# Dog Guide Handlers Australia

# Dog Guide Refusal Incident Report 28 October 2022

Author: Annette Ferguson

## Executive Summary

Since 2019 Dog Guide Handlers Australia has observed an increase in the number of members reporting they have been denied access to a place of business or service because of their Dog Guide. Between 27 April 2022 and 30 October 2022 an online form gathered 69 reports of Dog Guide refusals across a variety of services and businesses within Australia. The form was designed to capture the severity of the refusal problem and was shared with the DGHA membership and through other channels. Rideshare and taxi companies were the most commonly cited offenders with 13CABS and Uber topping the list. Respondents to this survey told us refusals cause a wide range of negative feelings and reactions ranging from stress and anxiety to humiliation, disempowerment, dehumanisation and vulnerability, and negatively impacting their reputation at work. They said they were treated with hostility and disrespect and asked to do some unreasonable things. They reported the need to make changes in their lives including going out and eating out less, disengaging from their community, missing important work and medical appointments, leaving their Dog Guide home when they go out and having to manage more depression and anxiety.

## Introduction

On 27 April 2022, Chairperson of Dog Guide Handlers Australia (DGHA), Dr Kevin Murfitt AM launched the Guide Dog Refusal Reporting Form.

Featured on the home page of their website, [www.dgha.org.au](http://www.dgha.org.au), DGHA designed this form to capture the scope of incidents where their members are illegally refused service or entry to a public place because of their Dog Guide. The online form enables people who are blind or have low vision to report individual refusal incidents and records information like the time, place, service or location of the refusal, as well as how each refusal affected the member and the outcome of each situation.

The questions included yes or no questions, multiple choice and open ended questions where respondents could answer in their own words.

In his press release Dr Murfitt said “We are increasingly hearing that people who are blind or have low vision and are Dog Guide Handlers are missing important appointments, jeopardizing their reliability at work, and even avoiding going out at all due to the mental health impacts of sometimes hostile operators denying them access to ride share vehicles, taxis, and other community services that others can just take for granted”.

[In line with the United Nations Universal Values, Principal Two, Leave No One Behind, developed by the United Nations Sustainable Development Group,](https://unsdg.un.org/2030-agenda/universal-values/leave-no-one-behind#:~:text=It%20represents%20the%20unequivocal%20commitment,of%20humanity%20as%20a%20whole.) Dog Guide Handlers Australia are calling for action to be taken by Australian authorities to stop blatant discrimination toward people who use Dog Guides for mobility.

## Background

Dog Guide Handlers Australia was established in August 2009 and currently has 186 financial members. Their Facebook group was established in December 2009 and currently has 841 members. In the 12 years since Dog Guide Handlers Australia established their Facebook group for members and those with an interest in Dog Guides they have observed regular posts and comments about refusal of Dog Guide Handlers to services because of their Dog Guides in their Facebook group.

In 2016 he [Victorian Disability Discrimination Legal Service](http://ddlsaustralia.org/) (DDLS) [formally expressed to the Australian Human Rights Commission (AHRC) its views on the current confusion around assistance animal legislation and policy in Australia.](http://ddlsaustralia.org/informationpublicationslinks/submissions-2/)

The submission from the DDLS highlights apparent inconsistencies in laws and policies across the States and Territories, and between the States and Territories and the Commonwealth, which mean that people who use assistance animals face discrimination, uncertainty and a range of associated challenges to accessing the community. It was noted by the AHRC that [“Without associated changes to address the current gaps in policy and regulation across the country with regard to assistance animals, continued barriers and discrimination will remain for people with disability who rely on those supports on a daily basis](https://humanrights.gov.au/our-work/disability-rights/projects/assistance-animals-and-disability-discrimination-act-1992-cth#Specific%20issue%20of%20regulation). The AHRC reported 41 complaints from blind and vision impaired people during a three year period between 2012 – 2015. It was not specified whether these complaints were related to Dog Guide Refusals.

In the period starting January 2019 and ending in April 2022 prior to the launch of our online refusal form the topic of Dog Guide refusals was raised in the Facebook group approximately 25 times.

On April 27 2022 [Guide Dogs NSW/ACT reported the results of their national survey which showed over a third of Guide Dog Handlers across Australia have reported being denied access to a public venue or form of transport](https://vic.guidedogs.com.au/news/one-in-three-guide-dog-handlers-put-in-danger-when-refused-access-or-service-because-of-their-guide-dog/) because of their Guide Dog in the past year.

## Overview

In the 181 days the reporting form has been online, we’ve received 69 reports of refusal of service or entry to a public place to people using a Dog Guide. The reporting period summarised here is 27 April 2022 to 30 October 2022. The form will remain open online and we will continue to collect submissions. The DGHA committee are aware of other places to report refusals, such as Dog Guide Schools, advocacy organisations and state and federal authorities and acknowledge that these reports are somewhat less than they would be if all reports were collated in one place.

## Location of refusals

The majority of the incidents occurred in Victoria and New South Wales recording 40 and 15 respectively. Queensland recorded 6, South Australia recorded 4, Western Australia 3 and Tasmania recorded 1.

## Services and businesses refusing Dog Guides

48 of the refusals were by taxi and rideshare drivers, most commonly 13Cabs (25 refusals) and Uber (9 refusals), 8 at non specified locations, 6 occurred at eateries, 3 at retail or businesses, 2 on public transport and 2 at accommodation providers.

## Handlers experience of refusals

When describing the refusal incident, respondents most commonly used the following terms to describe their experience:

* Increased stress, anxiety and fear
* Humiliated and embarrassed
* Angry
* Powerless or disempowered
* Disrespected
* Vulnerable

Many respondents noted that they were treated with disrespect and hostility and that they were asked to do unreasonable things like carry their dog, keep their dog off the carpet, eat outside eateries, leave their dog outside while they attended an appointment. Several respondents reported that drivers locked the doors so they couldn’t get into the car, or drove off as they went to grab the door handle.

Reports included complaints from rideshare, taxi and accommodation providers about having to remove the dog hair after accommodating a Dog Guide.

Many reports documented blatant disregard for the laws with some offenders denying the access laws existed and others knowing the law and refusing service or entry anyway. Some respondents reported that they were accused of having a fake service dog.

## The impact of refusals on Handlers

One of the most important aspects of this report is the impact Dog Guide refusals have on handlers.

Below is a selection of deidentified quotes from the respondents of our online form.

When asked how this refusal experience affected them, respondents told us:

“I cried. I’m tired and beyond hurt that we’re still being treated like non humans.”

“I am less inclined to go out knowing that it’s so difficult to get a taxi home and there are no busses after certain hours or on Sundays.”

“Highly stressed, increased anxiety, this negatively affecting my reputation at work and very disheartening.”

“Humiliated, unwilling to use taxis or ride share so loss of engagement in the community; anxiety and depression aggravated.”

“Missed a medical appointment as the Doctor could not wait as it made me upset and distressed.”

“Humiliated, disempowered, belittled - and embarrassed. My witness was a friend from interstate - a businesswoman - visiting for a reunion. She was horrified and distressed on my behalf.”

“Honestly, I have had that many restaurant refusals in this city it has made me reluctant to eat out any more, the encounters are uncomfortable and I don't want my friends inconvenienced because I have a guide dog, although they are extremely understanding and supportive of the situation. There are many more incidents to report here, however this one particularly stands out as it was so hostile.”

“After a particularly distressing refusal recently, my daughter told me that we shouldn’t bother trying to find another place to eat as it would just happen again. This is not how I want my children to experience my disability.”

“I never take Uber with my guide dog - I find it tiring to argue and advocate for myself all the time. If I have no choice other than uber, I will leave my guide at home. This isn’t ideal obviously for safety reasons.”

“It added to the extreme depression and stress I feel when I have to make trips like that, especially when it was while travelling to my father's funeral.”

“I feel humiliated, dehumanised and angry. I am less inclined to go out knowing that is' so difficult to get a taxi home and there are no busses after certain hours or on Sundays.”

“I'm tired of feeling lesser simply because I see the world differently.”

“It made me feel extremely anxious and vulnerable. I felt shaky for the rest of the day. I have spent today (the day after) in isolation. I need a break from people and the world right now.”

Through our Facebook group and other sources we have anecdotal evidence that many people are sick and tired of reporting refusal incidents and having no positive outcome that they have given up reporting them anywhere. They have found alternative ways to access what they need. For example, they will go to appointments and outings without their Dog Guide, or rely on friends for assistance, or pay support workers out of their NDIS funding as a way of obtaining reliable transport. It was evident from social media interactions that some handlers declined to register the refusals on our form because they already spent time on making a complaint with the relevant company/organisation often with unsatisfactory outcomes, and they simply didn’t have the energy to duplicate their efforts to yet another complaints form.

## Conclusion

Navigating the world as a person living with low vision or blindness is a challenge that is greatly relieved by the use of a Dog Guide. Dog Guides allow handlers with low vision and blindness to navigate the world safely and independently. They are highly trained and highly skilled animals who not only offer their exceptional guiding skills, but a means to dissolve socially isolating and cognitively challenging situations as well.

## Recommendations

With a rise in discrimination over the last few years seeing Dog Guide Handlers literally left behind with no transport, denied access to eateries and accommodation and other services, left with feelings of humiliation, dehumanisation, vulnerable and powerless, because business and service operators either don’t know or don’t follow the law, the following is recommended:

* Mandatory disability discrimination training for all business operators and frontline staff in Australia. This training must include how to effectively and respectfully interact with Dog Guide Handlers and people with low vision or blindness. The training company needs to be accountable, keep records of what the student learned.
* Financial penalties for discrimination that are significant, at least $5,000, national, enforceable and that will actually change behaviour
* Complaint procedures that are simple and fully accessible, and with the outcome of the complaint reported back to the person making the complaint
* Collaboration from all blindness organisations, Dog Guide Training Schools, and Assistance Animal organisations within Australia to build and maintain a central database of refusal reports and to actively support their members and clients to combat this increasing and persistent discrimination.