

## **Step'N with Stetson**

**Recently I traveled from Phoenix, Arizona to Washington D.C. for the 2019 NIB/NAEPB Advocates for Leadership and Employment Symposium. This would be my guide dog Stetson's first time on Capitol Hill, meeting with various Congressional dignitary and their Staffers.**

**My journey to D.C. began bright and early on the day of departure. Using the built-in screen reading software (Voice Over) on my iPhone, I ordered my ride to the airport. Voice Over is an accessibility tool that enables me to navigate the iPhone, read and compose text messages, emails, and post on social media. When the car arrived, I gave Stetson the command to find the curb, and then proceeded to get in the back seat. Stetson rides on the floor between my feet. When we arrived at the airport and after gathering my suitcase, I asked Stetson to "find the door inside" and he worked his way through the bollards, people, luggage and into the ticketing area. I was greeted by an airline representative who pointed me in the direction of the ticketing counter. Stetson and I zigged zagged our way through the line and I told him to find the counter, which he did with perfection.**

**Most airports have escorts, no... not that type of escort! rather employees who will assist passengers who may need assistance getting from the ticketing area to the gate. On this occasion, I requested assistance since I was departing from a gate that was unfamiliar to me. The person escorting me would provide verbal instructions to me, and I would then instruct Stetson to head in that direction. When we arrived at the TSA security check point, I had Stetson in a "sit, stay" position, made a long lease and walked through the metal detector. I then called the dog to me. TSA policy states that the harness, leash that is used to control the dog does not have to be removed, but any accessories or supplies must go through the normal screening process. After a quick pat down of the dog, we were off to the gate.**

**Stetson did a fantastic job maneuvering through the crowds of people, ignoring the various smells from the many restaurants and of course the occasional bark from those little yippy dogs running around the airport now a days. Once we arrived at my gate, I had Stetson sit under the chair until it was time to board.**

Using the environment around me, I was able to determine that the inbound plane arrived at the gate, passengers had disembarked, and we were ready to board. Following the sound of the scanners, I gave Stetson commands until we reached the door and then worked down the jetway and then onto the plane. Once I reached my row, I took off his harness for the four-hour trip into Reagan National. Stetson stayed on the floor in front of me, occasionally changing positions. Generally, I will place him with his hind end under the seat in front of me or will try and get a bulkhead seat for a little more room for both of us.

When we arrived in Washington D.C., the process is basically reversed. Follow the crowd of people to baggage claim, find our bag and out to the curb for a Lyft to the hotel. Although Stetson and I were in D.C. just six months ago, we were now staying in a different hotel, so I had to get us orientated to the facility. Giving him commands such as, “find the elevator,” or “find the escalator,” and “find our room.” Stetson and I had the layout down after a couple of trips up and down the elevators.

On the day of our “Hill visit,” Stetson and I jumped into a Lyft and headed to the Longmore Building to connect with my counterpart from NIB’s government relations consulting firm. We had three appointments and according to my ”pawdometer” we walked over 5 miles around the Capitol.

Stetson, a yellow Labrador Retriever from Guide Dogs of America, has several thousand air miles under his collar, as part of his training to become a guide dog, he traveled to Boston, Las Vegas and San Jose.

Guide dog teams are paired by taking into account a variety of factors like personalities and physical abilities. Additionally, the unique needs of the handler in his or her social, work and home environments are considered. A good match will take a team from Phoenix to the halls of power in Washington D.C. in efforts to strengthen the AbilityOne program.