

Standardizing Physician Approach to Disability Accommodations: Prescribing Support Animals

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Background

- ❖ The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) advocates for individuals with disabilities to accommodate them by performing tasks or providing emotional support.
- ❖ To ensure equity, the ADA requires these accommodations be **free** and **accessible** to all
- ❖ Providers in a primary care or mental health role are tasked with determining patients' eligibility for animal accommodations because they are the only source of prescription letters accepted by the ADA and the Department of Justice (DOJ).
- ❖ This quality improvement project arose from observations I made in the clinical setting during my 3rd year clerkships: apprehension and variable practices when asked to write letters for service animals and emotional support animals due to fears of liability and lack of clarity about the process.
- ❖ I noticed barriers and practices that violated the policies of the ADA and (DOJ) because they were cost-prohibitive or required certifications from outside agencies.

Program Description

- ❖ The handout tackled the following topics to standardize provider practices and advocate for patients:
- ❖ Providers are prescribing animals in good faith and are **not liable** if patients fraudulently seek letters or if animals are not safe or well-behaved. The ADA details strict criteria for an animal's eligibility and owner responsibility.
- ❖ Incomplete understanding of what patients stood to gain from provider prescriptions, such as waived pet fees in housing and service dogs traveling with patients for free.
- ❖ Lack of clarity on which disabilities qualified for animal accommodations, especially psychiatric disabilities.
- ❖ Practices violating the ADA such as:
 - ❖ Charging fees for letters (cost-prohibitive) or requiring documentation from outside agencies to legitimize a service or emotional support animal. Private companies sell these "certifications" that are not recognized or required by the DOJ or ADA and thus prey on patients with disabilities.

 Service Dogs Service Dogs are extensively trained to perform tasks specific to their handler's disability.	 Support Animals Support Animals are medically prescribed to provide patients with therapeutic companionship.	 Therapy Dogs Therapy Dogs provide emotional support and comfort as a form of therapy, mostly in clinical settings.
What kind of training do they receive?		
Service Dogs usually receive professional training. However, handlers may train the dogs on their own without any professional help.	Support Animals are not required to undergo specific training but usually have behavior/obedience training.	Like Service Dogs, Therapy Dogs go through training specific to their service as well as obedience. Therapy Dogs also require a friendly, laid-back temperament.
What types of animals can they be?		
The Americans with Disabilities Act does not recognize any animals other than dogs in it's definition. However, there is a provision that allows miniature horses, that meet certain requirements, to be service animals as well.	Support Animals can be any domesticated animal that is easily managed in public settings.	Same as Support Animals.
Is it OK for me to pet them?		
NO!! Distracting a Service Dogs while they are working could jeopardize their handler.	It is not OK to pet support animals. Similar to service dogs, support animals are focused on assisting their handlers.	While there are no laws or rules against petting Therapy Animals, it's best practice to ask the handler's permission first.
Where are they allowed and not allowed?		
Service Dogs are protected under the Americans with Disabilities Act and may accompany their handlers to any public place, even places that have a "no pets" policy.	With medical documentation, support animals are allowed to accompany their handlers in housing with "no pets" policies under The Fair Housing Authority but no longer allowed to accompany their handlers in airplane cabins under the Air Carriers Access Act.	Therapy Animals are not allowed in public "no pet" settings unless special permission has been given.
Do they have to be certified?		
While many of them are, Service Animals are not required to be registered, certified or to wear identifying vests.	No. However, medical documentaion is needed when taking the animal into planes, educational facilities and for housing that has a "no pets" policy.	Usually yes. This depends on the requirements of the entity where the dog is working.
What am I allowed to ask?		
It is against the law to ask anything except: 1. Does your dog provide a service? 2. What service is your dog trained to perform?	There are no laws against questioning the animals' legitimacy. However, only landlords, airline employees and education facility administrators can legally ask for medical documentation.	It is legal to question the legitimacy of the animal. Especially considering that therapy animals are not legally permitted in public spaces with a "no pets" policy.

Innovation

Created a 1-page reference handout for providers that addresses frequently asked questions and concerns about animal prescriptions for disabilities and provides guidance on prescribing service animals or emotional support animals

Discussion

- ❖ Reference handouts with algorithms to work up and treat medical conditions are broadly used to standardize patient care.
- ❖ It is just as important to have guidelines that abide by the ADA to accommodate our patients with disabilities and improve their quality of life.
- ❖ When a patient request a letter for an animal to support them with their disability, it can spark apprehension about how to do the right thing for the patient without committing wrongdoing.
- ❖ Offering a guide providers can reference quickly is a simple way to help providers feel confident about prescribing animals.

Conclusions

The field of medicine requires us know the best approach to treat thousands of medical conditions, and referenceable protocols are an effective way to standardize the quality of patient care we provide.

References

- ❖ <https://www.ada.gov/cguide.htm>
- ❖ <https://www.animallaw.info/article/faqs-emotional-support-animals#s4>
- ❖ https://adata.org/sites/adata.org/files/files/Service_Animal_Booklet_2014%20LP.pdf
- ❖ <https://www.humanesociety.org/resources/fair-housing-act-and-assistance-animals>