

# Service dogs helping carriers at work

**I**t seems that more and more American workers are bringing service dogs to their jobs to assist them with disabilities. Some might not even be capable of working without them. While there is no count of the number of service dogs in the workplace, professional trainers say the demand for service dog training has grown dramatically in recent years.

Service dogs aren't a new phenomenon—people with disabilities have relied on dogs since ancient times. Even a fresco in the ancient Roman city of Herculaneum from the first century shows a dog leading a blind man. Today, service dogs are trained to assist people in amazing ways.

Dogs act in many ways; some may bring objects to people or guide them around obstacles. The classic “seeing-eye” guide dog is familiar, but dogs also might act as ears for people with hearing impairments, alerting them to alarms, doorbells or a crying baby. A service dog can be trained to detect dangerous changes in a diabetic person's blood sugar, or detect an epileptic seizure or the presence of a dangerous allergen in food. Psychiatric service dogs are trained to detect, and possibly intervene in, behaviors like panic attacks or self-harm, especially in people with post-traumatic stress disorder.

The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) requires state and local government and private employers to provide accommodations in the workplace for people with disabilities, which might include a service dog. The Rehabilitation Act of 1973, a law that predates the ADA, protects federal employees with disabilities. But what about when the workplace is a letter carrier's route?

The age-old stereotype of dogs as the enemies of mailmen makes it surprising to see a letter carrier with a canine assis-

tant. *The Postal Record* has brought you the story of a carrier with a service dog before (see the November 2022 issue), but there are additional carriers with service dogs out there helping them navigate their jobs while dealing with disabilities.

**Louis Canceicao** has been injured in accidents three times since 2019, when a scooter hit him while he was crossing the street in a crosswalk. The San Francisco, CA Branch 214 carrier was pushed into an equipment cart at his station in 2021 and fell inside a ProMaster van the following year.

“I ended up with migraine headaches, which still plague me. I used to get a migraine every day.”

His migraines can strike at any time, causing symptoms like tunnel vision, nausea and dizziness that require him to nap to recover—unless he takes medication right before the onset of the migraine. That's where his service dog, Chispi, comes in.

Since July of 2023, Canceicao has carried Chispi, a Chihuahua, in a special satchel along with his mail satchel.

“Obviously, the Post Office would rather me continue working than sleep for 30 minutes every so often,” he said, and Chispi makes that possible. Chispi is trained to use her uncanny canine senses to detect when Canceicao is about to experience a migraine, even before he feels it, so that he can take his medication.

“She'll start whining a little, and then she'll start scratching, and then I'll take the prevention medicine.” Chispi's warnings allow him to continue on his route.

Amazingly, the dog detects an impending migraine through her keen sense of smell. It took intensive training to teach her how to do this. Canceicao trained Chispi with the help of a nonprofit agency that trains service dogs. While some service dogs are trained by



**Louis Canceicao carries Chispi with him in a satchel to help him become aware of the onset of migraines.**

## Service dogs (continued)

professional trainers, many dog owners train the dog by themselves or with a little assistance from a trainer.

“They trained for obedience first,” he said. Chispi learned not to bark for no reason, to be calm around people and to ignore other dogs. She also learned how to behave while on the job. “With the service dog uniform on, she is quiet and calm. With the uniform off, she is a crazy dog.”

The training to detect migraines starts with ear swabs. “You rub it under your tongue and you let the dog smell, and you continue doing this,” he said. That taught Chispi to recognize Canceicoa’s normal odor. “And then, when you do get a migraine, then you do the same thing.”

When Chispi reacted to the odor associated with a migraine, she got a reward. “You give them a ‘good girl,

good boy,’ and you treat them, like tossing a ball.”

“If she senses or sees a prelude to a migraine, she will try to get my reaction or attention,” he said. “She will make a weird crying noise that I am going to come into a migraine or under stress. She will stare at me, and she will headbutt me to get my attention. Until I react to her, she will continue to try to get my attention.”

Chispi is so good at her job that, out on Canceicoa’s route, she once detected an impending migraine in a young girl, one of a group of school-children at a playground who were petting Chispi.

“Chispi started crying. She started turning in her pouch and screaming. And she doesn’t do that. You don’t hear her bark at any dogs or anything like that,” Canceicoa said. “One of the children at that playground started crying and grabbing her head.” The child’s surprised teacher confirmed that the little girl sometimes suffered from migraines.

It’s no surprise that Chispi, a tiny, cute dog with her head popping out of a satchel, is popular, especially among children. Unlike some service dogs on duty, Chispi isn’t distracted from her mission by people giving her pets or attention.

“Customers love her,” he said. “They bring her little treats. They take pictures of us.”

But not everyone liked Chispi. When Canceicoa transferred to a new station in 2023, a supervisor angrily demanded that he not bring her with him to the station. He already had a letter from a U.S. Department of Labor doctor affirming that his need for a service dog was legitimate, but the supervisor still didn’t budge.

With the help of his branch president, **Karen Eshabarr**, and branch

Athena helps Sammy Swanson deal with bouts of anxiety.



member **Carol Maggio**, Canceicoa filed grievances and complaints. His case ended up going before the Reasonable Accommodation Committee (RAC) for his postal district.

Every postal area and district has an RAC. Members include postal managers and medical professionals who review accommodations issues and settle disputes over them. In February 2023, the RAC noted that Canceicoa had demonstrated his need for a service dog, that Chispi was properly trained to help him, and that she didn't cause problems in the station or on his route. It ruled that he could continue to take Chispi with him on the job.

Though he doesn't take his service dog out to deliver the mail, North Little Rock, AR Branch 3745 President **Sammy Swanson** relies on one to do his job. Swanson handles grievances and other union business full time with the help of Athena, his Alaskan Klee Kai.

"I got her in 2021, and she helps me out a bunch," Swanson said. "I got her as a pet to start out with. Then we went from there. My therapist recommended getting a service dog or getting her trained as a service dog to help me with anxiety."

The Alaskan Klee Kai resembles a Malamute or Husky, but is much smaller. Athena weighs just 7 pounds. Swanson took her to a trainer near his home to prepare her for her new role as a service dog, detecting his anxiety when it builds up. "She's trained just to lay down on my lap if I need her there," he said.

"A lot of people think she's a Chihuahua and a Husky mixed, because she's the size of a Chihuahua, but she looks exactly like a Husky," he said. "She's pretty much like an anxiety blanket. She's just there. If I need to pet her, that helps calm me down, too."



"She has been with me to multiple union events such as the state convention, branch meetings and MDA fundraisers," Swanson said. "Everyone, union wise, has been very welcoming of Athena and always asks about her on the occasions she isn't with me. I've been told that just seeing her around brightens up peoples' days.

"People often comment on how well behaved she is and jokingly ask if I know anyone that could train their kids to behave," he added.

Though Athena doesn't go out on a route, Swanson sometimes brings her to postal facilities. And, as with Canceicoa and Chispi, Swanson got some push-back after assuming having a service dog wasn't an issue, and is working on getting clearance for her through the accommodation process.

"I'm in the middle of going through something right now because for a while, they didn't say anything about it," he said. "And then we have a clerk who doesn't like dogs or something. Now I'm having to get my therapist to write some paperwork and turn that in to do the reasonable accommodations. I didn't know I needed to do anything like that because I had been bringing her in, and nobody had any problem with it."

By helping letter carriers with disabilities work, service dogs are turning the old dog-versus-mailman rivalry on its head. It's likely we will see more carriers with dogs like Chispi and Athena by their sides. **PR**

**Canceicoa had to take his case to the Reasonable Accommodation Committee for his postal district to be able to bring Chispi to the station and on his route.**