

service, therapy, and
emotional support animals
THE VETERINARIAN'S ROLE



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As a veterinarian, it is important to be aware that animals have roles beyond that of the beloved family pet. An increasing number of animals assist clients with physical or psychological disabilities or participate in animal assisted activities. A better understanding of these roles will allow you to best address the specific health concerns of these animals.

SERVICE ANIMALS

Description

- Dogs, or in extremely rare circumstances, miniature horses
- Assist an individual with a physical or psychological disability as defined by the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA)
- Individually trained to perform specific task(s) to assist in the activities of normal living
- Do not need to be licensed or certified, although many are trained through a service animal agency — some agencies maintain ownership of the animal
- Allowed to accompany the owner at all times when they can be reasonably accommodated
- No federal requirement regarding identification — agency-trained animals will generally wear a logoed harness
- Recognized under: Americans with Disabilities Act, Fair Housing Act, Air Carrier Access Act

Health and client management considerations

- Carefully assess health variables relevant to the task the animal performs, such as ophthalmic exams for guide dogs or orthopedic exams for service dogs trained to propel a wheelchair.
- Inspect harness fit and any variables that might affect performance.
- Ensure preventive medicine compliance, such as vaccination, infectious disease and health screening, and parasite control.
- Consider how the effects or side effects of any treatments might affect the ability of the dog to perform its task. Ensure the client is aware so that alternative arrangements can be made if needed.
- Maintain records to assist the owner and agency in decisions regarding animal retirement.
- When the animal is agency-owned, clearly identify the diagnostic and treatment approval process, submission of health reports, and responsibility for payment.
- Procure and maintain contact information of the agency that trained and placed the animal. Some have a policy of intervention or investigation on behalf of the animal in case of serious concerns not addressed by the handler.



EMOTIONAL SUPPORT ANIMALS

Description

- Any animal species
- Animal's use is supported in writing by a qualified physician or mental health professional based on a disability-related need
- No specific training requirement
- No requirement for licensing or certification
- May accompany the handler in their home when they can reasonably be accommodated
- Recognized under: Fair Housing Act and Rehabilitation Act — No longer recognized as service animals by the regulations under the Air Carrier Access Act and U.S. Department of Transportation Guidance Concerning Service Animals in Air Transportation; airlines may apply the same rules as for pets

Health and client management considerations

- Advise on optimal husbandry for the species, including housing, nutrition and socialization.
- Carefully investigate any impairment of appropriate temperament, or sources of stress, to determine the cause. Share concerns with the client and, where appropriate, refer to a veterinary behaviorist or trainer.
- Consider federal and state regulations for traveling with animals as they are considered pets.
- Ensure preventive medicine compliance such as vaccination, infectious disease and health screening, and parasite control.



THERAPY ANIMALS

Description

- Any animal species
- Participate in a range of animal-assisted interventions (i.e., activities or therapy)
- Typically registered with/certified by an animal assisted intervention organization after successful training, behavioral and veterinary evaluation
- Access to facilities where pets are prohibited is at the discretion of management. No federally protected right to access
- No federal requirement regarding identification — animals usually wear a bandana, harness or ID tag
- Not recognized by federal law



Health and client management considerations

- Review the protocols of activities in which the animal may participate to ensure compliance with any veterinary medical requirement.
- It is recommended that a cooperative wellness plan be developed.
- Animal care should be informed by the health status of people with which the animal has contact. Some may require more stringent preventive medicine (e.g. vaccination, infectious disease and health screening, parasite control).
- Many organizations prohibit raw food diets.
- Maintain records of the certifying organization, as these may suggest specific health requirements.

A FEW THINGS TO KEEP IN MIND WHEN SEEING SERVICE, THERAPY, AND EMOTIONAL SUPPORT ANIMALS AS PATIENTS

Before the consultation

- States have varying definitions for what a service animal is, and which is protected in public spaces. For a full and updated list refer to the Michigan State University Animal Legal and Historical Center website.¹
- If your practice has a veterinarian with training or experience in the care of service, emotional support, and therapy animals, suggest an appointment with that veterinarian.
- Consultations with owners of service, emotional support, and therapy animals may sometimes take a little longer. However this should not be used as a basis for refusing the appointment.
- Remind the client to bring any necessary paperwork to be completed for the overseeing agency or organization that certifies/regulates the animal (service animal or therapy animal). For emotional support animals, the housing agency may require specific paperwork to be completed by a veterinarian.

During the consultation

- Avoid or minimize periods of separation of the animal from the owner.
- Focus your questions on the particular task or activities the animal takes part in, and the related needs of the animal. For example, do not ask “what is the nature of your disability?” but rather ask “what assistance does this animal provide for you?”
- Gain insight into the workload placed on the animal: duration and frequency of work and breaks.
- Clients may choose to share information about their therapeutic needs or disability status but this information is not required for care of the animal patient and should not appear in veterinary records.
- While owners may choose to describe or identify their animals in a variety of ways, always identify the correct legal status of the animal under relevant federal and state law to ensure that any advice you give is accurately contextualized.
- Request copies of any plans, guidelines, or protocols such as annual evaluation or retirement assessments that apply to the animal to ensure all specified veterinary criteria are identified (e.g. preventive care).

¹ <https://www.animallaw.info/topic/table-state-assistance-animal-laws>

- For any sick patients, advise that the animal not return to work until fit for duty and clinical signs are resolved, depending on the particular ailment.
- Consider that people with service animals may require a modified treatment plan or assistance to administer treatment; be sure to discuss options with them (for example, recruiting a friend, assistant, or family member to help).

After the consultation

Copy and add to the animal’s medical file any documentation or record listing requirements for the animal. Make sure these are reviewed prior to future appointments.

The role of service, emotional support, and therapy animals is important and evolving. The American Veterinary Medical Association is seeking opportunities to work with other professions to coordinate appropriate care and support for people with disabilities and their assistance animals. For more information visit: www.avma.org/AssistanceAnimals.



