

Service Animals

Overview

The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) defines a service animal as “a dog that has been individually trained to do, work, or perform tasks for an individual with a disability.” If they meet this definition, these dogs are considered as service animals under the ADA regardless whether they have been licensed or certified by a state or local government. In 2010, the revised ADA regulations were published, and a provision that allows miniature horses to be trained as service animals was included. The rights of the owner of the service animal and the service animal itself are protected by the ADA, which is administered by the Department of Justice. Organizations that fail to provide appropriate accommodation can be fined. Children and adults may benefit by having a service animal accompany them while at work, at play, or when visiting institutions such as a library. Service animals are often easy to recognize. “Guide dogs” or “seeing eye dogs” (assisting people who are blind or vision impaired) may wear distinctive leather harnesses. Many “signal dogs” or “hearing dogs” (assisting people who are deaf or hard of hearing) may wear bright orange collars, leashes, or vests. Dogs trained by organizations such as Canine Companions for Independence may wear backpacks. Some service animals may have a special tag issued by a local animal care and control agency. Although special identifiers may be helpful, the ADA specifically states that service animals do not need to have a special license, display a tag, or wear a vest while working. Often, an owner will dress their animal as a courtesy to the public.

Service Animals for Persons who are Blind or have a Visual Disability

Guide dogs keep their handlers on a direct route and maintain a steady pace while ignoring distractions; stop at curbs and at the top or bottom of stairs until told to proceed; turn left or right, move forward, or stop on command; disobey commands that would put their handler in danger; and recognize and avoid obstacles. These obstacles may include narrow passages and low overheads. Guide dogs also bring their handlers to elevator buttons.

Service Animals for Persons who are Deaf/Hard of Hearing

Hearing dogs alert their owner to sounds unique to their environment. These may include smoke alarms, stove timers, alarm clocks, distress sounds from family members or co-workers, ringing telephones, doorbells, and unusual sounds that may indicate danger or emergencies. Hearing dogs will nudge their owners towards the sounds. Most hearing dogs will recognize their owner’s name and alert them when someone is addressing them.

Service Animals for Persons who have Autism

Dogs trained to especially serve children with autism can guide and protect them from danger; interrupt them from engaging in repetitive behavior (e.g., flapping hands in front of their faces) and redirect their attention; draw attention to their name being called; get help when needed; calm them and help attenuate anger, aggression, and mood swings; and provide comforting touches that make it possible for children to interact in mainstream environments. These positive interactions allow the children to develop language and social skills. It is not unusual to see a child with autism tethered a to the service dog as a security measure.

Service Animals for Persons with Mobility/Dexterity Disabilities

Dogs may be trained to pull wheelchairs; assist handlers if they fall; help with balance; carry or pick up things; open and close doors, cupboards, and refrigerators; turn lights on or off; and assist with dressing or undressing.

Service Animals for Persons with Psychiatric Disabilities

These service animals can help people regain the ability to venture out in public, and sometimes to return to work by helping control panic attacks, depressions, or agoraphobia, which the Mayo Clinic describes as "a type of anxiety disorder in which one fears and avoids places or situations that might cause one to panic and make one feel trapped, helpless or embarrassed." Psychiatric alert dogs can be trained to remind handlers to take medication on time and help to provide discernment against hallucination among other tasks.

Service Animals for Persons with Epilepsy

Seizure-alert dogs can sense and notify their human companions of an oncoming seizure. The time frame in which the dog can sense the coming of a seizure can vary from a few seconds to forty-five minutes. The dog alerts its owner by making close eye contact, circling, pawing, barking etc. This behavior allows the owner to sit if standing or take other actions to minimize the effect of the seizure; seizure-alert dogs also can summon help, fetch medication, or to simply stay with the owner till the event passes.

Support Animals

Support animals, by definition, are different than service animals. They are not trained to perform specific job tasks to help people with disabilities and are not qualified to be considered as service animals under the ADA. Check your state or local laws about support animals before developing a library policy. Support animals can provide comfort and companionship to their owners and can serve as therapy animals to help patients in clinical settings. Many public and academic libraries also bring in trained therapy dogs for their patrons during certain times of the year, such as exam periods.

Tips

- If your library has a “No Pets Allowed” policy, you are required to make a modification to your policies, practices, and procedures to ensure that people who use service animals are permitted to bring those animals into your library.
- Even if an animal is not wearing a distinctive leash, harness, vest, backpack, or tag, it may still be a legitimate service animal. In situations where it is not obvious that the dog is a service animal, library staff should ask only two specific questions: (1) is the dog a service animal required because of a disability? and (2) what work or task has the dog been trained to perform? If people say an animal is a service animal, take them at their word and let them bring the animal into the library with them.
- If your community has a leash law for dogs, staff can tell users that their dog must be on a leash and must be under control at all times while it is in the library.
- Staff may ask a person to remove from the library any animal, including a service animal, when that animal's behavior poses a direct threat to the health or safety of others. For example, any animal that displays vicious behavior toward other users may be excluded. You also may ask a person to remove his or her dog if it is barking uncontrollably or if its behavior is disturbing other users.
- Do not make assumptions about how a particular animal is likely to behave based on your past experience with other animals. Each situation must be considered individually.
- Allergies and fear of animals are generally not valid reasons for denying access or refusing service to people with service animals. If other library users raise those issues, help them find a different place to do their work.
- Never pet, talk to, or otherwise distract a service animal when it is working.

Resources

2010 revised ADA regulations (link: https://www.ada.gov/service_animals_2010.htm)
Frequently Asked Questions about Service Animals and the ADA
(link: https://www.ada.gov/regs2010/service_animal_ga.html) NSAR - National Service Animal Registry (link: <https://www.nsarco.com/>) ADA National Network Service Animals and Emotional Support Animals (link: <https://adata.org/publication/service-animals-booklet>) A Guide to State Service Animal Laws
(link: <https://usaservicedogregistration.com/service-dog-state-laws/>)

Toolkit updated by the ASGCLA Accessibility Assembly, June 2019