



USAID
FROM THE AMERICAN PEOPLE

BULGARIA

CASE STUDY

Training Eyes on Four Paws

Group opens nation's first school to train dogs to assist the blind



Photo: USAID/Bulgaria/Jennifer Croft

Martina Marinova, the only certified instructor of guide dogs for the blind in Bulgaria, trains one of the Labradors at the school.

“We started with nothing but an idea and a list of goals,” said Albena Alexieva, chairperson of the Eyes on Four Paws Foundation, which trains guide dogs in Bulgaria.

Telling Our Story
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Challenge

In 2001, the words “guide dog” wouldn’t ring many bells for most Bulgarians. That’s when Albena Alexieva established the Eyes on Four Paws Foundation with the aim of creating a Bulgarian school to train guide dogs for blind people. Trained guide dogs were not available in Bulgaria, where the blind often endure secluded lives with limited mobility.

Initiative

In 2001, Eyes on Four Paws participated in the first grant competition for social enterprises sponsored by USAID. It received support for its plan to offer training courses for dog owners as a way to raise money for the school. The staff also visited a school for guide dogs in the Czech Republic and acquired practical experience in organizing a social enterprise and interacting successfully with businesses. “The organizational and theoretical knowledge we received through USAID was extremely valuable for the development of our activities,” remarked Mihail Nedkov, the foundation’s coordinator of the socialization program. In 2005, after winning first prize at the annual Business Plan Competition for Social Entrepreneurs in Bulgaria, foundation staff visited the Prague school for a second time. They also purchased three Labradors from the best breeding farm in the region.

Results

As a result of strong teamwork, six years later the foundation has achieved its major goals, officially opening the school in Sofia in 2007, and handing over two trained dogs to their new owners in Plovdiv and Harmanli for a symbolic one Bulgarian leva (about 75 cents). Today, the school is a busy place, with two dogs preparing to start training after their host family stay and three dogs preparing to begin their new lives as companions to the blind. Seven blind people are on the waiting list to receive a guide dog. Eyes on Four Paws has ambitious plans to train up to 15 dogs annually over the next several years.