

Service Dog vs. Emotional Support Dog



A **service** dog is one “trained to do work or perform tasks for people with disabilities,” according to the Americans for Disabilities Act (ADA). ... While **service dogs** do provide comfort and **emotional support** for their owners, they only meet the federal definition if they do a job the owner can't perform themselves.

A **service dog** is trained to perform a function, or do a job, that his or her owner can't perform on their own due to a physical, intellectual, or emotional disability. These dogs may, of course, provide emotional support and comfort, but they are specifically trained to provide assistance beyond soothing benefits.

A **support dog** is a companion animal (not necessarily a work animal) that provides therapeutic benefits to a person with a medically diagnosed disability. Support animals do not have to be trained for their role, but medical documentation is required in order to receive this designation.

Service dogs receive more legal protections than emotional support dogs and are allowed in just about any and every public space, whereas emotional support dogs do not enjoy the same widespread access.

What is a Service Dog?

A **service dog** is one “trained to do work or perform tasks for people with disabilities,” according to the Americans for Disabilities Act (ADA). Service dogs provide seeing functions for the blind, hearing functions for the deaf, or pick up objects for owners with limited dexterity. Service dogs can function as medical alert dogs, help those with limited mobility, and improve life for children with autism.

While **service dogs** *do* provide comfort and emotional support for their owners, they only meet the federal definition if they *do a job* the owner can't perform themselves. Some states have broader definitions for service, but these vary across the US. Regardless of the precise definition, service dogs make a tremendous difference in a person's quality of life, their ability to engage with the world, and their feelings of confidence, growth, and productivity. A study completed in 2017 by Purdue University verified these outcomes.

“Our preliminary results show that, overall, family members with a service dog in the home exhibit better social and emotional functioning as well as decreased worry as a result of the recipient's health. They also exhibited better management of daily family activities,” said Maggie O’Haire, leader of the Organization for Human-Animal Interaction Research.

In order to obtain a **service dog**, a person must first be diagnosed with a disability and then consider what function they want a service dog to perform in order to assist them. A **service dog** agency then works with a potential owner to find a dog that suits their lifestyle and needs. This article offers more information on obtaining a service animal.

Four dog breeds demonstrate strong success rates when it comes to training for service: Labrador retrievers, golden retrievers, Labrador/golden retriever mixes, and German shepherds. Smaller dogs

are also able to work as service dogs. They can't always pull or guide, but they can work as effective medical alert dogs.

Most dogs typically train for two to four months before beginning service. Some service dogs wear a colored vest, but this is not a requirement, so you shouldn't expect to see a vest on every service dog. A blue vest, however, is an indication that the dog is assisting someone with a disability.

What Is an Emotional Support Dog?

Emotional support dogs are companion animals that provide therapeutic benefits to people with medically diagnosed mental, intellectual, or physical disabilities. In order to receive an **emotional support animal** designation, the animal's owner must fit the medical definition of a disability, receive a diagnosis by a doctor or mental health professional, and receive a letter stating the animal provides benefits to the owner with regard to the diagnosed disability. It is not merely up to the pet owner to decide whether their pet fits the standard.

Owners of **support dogs** may live with the complications of any number of mental and emotional challenges: anxiety, bipolar disorder, depression, eating disorders, insomnia, post-traumatic stress disorder, or schizophrenia, to name a few. There are approximately forty qualifying disorders on the approved list for an emotional support animal designation. There are also numerous agencies online that offer services to help people register their pets or locate pets that function as support animals. But someone already seeking medical help for a condition would not likely need an agency's assistance.

Emotional support dogs and their owners receive fewer federal protections through the ADA than service dogs, and those protections extend only to housing and air travel. This means the owner of an emotional support animal must be allowed to live with a pet in a residence that would otherwise be pet free. But other private businesses, such as restaurants or retailers, are not required to allow **emotional support animals** on their premises. **Owners are encouraged to carry their medical letter as proof, should someone ask, but again, private businesses are not required to honor the designation.**

Part of the issue relates to the sheer volume of **emotional support animals** and how to accommodate them all. Another issue, however, stems from the fact that **emotional support animals** are **not required to receive training** as part of their designation, which means: not every emotional support animal can be counted on to behave well in public.