



Overview: Service Dogs, Therapy Dogs, and Emotional Support Animals

There are many different types of dogs who assist humans with specific challenges. Their assistance can take many forms and each one comes with its own parameters! Here is an overview of the 3 most common categories of support animals:

Service Dogs

A **Service dog** means 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.

Tasks performed can include, among other things, pulling a wheelchair, retrieving dropped items, alerting a person to a sound, reminding a person to take medication, or pressing an elevator button.

Emotional Support Animals, comfort animals, and therapy dogs are not service animals under Title II and Title III of the ADA.

A few examples of animals that fit the ADA's definition of Service Animal *because they have been specifically trained to perform a task for the person with a disability*:

- **Dogs trained to provide mobility assistance** to persons who have severe visual impairments or are blind, or who use a mobility aid such as a wheelchair.
- **Dogs trained to provide early detection for, and act to lessen subsequent effects of medical episodes** such as seizures, or conditions that can cause drastic dips in blood pressure or blood sugar, such as heart disease or diabetes.
- **Dogs trained to alert to and/or provide supportive care for psychiatric episodes** such as those connected with things like PTSD, Bipolar Disorder, and panic disorders.

Tasks performed by Service Dogs require a high level of focus. Dogs who become easily distracted by novel stimuli, do not have experience keeping continued focus on their handler, or who are disruptive in public spaces (leash pulling, barking, greeting passers-by) are not considered good candidates for service work.

Because of this, most dogs who become Service Dogs are either *bred for that purpose and/or begin training at a very young age*. Careful and targeted socialization during the "socialization window" (6-16 weeks) is essential, since the expectations for the behaviors of these dogs are so specific. Not only will they be trained to perform specific tasks for their handlers, but they must also be trained to *ignore a multitude of stimuli in order to be attentive to those tasks*.

For more information or to request behavior assistance, visit eastbayspca.org/behavior.

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There is no official Service Dog certification process in the United States. [Learn more about Service Dog classification, access, and rights.](#)

Therapy Dogs

A **therapy dog** is generally defined *as a dog trained to provide affection and comfort to people other than their handler* in hospitals, retirement homes, nursing homes, schools, and stressful situations, such as disaster areas or courtrooms. There is no legal definition for therapy dogs. Therapy dogs are working dogs that have an important job of making people feel better, but *they are not entitled to the same public access as service dogs.*

- Therapy dogs are permitted in public accommodations *only by permission of each establishment.* They are not guaranteed public access.
- Some therapy dogs have enhanced training that allows them to participate in animal assisted activities and therapy that helps patients meet specific cognitive, physical, or social goals.

Therapy dogs are trained to behave calmly and non-disruptively in public, and should behave similarly to service dogs, even though they don't have the same access rights. Therapy dogs are considered pets, despite their considerable contribution to the well-being of those they visit and are not guaranteed access to public accommodations.

Emotional Support Animals (ESA's)

An **emotional support animal** is a therapeutic pet, usually prescribed by a therapist, psychiatrist, or doctor, to *help one specific person cope with emotional difficulties or loneliness.* The dog is *not trained to perform a specific task* like a service dog. It is simply the presence of the dog which benefits the individual.

ESAs do not have public access, and cannot go into "no pet" places the way a service dog can. However, *they are given a right to live in a rented residence under the Fair Housing Amendments Act of 1988,* Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 and the Title II of the Americans with Disabilities Act.

In 2020, the U.S. Department of Transportation announced that they were revising their Air Carrier Access Act (ACAA) to exclude ESA's from traveling in airplane cabins. Read a full summary of the changes [here.](#)

There are service dogs, known as psychiatric Service Dogs, that work specifically with people whose disability is due to a mental illness. *This is different than an ESA.* Psychiatric Service Dogs detect the beginning of psychiatric episodes and help ease their effects. Although this sounds similar to the role of an ESA, *the difference between a psychiatric Service Dog and an ESA is in the tasks performed by the dog.* If it is simply the dog's presence that helps the person cope, then the dog does not qualify as a psychiatric Service Dog. For more information on ESA's, see [this link.](#)

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False Service Dog Claims

Despite the parameters above, fake service dog vests are available at low cost online. There are many who purchase these or similar items to give their personal dog access to areas which might otherwise be off limits. *While this might seem like a victimless crime, service dog fraud can have many serious consequences:*

- Fake service animals in public places can be disruptive, as they are typically not trained as legitimate service animals.
- Fake service animals can pose a risk of distraction or injury to legitimate service animals; a distracted service animal can inadvertently cause harm to their handler by not being able to perform their trained functions properly.
- The damage and disruption caused by fake service animals has led businesses to put pressure on legislators to change ADA rules, which could have negative impacts on individuals with disabilities.
- The rise in fake service animals in recent years has caused individuals with real service animals to fall under suspicion.

California Penal Code § 365.7 prohibits service dog fraud. This is defined as making a false claim that your dog is a medical service dog in order to take the dog to (or keep the dog at) an apartment or business establishment. *A violation of the code section is a misdemeanor offense that can lead to a county jail term of up to six months.*

[Read more about how service dog fraud can impact those with disabilities.](#)