

# Penny Forward Transcript S2E1

## Can I Afford a Guide Dog?

**Jake:** Guide Dogs for the Blind provides all of our services free of charge. We serve people who are blind and visually impaired in all fifty states and Canada. And what I mean by free of charge, I mean the application is free of charge, the dog, its equipment, instruction, and lifetime follow-up for you and your guide dog. So, we support you before, during, and after you train with your guide dog at Guide Dogs for the Blind.

**Chris:** Wow. What does this cost for Guide Dogs to raise these dogs and provide all these services?

**Jake:** The estimated cost to raise and train a guide dog, so that's basically birth to class ready status, is about sixty-five thousand dollars. The lifetime cost to the organization per guide dog is about a hundred and fifteen thousand, over the course of one guide dog's life.

The Penny Forward podcast is transcribed by Anne Verduin, a blind transcriber living in Portland Oregon who charges competitive rates. To hire Anne to transcribe your podcast, give her a call at 971-346-0973.

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**Chris:** This is the Penny Forward podcast, a show about blind people building bright futures, one penny at a time.

**Liz:** I'm Liz Botner.

**Chris:** And I'm Chris Peterson.

**Liz:** We are blind people, learning what it takes to be successful in our personal, professional, and financial lives.

**Chris:** Liz and I are both guide dog users. And we were curious about how affordable a guide dog might be. Especially to someone on a lower income. Guide dogs aren't for everybody, but for some people, guide dogs can offer more independence and freedom than traveling with a cane. But, if you're considering having a guide dog, there is some added cost, and some added responsibility. So we invited Jake Koch, from Guide Dogs for the Blind in San Raphael California and Boring Oregon, to come on the show to talk to us about the costs of owning a guide dog, and what it takes to get a guide dog, what happens during class, and what happens after you go home.

**Chris:** Jake, thanks for being here.

**Jake:** Thanks, Chris, for having me.

**Chris:** Before I get into my questions, why don't you introduce yourself?

**Jake:** Sure. My name is Jake Koch. I'm the community outreach specialist here at Guide Dogs for the Blind. I've been with the organization for eight and a half years, and I currently work at Guide Dogs for the Blind's Oregon campus, in a town called Boring, just outside of Portland. I'm visually impaired myself, have been my entire life, and I'm currently traveling with a seven-and-a-half-year-old female black Labrador named Forely. And Forely is my third guide dog.

**Chris:** Talk us through what happens when you're applying for a guide dog. Does it cost anything? What's the process like?

**Jake:** Yeah, great question, Chris. Guide Dogs for the Blind provides all of our services free of charge. We serve people who are blind and visually impaired in all fifty states and Canada. And what I mean by free of charge, I mean the application is free of charge, the dog, its equipment, instruction, and lifetime follow-up for you and your guide dog. So, we support you before, during, and after you train with your guide dog at Guide Dogs for the Blind.

**Chris:** Is it really free? I mean even transportation, stuff like that, to get to class? Does that cost anything?

**Jake:** It does not. So, we do provide transportation, room and board while you're with us in class, along with the dog's food during class. The only thing a person is responsible for is their dog's food, toys, and other accessories that they may want for their dog. We even offer a veterinary financial assistance program on an as needed basis, that's open to all of our graduates.

**Chris:** Cool! Well, tell me about, then, let's say you've gotten through the application process, and you've been told, "Hey, you're coming to class to get a guide dog." Then what happens?"

**Jake:** Excellent question. So, first, you'll receive some correspondence from the admissions department, and they'll let you know that your application has been accepted, and then they will follow up with a class date. On either our Boring Oregon campus or our San Raphael California campus. People do have the opportunity to

select that, so, if they, you know, for some reason, they want to go to "one campus over the other, we can take that into consideration during the admissions process. But after that class date is issued, if that works for you, it works for us, then we send you some lecture materials ahead of time. We use the adult learning model when it comes to class training, so we ask that people just sort of peruse the lectures ahead of time, and these are really your standard operating procedures, your emergency procedures for working with a guide dog, essentially the "how to" manual. That way, while you're with us in class, we can spend more time out on the street, working with your dog in a variety of environments, and we don't have to bore you with several hour long lectures and that sort of thing. So we have all this stuff pre-recorded for people to listen to, and we also have a video on our website called "Gearing Up for GDB," so it talks about the physical aspects of coming to class, some stretches and things, and exercises that people can do to help mitigate any sort of shin splints or discomfort while you're training with your new guide dog in class. Which can be a relatively physical

process, as you can imagine. Traveling with this new guide dog, and walking a faster pace than you may with a cane.

**Chris:** What do I need to bring with? Do I need to buy anything?

**Jake:** While you're with us in class, we'll provide all of the necessary equipment for handling your guide dog. So your dog will come with a leash, collar, harness, we'll provide you with a couple of toys to get started, a bed, some food to take home, we have a gift shop which sells extra guide dog equipment, bowls, tether cables, tie downs if you will, extra leashes, we also issue, as standard issue equipment, a set of booties, which are like dog shoes that protect the dog's feet, and a tie down, which is great for, if you need to leave your dog unattended for a short period of time, you can use that as well. And of course, our gift shop sells extras of those. So I always recommend to people, "Bring a larger suitcase than you might normally bring on a trip of two weeks, just because you may have some extra equipment that you might want to purchase

and bring home with you.- Certainly it's good ahead of time if you can maybe purchase some of this stuff if you like, and have already set up in your home. Like a dog food container, that's a big one, having that, if you prefer your own type of dog bowls, you can go to any pet store and purchase those, or online retailers, those are always great things. In terms of the dog's food, we'll tell you what they're eating in class, and you'll have sort of the two weeks then while you're in class to order it online, which is always a great option, and then it's just at your doorstep when you arrive, or certainly when you get home, you can make a trip to the pet store. But we always provide you with some food to get started.

**Male Announcer:** We'll continue our interview in a moment. But first, ...

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**Chris:** So, let's talk about class, then. What happens during class? What is it like?

**Jake:** Guide Dogs for the Blind offers a two-week, in residence, training class. For those students with extenuating circumstances, we also offer an in-home training course, so that's where we bring the dog and the instructor to you and we would work with you one on one in your home for about ten days. While you're with us in class, we're going to be simulating a lot of the

environments that you travel in in your home area. During the admissions process, we'll be collecting information about the types of routes that you travel, the types of areas that you go, what kind of area do you live in, what are your expectations in terms of your dog and travel environment, IE, do you live in a big city? A small town? Do you need a dog that can transition between both? Do you travel a lot? Do you do a lot of sidewalkless, maybe you live in a more rural area. Those are all environments that we want to know about ahead of time, because while you're with us in class, you'll be working with your instructor, and you'll be exposed to a variety of environments that you can practice working your dog through. And your instructor will be there the entire time, instructing you and providing feedback, often times we will build a route, so it will be a pre-established route that we'll orient you to, and that usually concludes with a destination. So the great thing is, we can problem solve in real time. And usually the route might conclude at a coffee shop, or an ice cream parlor or something like that, and it's a great time to just stop and say, "So how did that go?"

How did that feel?" The first week is a couple of pre-established routes that kind of just gives you a lot of time behind the harness, as I like to say. Just putting on the miles, and getting used to things. And then the second week is much more customizable. So that's the week where if you say, "Well I have a goal to go hiking with my guide dog." We might expose you to a hiking trail. Or you might say, "I love the water, and I'm a part of a Yacht club." Okay, we might go to a boat dock and spend some time near the water, exposing your dog to that. Or "I take the subway. I need to work around platforms and in a subway environment." Etc., etc. So it's really a highly customizable, individualized training program for each and every one of our clients.

**Chris:** And if I stop at a coffee shop or an ice cream parlor, can I buy coffee or ice cream while I'm there if I want to?

**Jake:** Absolutely. You're welcome to purchase those items, and if you have specific needs, or little errands that you might need to run, sometimes we can incorporate that

into the training during the day that you're doing with your new guide dog.

**Chris:** All right. So, we've gotten through class, and before we leave class, we might want to pick up some souvenirs or something for the fam, is that something we can incorporate into routes also?

**Jake:** Oh absolutely. Yeah. Often times we are working in a downtown area or an urban area, so if there's something you're interested in and you're looking for, we can certainly try to find a retailer that sells those items. We also have our gift shop. All proceeds from the gift shop go directly back to Guide Dogs for the Blind's programs and services, so it's kind of like you're donating, you're supporting the organization, which is great. And there's lots of great GDB branded souvenirs and things like that there as well.

**Chris:** Okay. So, now we're about to go home, and what is that process like, and what should we have once we get home with our brand-new, shiny dog?

**Jake:** Great question. So, guide dog class concludes with a graduation. So, we recognize the contributions made by yourself, as a guide dog handler. People who are blind or visually impaired have worked very hard to get to this point. Learning orientation and mobility skills, adjusting to blindness, making this big life changing decision, so we want to recognize all Of that. of course, taking the two weeks to come into class and go through the training. We recognize the puppy raisers, the guide dog instructors, volunteers and staff and donors that make this all possible. Guide dogs for the blind is a non-profit charitable organization solely supported by corporate and private gifts. We don't receive any government funding. So that's graduation. It's a very emotional time. It's a very exciting time. And then you return home with your guide dog, we provide transportation home, and we really want you to resume your lifestyle. So, maybe you arrive on a Saturday and you start work again on a Monday, or whatever you do, go back to school, etc., we want you to return to that. And take your new guide dog with you. Ideally, you've got routes in your neighborhood that are well established,

you're comfortable with, because this is all new to the dog. So you providing that leadership on a familiar route is going to make the transition much easier for both you and the dog. That's not to say that you can't travel in unfamiliar areas, but certainly having those established routes that you travel on is going to make your new partnership with your guide dog flourish. So that's a little bit about what happens after training. We do provide both a two-week and ten-week post class follow-up phone call. That's provided by the class training supervisor who oversaw your class. We also have a dedicated support center which is staffed by guide dog handlers, guide dog mobility instructors, and veterinary professionals. So whatever question you might have about your dog, its training, its health, advocacy, any of those sort of things, the support center can handle it. And we also provide an in person annual follow-up visit. So that's where a guide dog instructor comes to your home, you guys visit once a year. It's not an inspection. I really want to emphasize that. It's very much of an organic conversation. It's a "Hey, how are you doing? How are things going? Would you like to get a

cup of coffee on me? I'd be happy to do that, and we can hang out and you can tell me about all of your adventures with your guide dog." And often times they lead to very positive conversations, and also sometimes people sort of relax and realize that this is just an organic conversation and they might say, "By the way, while you're here, I do have this one thing that I've been working on, or would like to work on. What do you recommend in terms of training a dog to do X or Y?" So that's really what follow-up is all about. It's to help you and your guide dog be the very best versions of yourself. And this program is also free of charge to all of our graduates.

**Chris:** Let's talk a little bit about the expenses, though, related to having a guide dog once you get home. Now you're kind of on your own, right? Paying for food, vet bills, things like that. Is this something that the average person can afford?

**Jake:** At Guide Dogs for the Blind, we estimate the average cost per month of having a guide dog can be around 75 dollars per month, Most of that will go to food.

Some of it certainly may go to toys and other accessories that you may choose to purchase for your dog. In terms of vet care, that's up to you in terms of how you want to handle that. Guide dogs for the blind does have a veterinary financial assistance program. And this is an as needed program. So if you say you would like help with the cost of vet care, we will provide that to you. And it's provided in a couple different ways. First of all, we provide an annual stipend for booster vaccines, annual vet visit, things like that. We ask that you take the dog to the vet once a year for an annual check-up. We also provide a lifetime supply of heart worm and flea medication, so that's for the life of the guide dog. Even after retirement, we continue providing that. If your dog needs a more serious procedure, maybe a teeth cleaning, blood drawn, surgery, something along those lines, all you have to do is contact our support center, speak to someone in the VFA program, or veterinary financial assistance program, and they can authorize that transaction. Sometimes vet clinics will agree to bill Guide Dogs for the Blind directly, so if you choose to take advantage of the VFA, they'll just bill Guide



Dogs directly and you won't have to be the middle person. Other vet clinics say, "Nope. We want the money up front, so you pay us, and then you and Guide Dogs can square up later." So if that happens, then you would simply provide us the receipt, and we would reimburse you for the cost of the vet care.

**Female Announcer:** We'll continue our interview in a moment, but first, ...

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**Chris:** So what do you think of the idea of pet health insurance? Is that something a guide dog owner would want to have?

**Jake:** That's a great question, Chris. It really depends on which school a person is choosing to apply to. Different schools are going to have different levels of follow-up and veterinary financial support. So if you're going to a school that maybe doesn't have as much support, or doesn't cover vet care, I would recommend looking into health insurance for your pet, pet insurance, just to see what the rates are, see what the coverage is. Especially if somebody is on a fixed income and might have a more challenging time covering the costs associated with vet care. If you're going to a school like Guide Dogs for the Blind, essentially, the veterinary financial insurance program here is like an insurance policy that you don't have to pay for. It's available any time you need it, and maybe you need it for a while, then you don't need it at all. So it really just depends on the school that an individual's planning to attend. And I would recommend, if you are

somebody who's researching guide dog schools, you're thinking about a guide dog, ask about follow-up services. Ask about veterinary financial assistance. And see what's out there so you know before you're going into this what the school is able to provide, and what they're not able to provide. And I think that will make your decision about getting pet insurance a lot easier.

**Chris:** Good advice! We know that guide dogs don't last forever. And at some point, they can't work anymore and they need to retire. What is that like?

**Jake:** You're absolutely right. I wish they did last forever. They don't. So, the average working life of a guide dog is about seven to nine years, and then the dog would retire. At Guide Dogs for the Blind, you as the guide dog handler get to choose, first and foremost, what happens to the dog. So if you would like to keep the dog as a pet, that's great. Once the dog retires, they do lose all of their service animal credentials and are no longer covered by any of the laws that grant us equal access to all places of public accommodation. So you're welcome to keep the dog for

yourself, or gift the dog to a family member or friend, someone else you know, and if that's not possible for you, Guide Dogs for the Blind is happy to bring the dogs back, and we have an adoption list full of people who specifically want to adopt an older, retired guide. So they always have a home to go to. Again, this is all free of charge. We are happy to help you make this challenging decision. That's a big part of our follow-up program as the dogs get older. We're here to support you. We're not going to tell you. We leave that decision up to you, but we're here to support, and to provide guidance and advice in terms of when might be the right time. cause it's different for every person, and it's different for every dog.

**Chris:** And if an older dog that's retired has health issues, does the VFA help with any of those if you decide to keep it?

**Jake:** The veterinary financial assistance program covers a retired guide so long as the dog is placed with the guide dog graduate or an immediate family member. So, it does

extend even after the dog's service life has ended, which I just think is incredible.

**Chris:** All right. So, let's then talk a little bit about the thing that everybody hates, never wants to think about, and that is the end of life of your guide dog.

**Jake:** Yeah. That's a great question. So it's going to be different for every dog, and for every person. People and dogs process this sort of thing differently. At Guide Dogs for the Blind, we have staff who are here to support you as your dog reaches this point. You know, because it's hard on you as a person. You become emotionally attached to these dogs. I've had three guide dogs now. I can certainly relate to that personally. And I'm sure you can too, Chris. So we're here to support you sort of emotionally. And also, from a health perspective. When is the right time for a dog to end life? That can be a very tricky question to answer. So at Guide Dogs for the Blind, we have two fully functioning vet clinics that serve our guide dogs in training, our puppies, and any local graduates that would like to use our veterinary services. So our staff veterinarians also

do a lot of consulting with our graduates across the country and in Canada. So, you always have access to a veterinarian here at Guide Dogs for the Blind who can talk you through when might be the appropriate time, along with your local vet. And sometimes, regardless of end of life or not, it might be a three-way call where you have yourself, your local vet, and one of the veterinarians from Guide Dogs sort of all working together to come up with a treatment plan, or in this case, end of life plan. If euthanasia is something that you're not able to afford, Guide Dogs for the Blind will cover that. We brought these dogs into the world, and we will help with end of life as well. So really nose to tail coverage here when it comes to that sort of thing.

**Chris:** Wow. Well, with all of the things that Guide Dogs does, and that Guide Dogs covers, what does this cost for Guide Dogs to raise these dogs and provide all these services?

**Jake:** The estimated cost to raise and train a guide dog, so that's basically birth to class ready status, is about

sixty-five thousand dollars. The lifetime cost to the organization per guide dog is about a hundred and fifteen thousand, over the course of one guide dog's life. So we do rely on the generous support of our donors, both private and corporate, to help support Guide Dogs for the Blind. We don't receive any government funding. And so we do have a very robust fundraising strategy, and a lot of long term planning to make sure that the program isn't here one day and gone the next.

**Chris:** Yeah. And it's been around since the 1940's, right?

**Jake:** Correct. We were incorporated in 1942, so we've been at this for almost 80 years.

**Chris:** 80 years. That's pretty amazing. I hope you're around for another 80 years. Tell us where people can get more information if they want a guide dog, or if they want to support Guide Dogs.

**Jake:** Sure. So the best place to go is

[www.guidedogs.com](http://www.guidedogs.com)

On our website, we have a whole host of resources about the guide dog lifestyle, including our student application. We also offer a variety of community outreach opportunities so you can learn more about the guide dog lifestyle, including our Path to a Guide Dog Lifestyle workshops, and when it's safe to do so, attendance at blindness conventions and blindness organizations around the country. You can also follow us on Facebook, LinkedIn, Twitter, Instagram, YouTube, all those sort of things as well. Or, if you'd like to give us a call, we'd be happy to speak with you. Our number, 800-295-4050.

**Chris:** Jake, thanks for being here. I appreciate it.

**Jake:** Thanks, Chris. It was a pleasure speaking with you today, and look forward to hearing from your listeners.

**Chris:** If you enjoy the Penny Forward podcast, please rate, review, and share it with your friends. We're supported by your donations. Please help us to continue producing Penny Forward by following the tip jar link in the show notes, or by visiting [www.pennyforward.com](http://www.pennyforward.com)



**Liz:** The Penny forward Podcast is produced by Liz Botner and Chris Peterson. Audio editing and postproduction is provided by Byron Lee, and transcription is provided by Anne Verduin. Music was composed and performed by Andre Loui, and web hosting is provided by Taylor's Accessibility Services.

**Chris:** Penny Forward is a community of blind people building bright futures, one penny at a time. Visit [www.pennyforward.com/about](http://www.pennyforward.com/about) to learn more about who we are, and what we do. Until next time, for all of us in the Penny Forward community, I'm Chris Peterson.

**Liz:** And I'm Liz Botner. Thanks for listening and have a great week.