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The use of assistance/service dogs from a human rights and animal welfare perspective

There has been a growth in the use of assistance and service dogs in a wide variety of contexts to enable humans to lead more fulfilling lives. Therefore, the role of assistance dogs has changed in society and with this brings additional challenges and welfare issues. The aim of this research was to explore the benefits and drawbacks of using assistance and service dogs and to investigate how this role affects the dogs and their welfare. The research explored the human experiences and perceptions of having an assistance/service dog while also investigating the perceived impact of this role on the dog and the dog's welfare. The research followed a mixed method approach with interviews being carried out with clients and dog trainers, and an online survey compiled based on the qualitative aspect of the research. Results revealed high level of satisfaction among service users with their dogs and with the support from the organisations who train and provide the dogs. A common theme emerged whereby interviewees believed that the present assistance/service dog industry in Ireland does not provide assistance/service dogs for many disabilities in comparison with other highly developed societies and this leaves people with certain disabilities discriminated against. The human right to live a fulfilling life despite physical, emotional and intellectual difficulties means that assistance/service dogs are required to complete various roles and tasks to meet these increasing demands. The results revealed an awareness of the conflicts between human demands and dog capabilities whereby there was an understanding of animal welfare particularly, unrealistic human expectations about what dogs can and should do, and how this has the potential to create stress for the dog, which negatively influences their welfare. Results revealed further that the Irish assistance and service dog charities' work is not transparent enough and that the dog training industry needs more regulation and the introduction of minimum standards for dog trainers' qualifications and competencies. Also the assessment and monitoring procedure of clients and dogs need stricter regulation and the setting up of

minimum standards. More knowledge and continuous learning about behaviour and dog welfare is a priority in the assistance and service dog field in order to ensure human and animal welfare and satisfaction. Also more knowledge and education is required among the general public about assistance and service dogs, their work and the responsible human behaviour towards the people who are using the dog. By investigating the mutual experiences of various parties including dog trainers, service users and the perceived perceptions of dog behaviour, the research filled a gap that exists in knowledge of animal experience and welfare in the role of assistance and service dog.