Charging a Marker Signal for Deaf Dogs

You've either just adopted a deaf dog, discovered that your dog is deaf or found that your dog is beginning to lose their hearing. What does that mean for your relationship between you and your dog, and how does that differ from owning a dog who can hear?

Honestly, not a lot.

They'll still do all the things that dogs who can hear like to do, have their own quirks, and, for a dog who is losing their hearing, they'll still maintain their personality just as you know them. The biggest change or difference will be when it comes to training. Since the rationale behind the trainings is all the same, the notable different with training a deaf pup is that we won't be able to use any verbal cues such as a voice or a clicker to mark or cue behaviors. Instead, we'll use hand signals.

All of the AWLA's protocols are written with the intention of using a clicker, except this one, of course. You can still use any of the protocols provided by the AWLA by replacing the clicker with a hand signal. Information on how to teach the hand signal is below!

Teaching the Behavior:

Just the with the protocol for charging a clicker, we need to take a cue that means nothing to your dog, and then attribute meaning to it. I like to use a raised, closed hand, then quickly open, and close my hand, "flashing five" as my marker signal. You can also see this signal in the training video linked below. This signal typically has no meaning attached to it for your dog, so it offers a clean slate to work with. We can now charge this hand signal the same as we would a clicker.

Without being predictable, pair the hand signal with a treat to create your marker. The treat should always come within 3 seconds of the signal. Do this until the dog begins to offer behaviors or increases their focus on you when you give the marker signal and looks for the treat. In other words:

flash → treat
flash → treat
flash → treat
flash → treat

You have now taken a hand signal that means nothing to your dog (the "flashing" of your hand) and taught them that it predicts a reward. It would be the same as if the alarm sound went off on your phone and then your received $100 immediately afterwards. Soon, you will be instantly reaching for your phone when the alarm sound.

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Now that your marker signal is charged, you can continue to use any of the other protocols on our behavior webpage! Simply replace the clicker with your marker signal, keeping all of the other hand signals in the protocols, and don't worry about using any verbal cues.

See the marker signal used in action here:
Butter is One Smart Cookie!