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Assistance Animals: What's the Story?

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Americans (including veterinarians!) love their animals, but many think that we currently have a situation where too many pets are being wrongly put forth as some type of assistance animals. Despite whether this misrepresentation happens through simple lack of understanding or willful fraudulent action, the consequences can be unfortunate. People and animals can be injured when pets untrained for the specific behavior required for service animals are put into public situations they are ill-equipped to handle. And those who rely on their service animals or emotional support animals can be denied access they are legitimately entitled to following bad outcomes involving animals that are misrepresented.

Veterinarians work to be part of the solution by helping everyone understand the types of assistance animals and what rights of access each does or does not have. A brief description follows, with links to infographics that are available for anyone to print and use.

There are three groups of assistance animals:

1. Service animals
2. Emotional support animals (ESA)
3. Animals involved in animal-assisted intervention (AAI)

Only service animals and ESAs have any federal right of access to public spaces. An important distinction in recognizing these two groups of animals is that service animals and ESAs **work with their handler for the benefit of that handler**. These animals have certain federal rights of access, granted by different federal acts. Service animals are granted broad rights of access by the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA): they are allowed anywhere the public is allowed. Emotional support animals, however, are granted federal access only in the cases of airline travel (via the Air Carrier Access Act – ACA) and housing (via the Fair Housing Act – FHA).

The difference between service animals and emotional support animals is that **service animals are trained to perform a specific task(s)** that helps with the disability of the handler, while **emotional support animals do not perform specific tasks**. Service animals are defined by the ADA as dogs or, in some instances, miniature horses. Miniature horses have been included as service animals because of their longer lifespan, which is beneficial to handlers for both emotional and logistical reasons.

The benefit of emotional support animals is not to be minimized despite the fact that they are not trained to perform specific tasks but instead provide comfort by their physical presence. These animals, which are not limited with regard to their species, require medical documentation from a licensed mental health professional who is currently overseeing the treatment of the handler of the animal.

It is worth noting that the distinction between service animals and emotional support animals is not always easy to make, particularly in the case of psychiatric service animals. The animal's ability to perform task(s) that ameliorate the handler's disability is the critical identifier of the service animal. Such tasks can be performed on the command of the handler, but might also be performed on a cue that the service animal has been trained to detect. So a psychiatric service animal might be trained to fetch medicine for their handler on command. Equally possible is the service dog for a handler suffering from PTSD, where dog is able to sense the handler's growing agitation in situations that could trigger a psychiatric episode, and then nudge the owner or otherwise physically alert them that they need to remove themselves from this situation.

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The animals who participate in AAI are not granted right of access to any public space and have no more rights than a regular pet. Crucial to identifying animals of AAI is the fact that **they work with their handlers for the benefit of other people**, not for the benefit of the handler. These animals go into public spaces by the permission of the facilities in which they perform their interventions. AAI includes animal-assisted therapy (in which therapy animals work with licensed therapists as part of goal-directed sessions), animal-assisted education (such as reading dogs, who help young children gain reading confidence by listening attentively while the child reads aloud), and animal-assisted activities, such as the familiar visitation animals who bring cheer and comfort to patients in hospitals and nursing homes.

As with the access granted to the animals of AAI by the facilities in which they participate, the ability to grant access to ANY animal is always within the right of a public establishment or business.

The VVMA's One Health Committee has developed several easy-to-follow printable infographics on the subject of assistance animals.

- Assistance Animals and Federal Rights of Access – suitable for use in veterinarians' offices as well as for general education purposes
- Guidance for Retail Establishments: Assistance Animals and Federal Rights of Access – tailored to give information about rights of access, or lack thereof, of assistance animals in retail businesses
- Guidance for Retail Establishments: Rights of Service Animals and Rights of Businesses – clarifies the Do's and Don'ts for businesses with regard to rights of federal access of service animals

These infographics are designed to be printed on legal or ledger size paper but can also be printed on regular size paper.

Assistance animals and the problem of fraud is an important and developing topic. The American Veterinary Medical Association (AVMA) is working on several fronts regarding this issue: ongoing dialog with airlines is helping to make travel with emotional support and other animals a safe and consistent process for all owners. Legislative initiatives in a number of states have addressed the question of misrepresentation of assistance animals, and the AVMA can be a resource for such legislation. At this time, Vermont has no legislation that supersedes any of the federal regulations. Please see the AVMA's [Assistance Animals: Rights of Access and The Problem of Fraud](#) for an in depth discussion of this entire issue.