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## Service Animals

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### HIGHLIGHTER COLORS GUIDE FOR ARTICLE ABOUT PLACE OR THING:

**YELLOW:** Who / What

**GREEN:** When / Where

**BLUE:** Why / How

Full Text:

Service animals, also called support animals and assistance animals, are specially trained dogs that aid and assist people with physical, sensory, psychiatric, and intellectual disabilities or disorders. Some of the tasks service animals help people with include opening doors, retrieving dropped items, and alerting individuals to take their medications. For years, dogs were the only officially recognized service animals under the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), which governs the use of service dogs in public places and provides guidelines and protections for these animals. In 2011, miniature horses were recognized as service animals in some cases. Animals used for other needs—such as emotional support, comfort, and therapy—are not recognized as service animals by the ADA.

Critical Thinking Questions

- Why is the use of service animals important?
- Do you believe other animals should be recognized as service animals?
- Why do you think that emotional support animals, comfort animals, and therapy animals are not recognized as service animals by the ADA?

## History

The relationship between humans and canines can be traced back about fifteen thousand years to when ancient civilizations tamed dogs to perform different tasks. However, no formal date exists to determine exactly when people began using dogs as service animals.

In the mid-eighteenth century, a hospital for the blind in Paris, France, began using dogs to help visually impaired individuals. A few years later, a blind Austrian man named Josef Reisinger trained a poodle and a spitz to assist him. The dogs were so well trained that many people thought that Reisinger was faking his disability. In 1819, Austrian Johann Wilhelm Klein (1765–1848)—who had founded the Imperial Royal Institute for the Education of the Blind, Vienna years earlier—published one of the first guides about training dogs to serve people. He preferred the use of poodles and German shepherds, and he paired them with special harnesses and poles.

The use of mustard gas as a weapon during World War I (1914–1918) left thousands of German soldiers visually impaired. One day, a doctor named Gerhard Stalling stopped at a veteran's hospital and left his German shepherd with a blind man. He noticed that the dog seemed very protective of the man. Stalling served as the president of the German ambulance association, which trained collies to find injured soldiers, carry messages, and perform other tasks on the front lines during the war. He realized that dogs could be trained to aid war veterans who had been blinded. Near the end of the war, he had the German ambulance association retrain the collies to assist visually impaired veterans. The organization worked for nearly a decade training dogs. In 1923, the German Shepherd Dog Association established a facility in Potsdam, Germany, to train thousands of guide dogs for disabled veterans and civilians.

Around this time, American Dorothy Harrison Eustis (1886–1946) had been training and breeding dogs for the Swiss army. She visited the Potsdam facility, where she observed a dog assisting a blind man in navigating busy streets. She wrote about the experience in the *Saturday Evening Post* magazine in October 1927, endorsing the German shepherd as the guide dog model. Her piece was well received, and a blind nineteen-year-old man from Tennessee named Morris Frank (1908–1980) wrote to Eustis requesting that she help him. He asked her to train him how to use a guide dog in return for him teaching others.

Eustis agreed, and Frank went to Switzerland to train. He was able to live an independent life with the help of his service animal. In

1929, Eustis and Frank established the Seeing Eye, the first guide dog school in America, in Nashville, Tennessee. Within a few years, other guide dog schools and training centers were founded throughout the world. Eventually, these facilities expanded to train dogs to assist people with anxiety, autism, epilepsy, and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). International Assistance Dog Week was created in 2009 to honor service animals and their trainers and raise awareness about the importance of these animals.

### The Seeing Eye

The Seeing Eye was the first official guide dog training facility in the United States. It played a huge role in the guide dog movement and helped to shape policies protecting service animals and the individuals who depend on them. The school was established in Nashville, Tennessee, on January 29, 1929. It quickly outgrew its location, and organizers decided to move the organization to a cooler climate in Morristown, New Jersey, a few years later. Since then, the organization has established additional training facilities, a breeding station, administrative offices, student residences, a veterinary clinic, and kennels. The Seeing Eye breeds, raises, and trains dogs to become service animals for the visually impaired. It also instructs blind people on how to handle and care for the dogs. Only service dogs trained at the Seeing Eye can be called Seeing Eye dogs. Service dogs trained at other facilities are called guide dogs.

## Types of Service Animals

The ADA governs the use of service animals and limits these animals to dogs. However, miniature horses that have been trained as service animals are allowable in certain cases, according to the ADA. Service animals must be specially trained to help individuals with disabilities perform certain tasks. Many service animals wear special collars and harnesses to indicate they are working. People should not approach these animals. Interacting with a service animal could distract it from its job, which could potentially harm its handler.

Several types of service dogs exist. A guide dog aids a visually impaired or blind person in navigation. These dogs escort a person away from potentially hazardous situations, such as oncoming traffic. A hearing dog, or signal dog, works with person who is deaf or has hearing loss. These types of dogs are trained to alert a person to a noise, such as a doorbell or fire alarm. A psychiatric service dog assists people who have various psychiatric illnesses, such as severe depression, anxiety disorder, and post-traumatic stress disorder. These dogs are trained to keep people with psychiatric illnesses out of dangerous situations. They can remind people to take their medication, turn on lights for them, and prevent individuals from committing harmful acts, such as self-mutilation. They can also search areas to make sure they are safe for their handlers.

A sensory signal dog, also called a social signal dog or SSigDOG, assists people with autism. These dogs can alter their handler to distracting repetitive movements, such as arm flapping, which allows the person to stop the movement. A seizure response dog works with people who have seizure disorders. These dogs can either protect a person while he or she is having a seizure or locate help for the person. Some dogs can even predict when a seizure is about to occur and warn the person in advance. Other service dogs can help people with limited mobility or physical impairments. They may assist in opening doors, retrieving items, and pressing elevator buttons.

Other animals may provide emotional support, comfort, and therapy to humans—with or without disabilities—but these animals are not considered service animals according to the ADA. Unlike psychiatric service animals, these types of animals are not specially trained to assist individuals with disabilities or psychiatric disorders. A trained psychiatric service animal can recognize signs that a person is responding negatively to a certain location or situation and can help remove them potential danger. Emotional support animals typically are pets that provide a person with a sense of safety and well-being. For example, people may not feel comfortable to leave their home unless their animal accompanies them. These animals provide emotional comfort but do not aid their owners with tasks. While the purpose and benefit of emotional support animals is not disputed, they are not qualified as service animals and are not afforded legal protections. Under the ADA, emotional support animals are not granted the same rights to public places that service animals are. Public places such as grocery stores have the right to refuse entry to emotional support dogs, but these facilities must permit service animals into the store.

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