to canine genetics, health and breeding outcomes. Participation in this registry provides Leader with valuable insights to maintain the health and genetic diversity of our breeding colony, while also contributing data that strengthens the service dog industry.

As a member of the International Guide Dog Federation (IGDF), Leader Dog aligns with global standards for guide dog programs and participates in initiatives that advance best practices across the field.

Through collaboration with Assistance Dogs International (ADI), Leader Dog also engages with organizations serving people with a wide range of disabilities. This exchange of expertise supports high operational standards, comprehensive client screening and the ethical treatment of dogs.

Together, these partnerships strengthen every aspect of Leader Dog's work—from visual rehabilitation and orientation and mobility programming to canine health and breeding. By sharing knowledge worldwide, we help improve practices, advance professional standards and inspire innovations that create better outcomes for the clients we serve.

BOARD DIRECTORS FROM IGDF AND ADI HELD THEIR ANNUAL JOINT BOARD MEETING AT LEADER DOG IN OCTOBER 2025.



Not every dog trained at Leader Dogs for the Blind becomes a guide—but their journey of service doesn't end there. Through a powerful partnership with CARE House of Oakland County, the Canine Advocacy Program (CAP) gives our career changed dogs a new and equally meaningful mission—comforting children who have experienced abuse or neglect.

Before becoming advocate dogs, those recommended for an alternative career by the Leader Dog team complete a thorough behavior and temperament evaluation to ensure they're well-suited for the sensitive work of victim advocacy. Dogs selected for this kind of work are comfortable in novel environments, calm when interacting with children, well-mannered in public, and comfortable settling for long periods of time in a court room.

CAP places these dogs in child advocacy centers, courthouses, and prosecutor's offices across Michigan and Ohio. There, they provide emotional support to young victims as they navigate the legal system—a time that can often feel intimidating or frightening. This partnership is a testament to the many ways dogs can bring healing and hope. By offering comfort during interviews, court hearings, and other difficult moments, these dogs help children feel safer and more supported.

Leader Dogs for the Blind and the Canine Advocacy Program show that a change in career doesn't mean a change in purpose. Together, we're helping dogs and children move forward—one step at a time.

If you would like to learn more about our partnership with the Canine Advocacy Program, or any of the other partners who receive our career changed dogs, please contact Megan Jones at Megan.Jones@leaderdog.org.



If you are enjoying this issue and would like to support Leader Dog, you can make an online donation and make even more people unstoppable TODAY by clicking below.

DONATE NOW





After more than a decade, Puppy Day made a joyful return to Leader Dogs for the Blind on September 20, 2025—a day devoted to celebrating the volunteers who open their hearts and homes to raise Future Leader Dogs or host breeding stock dogs. Nearly 300 guests filled our campus with laughter, wagging tails, and a shared love of the mission that brings us all together.

Guests enjoyed breakfast, inspiring client speakers, educational sessions and plenty of fun—from puppy art and a sensory trail to tours of the canine development center and frozen treats from the Kona Ice truck. Every detail was designed to honor the dedication of those who nurture and care for Leader Dog puppies, moms and dads.

“Puppy Day is our chance to say a heartfelt thank you,” said Vijay Joshi, manager of raiser and host experience. “Our volunteers make everything we do possible, and it was incredible to celebrate them—and the many paid and volunteer team members who helped bring this special day to life.”

Because of dedicated volunteers, more people with vision loss will experience the independence and confidence that come from a Leader Dog partnership—a truly life-changing impact worth celebrating every day.



SIMPLE WAYS TO MAKE A BIG IMPACT



Leaving a donation to Leader Dogs for the Blind in your will or trust is a simple but impactful way to support the work we do and ensure our future. Another way to make a lasting difference is to designate Leader Dog as a beneficiary of your retirement plan, IRA, life insurance or donor-advised fund.

To find out more about donating these types of assets or joining our Legacy Society, please contact Amy Bush, director of planned giving, at 248.650.7108 or Amy.Bush@leaderdog.org.

NEW LEGACY SOCIETY MEMBERS

Anonymous (2)

Mark & Ann Brady

Mary Jo & Clarke Maxson



Since 2002, Leader Dogs for the Blind has partnered with correctional facilities to train Future Leader Dogs. The initiative began with four facilities and has grown to include 10 facilities across three states—Michigan, Minnesota and Ohio—including one recently added in Grafton, Ohio and three others in Ohio interested in onboarding. Puppies are placed with carefully screened inmates who demonstrate model behavior, giving them 24/7 care for 5-13 months while learning basic cues, socialization and essential skills. Monthly training sessions, volunteer puppy counselors and detailed manuals provide ongoing support, while Leader Dog covers all expenses for food, veterinary care and supplies.

The initiative benefits everyone involved. Puppies boost morale, reduce tensions, and improve social interactions, while participants develop patience, compassion and a renewed sense of purpose. Inmate puppy raisers can even opt to take a Dog Care Professional Course through their Leader Dog counselor—a course with homework and testing, that they can get certified through and use once paroled. Hundreds of puppies have successfully graduated and gone on to serve individuals who are blind or visually impaired.

“I have learned that despite the pain and guilt I carry, I can make a positive difference,” one raiser shared. “The dogs we care for lift us above negativity, give us purpose beyond the correctional facility and help improve the lives of the people they will serve.”

Another participant added, “It gives me a purpose beyond these walls where I can make a helpful impact on others.”

Through the growth of this initiative, Leader Dog enriches its mission and the lives of participants, their communities and the clients who rely on these dogs.

Current Correctional Facility Partners:

- G. Robert Cotton CF (Jackson, MI)
- Oaks CF (Manistee, MI)
- Macomb CF (New Haven, MI)
- Richard A. Handlon (Ionia, MI)
- Ionia CF (Ionia, MI)
- Marquette Branch Prison (Marquette, MI)
- Bellamy Creek CF (Ionia, MI)
- Chippewa CF (Kincheloe, MI)
- Lino Lakes CF (Lino Lakes, MN)
- Grafton Correction Institution (Grafton, OH)





Leader Dogs for the Blind is proud to announce the launch of our new Alumni Board, an exciting step in strengthening connections within our client community. The 11-member board was created to give graduates a meaningful role in shaping the future of Leader Dog programs—fostering leadership, engagement and community among alumni.

Building on the dedication of the Voices of the Client Advisory Team (VOCAT), the inaugural board reflects the diversity of our clients across geography, programs, age, gender and ethnicity. Its purpose is to provide a platform for alumni to share insights, advise on initiatives, and support community engagement, helping ensure that our programs continue to meet the needs of those we serve.



Pictured (L to R): Stuart, Juanita & Jeff

Over time, the Alumni Board will grow and evolve through a client-led process, with the potential to expand into regional chapters. These chapters will create additional opportunities for connection, leadership, and advocacy, strengthening bonds among graduates and deepening the impact of the Leader Dog community.

This board marks an exciting new chapter in our commitment to client involvement. By empowering alumni to take an active role, we celebrate the spirit of service, leadership and community that defines Leader Dogs for the Blind.

ALUMNI BOARD MEMBERS

- Juanita Lillie, Board Chair, Michigan
- Jeff Hawkins, Vice Chair, Michigan
- Stuart McGregor, Secretary, Ontario, Canada
- Krista Webb, Texas
- Rita Harris, Georgia
- Andi Horstkotte, Tennessee
- Teresa Arroyo-Llosa, Ontario, Canada
- Enrique Marroquin, Texas
- Kelly Lemke, Minnesota
- Elizabeth Fryseth, Wisconsin
- Joey Johnson, Georgia



MISSION MOMENT

“My time at Leader Dog was very informative and we learned a lot. I’ve always had good experiences coming to Leader. Freedom is what I will have with Leader Dog Obi.”

~Dave W.



Leader Dogs for the Blind thrives through collaboration with businesses that share our belief in empowering people who are blind or visually impaired. Our corporate partners make it possible to provide the full range of Leader Dog programs, services, fundraising efforts, and outreach events that strengthen our community and expand our impact. We're proud to recognize some of our leading corporate partners whose generosity fuels our mission every day.

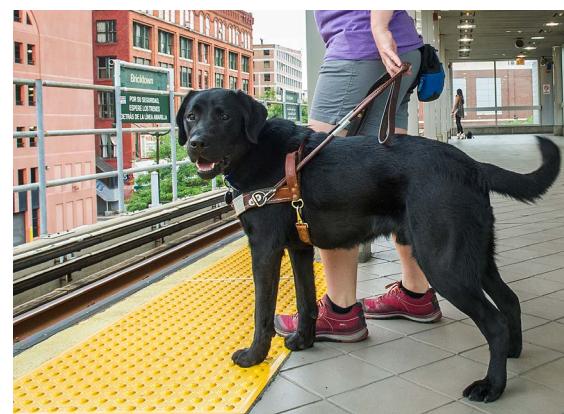
Nestlé Purina Pro Plan

For more than 20 years, Purina has supported Leader Dog through generous donations of Pro Plan® and Pro Plan Veterinary Diets®, providing the exceptional nutrition our dogs need to stay healthy and strong throughout their training. Beyond in-kind support, Purina's financial contributions have enhanced training programs and funded key facility upgrades—helping prepare every future Leader Dog for success.



Coastal Pet Products

Since 2008, Coastal Pet Products has supported Leader Dog through its Good Works Program, aligning perfectly with the company's commitment to causes that matter to pet lovers. Coastal provides the high-quality leather used to craft every Leader Dog harness, along with essential pet care products. Employees even host their own Bark & Brew 5K in Ohio, raising funds and awareness to complement the Rochester event.



Tevra Brands

As the official flea and tick preventive partner of Leader Dog, Tevra Brands keeps every dog in our breeding, raising, and training programs healthy and parasite-free with vet-quality TevraPet® products. Their team's commitment goes beyond product donations—Tevra employees have also volunteered as puppy raisers, including caring for "Nellie," a Future Leader Dog who began her journey with a Tevra family.



Chief Financial Credit Union

Chief Financial Credit Union, our first official credit union partner, turns everyday purchases into lasting impact. Through its branded credit card program, Chief matches reward points with donations, creating steady, monthly support for Leader Dog's guide dog placements and client services—all while engaging their members in giving back.

We're grateful for these companies and the impact their corporate support makes possible.



To learn more about sponsorship and partnership opportunities, or to collaborate with Leader Dog, please contact our philanthropy team.



OUTREACH IN ACTION

Leader Dogs for the Blind is proud to partner with a broad network of professionals, agencies, and organizations across the blindness and low vision community—including state blindness rehabilitation agencies, nonprofit organizations, Veterans Affairs (VA) programs, medical providers, and universities. Together, we share knowledge, resources, and expertise to strengthen client recruitment, education, and service delivery. These partnerships are not only essential but mutually enriching—ensuring that each client we serve receives the most comprehensive, personalized support possible.

Beyond direct client services, Leader Dog is also committed to empowering both individuals who are blind or visually impaired and the professionals who support them. We offer a range of free resources on orientation and mobility (O&M), professional development seminars, and virtual learning opportunities that foster skill-building, confidence, and independence.

Every connection helps us move closer to a world where people who are blind or visually impaired can live and travel safely, confidently, and independently. If you know of an organization that could benefit from learning more about Leader Dogs for the Blind's free services, please contact Leslie Hoskins, outreach services & community engagement manager, at Leslie.Hoskins@leaderdog.org.



TAX-WISE GIVING: SMART STRATEGIES FOR YEAR END

Supporting Leader Dogs for the Blind can be both impactful and financially savvy when you use tax-wise giving strategies. Donating assets like IRA distributions, appreciated stock and cryptocurrency can offer significant tax advantages while maximizing your charitable impact.

One powerful gift is the Qualified Charitable Distribution (QCD). If you're 70½ or older, you can donate up to \$100,000 annually from your individual retirement account (IRA) directly to Leader Dogs for the Blind. These gifts can count toward your Required Minimum Distribution (RMD) but are excluded from your taxable income, making them a highly tax-efficient way to give.

Appreciated stock gifts are another strategic giving option. By donating stock that has increased in value (held for more than one year), you reduce capital gains tax and may receive a charitable deduction. This allows you to give more without increasing your out-of-pocket costs.

Similarly, donating cryptocurrency (such as Bitcoin) can offer the same benefits. If held for over a year, crypto gifts allow donors to bypass capital gains taxes and still claim a deduction for the asset's fair market value.

These tax-wise gifts not only reduce your tax burden but also provide meaningful support to Leader Dogs for the Blind and the clients we serve. Be sure to consult your financial advisor to determine the best approach based on your unique tax situation.

Learn more about tax-wise giving strategies today. Contact Amy Bush, director of planned giving, at Amy.Bush@leaderdog.org or 248.650.7108 or scan the QR code.

Thank you for helping lead the way to independence.



Lions Gather for Summer Visits



LIONS CLUB CONNECTION

IN EVERY LEADER DOG LIES THE HEART OF A LION—A Leader Dog partner since 1939.

This summer, Lions from across the United States and Canada gathered on our campus for the annual Lions Summer Visits. A tradition since the 1960s, this event celebrates the deep connection between Lions clubs and Leader Dogs for the Blind while showcasing the impact of our shared mission.

Among those attending were members of Leader Dog's Top Dog Clubs, whose generosity sustains our programs year after year, and Vice District Governors eager to experience firsthand the life-changing work supported by Lions across North America.

Guests heard inspiring stories from Leader Dog clients, including Walker Jones, Joey Johnson, Kayla Penzone and BJ Blahnik. Each shared how their Leader Dogs have restored independence, mobility and confidence in everyday life—painting a vivid picture of the impact Lions and our donors make every day.

“My visit to Leader Dogs for the Blind in Rochester Hills was truly unforgettable. From walking with a white cane and being guided by a Leader Dog to experiencing Dinner in the Dark, I gained a deeper understanding of the challenges people with vision impairments face—and the extraordinary independence these dogs help restore. Touring the Polk Residence and the canine development center, and hearing directly from clients about how their Leader Dogs have transformed not only their lives, but their families’ lives was incredibly moving. Knowing that these services are offered at no cost, and funded entirely through philanthropy, makes me even more proud that Lions support this organization. I’m deeply grateful to Lion Kelsey, Lion Jess, Lion Claudia, Lion Joey and Leader Dog Tucker, Lion Walker and Leader Dog Loki, and the entire Leader Dog team for opening their doors and their hearts to me this weekend,” said 8N Vice District Governor Toni Hardy of Louisiana.

During Summer Visits, Lions try on ocular glasses simulating different eye conditions; experience blindfold walks with dogs or utilizing a white cane; learn human guide techniques; tour our canine development center and Polk Residence where the clients stay, and so much more. Beyond the activities, Summer Visits offered time for fellowship, laughter, and shared pride. Lions connected with one another, celebrated their accomplishments, and looked ahead with excitement to the future of this extraordinary partnership.

For more than six decades, Lions Summer Visits have been a joyful reminder of what's possible when Lions and Leader Dog work together. This year was no exception—it was a celebration of service, generosity, and lives forever changed.





LEADER DOGS FOR THE BLIND®

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SAVE THE DATE

Leader Dog hosts several events annually. We would love to see you there!
Please save the dates for some of our featured events.

November 24, 2025

Light Up Leader Dog

Leader Dog Downtown Training Facility
323 Walnut Blvd, Rochester



January 18, 2026

Frozen Paw 5K

Downtown Rochester



March 20, 2026

Dinner in the Dark

Palazzo Grande
54660 Van Dyke Ave, Shelby Twp.



June 7, 2026

Bark & Brew

Rochester Mills Beer Co.
400 Water St, Rochester



To register for an event, or for additional information, please visit LeaderDog.org/events, scan the QR code to the right or contact Stephen Moran, special events manager at 248.659.5046.

