

About the Presenter

Mike Burkel is a dedicated dog trainer and service dog trainer with nearly 30 years of experience. Since 1997, he has specialized in training service dogs for mobility assistance, medical alert work, and customized tasks to support individuals with complex disabilities.

A retired law enforcement K9 handler/trainer, U.S. military veteran, and commercial pilot, Mike also served for seven years as a Registered Cardiovascular Invasive Specialist at the Mayo Clinic. This diverse background gives him a unique combination of discipline, medical knowledge, safety awareness, and hands-on expertise in developing reliable service dog teams.

Through his company, Mike Burkel Dogs, Mike has successfully placed service dogs in 42 states and 7 countries. He works extensively with individuals living with Charcot-Marie-Tooth disease (CMT), Diabetes, Dravet Syndrome, Multiple Sclerosis (MS), PTSD, and various mobility challenges. His training philosophy emphasizes positive reinforcement, realistic expectations, and long-term support for both the handler and the dog.

Mike is passionate about creating genuine, life-changing partnerships between people and their service dogs.

Dog Selection & Breed

What breed or temperament profile is the best fit for my specific CMT symptoms and lifestyle?

In my nearly 30 years of training service dogs, I've found that **English Labrador Retrievers** and **Standard Poodles** are often the strongest fits for individuals with CMT. English Labs typically have the calm, steady temperament, solid structure, and natural desire to work closely with their handler that CMT work requires. Standard Poodles offer excellent focus, intelligence, and a hypoallergenic coat, along with good physical resilience when properly bred.

I generally do not recommend Golden Retrievers or Doodles for CMT service work. While they can be wonderful pets, I've found they often have higher energy levels and can be more prone to distraction or joint issues that make consistent mobility and brace work more challenging. The most important factor is finding a dog with a calm, confident, and handler-focused temperament that matches your daily energy level and lifestyle.

How do I evaluate whether a dog I already own has the right temperament to be trained as a service dog?

The most important step is **honest observation** and this is where many people struggle. It's very common for owners to believe their dog is a great candidate while the dog is in the comfort of their own home. However, once I take that same dog into unfamiliar environments, busy public spaces, or new situations, many of them become anxious, distracted, or overwhelmed, essentially turning into a "basket case."

A good service dog candidate should naturally focus on you, remain calm and confident in new environments, and recover quickly from distractions or startling noises. They should also show a willingness to offer support when you use mobility aids. I strongly recommend having a professional trainer conduct a formal temperament evaluation in multiple real-world settings before investing significant time and money.

Be cautious not every "professional" evaluator is honest. Some may tell you what you want to hear in order to sell you training packages. Ask for references and observe how they test the dog.

What health clearances and genetic testing should I require from a breeder?

For mobility and medical alert service dogs, health testing is non-negotiable. I require OFA or PennHIP evaluations for hips and elbows, OFA cardiac clearance, CERF/OFA eye certification, and genetic testing for breed-specific issues. One reason I strongly prefer working with English Labrador Retrievers is the excellent health guarantee offered by the breeders I use. They are willing to exchange the dog anytime during training or within the first year of service, as long as the health issue was not caused by handler negligence. Remember in dog breeding, the phrase “you get what you paid for” often holds true.

At what age should training begin, and what's the ideal puppy developmental window?

I generally begin working with puppies at **8 weeks of age**. At this point, the puppy has already gone through two important developmental stages and is about to enter the second socialization phase.

The first 16 weeks (4 months) of a dog's life are incredibly powerful. Everything a puppy learns during this time is deeply imprinted and stays with them for life. While negative experiences can be retrained and improved, they are never completely forgotten. This is why high-quality, positive socialization and early foundation work are so critical.

I begin introducing basic task work during my **Foundations I, II, and III** training phases, which take place within the puppy's first 6 months. Some physical tasks (such as bracing, fall prevention, and cushioning) may be too advanced for their young bodies, so we focus on imprinting the correct motions, positions, and body awareness early. This way, when the dog is physically mature and strong enough, we can easily add the full behavior without having to correct bad habits later

Additional Consideration for Owner-Training Your Own Dog:

Before deciding to owner-train your current dog, honestly ask yourself: Do I have the time, patience, and ability to do this work consistently? Many of my clients use a hybrid training approach that works very well. I train the dog in certain advanced areas (especially public access and mobility tasks), while the client handles other sections at home using video guidance and training plans I provide. This can be a very effective and more affordable path.

Task Training

Which specific tasks are realistic to train based on my disability profile?

Every person with CMT has a unique set of challenges, so I always customize tasks to your specific needs rather than using a generic checklist.

For most CMT clients, the most helpful and realistic tasks include:

- Counterbalance and light bracing for stability when standing or walking
- Retrieving dropped items (keys, phone, gloves, etc.)
- Deep pressure therapy or grounding during fatigue or pain flares
- Momentum pull or forward assist (when appropriate)
- Fall cushioning

The goal is to focus on quality and reliability of the most important 4–6 tasks rather than trying to teach too many.

How do I train counterbalance correctly without putting harmful strain on the dog's joints?

Proper counterbalance training is done gradually and with great care. The dog learns to lean into your body weight while keeping all four feet planted and maintaining a straight back. We never allow the dog to pull or support your full body weight.

A technique I use frequently is training on **stairways** where there is a railing for the handler's support. This allows the dog to learn the correct position and helps distribute the weight properly across the dog's anatomy, reducing strain on the shoulders and back. Training starts with very short sessions and builds slowly over time. I also emphasize proper harness fit, regular veterinary check-ups, and careful conditioning to protect the dog's joints long-term.

What weight and size dog is appropriate for mobility and brace work?

For most adults with CMT, I recommend a dog in the **50–80 pound range** with a sturdy, balanced build. The dog needs enough mass to provide meaningful support and counterbalance, but not so much that they become difficult to handle or create tripping hazards.

The ideal size ultimately depends on your height, strength, balance issues, and the specific type of mobility support you need. English Labs in this weight range have worked very well for many of my CMT clients.

How many tasks can one dog reliably learn and retain?

A well-trained service dog can usually master and reliably perform between **8 and 12 solid tasks**. However, quality is much more important than quantity.

I prefer to perfect the most critical 4–6 tasks for daily life before adding additional ones. A dog that performs six tasks perfectly is far more valuable than one that knows fifteen tasks poorly.

It's also common for the initial tasks a dog learns to only be used for a short time. As the handler becomes more confident and their lifestyle evolves, they often discover they no longer need certain tasks and will request new ones that better fit their current needs. This is a normal and healthy part of the service dog journey.

Public Access & Behavior

How do I proof my dog's behavior in high-distraction public environments?

We do the majority of our training in real public environments throughout the entire program. This includes busy stores, restaurants, malls, parks, and public transportation such as Ubers, trains, buses, airlines, and TSA checkpoints.

Proofing is done gradually starting with low-distraction settings and slowly increasing difficulty with real-life distractions like other dogs, food on the ground, crowds, loud noises, and sudden movements. The goal is for the dog to remain focused on you and calm no matter what is happening around them.

What does a legitimate public access test look like, and how do I know when my dog is ready?

I administer a comprehensive public access test between months 6–8 of training. The dog must score **95% or higher** (only one minor error allowed) to receive full certification and the laminated ID card.

The test is performed in real public locations (mall, grocery store, restaurant, bus, or elevator). I follow with a clipboard so the handler has no idea which distraction comes next. This ensures the dog is truly prepared for everyday life.

Here is an overview of the key elements I evaluate:

- Controlled unload from vehicle (no lunging or barking)
- Handler body-block with calm yielding to pressure
- Controlled walk through parking lots and store aisles
- Proper door etiquette (waiting for release)
- Reliable Sit/Down in multiple locations
- “Under” at a table or booth for 10 minutes
- Down-Stay with handler 20 feet away (line of sight broken)
- Recall past food distractions
- Ignoring dropped food and shopping carts with treats
- Calm greeting of strangers (no jumping or excessive sniffing)
- Calm reaction to loud noises
- Calm elevator/escalator ride (if available)
- Controlled load back into vehicle
- Medical alert task performed on command (or naturally)

We conduct this test **a minimum of three times** in different environments and video record the client performing it so we can review progress together. Your dog is considered public-access ready when they can consistently pass this test with 95% or higher across multiple real-world settings.

How do I handle my dog refusing a task or becoming distracted mid-task?

First, stay calm. Refusals and distractions are normal during the learning process. The solution is almost always to go back a step in training and rebuild the behavior in an easier environment.

If the dog becomes distracted, I use a clear marker (“Eh-eh” or “Leave it”) followed by immediate redirection, then reward heavily when they succeed. If a task is refused, we return to an earlier foundation stage. Punishment is never used, as it damages trust and the working bond. Most issues stem from confusion, stress, pain, or insufficient proofing.

Owner Training Process

How many hours of training are realistically needed before the dog is public-access ready?

Realistically, it takes **approximately 400–600 hours** of structured training to prepare a service dog for reliable public access. This includes foundation obedience, socialization, proofing in public environments, and initial task training.

For owner-trainers, this process typically spreads over 6 to 12 months, depending on how consistently you can train and how much professional support you receive. The biggest factor is not just the total hours, but the **quality and consistency** of training.

What does a training regression look like and how do I correct it?

Training regressions are very common and usually look like this: the dog suddenly forgets a behavior they previously performed well, becomes distracted more easily, or starts refusing tasks.

Most regressions are caused by moving forward too quickly, insufficient proofing, or the dog experiencing stress, pain, or confusion. The correct response is **never to punish**. Instead, go back to an easier version of the behavior, rebuild it in a low-distraction setting, and gradually increase difficulty again. Patience and consistency almost always resolve regressions quickly.

Should I work with a trainer who specializes in mobility dogs specifically?

Yes especially if your CMT involves mobility assistance or brace work. One of the biggest differences between owner-training and working with a professional is **consistency**. Professional trainers develop their own clear language, mannerisms, and expectations that dogs quickly learn to respect.

A good trainer can help you “**Master your Voice**” teaching you how to use consistent tone, inflection, timing, body language, and leash pressure so you become an effective training partner for your dog. This skill is critical for long-term success and is one of the most valuable things I teach my clients.

Owner-Trained vs. Professionally Trained Service Dogs

Many people with CMT wonder whether they should owner-train their own dog or work with a professional trainer. Both paths are valid, but they are very different experiences.

Owner-training can be rewarding and more affordable, but it requires a tremendous amount of time, consistency, patience, and knowledge. Many owners discover that maintaining professional-level reliability in public access, mobility tasks, and medical alerts is much more challenging than expected.

Professionally trained service dogs offer several important advantages:

- Higher consistency and reliability from day one
- Expert-level proofing in real-world environments
- Proper training for complex mobility and brace work
- Significantly less stress on the handler during the critical early months

What sets our program apart:

- **Personal follow-up support** — We provide an intensive 2–3 day initial placement, a 6-week in-person visit, a 6-month check-in, and at least one additional visit per year at our own expense.
- **Health guarantees from proven breeders** — Especially with our English Labrador lines, breeders will exchange a dog during training or the first year of service if a health issue arises (as long as it wasn't caused by handler negligence).
- **No wait lists** — We keep a small, focused program so we can match the right dog to the right family much faster than large organizations.
- **Customized training** — Every dog is trained specifically for your CMT symptoms and lifestyle, not a one-size-fits-all approach.
- **Long-term partnership** — We don't just place the dog and disappear. We stay available for ongoing support, refresher training, and new task development as your needs change.

Whether you choose to owner-train with our guidance or have us fully train and place a dog for you, our goal is the same: to help you build a safe, reliable, and life-changing service dog team.

What to Look For When Choosing a Service Dog Trainer

When selecting a trainer or program for a service dog, especially for mobility and medical alert work, we recommend asking these important questions:

- **Health Guarantees** — Does the breeder or program offer a written health guarantee? Will they exchange or replace a dog if a significant health issue arises during training or the first year of service (provided it wasn't caused by handler negligence)?
- **Follow-up & Ongoing Support** — How much continued support does the trainer provide after placement? Do they offer in-person visits, video check-ins, or refresher training? How long does this support last? How much will it cost you as the client?
- **Continuing Education** — Does the trainer offer continuing education to their clients with active service dogs? What is the cost? Where does the training take place?
- **Experience with Your Condition** — How many dogs has the trainer successfully placed for people with CMT or similar mobility and neurological conditions?
- **Transparency** — Is the trainer willing to provide references, allow you to observe training, and clearly explain their methods and expectations?

A quality program should be happy to answer these questions openly. At **Mike Burkel Dogs**, we provide strong health guarantees through our breeders, structured follow-up visits (including annual visits at our expense), and ongoing support as long as you and your dog need it.

Retirement & Succession

At what age or point should a service dog be retired from active duty?

Most service dogs begin showing signs they are ready for retirement between **8 and 10 years of age**, though this varies by individual dog and the physical demands of their work.

Common signs include slowing down on longer outings, reluctance to perform certain physical tasks (like counterbalance or bracing), increased stiffness after work, or needing more rest days. For CMT handlers, I pay close attention to any reluctance with mobility tasks, as we want to retire the dog before the work becomes physically uncomfortable or unsafe for them.

How do I plan for a successor dog before my current dog retires?

The best time to start planning for a successor is **12 to 18 months before** you plan to retire your current dog. This gives you enough time to find, raise or select, and train the new dog while your current dog is still able to help teach and model good behaviors.

I recommend beginning the search for a new prospect while your current dog is still working reliably. Many of my clients overlap the two dogs for several months so the younger dog can learn from the experienced one. This transition period is much smoother than waiting until the older dog is fully retired.

What happens to my dog's behavior and routine after retirement?

After retirement, the dog transitions from “working” to “pet” status. Most dogs adjust very well and enjoy having more freedom, playtime, and cuddles. However, it’s important to maintain a consistent routine so they don’t become anxious or bored.

Many retired service dogs still enjoy light tasks around the house (such as retrieving items or “Under” at the table) because it gives them purpose. We help families create a gentle retirement plan that includes regular exercise, mental stimulation, and continued affection so the dog remains happy and well-adjusted.

Ongoing Maintenance

How often does a trained service dog need refresher training?

Even well-trained service dogs benefit from regular refresher training. I recommend **short, consistent refreshers** at least 2–3 times per week, even after the dog is fully trained. These sessions are usually 10–15 minutes and focus on maintaining reliability in commands, public access manners, and key tasks.

Once or twice a year, I also suggest a more structured “tune-up” session with me (either in person or via video) to address any small issues before they become bigger problems.

What are early signs that a dog is burning out or stressed in its working role?

Early signs of burnout or stress can be subtle. Watch for:

- Reluctance to put on the working harness or vest
- Slower response to commands
- Increased panting, pacing, or whining in public
- Avoiding eye contact or seeming “flat” during work
- Needing more recovery time after outings
- Changes in appetite or sleep

Catching these signs early is important. Many dogs can recover fully with reduced workload, more play time, and targeted refresher training.

Who do I call if a trained behavior starts to break down?

You should always feel comfortable reaching out to me directly. As part of our commitment to your team, I provide ongoing support beyond the initial 6-month follow-up.

Whether it's a task that's fading, new distractions appearing, or concerns about your dog's attitude toward work, contact me right away. It's much easier (and faster) to fix small issues than to wait until they become major problems. My goal is to help you and your dog succeed together for as long as possible.

Ongoing Support After Placement

One of the most important parts of the service dog journey is what happens **after** the dog comes home. At **Mike Burkel Dogs**, we are committed to long-term success and provide structured follow-up support.

Our Follow-Up Process Includes:

- **Initial Placement:** A 2 to 3-day intensive training period in your home to help you and your dog transition smoothly and begin working together as a team.
- **6-Week Follow-Up:** An in-person visit where we begin refining and customizing service tasks specifically for your needs and lifestyle.
- **6-Month Follow-Up:** Another check-in, either in person or via video chat, to evaluate progress, address any challenges, and make adjustments as needed.
- Trainer travel expenses for these follow-up visits are covered by the client. However, I still make it a priority to personally visit all my active clients **at least once a year at my own expense** to ensure everything is going well and to provide additional support.

This ongoing commitment is one of the biggest advantages of working with our program. Many trainers place the dog and offer little to no continued guidance. We believe consistent follow-up dramatically increases the chances of long-term success and helps prevent common problems before they become serious.

We remain available to our clients beyond the 6-month mark for additional support, refresher training, or help with new tasks as your needs change over time.

Working With Us

At **Mike Burkel Dogs**, we are committed to helping individuals with CMT find the right service dog solution for their unique needs and lifestyle.

Whether you are interested in owner-training your own dog, starting with a puppy from one of our carefully selected breeders, or considering a fully trained service dog, we offer personalized guidance every step of the way. Our approach emphasizes quality training, long-term support, and realistic expectations.

If you would like to learn more about our program, discuss your specific situation, or explore whether a service dog may be a good fit for you, I encourage you to reach out. Every person's journey with CMT is different, and I'm happy to answer your questions and help you determine the best path forward.

A large QR code linking to our website is available on the back cover for more information, current availability, and resources.

Contact Information

Mike Burkel

Owner & Head Trainer

Mike Burkel Dogs

Phone: 480-954-7331(o) or 651-764-0261 (c)

Email: mikeburkeldogs@gmail.com

Website: www.mikeburkel.com

I look forward to speaking with you and supporting you on your service dog journey.