

You're a *what?*



Dog Walker

“**W**hat I do is totally illegal,” says a seasoned Baltimore dog walker as he ushers several dogs through the woods.

The reference to lawlessness isn't about what he does (walking dogs) but, rather, how he does it: this dog walker—who prefers to remain anonymous—allows the pets in his care to run free on public property in violation of community leash laws.

Not all dog walkers tread on the wrong side of the law, though. In her business, dog walker Cynthia Elkey follows the rules. For reasons of safety, both the dogs' and people's, Cynthia insists that her pooches remain on-leash at all times.

Most dog-walking services, including Cynthia's, are geared toward people who are gone for long periods during the workweek. Services are especially helpful, she says, for those who have puppies or older dogs that need to go outside more often, as well as for those who have high-energy dogs.

For Cynthia, this occupation allows her to earn money doing what she enjoys: Being outdoors, getting exercise, and caring for dogs. It also capitalizes on other strengths she has. “When I heard about this occupation, I thought it'd be perfect for me,” Cynthia says. “I'm very detail oriented, self-motivated, like to work unsupervised, and can follow a schedule.”

Cynthia typically begins her work in midmorning or early afternoon, driving to her clients' homes. She takes each dog for a 15- or 30-minute walk around the neighborhood and then brings the dog back to its home, where she might give it a treat. Before moving on to her next client, she always makes sure that

the dog has plenty of fresh water.

“It's a very physical job,” she says. “You need to get in and out of cars, put on leashes, bend over to pick up after the dogs. We're outside a lot—in all kinds of weather.” And walking dogs, especially large or headstrong ones, can be challenging in any conditions.

As an occupation, dog walking varies significantly in the details. Some dog walkers, particularly those in large urban areas, walk more than one dog at a time. The terrain and duration of the walks can range from a brief, leisurely stroll on city sidewalks to long, brisk hikes through rural parks. Furthermore, some dog walkers work independently; others have helpers or work as part of a team.

Cynthia is part of the latter group; she hires other dog walkers to help her respond to a growing clientele. She and her assistants work Monday through Friday, each of them walking two to six dogs every day. As business manager, Cynthia establishes territories and arranges her teams so that each dog walker works in one area, usually close to his or her home.

Positioning workers and working with dogs are only part of Cynthia's duties. “You wear a lot of hats with this business,” she says. Cynthia also is responsible for advertising and marketing to attract new clients, hiring and managing employees, and doing administrative tasks such as billing clients, paying workers, and preparing taxes. In addition, she holds monthly employee meetings to discuss dog health and behavioral issues.

Another part of Cynthia's job is to train her assistants. Training may include instruction on basic dog-walking techniques, such as the proper way to hold a leash, and a review of Cynthia's business policies. There are no formal training requirements for becoming a dog walker, however.

The Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS) doesn't collect

Elka Jones is a contributing editor to the OOO, (202) 691-5719.





*by
Elka
Jones*

data specifically
for dog walkers.

Cynthia estimates that most dog walkers make about \$10 to \$15 an hour, with business owners earning more. She pays her employees a commission—a percentage of the money that clients pay for each walk. But it's hard to make walking dogs a full-time career. "It's an ideal job for people who want to work part-time during the middle of the day," she says, adding that many of her employees are homemakers, retirees, or self-employed people.

Cynthia, like many dog walkers, entered the occupation informally. In the mid-1980s, a friend asked Cynthia if she would be interested in taking her dog outside in the afternoons. Cynthia's schedule allowed her to be home during the day, so the arrangement worked well. And the experience helped Cynthia realize the potential for making a living by walking dogs.

Before embarking on any new career, of course, people should research it—and dog walking is no exception, says Cynthia. Occupational research should include learning and reading as much as possible about dogs, she says, especially their behavior and body language.

The details of creating a business require research, too, beyond learning the basics, such as how to set up a spreadsheet to track income and expenses. Some dog walkers may be required to have a business license, for example, and many opt to become insured and bonded as a safeguard for both themselves and their clients. Cynthia recommends contacting local jurisdictions for specific requirements. National and international associations also can provide valuable information, she says, especially for those who are just starting out.

In addition, prospective dog walkers should realize that the work isn't just a walk in the neighborhood park. As with any caretaking job, dog walkers need to be able to deal with problems their

charges present. One of the most common problems, says Cynthia, is dogs that pull on the leash. Cynthia instructs her employees to change directions when this happens, tugging on the leash to get the dog to follow. "You can almost keep going in circles doing this," she says, "but the dog will usually learn from this corrective behavior."

But some of what prospective dog walkers need to succeed comes from neither research nor instruction. "It takes a special person," says Cynthia. "A good dog walker has patience and a love of dogs, a sort of empathy for them." 

