

Service Animals

From the U.S. Department of Justice, Civil Rights Division, Disability Rights Section

Frequently Asked Questions about Service Animals and the ADA

Many people with disabilities use a service animal in order to fully participate in everyday life. Dogs can be trained to perform many important tasks to assist people with disabilities, such as providing stability for a person who has difficulty walking, picking up items for a person who uses a wheelchair, preventing a child with autism from wandering away, or alerting a person who has hearing loss when someone is approaching from behind.

The Department of Justice continues to receive many questions about how the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) applies to service animals. The ADA requires State and local government agencies, businesses, and non-profit organizations (covered entities) that provide goods or services to the public to make "reasonable modifications" in their policies, practices, or procedures when necessary to accommodate people with disabilities. The service animal rules fall under this general principle. Accordingly, entities that have a "no pets" policy generally must modify the policy to allow service animals into their facilities.

DEFINITION OF A SERVICE ANIMAL

What is a service animal?

Under the ADA, a service animal is defined as a dog that has been individually trained to do work or perform tasks for an individual with a disability. The task(s) performed by the dog must be directly related to the person's disability.

What does "do work or perform tasks" mean?

The dog must be trained to take a specific action when needed to assist the person with a disability. For example, a person with diabetes may have a dog that is trained to alert him when his blood sugar reaches high or low levels. A person with depression may have a dog that is trained to remind her to take her medication. Or, a person who has epilepsy may have a dog that is trained to detect the onset of a seizure and then help the person remain safe during the seizure.

Are emotional support, therapy, comfort, or companion animals considered service animals under the ADA?

No. These terms are used to describe animals that provide comfort just by being with a person. Because they have not been trained to perform a specific job or task, they do not qualify as service animals under the ADA. However, some State or local governments have laws that allow people to take emotional support animals into public places. You may check with your State and local government agencies to find out about these laws.

If someone's dog calms them when having an anxiety attack, does this qualify it as a service animal?

It depends. The ADA makes a distinction between psychiatric service animals and emotional support animals. If the dog has been trained to sense that an anxiety attack is about to happen and take a specific action to help avoid the attack or lessen its impact, that would qualify as a service animal. However, if the dog's mere presence provides comfort, that would not be considered a service animal under the ADA.

Does the ADA require service animals to be professionally trained?

No. People with disabilities have the right to train the dog themselves and are not required to use a professional service dog training program.

Are service-animals-in-training considered service animals under the ADA?

No. Under the ADA, the dog must already be trained before it can be taken into public places. However, some State or local laws cover animals that are still in training.

GENERAL RULES

What questions can a covered entity's employees ask to determine if a dog is a service animal?

In situations where it is not obvious that the dog is a service animal, staff may 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? Staff are not allowed to request any documentation for the dog, require that the dog demonstrate its task, or inquire about the nature of the person's disability.

Do service animals have to wear a vest or patch or special harness identifying them as service animals?

No. The ADA does not require service animals to wear a vest, ID tag, or specific harness.

Who is responsible for the care and supervision of a service animal?

The handler is responsible for caring for and supervising the service animal, which includes toileting, feeding, and grooming and veterinary care. Covered entities are not obligated to supervise or otherwise care for a service animal.

Can a person bring a service animal with them as they go through a salad bar or other self-service food lines?

Yes. Service animals must be allowed to accompany their handlers to and through self-service food lines. Similarly, service animals may not be prohibited from communal food preparation areas, such as are commonly found in shelters or dormitories.