

WRITTEN QUESTION P-2699/03
by Uma Aaltonen (Verts/ALE)
to the Commission

Subject: Status of assistance dogs in the Union

In several Member States people suffering from various forms of disability use dogs specially trained to help them. Guide dogs for the blind and visually impaired are the most familiar example of animals providing help of this kind, which give their owners both independence and security. Guide dogs are recognised to be necessary to their owners and in the EU are now admitted to almost every place where their owners might need to go. However, in European Year of People with Disabilities it might be appropriate to draw attention to the newer ways in which dogs are increasingly being used to improve the quality of life for the disabled. People with reduced mobility have assistance dogs to make the course of their day-to-day lives easier by opening doors, turning lights on and off, picking up objects that have been dropped, bringing necessary items within reach, and helping to support or pull their owners along when they move about. People can be more independent when they do not always have to rely on other human help. To help the hard of hearing and the deaf, dogs can also be trained to warn of sounds that demand action. Hearing dogs alert their owners when a warning signal or fire alarm sounds, the doorbell or telephone rings, water or food is boiling on the stove, and when they hear signs of many other significant everyday occurrences. In addition, all assistance dogs act as 'standard-bearers' for their owners at the social level, reducing the isolation caused by disability.

1. What will the Commission do to ensure that life runs smoothly for citizens who use assistance dogs, without the inconvenience of explanations or delays to which they are subjected at present?
2. Can the Commission provide some form of aid to the disabled in the new Member States by already starting to support social, employment, and public health initiatives and programmes to train guide, assistance, and hearing dogs in those countries?
3. Can the Commission recommend to the Member States that they adopt common standards and a distinguishing emblem to enable all citizens who use assistance dogs to move about, study, seek and do work, and engage in social intercourse without obstacles and delays? Such a 'passe-partout' symbol, which would have a very considerable impact on everyday life, should lead to an increase in dog training and help the disabled to live more normal lives.