

Faithful FRIENDS



February 2026

News for you, a friend and supporter of Leader Dogs for the Blind

Expanding Orientation & Mobility Instruction in 2026



We are excited to share that Leader Dogs for the Blind will be expanding our Orientation and Mobility (O&M) program in 2026! This growth reflects our continued commitment to helping people who are blind or have low vision travel with confidence and independence.

One of the greatest strengths — and challenges — of O&M instruction is its highly individualized nature. Each client begins by setting personal goals, and instruction evolves throughout the training weeks to meet those goals in real-world settings. Lessons span indoor, outdoor and unfamiliar environments, from campus pathways to busy city streets. Each setting requires thoughtful, tailored strategies to ensure clients are prepared for safe, independent travel wherever life takes them.



Technology is also becoming an increasingly important part of mobility training. Clients learn to use GPS apps and emerging AI-enhanced tools alongside foundational skills such as interpreting sensory cues and applying white cane techniques that are customized to their needs.

Leader Dog's O&M program supports people at all stages of travel independence, including specialized programs for teens. This expanded approach allows us to reach more individuals and empower them earlier in their journeys.

As we look ahead to 2026, Leader Dog's expanded O&M program will continue to address a vital national need. Your support helps make this life-changing instruction possible — thank you for being part of our mission.



Different Cane Tips

The long white cane is an essential mobility tool that helps people who are blind or visually impaired navigate their surroundings safely. Often considered an extension of the user's body, the cane provides information about the environment as it sweeps back and forth with each step.

Cane tips vary in both shape and material, and each serves a different purpose. Common options include the pencil tip, which works well for touch techniques — where the cane is lifted and tapped once on each side — and rolling tips, such as the marshmallow or ball tip. Rolling tips are ideal for constant contact, allowing the cane tip to glide smoothly over a variety of surfaces. Specialized tips, like ceramic tips, offer enhanced tactile feedback, while options such as the jumbo roller or "Supaball" tip are designed for rough terrain or extended distances.

As Leader Dog expands our Orientation and Mobility (O&M) program in 2026, tools like these will help even more clients travel with safety, confidence and independence.



INSIDE this Issue:

Message from the President
Page 2

Raleigh Host Lions Club's Support
Page 2

Services for DeafBlind Clients
Page 3

New Alumni Board
Page 3

Cryptocurrency Gifts
Page 4



1039 S. Rochester Road
Rochester Hills, MI 48307
LeaderDog.org

Vision

Every person who is blind or visually impaired travels safely and independently.

Mission

Empowering people who are blind or visually impaired with lifelong skills for safe and independent daily travel.

Values

- Do what is right
- Show respect and compassion
- Demonstrate passion for the work
- Deliver a superior experience
- Work as a team
- Seek innovation
- Practice safety



Message from the President

Dear Faithful Friends,

As we step into a new year filled with promise and purpose, I'm thrilled to share exciting developments at Leader Dogs for the Blind that reflect our unwavering commitment to serving people who are blind or have low vision.



I am extremely proud to introduce our newly formed Alumni Board; a dynamic group of Leader Dog clients who will help shape the future of our services. Their lived experiences and insights are invaluable as we continue to evolve and innovate. The Alumni Board will serve as a vital bridge between our organization and the community we serve, ensuring that our programs remain responsive, relevant and deeply impactful.

We're also shining a spotlight on two of our most transformative offerings: Orientation & Mobility and Adaptive Services. These programs are often the first steps toward independence for many of our clients. Whether someone is learning to navigate with a white cane or has specific requirements that require an instructor with a specific skill set such as American Sign Language, these services lay the foundation for confident travel and daily living. They are a testament to our belief that independence begins long before a guide dog is placed, and that every journey deserves support.

Your generosity makes all of this possible. Because of you, we continue to provide these life-changing services at no cost to our clients. Thank you for being a faithful friend to Leader Dog and to the thousands of individuals whose lives are forever changed through your support.

With heartfelt gratitude,

Melissa L. Weisse
President and CEO
Leader Dogs for the Blind



Championing Independence: Raleigh Host Lions Club's Support

Lion Claudia Gregory, Manager of Lions Engagement — Eastern U.S., had the pleasure of joining the Raleigh Host Lions Club in North Carolina for their October meeting, giving a presentation on our programs and how Lions partner with Leader Dog. After the presentation, Club President, Lion Harry Dixon; Past Club President, Lion Bill Whitley; and Club Treasurer Mike Lord, presented Claudia with a generous \$10,000 donation.

For three consecutive years, the Raleigh Host Lions have been among our strongest partners in North Carolina — earning Top Dog Club honors year after year. Thank you, Raleigh Host Lions — your commitment to our mission is inspirational!

If your Lions Club is interested in learning more about becoming a Top Dog Club, please contact the Lions Team at LionsSupport@LeaderDog.org



From the left: Current president, Lion Harry Dixon; Past Club President Bill Whitley; Claudia; and Club Treasurer Mike Lord.

The Incredible Services Available to DeafBlind Clients

Leader Dogs for the Blind is one of only two guide dog organizations in the United States able to place guide dogs with clients who have combined vision and hearing loss. Through our DeafBlind and Adaptive Services (DBAS) team, we provide specialized instruction — including direct training in American Sign Language (ASL) — to support these unique partnerships.

Leader Dogs matched with clients who have dual sensory loss meet the same rigorous standards as all guide dog placements. Depending on individual needs, some Leader Dogs receive additional training, such as responding to hand signals, targeting Accessible Pedestrian Signals or alerting to doorbells or knocks. This customized approach helps clients travel safely and confidently.

When a client has both vision and hearing loss, clear communication and strong environmental awareness are essential for Leader Dog teams. While a hearing client may notice the sound of jingling tags as a sign of distraction, a DeafBlind client relies on subtle changes in movement or context. Familiarity with travel environments helps clients anticipate challenges, support their Leader Dog and maintain safe, confident travel.

Guide Dog Mobility Instructors on the DBAS team complete extensive training and, when instructing in ASL, demonstrate fluency in the language. Their expertise, combined with an understanding of Deaf culture, ensures each client receives the support needed to build a strong, successful Leader Dog team.

MISSION MOMENT

“One of my favorite memories of training with Winter was the first time she saw me signing. I was on FaceTime and when she saw my hands flying around, she started wagging her tail excitedly and tilting her head back and forth.”



Chelsea, a Guide Dog Mobility Instructor, with Winter



Pictured from left to right: Stuart McGregor, Juanita Lillie and Jeff Hawkins

Introducing the Alumni Board!

We're proud to introduce something special that's rooted in community, connection and progress — the launch of our very first Leader Dog Alumni Board!

Made up of 12 remarkable graduates from our programs, the Alumni Board represents a wide range of backgrounds, life experiences and voices from across our client community. This group was formed to strengthen relationships between alumni and the Leader Dog organization to ensure the services we offer remain inclusive, empowering and responsive to real-life needs.

These passionate volunteers are more than board members, they are advocates, mentors and ambassadors.

A heartfelt welcome to the board's leadership team:

- **Juanita Lillie**, Chair
- **Jeff Hawkins**, Vice Chair
- **Stuart McGregor**, Secretary

The Alumni Board is a powerful new initiative designed to foster a connected community among Leader Dog graduates. It offers meaningful opportunities for mentoring, networking and advocacy, creating pathways for alumni to support one another and stay actively engaged in our mission. By strengthening ties between clients, this board will help build a lasting sense of belonging and shared purpose, while also extending connections to our broader network of volunteers, donors and staff.

We're incredibly honored to celebrate this milestone with you and pay tribute to the graduates who are stepping up to serve. Their dedication and vision reflect the values of Leader Dog, and we couldn't be more excited about what lies ahead.



WE HEARD FROM YOU!

Here are your responses to the survey we sent out last June.

7% Have low vision

Know someone with low vision 33%

70% Have a pet at home

Have a Dog 33%

21% Have a Cat

Have Cats and Dogs 13%

49% Interested in a campus tour



Taking the Lead Podcast

Tune in to Taking the Lead every other Thursday. Our podcast welcomes guests from the blindness community who share stories, experiences and so much more! You can find Taking the Lead wherever you stream podcasts, on our website at LeaderDog.org/resources/#podcast or by scanning the QR code.



Give a Gift of Cryptocurrency

A Message from Jeff Stein,
Director of Personal Giving

I want to take a moment to express our gratitude for your unwavering support. Your commitment helps us provide vital programs and services to people who are blind or have low vision, empowering them to live independently and confidently.



We're excited to announce that Leader Dogs for the Blind now accepts donations of Ethereum, Bitcoin and other cryptocurrencies! This new option, along with gifts of appreciated stock, grants from donor advised funds (DAFs) and qualified charitable distributions (QCDs) from an IRA, offers you a more "tax-smart" way to support the Leader Dog mission.

Your contributions — whether in cash, stock, crypto or through your DAF — directly enable clients to receive our services for free.

Support Leader Dogs for the Blind today by giving crypto. And thank you for being a part of our community. Together, we can continue to transform lives.

freewill.com/smartgiving/leaderdog

Giving Your Way

► **Designate a DAF Gift** - Don't forget to designate your DAF gift and consider making it recurring. Create a lasting impact by naming Leader Dogs for the Blind as a full or partial beneficiary of your DAF today.

► **Give a Gift of Stock** - Consider making a gift of stock this year. Why? Because stock gifts can help make people unstoppable while also providing tax benefits to you. Donate stocks directly to Leader Dog in about five minutes.

► **Give a Gift from Your IRA** - A Qualified Charitable Distribution (QCD) is a tax-efficient way for those 70 1/2 or older to give from their IRA.

More Ways to Give - To explore the many giving options available to you to support Leader Dogs for the Blind, please visit LeaderDog.org/ways-to-give or scan the QR code.



Have questions? Contact our philanthropy department at 888-777-5332, 248-651-9011 or donorsupport@leaderdog.org.

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