

## **Definition of a Service Dog vs. Emotional Support Animal vs. Therapy Dog**

While the terms “service dog,” “therapy dog,” and “emotional support animal” are often used interchangeably, these three types of animals have very distinct roles and qualifications. This resource is designed to clarify the roles among dogs that are geared to improve human health.

### ***Service Dogs***

Service dogs (also known as “assistance dogs”) are trained to perform quantifiable tasks that directly ease the challenges associated with their owner’s physical, psychiatric, sensory, and/or developmental disability. The most common types of service dogs include guide, hearing, medical alert, mobility, autism service, and psychiatric service dogs (such as those who assist veterans with post-traumatic stress). Having a service dog provides handlers with greater independence, as well as enriched confidence to leave their home, foster social relationships, and enter or re-enter the workforce.

The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) protects the rights of people with disabilities to bring their service dogs with them to most public places, including restaurants, theaters, shops, hotels, government agencies, and non-profit organizations. Likewise, the Air Carrier Access Act (ACAA) of 1986 ensures that service dogs may travel with their owners on airplanes (note: the ACAA has a separate definition of “psychiatric service animal”), and the Fair Housing Act of 1968 stipulates that housing with a “no pets policy” must make an exception or reasonable accommodations for people with service dogs.

Currently, there are no nationally or legally recognized service dog training, certification, or identification standards, and both professional trainers/organizations and laypersons may train and provide service dogs. At a minimum, service dogs should be individually trained in essential tasks that a person could not otherwise perform due to his/her disability (such as alerting a person with epilepsy when s/he shows signs of an impending seizure). Additionally, service dogs should be well behaved and under control in the community.

### ***Emotional Support Animals***

Emotional support animals are companion animals who help their owners cope with the challenges associated with emotional and mental health conditions (such as depression and anxiety) by providing comfort with their presence. Unlike service and therapy dogs, emotional support animals are not expected to perform specific tasks related to their owner’s condition, nor must they adhere to any behavior standards or training. Their presence alone is what is thought to provide their owner with solace and therapeutic benefit. Emotional support animals are not allowed in public places, with the exception of air travel, which requires special documentation. The Fair Housing Act requires that most housing units accommodate emotional support animals with appropriate documentation.

### ***Therapy Dogs***

Together with their owners, therapy dogs are certified or registered to visit hospitals, long-term care facilities, treatment centers, schools, and other settings to benefit people in need. While typically trained in basic obedience skills, therapy dogs (or “comfort dogs”) are not required to perform essential tasks for those they serve or specialize in any particular area of service. Therapy dogs do not have public access rights under the ADA and are only allowed in facilities by invitation/agreement.

Additionally, they serve people other than their owners (also known as handlers), and their role is often to complement more traditional modes of treatment or therapy through comforting, supportive, calming, and engaging interactions. This is frequently done through the work of volunteer therapy dog-

handler teams, but professionals (such as psychotherapists and social workers) may also incorporate a therapy dog into their practice with clients. While many types of animals can be therapy animals (such as horses and cats), dogs are by far the most common species and any canine breed is eligible.