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## **Enhancing Independent Living: Survey Outcomes of Active Graduates from Guiding Eyes for the Blind**

### **Summary Report**

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Points of view or opinions contained within this document are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the official position or policies of Guiding Eyes for the Blind. All errors are my own.

## Report Overview

Choice Research Associates (CRA) was asked by the Guiding Eyes for the Blind to analyze and summarize survey data from 110 graduates of the guide dog program. This summary report provides an overview of the survey methodology, participant descriptives, and key outcomes.

### Survey

Surveys were completed by 110<sup>1</sup> graduates of the Guiding Eyes for The Blind (GEB), between Dec 2011 and May 2012. Survey respondents were randomly selected from a pool of GEB active graduates (defined as those still using a guide dog). Each graduate was sent an email with a link to the web-based survey, and then a volunteer, experienced in conducting telephone surveys, called each participant to follow-up on the survey invitation. A total of 120 individuals were initially selected (representing over 10% of GEB active graduates) and 110 agreed to participate resulting in a response rate of 92%.

Survey respondents were asked to provide information related to their living situation as well as demographic data. They also answered a number of questions focused on how having a guide dog improved or changed their lives. These questions related to transportation needs, engagement in social and educational activities, employment, income, health, and explored the physical and emotional benefits of having a guide dog. This brief report summarizes key information gathered from this survey.

### Respondent Portrait

Of the 110 individuals who completed the survey, they were on average 49 years (ranging from 17 to 88), were 39% male, 61% female; and 8% were veterans. The majority of respondents were Caucasian (86%) while 6% were African American, 6% Hispanic, and the remaining 2% were Asian and multi-racial. Approximately half of respondents were married (49%), with the remaining single (39%), divorced (7%), widowed (4%) and in a domestic partnership (1%). On average, these survey respondents live with 2 other people ranging from 1 to 5 people. Specifically, 23% lived alone; 47% live with one other person; 17% with two others, and 11% live with four or more. With 83 graduates reporting, 40% are the sole wage earner in their household.

### Guide Dog Experience

In terms of their history of having a guide dog, respondents reported that they were 35 years old, on average, (ranging from 16 to 83) at the time of their first experience with having a guide dog. The majority of those surveyed (69%) had had a guide dog for more than 3 years, with 15% had a guide dog from 1 to 3 years; 13% 6 to 12 months, and the remaining 3% for less than 6 months.

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<sup>1</sup> Originally there were 114 surveys completed, but 4 were duplicate entries and were deleted.

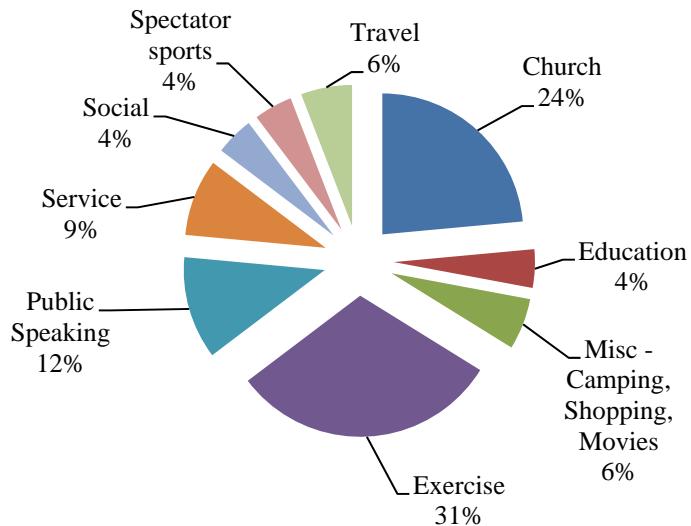
## Transportation

The 110 respondents were to select all the modes of transportation they had begun to use or use more frequently as a result of having a guide dog.<sup>2</sup> Overall, they report using 2.95 different forms of transportation (ranging from 0 to 6). Among these, 91% of those surveyed report walking now or more frequently, 61% take the bus, 46% use planes, 36% trains, 35% para transit, 20% subway, and 5% take taxicabs.

## Engagement in Activities

Among the respondents, 72% of those surveyed report that they spend less time at home now that they have a guide dog while 5% spend more time at home and the remaining 23% spend the same amount of time at home. Respondents also indicated that on average, they engaged in 1 (ranging from 0 to 6) new activities or participated more than before having a guide dog. These activities included hobbies (28%), sports (21%) and over half (51%) joining a club, group and other organization. Other specifically stated activities are exhibited in Figure 1.

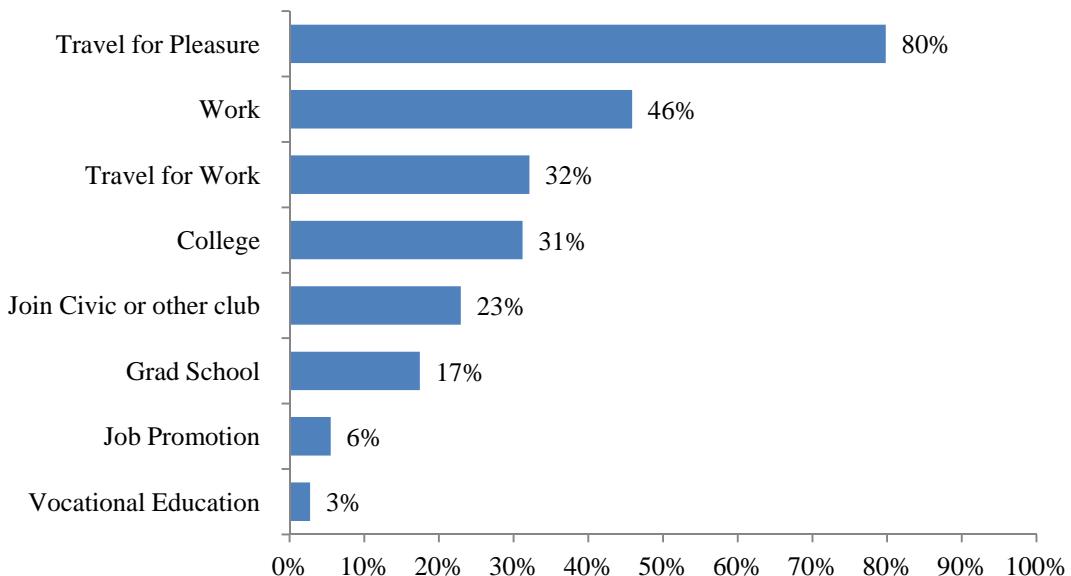
**Figure 1: Other Activities Engaged Among 68 Respondents**



Many of those surveyed advised that they felt it was easier to meet new friends now (noted by 81% of participants) and 90% said it was easier to travel now that they had a guide dog. In addition, respondents were asked to indicate activities that they could not or had not accomplished prior to having a guide dog. On average, respondents were able to accomplish or engage in 2.38 activities, ranging from 0 to 6. As indicated in Figure 2, among other activities, having a guide dog allowed survey respondents to travel for pleasure (80%), to work (46%), to travel for work (32%), and attend college (31%) and graduate school (17%).

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<sup>2</sup> Those graduates who had more received more than one guiding dog from GEB were asked to think about and report the impact of having a guide dog based on their first GEB and Guide dog experience.

**Figure 2: Perform in or Engage in Activities Now with a Guide Dog N=109**

## Changes and Benefits

Overall, 56% of respondents advised that with a guide dog, they found their performance in normal daily activities improved a great deal and another 35% improved somewhat. The remaining 9% indicated a slight improvement. Most of the 108 respondents (86%) also advised they spent more time on their feet now that they had guide dog, and 92% stated they walked 3 or more times a week for 30 minutes or more. Other situational changes are detailed below.

### *Employment*

Prior to having a guide dog, with 85 graduates reporting, 42% of respondents were employed. Now with a guide dog, 60% are employed – a statistically significant increase in number of graduates employed ( $p<.01$ ). Among the 31<sup>3</sup> graduates employed prior to having a guide dog, 4 (13%) advised they had been promoted or advanced to a new position at their existing employer; 13 (42%) changed to a higher paying or better job at a new employer, and 14 (45%) had no change in their employment status. Among 57 respondents, 53% advised they had an increase in their wages, reporting a median wage increase of 25%, (ranging from 2% to 500%).

Among the 32 respondents who are currently unemployed, 66% stated that having a guide dog makes it likelier they will seek employment and/or are currently seeking employment. Finally, 57% of 49 graduates reported that having a guide dog enabled them to enhance their skill set or learn new skills that increased their opportunities of finding employment or advancing in their current position.

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<sup>3</sup> When the number of respondents with data to assess becomes small (e.g., below 50) it is less likely they represent others in similar circumstances. Therefore it is important to exercise caution and to view these results as anecdotal rather than definitive.

### *Financial Impact*

The current annual income reported by 50 graduates averages \$47,542, ranging from \$5,000 to \$140,000 a year. Among 75 respondents, 45% state their income is the same as it was before receiving a guide dog; 52% report their income increased; and 3% noted their income decreased. Prior to participating in Guiding Eyes, 18% of 100 graduates reported that they received financial assistance from another individual (such as a family member, friend or companion). With 97 respondents reporting, 14% also state they received public assistance, (excluding SSI or SSDI) but including Medicaid, food stamps etc. Among the 14<sup>3</sup> individuals reporting they were receiving this assistance, 8 (or 57%) continue to receive assistance, 2 (14%) reduced and 4 (29%) eliminated their reliance on public assistance after receiving a guide dog.

### *Education*

The education portion of the survey limited the respondents to those who had a guide dog at the time they were currently attending or when they had attended a college or pursued other higher education goals in a vocational or trade school. At the time these individuals attended school with their guide dog, they were on average 28 years old, ranging from 17 to 54 years old.

The survey asked if having a guide dog enabled or influenced the individual's decision to attend school, and of the 52 who responded to this question, 67% agreed this made a difference. All (100%) of respondents stated that having a guide dog made it easier to navigate campus, 92% agreed that having a guide dog positively impacted their social life, and 98% stated that a guide dog enhanced their overall experience at school. Finally, 90% agreed that having a guide dog motivated them to pursue their career by fostering independence and confidence.

### *Health*

The 109 graduates report a statistically significant increase in their health status ( $p<.01$ ). Prior to having a guide dog, respondents rated their health on a scale of 1 to 5 where 1 is poor, 2 is fair, 3 is good, 4 is very good and 5 is excellent. The average rating was 3.68. After having a guide dog, that average increased to 3.95.

In addition, among 104 respondents, 28% stated their overall health was greatly improved, 32% stated it improved somewhat; while 40% stated that their health improved slightly or not at all. It is also worth noting that 77% of 106 graduates reported that they noticed a reduction in the number of accidents and injuries such as burns, trips and falls since receiving a guide dog.

Other health benefits are illustrated below in Table 1. For example, with 102 graduates responding, 82% agreed that they experienced increased physical strength or endurance, 64% of 91 graduates lost weight; 54% of 78 lowered their blood pressure. In terms of mental health, 79% of 86 graduates found they were less irritable, 85% of 92 graduates were less depressed, and 85% of 97 were less anxious.

**Table 1: Health Improvements**

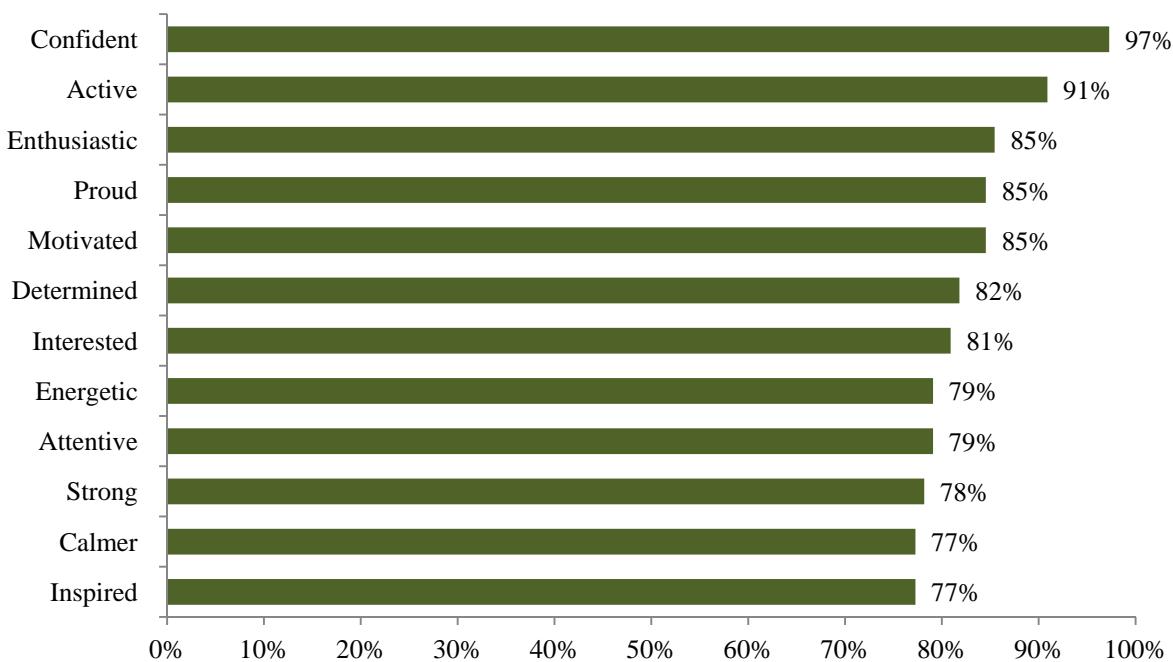
<b>Health Benefit/Improvement</b>	<b>N*</b>	<b>Percent Who Agreed with Statement</b>
Weight Loss	91	64%
Lower Blood Pressure	78	54%
Lower Cholesterol	70	44%
Reduction or Eliminate Pain	74	42%
Improve joint/bone health	81	54%
Increased Overall Physical Strength or Endurance	102	82%
Less Depressed	92	85%
Less Anxious	97	85%
Less Irritable	86	79%
Health Other Issue Improved	10	30%

\*N is the number of cases with available data

In addition to the health improvements listed above, a small number of graduates (9% of 95 reporting) stated they had eliminated the need for medications, while 14% of 96 surveyed noted they reduced their need for medications after receiving a guide dog. Among the 10<sup>3</sup> graduates reporting a reduction in medications, the average reduction was 44%, ranging from 10% to 80%.

### *Emotional Health*

Survey respondents were provided a list of emotions and instructed to “check all that apply” in response to the question: “Has having a guide dog tended to make you feel ...” As indicated in Figure 3, among the 110 graduates, having a guide dog has a substantial impact on the mood and emotions of the respondents. For example, 97% feel confident with a guide dog; 85% feel motivated; and 77% feel calmer.

**Figure 3: Emotions and Moods N=110**

According to the graduates who completed the survey, it is clear that receiving a guide dog through Guiding Eyes for the Blind has been an overall positive experience. However, there are limitations to these data, as discussed below.

### **Limitations**

The 110 graduates who completed this survey were random selected and represent over 10% of graduates. While this is an adequate sample size for most questions, as one divides the data down to particular groups of graduates (e.g., previously employed vs. not previously employed) the number of respondents remaining becomes quite small. For these smaller sub-samples, those who responded may not be representative of the larger population.

In addition, Guiding Eyes should also explore the possibility of including a comparison group of similarly situated individuals to survey and compare to their population of graduates. One option may be to survey those who received a guide dog from another organization, while another option may be to choose a group of people who to use a different type of assistance (e.g., a cane). If the former, this will enable Guiding Eyes to assess the impact of the provision of the dog from their specific program, and with the later suggested comparison group, this would allow them to assess the overall benefit of a guide dog.

### **Conclusion**

Among the graduates who completed this survey, there are clear benefits to receiving a guide dog. Increased opportunities to engage in social, civic, and a variety of other types of activities; improved health; increased educational and employment opportunities; financial benefits including higher wages and reduced reliance on public assistance; as well as the expressed

emotional benefits from feeling strong, proud, active, inspired, and confident. A critical factor is that 76% of the graduates stated that the ability to receive a guide dog at no cost influenced their decision to participate in Guiding Eyes.

Overwhelmingly, survey respondents viewed their experience positively -- 98% stated they would recommend Guiding Eyes Programs to others. These overall findings and the strong support by graduates of the program indicate that Guiding Eyes provides an important service and improves the quality of life to the individuals in this community.