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Opal works like a dog; now she can play like one

By OLIVER MOORE
From Friday's Globe and Mail

Thanks to guide dog's companion, Halifax service animals have their own off-leash run

Opal is trained to work with the unflappable calm you expect from a Seeing Eye dog. Conditioned to ignore distractions, the black lab is usually the epitome of propriety as she guides Helen McFadyen around Halifax

But while extensive training has taught Opal to suppress her instincts, she still has all the energy of a five-year-old dog and Ms. McFadyen says she'll run "like a freight train" when given the chance.

"There's the assumption that these dogs are regimented little machines," Ms. McFadyen said. "But they're still dogs. They need downtime. They need play."

Until this summer, though, when Halifax opened what is believed to be the country's first dog run specifically designed for service animals, letting Opal play the way she wanted was too big a risk for Ms. McFadyen. She worried about letting her trusted companion out of reach, and the only way to allow Opal to get real exercise, she said, was to stand in an open space with a long leash and let the dog do laps around her.

"She would run in circles," Ms. McFadyen said. "It gives an opportunity to run very hard but not what you'd call free running."

Now, thanks to her lobbying efforts, the dog can run free. The downtown spot set aside for service animals is not big, and it is bounded by several major roads. But it is fenced and double-gated, secure enough that Ms. McFadyen is comfortable letting Opal off leash to work out her excess energy.

Ms. McFadyen, a master of divinity student at the Atlantic School of Theology in Halifax, is chair of the municipal government's advisory committee on persons with disabilities, which comprises councillors and members of the public.

Blair Blakeney, capital projects parks co-ordinator for the Halifax Regional Municipality, said the city already owned the land when the request came in from the advisory committee, making it a relatively easy idea to pursue.

"This is not a dog park; it's an area we set aside especially for people with service dogs," he said. "They deserve something unique."

The idea is unique not only in the region but apparently in the country as well.

John Rafferty, CEO of the Canadian National Institute for the Blind, said that he is not aware of a similar project elsewhere in Canada.

"I think it's a great step," he said. "It's certainly a fantastic commitment by the city of Halifax."

His organization will be watching to see how well used the dog run is before deciding whether to advocate for similar areas in other jurisdictions, Mr. Rafferty said.

The people behind the Halifax project are similarly curious to see how popular it will be. It has not been an instant hit but, with fewer than 100 service animals estimated to be in the area, no one expected it to be inundated. Interest has been piqued far beyond the city, though.

"There's a lot of inquiry and there seems to be a lot of support from the guide-dog community," Ms. McFadyen said. "They're envious."

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