

Understanding the Difference Between Service / Emotional Support / Therapy Animals

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The purpose of this article is to clarify the differences between a “Service Animal”, Emotional Support Animal” (ESA); and “Therapy Animal”. The following information has been compiled from multiple sources: The US Department of Justice Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), The American Kennel Club (AKC), the ADA National Network, International Association of Assistance Dog Partners, and Assistance Dogs International.

I have been a Registered Therapy Dog Handler for over 12 years, as well as Instructor for Family Dog Training Center. On innumerable occasions in both roles, clients and students have asked how to either obtain a Service or Emotional Support Dog for themselves or a family member, or how they can train their own dog to become one.

Many people desire to have their dog go through the process to become a Service (Assistance) Dog or an Emotional Support Assistance dog for themselves or one of their family members. The presence of Service and Emotional Support Dogs (both legitimate and fake) in public areas (businesses, restaurants, etc) has become prevalent in the last several years. While some people may have a reasonable need for a Service/ESA, and have very good intentions, not all understand the difference between a Service Animal and an Emotional Support Animal (also sometimes referred to as a Therapy Animal). It’s important to understand the distinction between the three. The U.S. Department of Justice’s ADA (Americans with Disabilities Act) defines specific criteria for each.

Service Animal (Also referred to as Assistance Animal)

The Americans with Disabilities definition: ***“A service animal means any dog that is individually trained to do work or perform tasks for the benefit of an individual with a disability, including a physical, sensory, psychiatric, intellectual, or other mental disability. Tasks performed can include, among other things, pulling a wheelchair, retrieving dropped items, alerting a person to a sound, reminding a person to take medication, or pressing an elevator button.”***

“Under Title II and III of the ADA, service animals are limited to dogs. However, entities must make reasonable modifications in policies to allow individuals with disabilities to use miniature horses if they have been individually trained to do work or perform tasks for individuals with disabilities.”

Specific examples of animals that fit in the ADA’s definition of “service animal” can be found on the ADA National Network – Service Animals and Emotional Support Animals website at:

<https://adata.org/publication/service-animals-booklet>

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Additional information regarding Service Dogs can be found on the following websites:

- US Justice Department ADA Requirements – Service Animals:
https://www.ada.gov/service_animals_2010.htm
- US Department of Justice - Frequently Asked Questions About Service Animals and the ADA:
https://www.ada.gov/regs2010/service_animal_ga.pdf

Multiple sites on-line offer to “register” your animal as a service animal. The only requirement is to fill out information about your disability then pay a fee. Then they send you the dog’s “certification” papers and a service dog vest. These sites are *not legitimate* Service Dog organizations. They are **not associated with any nationally recognized Service Dog program, nor do they require that dogs be evaluated or tested** (Public Access Test) **to determine their suitability for Service Dog work.** These on-line organizations have resulted in individuals bringing “fake service animals” into public places even though the animal exhibits inappropriate behavior (growling, barking, lunging, jumping on people and things, eliminating, etc.). None of these behaviors would be displayed, nor be allowed to be displayed, by a highly trained Service Dog.

Allowing such “registered” dogs into our communities is creating a widespread problem for people with disabilities who do require an Assistance Dog – one that has been extensively and specifically trained for the job that is needed by their handler. They are being questioned inappropriately and being required to offer proof of their need for a service animal. The on-line organizations have resulted in

This has also put legitimate Service Dog access in jeopardy, by giving the title of “Service Dog” a bad name / reputation and causing businesses and public places to require proof of legitimacy, which the US Department of Justice ADA clearly does not require. **Disabled individuals are not required, by law, to show proof of the need for their animal, nor are they required to show proof (such as an ID, certification papers, vest, etc.) that their animal is legitimate.** The end result is that persons with disabilities that require such Service animals are finding public access more difficult.

So, beware of organizations that offer to “register” your animal as a Service or Emotional Support animal without hands-on assessment (Public Access Test) of your dog. They often present themselves as legitimate Service Dog Registries by citing the ADA requirements. But the ADA has no such endorsement of these organizations or their services.

The American Kennel Club (AKC) is an organization that is *“dedicated to protecting the rights of all dog owners, promoting responsible dog ownership and ensuring that laws governing dog ownership and breeding are reasonable, enforceable and non-discriminatory.”* They state: *“Because service dogs have public access into restaurants, stores, and the cabin area of airplanes, some people obtain fake service dog credentials just because they want their dog to be with them. For a certain amount of money and minimal application standards, a dog owner can receive a vest and certificate for an untrained pet. This practice is unethical and detrimental to the well-being of working service dogs. The exploitation of service dog laws is a federal crime.”*

According to the AKC, *“Service dog training is a long, arduous process. Dogs must be able to perform their tasks on command and have to perform the skills needed for the Assistance Dogs International Public Access Test, a series of objectives designed to evaluate the dog’s behavior in distracting environments.”*

*“Service dogs must be handler-focused, desensitized to distractions, and **highly trained to do specific tasks**. They should not be distracted by the public, as they should **focus solely on their owner** when working. For service dogs, training can last up to two years before they are placed with a client. Service dogs typically wear a vest that identifies them as a service dog and asks the public not to pet them.”*

*“Owner-trained service dogs have become more popular in the last few years. Long waiting lists, the extra time and expense, and the uncertainty of receiving an organization-trained dog have encouraged more people with disabilities to train their own service dogs. Owners who want to train their own dogs to assist them should **seek professional dog-training help with a trainer experienced in working with service dogs**. They should consult with **Assistance Dogs International (ADI) for help with finding a trainer** and to make sure they are aware of all laws involving service dogs.”*

“Every service dog must be trained in tasking skills specific to the handler’s disability and in public access skills. ADA regulations state that service dogs also must be house-trained and under control at all times in public.”

- American Kennel KC - Service Dog Training 101 – Everything You Need to Know: <http://www.akc.org/content/entertainment/articles/service-dog-training-101/>
- The International Association of Assistance Dog Partners <http://www.iaadp.org/iaadp-minimum-training-standards-for-public-access.html> explains the training standards for Service Dogs, as well as the Public Access Test.
- Assistance Dogs International: <https://www.assistedogsinternational.org/faq-category/would-like-assistance-dog/> is another great resource for information about Service / Assistance Dogs

Emotional Support Animal

Many people recognize that an Emotional Support Animal (ESA) is not the same as a Service Animal. However, there is a common misunderstanding regarding the differences regarding public access with ESAs vs Service Animals. Even though the US Department of Justice has clearly defined questions that are allowed to be asked regarding Service Dogs, businesses have also become unclear on whether ESAs fall under the same privileges to public access as a Service Dog. In a nutshell, they do not.

The US Department of Justice’s ADA states: “Emotional support animals, comfort animals, and therapy dogs are not service animals under Title II and Title III of the ADA. Other species of animals, whether wild or domestic, trained or untrained, are not considered service animals either. The work or tasks performed by a service animal must be directly related to the individual’s disability. It does not matter if a person has a note from a doctor that states that the person has a disability and needs to have the animal for emotional support. A doctor’s letter does not turn an animal into a service animal.”

While Emotional Support Animals or Comfort Animals are often used as part of a medical treatment plan as therapy animals, they are not considered service animals under the ADA. These support animals provide companionship, relieve loneliness, and sometimes help with depression, anxiety, and certain phobias, but do not have special training to perform tasks that assist people with disabilities. Even though some states have laws defining therapy animals, these animals are not limited to working with people with disabilities and therefore are not covered by federal laws protecting the use of service animals. Therapy

animals provide people with therapeutic contact, usually in a clinical setting, to improve their physical, social, emotional, and/or cognitive functioning.” <https://adata.org/publication/service-animals-booklet>

Again, from the ADA National Network website: “Emotional support and psychiatric service animals – Individuals who travel with emotional support animals or psychiatric service animals may need to provide specific documentation to establish that they have a disability and the reason the animal must travel with them. Individuals who wish to travel with their emotional support or psychiatric animals should contact the airline ahead of time to find out what kind of documentation is required.

Examples of documentation that may be requested by the airline: Current documentation (not more than one year old) on letterhead from a licensed mental health professional stating (1) the passenger has a mental health-related disability listed in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM IV); (2) having the animal accompany the passenger is necessary to the passenger’s mental health or treatment; (3) the individual providing the assessment of the passenger is a licensed mental health professional and the passenger is under his or her professional care; and (4) the date and type of the mental health professional’s license and the state or other jurisdiction in which it was issued.¹⁶ This documentation may be required as a condition of permitting the animal to accompany the passenger in the cabin.

Therapy Animal

Emotional Support Animals are also sometimes referred to as Therapy Animals. However, there is also a clear distinction in the definition of a Therapy vs a Service or Emotional Support Animal.

From the AKC Website: <http://www.akc.org/content/entertainment/articles/service-dog-training-101/>
“Service dogs are one dog for one person and perform specific tasks to help that person cope with a disability. Therapy dogs are one dog for everyone—they bring cheer and comfort to hospital patients, assisted living center and nursing home residents, homeless families, and students.”

“Therapy dogs should be friendly and outgoing, yet calm and obedient, and socialized to a variety of people, places, and things. Therapy dogs need to be trained in basic manners and obedience and are required to take continuing education workshops. Therapy dogs and their owners provide opportunities for petting and affection in a variety of settings on a volunteer basis.”

The AKC also defines Therapy Dogs as: “dogs who go with their owners to volunteer in settings such as schools, hospitals, and nursing homes. From working with a child who is learning to read to visiting a senior in assisted living, therapy dogs and their owners work together as a team to improve the lives of other people. Therapy dogs... do not have the same special access as service dogs. It is unethical to attempt to pass off a therapy dog as a service dog for purposes such as flying on a plane or being admitted to a restaurant.”

In Summary

Make sure you understand the differences between a Service, Emotional Support and Therapy Animal and what your personal needs are.

Understand the ADA laws pertaining to Service Dogs and remember that Emotional Support and Therapy Animals are not covered under these laws.

There are organizations that provide dogs as Service Dogs. Some organizations raise them from puppies and the process can take 1 ½ - 2 years. Other organizations obtain older dogs, but they still go through a rigorous training process in order to pass their Public Access Test and become a Service Dog. With both of these types of organizations, the dogs are eventually matched with a handler with whom they will serve as a Service Dog. There are also a few organizations that work with an owner's own dog. The owner and dog both go through the process of training together. This training may also take 9-12 months to complete.

In the event that you do require a Service Dog, search out a reputable a Service Dog trainer. The organizations contained within this packet can help you find one in your area. Realize that passing your dog off as a Service Animal when it has not gone through the rigorous training and evaluation needed, compromises the integrity of legitimate Service Animals working with people that have disabilities.

Resources for Service Dog Organizations:

The following organizations serve Washington state and should be able to provide you with more information to help you meet your needs.

International Association of Canine Professionals (IACP): <http://www.canineprofessionals.com/find-a-professional>.

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Prison Pet Partnership Program: Gig Harbor WA www.prisonpetpartnership.org

Summit Assistance Dogs: Anacortes WA www.summitdogs.org

Brigadoon Service Dogs: Bellingham WA www.brigadoondogs.org

America's VetDogs – the Veteran's K-9 Corps, Inc.: NY www.VetDogs.org

Assistance Dogs of the West: Santa Fe NM www.assistancedogsofthewest....

Bergin University of Canine Studies: Rohnert Park CA www.berginu.edu

Canine Companions For Independence: Santa Rosa CA www.cci.org

Canine Partners For Life: Cochranville PA www.k94life.org

Canines for Service, Inc.: Wilmington NC 28405 www.caninesforservice.org

Dogs for Better Lives: Central Point OR www.dogsforbetterlives.org

ECAD, Educated Canines Assisting with Disabilities: Torrington CT www.ecad1.org

Freedom Service Dogs of America: Englewood CO www.freedom servicedogs.org

Great Plains Assistance Dogs Foundation dba Service Dogs for America: Jud, ND
www.servicedogsforamerica.org...

Guide Dog Foundation for the Blind, Inc.: Smithtown NY www.guidedog.org

Guide Dogs of America: Sylmar CA www.guidedogsofamerica.org

Guide Dogs of the Desert: Trina Ver Vooren Palm Springs CA www.ggdca.org

Guiding Eyes for the Blind: Yorktown Heights NY www.guidingeyes.org

K9's For Warriors: Ponte Vedra FL www.k9sforwarriors.org

KSDS Assistance Dogs, Inc.: Washington KS www.ksds.org

Leader Dogs for the Blind: Rochester Hills MI www.leaderdog.org

NEADS/Dogs for Deaf and Disabled Americans: Princeton MA www.neads.org

Patriot PAWS Service Dogs: Rockwall TX www.patriotpaws.org

Paws Assisting Veterans (PAVE): Cornelius OR www.paveusa.org

Paws With A Cause: Wayland MI www.pawswithacause.org

Power Paws Assistance Dogs: Scottsdale AZ www.azpowerpaws.org

Puppies Behind Bars: New York NY www.puppiesbehindbars.com

Southeastern Guide Dogs: Palmetto FL www.guidedogs.org

Support Dogs, Inc.: St Louis MO www.supportdogs.org

The Joys of Living Assistance Dogs: Joy St Peter Salem OR www.joydogs.org

The Seeing Eye, Inc.: Morristown NJ www.seeingeye.org

Warrior Canine Connection, Inc.: Boyds MD www.warriorcanineconnection.com....