

Paul Mundell, National Director of Canine Programs for Canine Companions for Independence, a national nonprofit organization that breeds, raises and trains assistance dogs for people with disabilities, spoke on *Selection, breeding, training and conditioning* dogs for work as service companions. Their web site is www.cci.org

Paul estimates that there are approximately 18,000 dogs currently working as assistance dogs. There are also generally another 12,000 juvenile dogs in some stage of training. These dogs are trained by CCI and all the other programs affiliated with Assistance Dogs International/ADI. He further estimates that there is probably somewhere in the neighborhood of 100,000 dogs employed by government agencies (e.g., military, police, customs, etc.) currently working in all countries worldwide. CCI trains four types of assistance dogs: service, facility, skilled companion and hearing dogs, but there are many other jobs that dogs perform worldwide.

Within their breeding colonies at their five regional centers, they have approximately a 44% success rate, however, when they take in dogs from outside breeders, their success rate diminishes to ~12%. Their dogs are primarily Labrador Retrievers or Golden Retrievers or deliberate crosses of those two breeds. Their breeding program staff evaluates each dog's temperament, trainability, health, physical attributes, littermate trends and the production history of the dam and sire. They carefully map trends within and between litters and work closely with geneticists to produce sound, stable, healthy, long-lived dogs. Their temperament priorities tend to be somewhat different than those that an agency like the TSA seeks based on the dogs' different tasks.

They work cooperatively with different dog food and supplement manufacturers to optimize the dogs' and pups' health, and keep careful records to see the effects of nutrition and different supplements on their dogs.

At eight weeks of age, CCI puppies are placed in the homes of CCI's 1,000+ volunteer puppy raisers who take them to puppy classes, teach them basic house manners and public etiquette. This early training includes being socialized to important sights, sounds and activities. At roughly 13-18 months of age, CCI dogs are returned to one of their regional training centers for a minimum of six months of Advanced Training under the guidance of professional instructors. Instead of becoming a working assistance dog, an outstanding CCI dog may be selected to join their breeding colony. Occasionally, a CCI dog may be released to a police, fire, or other government agency for detection work, or sometimes dogs may be released from their training program due to a temperament or medical issue.

The care and attention given to these dogs is equaled only by the skills and abilities that these dogs develop and provide to their ultimate owners.