Join us for Smart Service series, *Focus on the Phases*! Come along with us as we explore the various stages of the guide dog training process. Each week, we'll give you some insight into the specific skills and milestones that guide dogs in training go through when they are on campus.

***Focus on the Phases* – Phases 0 & 1**

The beginning of our guide dogs' training begins on Recall Day when dogs return from their volunteer puppy raising home to our training facilities in Kloof Durban. At Recall, some dogs are selected for Breeder Evaluation to potentially join SSD's breeding colony, others will soon begin their formal guide dog training!

Phase 0 of guide dog training begins with getting acclimated to the kennels and to campus. The dogs will experience a variety of enrichment activities to aid in a smooth transition to their new surroundings. Enrichment can come in many forms – from walks, to puzzle toys, to nylon-bones, and even music! Other activities include grooming, being paired with a kennel roommate, and group play introductions. They will also have a thorough health screening to ensure they are in tip-top shape to begin their guide dog training. To maintain happy, balanced dogs throughout their time on campus, they will continue to be provided with assorted enrichment.

We begin formal training exercises in Phase 1. Food rewards are used in the SSD training program as a powerful motivation and reinforcement tool for learning and maintaining desired behaviors. SSD approaches dog training using positive reinforcement. This means reinforcing the desired behavior with something the dog enjoys such as food rewards, praise, and play.

During Phase 1 of training, guide dogs in training are taught to associate the noise of a clicker with a food reward. The clicker marks the precise moment that the guide dog performed the desired behavior, and indicates that a food reward is coming. Clicker training will be used through all phases of training to teach the dog new guide dog skills.

The position of the dog's body in relation to the handler is very important in guide dog training. Much time is dedicated in Phase 1 to teaching the dog what position to be in. This is typically at the handler's left side. To aid in shaping proper positioning, a pedestal is often used. This is a raised, narrow platform about two inches high and just long enough for the dog to get all four feet on. The dog learns to stand, sit, stay, and lay down on this pedestal, keeping its body in a straight line. Looking ahead at what will be asked of a working guide dog, this will help the dog have straight body alignment for obedience behaviors (sit, down, heel) and when guiding their handler to things like curbs, doors, and stairs.

Maintaining focus around potential distractions is also introduced in Phase 1 of training. Guide dogs in training will begin to learn the basics with their handler in a familiar environment, like their kennel run. Then they will move to other more challenging environments starting with low-level distractions and increasing in difficulty as the dog is ready.

Phase 1 is also when the dogs are introduced to wearing their specialized guide dog harness. The harnesses are sized specifically for each dog for the most comfortable fit!