

# Helping Paws pups in-training now located in EP

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It's all paws on deck at the Helping Paws new training facility in Eden Prairie.

"It was just a really great place for us to grow," said Executive Director Alyssa Golob about the move.

For more than 35 years, Helping Paws has sought to further people's independence and quality of life through the use of assistance dogs for people with physical disabilities outside of vision and hearing, for veterans and first responders with PTSD as well as facility dogs.

The larger building, a 3,000-square-foot increase from their previous facility in Hopkins, was a very big need for Helping Paws and the growth it has experienced as a whole. Golob attributed the growth to not only more people realizing that the organization exists, but also because people are living longer and realizing that service dogs can be a real help, particularly for veterans.

"In the veteran world, thank goodness that depression and PTSD and mental health are becoming less stigmatized, and that has opened up a floodgate of, 'Okay, I can do something about

this. There's a way to get out of my house.' Service dogs for PTSD have become a real, real need," she said.

The new facility will accommodate more training classes of soon-to-be service dogs, allow the nonprofit to expand the number of applicants they can provide dogs to and afford them a space to create community engagement opportunities about what they do.

At the old facility, they were able to graduate 16 dogs each year. In the new facility, they hope to graduate 60 dogs by 2027.

With two floors to expand on, an elevator and full accessibility throughout the building itself, they are making the most of the new space. New special flooring was also installed to make it more comfortable for the dog, which is a plus for the adorable new addition to the team, 3-month-old Teller, Helping Paws' future in-office demo dog.

## Helping Paws dogs

Last year, the nonprofit celebrated 35 years as the oldest service dog organization in the state.

"One of the things that just struck me the last week or so... We do behavioral assessments. How did you feel before the dog and how did you feel after the

dog, and we had one young girl who now has a dog and I was reading through the assessment. She said for the first time, she's 12 or 13, 'For the first time, my mom doesn't have to open a door for me.' And it kind of just struck me how we all have a very different definition of independence and for that little girl, having her mom have to open the door for her took away her identity and she got her identity back because this dog is like having another arm. It's her ability to be independent and walk through a door by herself," Golob said.

Something the nonprofit also does is breed its own service dogs, focusing exclusively on golden retrievers and labrador retrievers.

"We use those for three reasons. One, they retrieve. They are bred to retrieve and that's one of our biggest needs. Pick up keys, pick up medicine bottles, bring the phone. They have very mild temperaments which work really well with our veterans. They are incredibly loyal. However, they also transfer affection fairly easily," she said.

Unlike breeds like German Shepherds, who she called "loyal to the point of not being able to make that transition," and are better for working with people like police officers, golden re-

trievers and labrador retrievers can work for a variety of people throughout their lifespan without complication.

A litter of puppies makes up one class at Helping Paws. At 8 weeks old, the litter is then transferred to a foster home to begin a long series of training until they're 2-and-a-half years old and ready for graduation. After that, a matching occurs between a recipient and the dog which, in reality, is more like finding a friend.

"What's really important to understand is just because you're No. 1 on the list, it doesn't mean you're up for the next dog. It has to be a proper match. That's really really important to us, that the dog and the person are going to end up being a successful team," Golob said.

For a small application fee, anyone in need of a Helping Paws dog can apply on the nonprofit's website by submitting a letter of interest. There is a veteran's/first responder program coordinator, a breeding program coordinator and a client services coordinator that will help applicants through the process.

Helping Paws' waitlist is currently three years out, but they hope to whittle it down with building expansion and if they

can get more volunteers to foster their new litters of puppies. Volunteers for foster homes are a major asset for the nonprofit and something they are always in serious need of.

Golob shared that if they had to pay trainers to train the dogs, it would cost millions of dollars. By the time a dog graduates from its training, the dog is worth \$30,000 and gifted to a recipient free of charge.

While normal medical care is the responsibility of the recipient, Helping Paws also has an emergency fund set aside for larger medical expenses above a certain threshold as they arise. With a predicted lifespan of about 10-12 years, recipients can also get a successor dog if they lose one.

As a person's needs may change throughout their lifetime, Helping Paws dogs are also subject to "tune-ups" with a team that does follow-up care with the recipient and their dog.

Next up for Helping Paws as they adjust and finalize the move include a graduation ceremony from 6:30-8 p.m. on March 29 at Hopkins High School, 2400 Royals Drive in Minnetonka and the Paws in Motion 5K on May 5.

For more information or to apply for a dog, visit [helpingpaws.org](http://helpingpaws.org).