

Service Dogs, Emotional Support Animals & Therapy Dogs: Truths & Myths

Common Misconceptions & Truths About These Misconceptions

- ❌ **You must register or certify a service dog and it must wear a vest or ID tag.** ❌
 - ✅ In the USA there is no registering agency or official certification required for service dogs
 - ✅ Service Dogs are not required to wear any vest or carry/hold an ID tag either
- ❌ **An Emotional Support Dog (known as an ESA) is a type of service dog.** ❌
 - ✅ ESAs are not recognized as service dogs, they are simply pets with a few exceptions.
 - ✅ ESAs are not protected by the Americans with Disabilities Act (Service Dogs are).
 - ✅ ESAs do not have public access rights & cannot go in public places where normal pet dogs aren't allowed.
- ❌ **Therapy dogs are like ESAs (emotional support animals).** ❌
 - ✅ Therapy Dogs are not service animals or ESAs, they are designed to bring joy to *other* people.
 - ✅ Therapy dogs are what people bring to hospitals, nursing homes & some other places for other people to pet & love on.
 - ✅ Therapy Dogs do not have any rights to be on an airplane, in a business or non-dog friendly location. They are just pets.

Service Dogs (SDs)

What is a Service Dog?

A service dog (SD) is trained to perform at least one task (sometimes several tasks) which will mitigate their handler's disability. The person has the right to be accompanied by their service dog anywhere the general public is allowed per the [Americans with Disabilities Act \(ADA\)](#).

"...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." – ada.gov

Types of Service Dogs (SDs)

Because service dogs are trained to assist a person who has a disability, they are also known as assistance dogs or by names associated with their tasks. Some examples are:

- **Guide Dog** – Guides & assists a person who is visually impaired.
- **Hearing Dog** – Alerts a person who is deaf or hearing impaired to sounds such as door bells, smoke alarms, alarm clocks, phones & other sounds that will assist the person in daily life.
- **Mobility Dog** – Assists a person in performing tasks such as opening doors, picking up objects, turning on lights, opening doors, etc. as well as pulling wheelchairs. They may also provide stability to a person that needs help with mobility & stability.
- **Medical Alert Dog** – Notifies a person of a change in body chemistry that may indicate a health concern, such as low or high blood sugar for a person with diabetes, or that a seizure is imminent for a person with epilepsy or other seizure and/or neurological disorders.
- **Psychiatric Service Dog** – Assists a person with a diagnosed psychiatric or mental disorder. It is an important distinction of a psychiatric service dog that it performs a specific task to assist its person, as is the case with all service dogs.

Some examples are:

- If a person suffers from PTSD & is not comfortable venturing alone in public, their SD may be trained to move in & stand as a barrier between them & anyone who approaches.
- If a person occasionally does something unconsciously & may physically harm them, such as pulling at something, their SD may be trained to alert them to their actions so that they can stop.
- If a person suffers from panic attacks that may impede the person's day-to-day abilities, their SD may be trained to calm the person to prevent a panic attack altogether or lessen its intensity if/when it happens.

Training, Certification, Registration, Documentation, ID Cards & Vests

A person can train their service dog by him/herself, without an organization or trainer. There is no legal requirement that they be associated with a service dog organization or trainer. Although, it's highly recommended that if you are not well-versed in dog training and behavior that you hire someone to help you with this great venture.

There are many wonderful organizations and trainers that help people who can benefit from owning a service dog. These organizations provide the training necessary for the dog to perform tasks to assist the person with their disability, as well as the training necessary to ensure that their dog will be well-behaved in public.

Organizations often provide ID cards and vests, which can be helpful because most people are not familiar with the laws pertaining to service dogs and are accepting of something looking official. However, it is not required by law that a SD wear a vest or ID card. Sadly, this plays into the hands of those committing fraud, who purchase ID cards and vests to impersonate service dogs. Per the ada.gov website,

"There are individuals and organizations that sell service animal certification or registration documents online. These documents do not convey any rights under the ADA and the Department of Justice does not recognize them as proof that the dog is a service animal." – ada.gov

Where can I take my service dog by law?

- **Businesses:** In accordance with the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), a person with a disability generally has the right to be accompanied by their service dog anywhere the general public is allowed. However, a business may ask that the dog be removed from the premises if it is out of control, e.g., barking in a movie theater or begging food from patrons in a restaurant, or it poses a threat to the health or safety of others.

A person taking a so-called "comfort dog" into a supermarket because they don't want to leave it in their car is committing service dog fraud, and putting it in their shopping cart where food goes is both unsanitary and inconsiderate to others.

A business may only ask a person if their dog is a service dog required because of a disability, and what task it has been trained to perform. They may not ask the person about their disability, nor ask that the dog demonstrate its task.

You'll find a good overview on the subject of service dogs and businesses here <http://bit.ly/2GicHDq>

- **Hotels and Motels:** Hotels and motels are treated as businesses. They may not charge a deposit or surcharge for a service dog even if such charges are routinely charged for pets. However, a business which normally charges guests for damage they cause may charge for damage caused by a service dog.
- **No-Pets Housing:** The Fair Housing Act (FHAct)* allows that a person may keep a service dog in housing with a "no pets" policy. Note, however, that it only requires that housing providers make reasonable accommodations for persons with service dogs.

**The Fair Housing Act does not apply to hotels, motels or other facilities lodging transient guests.*

- **Airplanes:** The Air Carrier Access Act (ACAA) allows that a service dog may travel with its owner on an airplane. Due to recent events several major airlines have changed their rules for traveling on their airline with SD. You may read more about this here: [New Rules, Proposed Laws](#).

Can any other animal be a service animal, other than a dog?

Only dogs, and miniature horses – meeting certain criteria – can serve as service animals per the ADA. For reference and information on the criteria for miniature horses see this page <http://bit.ly/2HUOK2g>

Emotional Support Animals (ESAs)

What is an Emotional Support Animal?

An emotional support animal (ESA) is a companion animal that a medical professional or therapist has determined provides benefit for an individual in some way, usually emotionally. *They are not Service Dogs*, as they do not require any training and cannot go to public places with their person (with a couple of exceptions, see below) nor do they perform any specific trained task(s) that mitigate their diagnosis. Emotional support animals may be used by people with a range of [physical](#), [psychiatric](#), [anxiety disorders](#) and/or [intellectual disabilities](#) and usually provide comfort and emotional support to this individual. In order to be prescribed an ESA the person seeking such an animal must have a verifiable diagnosis and be written a letter that their animal should be deemed as an ESA by a medical professional and/or licensed therapist.

Training, Certification, Registration, Documentation, ID Cards and Vests

Emotional support dogs are often referred to as companion dogs, or comfort dogs by both the public and health professionals. They are basically household pets, and as such require no special training. Like SDs, they are not required to wear a vest or don an ID and there is no formal registry so they are cannot be "officially registered".

However, while all dogs provide love and emotional support, the designation of emotional support dog is only applicable to dogs which have been prescribed by a licensed professional.

Where can I take my ESA by law?

- **Businesses: ESAs have no public access rights by law.** They are not covered under the ADA in the way that SDs are. They cannot go to any businesses or public locations that any other "normal" pet dog cannot go.
- **Hotels and Motels:** Hotels and motels are treated as businesses. They will normally consider an ESA as any other pet dog. You will likely have no extra privileges or discounts given by hotels or motels. Call any hotel or motel to ask about their policy with ESAs, some may have their own policies in place.
- **No-Pets Housing:** The Fair Housing Act (FHAct)* allows that a person may keep an ESA with a "no pets" policy. Note, however, that it only requires that housing providers make reasonable accommodations for persons with ESAs. This is not the same as rights provided by the ADA to SDs. Remember, ESAs are not SDs.

To read more about your rights as a renter or tenant as governed by the laws in your state, follow the link to information for your state on this HUD page: [Tenant Rights by State](#), or you can follow the link for your state on this HUD page to find a local counseling agency that you can phone: [HUD Approved Housing Counseling Agencies](#)

**The Fair Housing Act does not apply to hotels, motels or other facilities lodging transient guests.*

- **Airplanes:** The Air Carrier Access Act (ACAA) allows that an ESA may travel with its owner on an airplane. Due to recent events several major airlines have changed their rules for traveling on their airline with an ESA (and some with SDs too). You may read more about this here: [New Rules, Proposed Laws](#). This is an on-going process with airlines due to the abuse of the ESA laws and those who try to take any and all pets on an airplane and report them to be ESAs.

Can any other animal be an emotional support animal, other than a dog?

As of right now, the law does not state that other animals cannot be considered for someone's ESA. However, due to recent events and the abuse of the ADA and people passing off any animal or pet as their ESA, many places are [changing their policies](#) and rules on ESAs. Check local laws and the FFA for up to date information on new laws in place for ESAs.

Therapy Dogs

A therapy dog provides therapeutic support to people *other than* its handler (who is usually the dog's owner.) Therapy dogs are frequently invited (with their owner) to visit schools, libraries, assisted living homes, hospitals and hospices, though a therapy dog handler has no special rights to be accompanied by their therapy dog anywhere that dogs are not generally allowed. **Therapy dogs are incredibly different from any type of SD or ESA as they do not serve to help their handler but rather others that benefit from being around a well-behaved dog, namely in a facility, hospital, school or assisted living home.**

Training, Certification, Registration, Documentation, ID Cards & Vests

Therapy dogs do not require any specialized training in the way that an SD does. Therapy dogs have to know basic obedience, have a great temperament and qualify to help others as a therapy dog team (dog & handler). Certification or registration with a therapy dog organization, and the insurance the organization provides, will likely be a requirement of any facility you visit. The need for documentation and identification will be determined by the therapy dog organization you work with, and the facilities/locations you visit.

Where You Can Take Your Therapy Dog

A therapy dog handler has no special rights to be accompanied by their therapy dog anywhere that normal pet dogs are not generally allowed. Businesses, hotels and motels, apartments and condominiums, and airlines, usually treat therapy dogs as pets and not special trained animals. Therapy dogs must be invited to visit a facility/location by the facility/location itself and must consist of the dog plus it's handler (which is usually the dog's owner).

Other Species as Therapy Animals

Dogs, cats, guinea pigs, rabbits, domesticated rats, horses, donkeys, llamas, alpacas, pot-bellied pigs and birds can all be used in therapy animal work.