

# Emotional Support and Service Animals

## What are Service Animals and Emotional Support Animals?

An **Emotional Support Animal (ESA)** provides stability to individuals who experience psychological or emotional disabilities<sup>1</sup>. Emotional support animals provide comfort and support by providing affection and companionship for individuals experiencing a variety of conditions<sup>2</sup>. Research has shown that ESAs can help alleviate symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder, anxiety disorder, and panic disorders by calming the handler<sup>3</sup>. A **Service Animal (SA)** is an animal that is trained to do work or perform tasks for the benefit of an individual with a disability. A service dog has been trained to perform tasks directly related to their owner's disability (United States Department of Justice, 2011)<sup>4</sup>.

A **Psychiatric Service Animal (PSA)** is a special type of SA that has been trained to perform tasks that assist individuals with disabilities, detect the onset of psychiatric episodes, and lessen their effects. These tasks might include: reminding the companion to take medications, providing safety checks or room searches, turning on lights for persons with anxiety disorders, interrupting self-mutilation behaviors, anticipating epileptic seizures, and preventing impaired individuals from endangering themselves.<sup>5</sup>

## How is an Emotional Support Animal distinct from a Service Animal?

An ESA does not require special training and does not receive certification for its role in providing emotional support. ESAs provide emotional stability, companionship, and unconditional love. This helps alleviate symptoms associated with anxiety, depression, bipolar disorder/mood disorder, panic attacks, fear/phobias, and other psychological and emotional conditions.<sup>6</sup>

Because ESAs do not require specific training, they are not covered by Title II (Nondiscrimination on the basis of disability in state and local government services; 42 U.S.C.) or Title III (Nondiscrimination on the basis of disability by public accommodations and in public commercial facilities; 42 U.S.C.) of the ADA.<sup>7</sup>

## Considerations for an ESA & SA Policy

Unless your congregation receives public funding, you are not legally required to allow Service Animals. However, most congregations desire to be as accommodating as possible to people with disabilities. Because service animals must undergo specific and extensive training to provide support for people with disabilities, while emotional support animals are not required to have any training, it is fair for congregations to allow all trained service animals in the building, but to consider emotional support animals on a case-by-case basis.

Below are suggestions and resources to help your congregation discern this area of accessibility.

### 1. **Who does this affect?**

People with disabilities may need to use a service animal or an emotional support animal to cope with limitations that affect their daily lives. Who is being excluded by a strict no-animal policy?

### 2. **Consider the Potential Issues**

Thinking about potential issues will help in several ways: Naming potential challenges facilitates discussion about how to overcome the challenges, reassures people who may be skeptical, and makes the transition to allowing SA or ESA smoother. Issues to consider:

- Are there any congregants who are afraid of or allergic to animals?
- What kind of training has the animal received?
- Is always the animal under the control of the handler?

### 3. **Connect with Other Churches**

Consult a congregation that welcomes SAs or ESAs to learn more about what worked or didn't work as well for them in their process.

[Contact us if you have questions or would like to share your church's experience.](#)

### 4. **Research Legislation and Insurance Requirements:**

- [Church and service animals](#)
- [ADA and service animals.](#)
- Church Insurance Agency [Brotherhood Mutual on creating a policy.](#)
- Check local and state laws that apply to service animals and emotional support animals.

### 5. **Compare other Church's Policies**

Here are sample policies for SA and ESA:

- [Westside Unitarian Universalist Church Knoxville](#) (scroll down on page)
- [Treehouse Lititz](#) (an accessible playground from Lititz Church of the Brethren)
- [Columbus Mennonite Church](#)

## **Creating a Policy for Service Animals and Emotional Support Animals**

Whatever direction your congregation chooses to go, follow these steps to create a policy and share it with your congregation.

### 1. **Determine Expectations for Animals**

Many churches and institutions require that SAs or ESAs must be:

- Leashed.
- House-broken
- Trained not to bark or make other disruptive sounds indoors.
- Calm and under the control of the handler at all times.
- Not show any aggressive behavior, such as growling or snapping.
- Restricted to certain areas within the worship space and other parts of the building.
- An actual support to the person and not just a pet.

[When communicating boundary information to someone who has an ESA,](#)

take care to not require them to reveal more information about their disability than they feel comfortable revealing.

## 2. Determine Expectations for Owners

Many institutions require that:

- Church leadership be consulted before bringing an animal into the building or onto the grounds.

When someone wishes to do this, leaders are legally allowed to ask:

- Is the animal required because of a disability?
- What work or task has the animal been trained to perform?
- Animal owner be responsible for any damage or injury caused to church property or attendees.
- Any transgression of the policy may result in the animal being removed from the building and not allowed to return.

## 3. Communicate with the Congregation

Communicate the benefits and boundary expectations for SAs and ESAs with everyone. When all people in the congregation know why there are SAs or ESAs present in the church and feel like they know what to expect, they will often feel more comfortable. This can be accomplished in a variety of ways:

- Email, newsletter, or bulletin announcements to explain the decision-making process and outline the expectations.
- Post on the church website giving full details of the policy for and purpose of SAs or ESAs.
- Include a short line in the bulletin every week to welcome SAs and ESAs for people with disabilities and direct them to where more information can be found.

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<sup>1</sup> Younggren, J. N., Boisvert, J. A., & Boness, C. L. (2016). Examining emotional support animals and role conflicts in professional psychology. *Professional Psychology: Research And Practice*, 47(4), 255-260. doi:10.1037/pro0000083

<sup>2</sup> United States Dog Registry. (2013). Information on emotional support dogs. Retrieved from <http://usdogregistry.org/information/informationon-emotional-support-dogs/>

<sup>3</sup> " Regulations.gov, Document Details, Comment Submitted By Erika Hagensen, The Arc of the United States and United Cerebral Palsy, <http://www.regulations.gov/search/Regs/home.htm?documentDetail?R=09000064806cbd61> (last visited Sept. 3, 2009)

<sup>4</sup> United States Department of Justice. (2011). ADA requirements: Service animals. Retrieved from [http://www.ada.gov/service\\_animals\\_2010.htm](http://www.ada.gov/service_animals_2010.htm)

<sup>5</sup> Duffly, Z. (2015). Psychiatric service dogs & emotional support animals: Access to public places & other settings. Retrieved from <http://www.nolo.com/legal-encyclopedia/psychiatric-service-dogs-emotionalsupport-animals-access-public-places-other-settings.ht>

<sup>6</sup> United States Dog Registry. (2013). Information on emotional support dogs. Retrieved from <http://usdogregistry.org/information/informationon-emotional-support-dogs/>

<sup>7</sup> Younggren, J. N., Boisvert, J. A., & Boness, C. L. (2016). Examining emotional support animals and role conflicts in professional psychology. *Professional Psychology: Research And Practice*, 47(4), 255-260. doi:10.1037/pro0000083