



Accessibility for Patrons with Service or Support Animals: What You Need to Know Library Accessibility Tip Sheet 8

Overview

Children as well as adults may benefit by having a service or support animal accompany them while at work, play, or when visiting institutions such as the library. The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) defines a service animal as *any* guide dog, signal dog, or other animal individually trained to provide assistance to an individual with a disability. If they meet this definition, animals are considered service animals under the ADA regardless of whether they have been licensed or certified by a state or local government. The civil 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. Failure to provide access for them can result in a \$50,000 fine for the first offense and \$100,000 for subsequent offenses (plus reimbursement for the plaintiff's attorney fees).

Some service animals are easy to recognize. "Dog guides" or Seeing Eye dogs (assisting people who are blind or vision impaired) wear distinctive leather harnesses. Many "signal dogs" or "hearing dogs" (assisting people who are deaf or hard of hearing) wear bright orange collars, leashes, or vests. Dogs trained by organizations like Canine Companions for Independence wear backpacks. Some dogs may have a special tag issued by a local animal care and control agency. Be aware that there are miniature horses and capuchin monkeys in use as service animals. 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 and Support Animals for Persons who are Blind or have a Visual Disability

Dog guides 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; recognize and avoid obstacles, for example, narrow passages and low overheads; and bring their handlers to elevator buttons.

Miniature-horse guides are said to perform as their dog counterparts, and though they are not in frequent use, their rights receive the same protection. They also use a rigid leather harness and leash.

Service and Support Animals for Persons who are Deaf/Hard of Hearing

Hearing dogs alert people to sounds unique to their environment, for example, 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. The 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 and Support Animals for Persons who have Autism

Dogs trained to serve children with autism can guide them 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. Positive interactions allow the children to develop language and social skills. It is not unusual to see a child with autism tethered to the service dog as a security measure.

Service and Support 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. There are instances where capuchin monkeys have been trained to perform the same tasks and others which require dexterity.

Service and Support Animals for Persons with Psychiatric Disabilities

Emotional support animals help people regain the ability to venture out in public, and sometimes to return to work, by helping control panic attacks, agoraphobia, and depression. Some of the dogs can be trained to remind owner to take medication on time, and help to provide discernment against hallucination.

Service and Support 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 are able to summon help, fetch medication, or to simply stay with the owner till the event passes.

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 or support 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. If staff is suspicious that a patron is bringing a pet into the library staff may say something as simple as “Is this your pet?” This gives the patron a chance to explain the role of an animal without cuing them to the “service animal” terminology. 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

Commonly Asked Questions about Service Animals in Places of Business. U.S. Department of Justice, Civil Rights Division, Disability Rights Section, July 1996.
www.ada.gov/archive/animal.htm

The web site provides answers to basic questions concerning service and support animals' interactions within the public arena.

Skloot, Rebecca. “Creature Comforts”. N.Y. Times: Dec 31, 2008.

A well-written article which covers a wide gambit of service animals putting a human face of the topic.

This tip sheet, revised in 2010, is one in a series developed by the Association of Specialized and Cooperative Library Agencies, a division of the American Library Association. See www.ala.org/ascla