

Dog Walking 101

Last year the American Pet Products Association estimated that Americans would spend \$62.75B on their furry friends, up 4 % from the previous year. Roughly a third of that is spent on services, like dog walking. However, dog walking isn't just lucrative compared to the average job, it's also fun and rewarding. Every day the dog walker is the hero to several dogs, providing outdoor exploration, exercise and relief! Walkers also reap the rewards of exercise and a lower tax bracket for independent contractors vs. wage earners.

Dog Life Pro's vision for its walking services is to offer experienced and skilled dog walks for a lower price than its competitors. But why would the best walkers work for less? The answer is simple; you don't work for less, I do. You keep the majority of the bill rate! See the Contractor Requirements and Earnings document for detailed information on potential earnings.

It takes more than being a dog lover. Walking someone else's dog also requires knowledge, skill, and responsibility. The dog walker is actually taking on an enormous amount of responsibility. They have access to someone else's home and all of their belongings. If they were to leave a door unlocked and the owner's home was robbed, the walker may be liable. That's important, but not even the dog walker's primary responsibility, which is caring for the owner's dog and ensuring it doesn't get hurt or escape while in their care.

These are just two examples of the responsibilities a dog walker assumes. The remainder of this document reviews several risks that a dog walker may be exposed to, and actions they may take to mitigate those risks. You may use this document to prepare for a skills assessment exam, which you will be required to take and attain a passing score of 75% or higher in order to qualify for a contractor position working with Dog Life Pro, but using this document as your source of information is not required.

Responsibility

- Avoiding Injury, loss or death
- Damage or theft to the dog owner's dwelling
- Personal conduct
- Lawsuits

Avoiding Injury, Loss or Death

Providing dogs with an opportunity to stretch their legs, sniff, play and relieve themselves are all important, but it's **equally important** that a walker provides a safe experience. There is a lot that can go wrong on a walk and a professional contractor should be experienced and well prepared to manage these situations. Some key safety concerns:

- If a dog walker sees that a dog they are walking has any type of injury, is limping or seems lethargic and not her normal self, they should include this detail in a post walk update to the owner and notify Dog Life Pro.

- If a dog doesn't want to be caught, he won't be. So the best defense is to ensure he never gets away. Give all leash and harness clips and buckles a good tug before leaving the house to ensure they're properly secured. Plastic buckles don't always align correctly or snap securely, so it's wise to double check them.
- If a dog owner doesn't use a harness, ensure the collar is tight enough so that if the dog turns around and pulls backward, the collar won't slip over his head. This will be especially relevant if the dog has a small head. It would be wise for the walker to inform the owner and the agency in writing if they feel there is a problem or risk with any of the walking equipment. UPDATE: Since 2018 – all dogs must be wearing a properly fit easy walk harness. Please inform Dog Life Pro if the dog you're walking doesn't have a harness.
- Know the dog and review the dog's bio on file with the Dog Life Pro. If the walker is responsible for a dog that reacts by barking and lunging at other dogs, they should know this and avoid the situation all together by simply crossing the street or walking in a different direction. UPDATE: As of 2018, you should always cross the street so that you are not passing a dog or a person on the same sidewalk.
- Splitting is quite simply the act of putting oneself between a dog and the stimulus eliciting a reaction. This could be another dog, a squirrel, a person, or a loud garbage truck going by. Sounds simple but it takes some practice and the best method of becoming familiar with it is to practice it before the situation presents itself. Splitting is a great method to avoid problems before they happen.
- Walkers should ensure their dogs are wearing identification tags and send a written notice to Dog Life Pro if they are not. A dog that gets free without identification is going to be even more difficult to track down.
- Smart walkers close and lock all gates and doors ALL the time. If a home has a gate it should be closed and latched at all times. Leaving it open could result in a runaway dog if the dog runs past the front door. Take advantage of this "safety" gate by latching it all of the time, even when you're about to walk through it again..
- A good walker will keep their hand through the loop at the end of the leash and wrap it around their wrist once or twice. It doesn't have to be tight and uncomfortable, but if the dog suddenly pulls for something the walker didn't see, the leash may slip away if not held securely. Never let go of the leash or put it down for any reason. A dog that seems perfectly happy to walk with the walker may take off when given the opportunity.
- Walkers that scan ahead and around themselves are less likely to encounter problems. Looking at a phone or not paying attention to the environment could be disastrous for an off guard walker, resulting in a loss of control and an injured or runaway dog. **This is the most likely scenario in which a walker will lose a dog or encounter a dog injury.** Common examples:
 - Another person or dog that suddenly appears at a corner and startles the dog under the walker's care. When approaching such corners stay in front of the dog, closer to the blind side of the corner and keep a secure grip on the leash.
 - Another dog walks out from between two houses. Scanning ahead and paying attention is the main method to stay prepared for this. It would also help to keep the dog on the easement side.
 - A rabbit or squirrel will often cause dogs to suddenly pull on leash.

- Keeping a dog safe will also help to keep the dog walker safe. A dog walker looking at their phone when a large dog their walking takes off after a squirrel could incur a shoulder injury *and* lose the dog.
- Remember that dogs can be very unpredictable. Even a dog that knows its walker well and appears predictable could suddenly react to something that they were once fine with. A couple of examples: 1) A dog that was an easy walk for me for several months, suddenly started showing signs of fear as we approached people. I realized later, it was because the days were shorter and he couldn't see as well on our late afternoon walks when there was less light. 2) I once had a dog that one day darted through the fence gate and almost broke free. From this point on, I noticed that each time we went through the gate she seemed nervous and darted through it. I can only surmise that the heavy sprung gate closed on her one day with her owner and it hurt her. Had I not had the leash looped around my wrist, she may have run away. I know it's hard to imagine a dog that seems affectionate, running away until witnessed for oneself. I've seen a dog turn back to look at me, and then take off in a full run.
- The relationship a walker develops with a dog over time may also present unique challenges. I once had a dog that I walked for over a year and one day I noticed that she was acting aggressive when other people were walking towards us on the sidewalk. She didn't display this behavior for hundreds of walks. My theory is that she had become protective of me. As soon as I split her and put myself between her and the oncoming stranger her behavior began to change and over time returned to her previous mannerism. I now split dogs and people all the time. It's become habitual and instinctual for me, and I don't have to think about it.
- What to do if a dog does get away from their walker:
 - First give a feint and parry or play bow, then turn around and run away a few steps while calling the dog by name, making silly noises, and looking back. Hopefully the dog will think this is an invitation to a fun game of chase and will comply by chasing after the walker. Once he catches up to walker, they should step on the leash and then pick it up with their hand.
 - DO NOT chase the dog. He will likely think he's being challenged to a game of keep away or become fearful.
 - If luring the dog back with an invitation to play doesn't work, start tossing treats at him, bringing him closer and closer, until he takes one from the hand of the walker who can then step on the leash before attempting to pick it up.
 - Try presenting the dog with a squeaky toy or a ball to lure him close enough to step on the leash.
 - If none of these methods work and the dog starts to run away, call Dog Life Pro while calmly pursuing the dog. Dogs are masters of reading body language, so remain loose and calm with a happy go lucky expression.
- A dog getting away from its walker is the most likely way it will end up lost, injured or dead. So, take these precautions seriously and do everything to avoid this situation.
- Another likely scenario that could result in a dog getting injured is if it's bitten by another dog. For this reason a walker should never allow the dog they're walking to meet another dog. Owners often don't know how their dogs will react to other dogs on leash. They may say, "he's friendly" based on their past experience. However, leash introductions present unique challenges, like leash reactivity or barrier frustration. It's best to just inform the owner in a clear and firm voice that introductions are not approved by the dog's owner.
 - This could also happen if an off leash dog approaches while walking a client's dog. This situation presents a unique challenge and is not as rare as one might think. I usually encounter this situation once a year! I found [this article](#) to be very helpful in providing options in this situation.

- Human introductions should also be avoided. Dog walkers find this particularly difficult because dog lovers love petting any dog and walkers know this! The problem is that most humans, including many dog lovers, don't understand or know that many dogs don't like being petted on top of their heads, which is a primate instinct. Watch a cute puppy at a park sometime as it draws a crowd and you'll see most people will try to pet the dog on top of his head. This is a common way that humans show affection. However, dogs see this as a show of dominance and some may perceive it as threatening and lash out in fear, which could result in a dog bite.
- In spite of following all of these precautions, bad events can still unfold sometimes. So the experienced dog walker will be prepared by ensuring all relevant contact information is in their phone. This includes:
 - The dog owner's contact information. Include second and third phone numbers to call, the name, number, and address of the dog's vet, the dog's microchip ID number (if chipped) and the phone number of the company that maintains that database.
 - The phone number for Dog Life Pro 630-768-9220. Put it in your contacts. If something does go wrong contact me immediately, so that I am informed and can provide assistance.
 - A picture of the dog to share with others helping in the search and to send to animal shelters.
 - The animal control phone number.
 - A phone number for the closest 24 hour emergency vet clinic. Minutes matter if something does go wrong.

Damage or Theft to the Dog Owner's Dwelling

Having access to someone's home is a huge responsibility. As a dog walker most of the responsibility in this area centers around keeping the key safely and securing all locks, gates, and doors. A negligent step taken advantage of by a thief can leave the walker liable. Here is a list of actions one can take to avoid causing damage or loss to the dog owner's property:

- Although it's smart to keep the code to the key lockbox or alarm in the dog owner's contact information, it is not wise to label it as such. i.e 01357# is smart, but Lockbox key code 01357# is not wise, since the contact info will also have the owners residential address in it.
- Once inside the home, a smart walker will lock the door behind them just in case they walk out a different door. Then lock the door they walk out of with the dog.
- It's helpful for a walker to take their time on their first visit at a new client site. Many doors and locks have small quirks and differences; it's worth a few extra seconds to get to know each of them.
- Walkers should turn knobs and push/pull doors after they think they've locked them. More than once, I thought I locked a door but discovered it wasn't locked after a turn of the handle and a push/pull. Again a few seconds that could save a walker from liability.
- It's important that a walker be aware of their surroundings and pay attention when they enter and exit the property. If a criminal were watching them it wouldn't take long to document their movements and plan a break in while the walker is out with the dog.

Personal Conduct

- A courteous walker will remove their shoes or clean up after themselves when entering a home during inclement weather or with dirty shoes. Making a mess may not cause damage, but will most certainly generate a complaint and jeopardize the client contract.

- If returning from a dog walk in the rain, wipe down the dog and his paws before reentering the home, or just after entering if there is no outdoor shelter from the rain. It's also helpful to pay attention on the walk and help the dog avoid mud and puddles.
- After entering the home, lock it, and immediately put the keys in a pocket. A distracted walker may put the keys down in the home and lock themselves and the dog out of the home when leaving for the walk,. The walker will be embarrassed, could find themselves stuck outside in inclement weather and unable to finish their route. Call me so I can assist if this happens to you.
- Walkers earn goodwill points by cleaning up a bathroom mishap they may find in the owners home when they arrive. They should update the owner and inform Dog Life Pro if it's a regular occurrence.
- Walkers should always pick up feces. If a neighbor sees a walker leave a poop behind and recognizes the dog, they may complain to the owner who may complain to Dog Life Pro. Worse, the owner may just terminate their contract with DLP. Additionally, not picking up dog feces is usually fineable by most municipalities. In Berwyn the maximum fine is \$750.00.
- Remember that in today's world technology is becoming more and more prevalent. A remote controlled Internet camera can be bought for about the price of a large pizza. Many of these cameras have built in microphones. Many Dog Life Pro customers have them inside and outside of their homes. This is just another reason to maintain a professional appearance and demeanor, because you could be under observation - best to assume you are.

Lawsuits brought against you

Aspiring dog walkers probably never imagined so much could go wrong and that so much thought should go into a dog walk. It's not rocket science, but clearly it takes more than just a love for dogs for a walker to keep themselves and the dogs they've been entrusted to care for, safe. Owners love their walker because the walker cares for their dogs when they're unable to. However, even after a great relationship has been established an owner could decide to press charges against you if they feel you were negligent.

The above information is a comprehensive (but certainly not complete) review of the most prevalent risks associated with dog walking and what Dog Life Pro and its clients expect, but as a professional contractor applying for a contract to walk dogs, Dog Life Pro expects that you are aware of the above information and have knowledge and experience about the risks involved. This document in no way is a substitute for the knowledge and skill expected and you and your insurance company are liable for any mishaps or problems resulting from your negligence. That said, if you're responsible and careful, dog walking can be a lucrative and fun job, providing more flexibility than most jobs. In fact, I would say it doesn't feel like work to me at all. I get paid to spend my days outside with dogs, getting exercise and playing 😊