

Separating Fact from Fiction About Service Dogs

Many misconceptions persist about service dogs — their purpose and status, as well as the rights of the dogs and their owners. Even though service dogs may look like any other dog, know how they differ from emotional support animals and the invaluable support they provide to their humans.

STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- A service dog is a dog who has been trained to do work or perform tasks for the benefit of an individual with a disability; any breed of dog can be a service animal, as can miniature horses
- Service dogs do not require professional training and there are no required ADA certifications for service animals
- People with disabilities are allowed to bring their service animals to all public facilities and private businesses, without providing proof of their disability or dog's service animal status
- A service animal may be denied access if its presence interferes with legitimate safety requirements, such as a hospital unit that must maintain a sterile environment
- Service dogs should not be approached, talked to or touched, unless permission is asked for and granted by the dog's handler

Service dogs provide invaluable support to their humans, alerting them to potentially life-threatening medical problems or offering psychiatric or visual support.

Most of us have or will one day cross paths with a service dog, but despite their prevalence, many misconceptions persist about these wonderful animals. This is partly because service dogs look like any other dog, which leads some to believe they should be treated like any other dog — which isn't the case if the dog is "working."

Also problematic, the U.S. has no centralized process that allows people with disabilities to register service dogs,¹ which means, even though service dogs are afforded special rights, there's a lot of grey area when it comes to how those rights are protected, for both the dogs and their owners.

Clearing up common misconceptions is an important part of ensuring that service dogs and their owners get the respect and protections they deserve.

Service Dogs Are Different from Emotional Support Animals

The Americans with Disabilities Act 1990 (ADA) defines a service animal as, "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. Other species of animals, whether wild or domestic, trained or untrained, are not service animals for the purposes of this definition."²

Miniature horses have been added as an exception, however, provided they are housebroken, under the handler's control, can be accommodated by the facility and will not compromise safety regulations.

On the other hand, emotional support animals (ESAs), according to the Fair Housing Act and Air Carrier Access Act (ACAA), can be any species of animal, who must fulfill a disability-related need and whose use is supported by a physician, psychiatrist or mental health professional. ESAs do not have to be trained to perform a particular task and do not qualify as service animals under the ADA.

Service Dogs Are Not Only for the Visually Impaired

Guide dogs for the visually impaired are just one type of service dog. Service dogs can be trained to help people with physical or mental difficulties, including post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). If a veteran is experiencing anxiety or stress due to PTSD, for instance, a service dog can be trained to notice the signs and step in to provide calm and comfort.

They may wake a veteran up from nightmares and are also taught specific commands, including "block," in which the dog stands in front of the veteran to provide for more personal space, and "cover," in which the dog goes behind the veteran to "watch their back."³ Other examples of tasks that service animals may perform include:⁴

- Assisting individuals who are blind or have low vision with navigation and other tasks
- Alerting individuals who are deaf or hard of hearing to the presence of people or sounds
- Providing non-violent protection or rescue work
- Pulling a wheelchair
- Assisting an individual during a seizure
- Alerting individuals to the presence of allergens
- Retrieving items such as medicine or the telephone
- Providing physical support and assistance with balance and stability to individuals with mobility disabilities
- Helping people with psychiatric and neurological disabilities by preventing or interrupting impulsive or destructive behaviors

Not All Service Dogs Are Professionally Trained

Service dogs do not require professional training and there are no required ADA certifications for service animals. While most service dogs come from reputable trainers or organizations that specialize in training service dogs, according to the ADA, "People with disabilities have the right to train the dog themselves and are not required to use a professional service dog training program."⁵

That being said, many service dogs undergo about two years of training before they're ready and will continue to learn and adapt to their owner's changing needs over time.⁶ There are also misconceptions about what type of dog can be a service dog; according to the ADA, any dog breed can be a service animal.

In choosing a service dog, personality is often more important than breed; dogs who are fearful or aggressive are not well suited to be service dogs.

Can Service Dogs Ever Be Denied Access?

People with disabilities are allowed to bring their service animals to all public facilities and private businesses. The owners of a business may ask two questions to determine if the animal is a service animal — and only if the need for the service animal isn't obvious (such as a dog guiding someone who is blind). Those questions are:⁷

- Is this animal required because of a disability?
- What work or task has this animal been trained to perform?

Beyond this, no further questioning or "proof" is needed. As noted by the ADA, "A public entity or private business may not ask about the nature or extent of an individual's disability or require documentation, such as proof that the animal has been certified, trained or licensed as a service animal, or require the animal to wear an identifying vest."⁸

Generally, service animals are allowed to go where their owners go, but there are a few exceptions in which a business can ask for a service animal to be removed, including if the animal is out of control or not housebroken. A service animal may also be denied access if its presence interferes with "legitimate safety requirements," such as a hospital unit that must maintain a sterile environment.⁹

Should You Pet a Service Dog?

One important point to remember is that certain rules of etiquette apply when it comes to interacting with service dogs and their handlers. Generally speaking, don't interact with them at all; let the dog and the owner go about their business uninterrupted.

Service dogs should not be approached, talked to or touched unless permission is asked for and granted by the dog's handler, but take no offense if the handler asks you not to interact with the dog — doing so could distract him from his important role, which is to look out for the health and safety of his owner.

Sources and References

¹ [Walther, S. et al. Front. Vet. Sci., 19 January 2017 Sec. Veterinary Humanities and Social Sciences, Volume 4 - 2017](#)

^{2,4,7,8,9} [ADA National Network, Service Animals](#)

³ [Psychology Today, June 19, 2018](#)

⁵ [ADA.gov, Frequently Asked Questions about Service Animals and the ADA](#)

⁶ [Kinship, July 21, 2023](#)