

Larry Stigge – KSDS staff

This is Kansas Profile. I'm Ron Wilson, director of the Huck Boyd National Institute for Rural Development at Kansas State University.

Have you ever taken a dog to obedience training? It can be a wonderful experience. Today we'll learn about a remarkable service which trains assistance dogs to learn obedience and much, much more. At the highest level, they might even learn intelligent dis-obedience. It's today's Kansas Profile.

Larry Stigge is CEO of KSDS Inc., formerly known as Kansas Specialty Dog Service, in Washington, Kansas. KSDS Inc. is a non-profit, charitable organization which prepares dogs to help people with disabilities so that those people can have independence and inclusion in their community and society.

The service began 21 years ago. It remains true to its original purpose of providing dogs to assist people with disabilities. KSDS is the only facility in Kansas accredited by Assistance Dogs International.

Specifically, KSDS offers guide dogs to help the visually impaired, service dogs to help those who are physically impaired, and social dogs which are utilized in medical, educational, or professional settings. KSDS trains the dogs and then pairs them with people with disabilities. Amazingly, this service is free to the recipients.

"This is a gift to someone who needs a service dog," Larry Stigge said. "It's a testament to the supporters we have across the country." KSDS is its own 501c3 organization so it can receive charitable donations. It also has excellent partners such as Hill's Pet Foods, which provides dog food for life, and Kansas State University Veterinary Hospital.

But what is most touching is seeing the huge difference which an assistance dog can make in the day-to-day life of a person with a disability. This might be someone who has had spinal injuries, multiple sclerosis, or a stroke. It's remarkable how much the dogs can understand and help.

For example, one visually impaired man in an eastern Kansas community operates two cafeterias. His dog helps take him to the bank and navigate through grocery stores. The dog will even guide his hand to the key opening on a vending machine.

Another dog helps his partner pull her clean laundry out of the dryer. The dog will even help the woman tug her socks off her feet at the end of the day. Hmm, I wonder if I could teach my dog to do that.

The training of these KSDS dogs is just remarkable. It's one thing for a dog to lead a person around a puddle of water, for example, but these dogs can even be trained to watch out for a tree branch four feet above their heads, or an icy patch in front of the dog's partner.

Then there is the concept of intelligent disobedience. It is one of the highest levels of training for guide dogs. This is where the dog will disobey the instructions of its owner in order to protect its master. For example, a dog will learn to refuse to cross the street, even when told to do so, if cars are coming. These dogs can literally be lifesavers.

In its first year, KSDS graduated three trained assistance dogs. Today, 21 years later, KSDS has placed 462 dogs in both rural and urban settings in 32 states. Wow. One of its most recent placements was with a person in the nearby rural community of Palmer, population 106 people. Now, that's rural.

KSDS continues to expand, most recently with an ADA-accessible housing addition in which recipients can live while they are training. KSDS receives support in various ways. Some groups have

hosted fundraisers for KSDS, some people donate directly, and others donate supplies. One group of ladies makes blankets to send with the puppies.

“We’re very thankful for the support we’ve received and we’re looking for more, to expand our programs and help more people,” Larry Stigge said. For more information, go to www.ksds.org.

Have you ever taken a dog to obedience training? It’s wonderful to see a dog learn to obey, but it’s even more impressive to see a dog protect its master through intelligent disobedience. We salute Larry Stigge and all those involved with Kansas Specialty Dog Service. These dogs are literally making a difference in the lives of those they serve.

For the Huck Boyd National Institute for Rural Development, this is Ron Wilson with Kansas Profile.