



What are the Differences among Service Dogs, Emotional Support Animals and Therapy Dogs?

If you see a dog in a vest or other gear, it is likely this dog is working. In fact, there are many different types of dog jobs, such as therapy, search and rescue, drug detection and service dogs. We will focus on three commonly confused dog jobs.

Service Dogs

A service dog is a dog trained to mitigate the owner's disability. These dogs go through intense training to learn proper obedience both in home and in public. They also learn tasks, which are commands, skills or responses to their owners that help them in their day-to-day life. This can include things such as retrieving medication, guiding the owner through obstacles, alerting and responding to a medical event such as a seizure, and much more. They can be trained either by a large organization or by the owners themselves with the assistance of private trainers.

Service dogs can mitigate all types of disabilities, whether they be physical or psychological. If people who are using service dogs look "normal", it is very likely that they have invisible disabilities. Service dogs can only be used by people who meet the Americans With Disabilities Act's (ADA) definition of disabled. The individuals often talk with their doctors before pursuing the route of a service dog. Some organizations require doctors to fill out a form before accepting a prospective handler into their program.

Service dogs are the only classification of support dogs that have public access in all locations; however, certain federally owned buildings and churches do have the right to refuse service dogs access. They only have public access with their owners. Furthermore, if the dog is destructive or presenting a direct danger (allergies do not count as danger) to customers, a business may ask the handler and dog to leave. Only dogs and miniature horses can be service animals under the current Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) law.

Emotional Support Animals

Otherwise known as ESAs, emotional support animals do not receive special training like service animals do. ESAs are pets whose sole purpose is to provide emotional comfort to their owners, who have disabilities. They are often key companions to people suffering with mental health conditions, such as anxiety and depression. All animals can be ESAs, as long as they provide the emotional support needed. Even fish in a tank can provide enjoyment and relaxation in a therapeutic fashion. Like service dog handlers, owners of ESAs also often need doctors' notes as proof that the animals are integral to their health.

Emotional support animals do not have any public access rights, but under the Fair Housing Act, landlords cannot ban ESAs from housing or charge fees for these animals. ESAs can also ride on planes with their owners among the other passengers.

Therapy Dogs

Therapy dogs, unlike the previous two groups, do not assist their handlers in support of a disability. Instead, they are trained to bring smiles to other people! Therapy dogs undergo intense training so that they can work in a professional setting and must be certified by a therapy dog program. Often, therapy dog and handlers visit patients in hospitals or nursing homes, students in schools or libraries, and other groups, just to make these people's day a bit brighter. Through kind demeanor and silly dog smiles, these dogs bring comfort as they are petted.

These dogs are often integral to the well-being of patients, and can have such a strong effect that doctors note the positive change before and after dogs visit!

Therapy dogs have no access rights under the law, and therapy dog handlers need approval from the facilities they wish to visit before they can bring their dogs.

AIR Dogs: Paws For Minds.™ People Saving Dogs. Dogs Saving People.™

Contact AIR for More Information

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Sources: Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), US Department of Justice, Civil Rights Division, Disabilities Rights Section, Fair Housing Act (FHAct), Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, US Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD), and ServiceDogCentral.