

Service Animal Etiquette

TIPS AND RESOURCES



What is a service animal?

A service animal is defined as an animal that is individually trained to do work or perform tasks for the benefit of an individual with a disability. The animal must be trained through a specialty organization, professional trainer, or by the owner to perform a specific task relating to the owner's disability. Training a service animal is a lengthy, involved process that focuses on manners, obedience, and tasks/commands. A public access test can be completed to see if the animal is ready to work for the handler.

Service animals are allowed in public places even if the business or facility has a "no pets" policy. A person with a service animal cannot be denied entrance.

What Types of Animals Qualify as Service Animals?

Dogs and miniature horses are the only two animals recognized as service animals by the Americans with Disabilities Act right now. The ADA does not restrict the type of dog breeds that can be service animals.

Who would benefit from a service animal?

If you have a physical or a developmental disability that substantially limits one or more major life activities, then you are entitled to a service animal that performs tasks for you or assists you with these activities.

How do service animals help?

A service animal supports their handler to fully participate in everyday life.

A few of the common work tasks include, guiding people who are blind, alerting people who are deaf, pulling a wheelchair, and alerting and protecting a person who is having a seizure.

Service animals can also be trained to pick up medications, pick up a cell phone in case of an emergency, open doors and cabinets, press emergency buttons, brace or stand for stability during a transfer, turn lights on and off, and so much more.

What is proper etiquette around a service animal?

Although a vest, tag, or harness is not required, when a service animal has some type of identification on or is in public with its handler (or trainer), it is working.

Do not distract a service animal by making noises, offering food, water, toys or petting, or taking pictures, this could be dangerous to the person.

If you would like to interact with the service animal, always ask the handler first. Even if the service animal looks like it is resting or "off duty", do not assume you can interact with it. If the handler is not present, do not pet. Always ask.

It is not polite to ask personal questions about someone's health or disability or reason for needing a service animal.

In situations where it is not obvious that the animal is a service animal, there are only two appropriate questions:

1. Is the animal required because of a disability?
2. What work or task has the animal been trained to perform?

Businesses/facilities are not allowed to request any documentation for the animal or require that it demonstrates a task.

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What is the difference between a service animal, an emotional support animal, and a therapy animal?

A service animal has gone through significant training to support one person, with a disability, to complete specific jobs/tasks daily.

An Emotional Support animal, also called a comfort animal, is an animal that provides comfort just by being with a person. An emotional support animal has not been trained to perform a specific job or task and that is why they do not qualify as service animals under the ADA.

Therapy animals (typically dogs) also receive training but their responsibilities are to provide psychological or physiological therapy to individuals other than their handlers. These dogs have stable temperaments and are very friendly and easy-going. They typically visit hospitals, schools, hospices, nursing homes and more.

Who We Are and Who We Serve

The **Vanderbilt Kennedy Center (VKC)** works with and for people with disabilities and their family members, service providers and advocates, researchers and policy makers. It is among only a few centers nationwide to be a University Center for Excellence in Developmental Disabilities, a *Eunice Kennedy Shriver* Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities Research Center, and a Leadership Education in Neurodevelopmental and Related Disabilities Training Program. Center programs and staff can assist families, educators, and other service providers. (615) 322-8240, toll-free (866) 936-8852, vkc.vumc.org

Tennessee Disability Pathfinder provides free information, referral sources, and help with navigating services via phone, email, and website. Assistance is available to individuals of all ages, all types of disabilities, and all languages spoken. Its website database has more than 3,000 agencies searchable by Tennessee county and service. Pathfinder is a project of the VKC and is partially funded by Tennessee Council on Developmental Disabilities and other state agencies. (615) 322-8529, toll-free (800) 640-4636, DisabilityPathfinder.org

Take Part in Research

StudyFinder is a searchable database that lists current VKC studies. Studies seek people of all ages with and without developmental disabilities. See **vkc.vumc.org/studyfinder**. Research Match is a secure place for volunteers and researchers to connect. See researchmatch.org

Resources

TN Disability Coalition

www.tndisability.org/our-publications

US Support Animals

usserviceanimals.org

International Association of Canine Professionals

www.canineprofessionals.com

Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA)

www.ada.gov/service_animals_2010.htm

Pacer Center

www.pacer.org/parent/php/php-c164.pdf

This tip sheet was created in 2019 by Sarah Tocci, a trainee of the Vanderbilt Kennedy Center for Excellence in Developmental Disabilities.

