

# WASHINGTON STATE HUMAN RIGHTS COMMISSION

## GUIDE TO SERVICE ANIMALS AND THE WASHINGTON STATE LAW AGAINST DISCRIMINATION



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## Service Animals and the Washington Law Against Discrimination

The WLAD includes provisions prohibiting discrimination against persons with disabilities who use a service animal to assist them with the disability. RCW 49.60.040 defines a dog guide as a “dog that is trained for the purpose of guiding blind persons or a dog that is trained for the purpose of assisting hearing impaired persons.” RCW 49.60.040 defines service animal as “an animal that is trained for the purpose of assisting or accommodating a disabled person’s sensory, mental, or physical disability.”

Service animals are utilized by persons with a variety of disabilities and in many different ways. Service animals may lead blind people or serve as the ears of a deaf person. They may also carry and pick up items, be used for balance, and provide warnings of impending seizures or low blood sugar. Service animals may allow persons with anxiety disorders, PTSD or other emotional illnesses to function in society, by alerting their handlers to avoid anxiety triggers, by recognizing and blocking behaviors, or by stimulating the person to “snap back” to a conscious state. Service animals can remind handlers that it is time to take medication, and can summon help in the case of fainting or a seizure. The ways in which persons with disabilities use service animals are growing and evolving as we discover additional ways in which animals can be utilized by persons with disabilities.



Service animal laws in Washington are complex due to the intersection of state and federal law: there are different rules for places of public accommodation generally, for food establishments in particular, and for housing.

### **Training**

WLAD clearly defines a service animal as being “trained”. Training itself is not defined, and there is no requirement that the animal have a certain type of training, that the animal be certified, or that it be trained by a particular person or by a person having certification. Court cases have determined that the training needs to be more than obedience training or positive reinforcement that are given to family pets. A service animal must have training that sets it apart from a family pet; the service animal must be trained to engage in specific actions or tasks to assist its handler with a disability.

This training requirement often eliminates “emotional support animals”, “therapy dogs”, and “comfort animals” from the definition of service animal. Before determining that an animal falls into one of these categories and excluding the animal, an inquiry should be made into what the

animal is trained to do.



**However, if you are in a housing situation, federal law applies**, because it has a more expansive definition that looks upon certain animals as reasonable accommodations for persons with disabilities, with no training requirement. Please see “Housing” below for more information

### **Service animals in places of public accommodation**

RCW 49.60.215 prohibits discrimination in a place of public accommodation due to the “use of a trained dog guide or service animal by a disabled person.” WAC 162-26-130 requires “fair service in a place of public accommodation regardless of the use of a trained dog guide or service animal by a disabled person as well as because of the disability itself.” (Internal quotations omitted.)

Service animals must be allowed into all areas of a place of public accommodation where the general public is allowed – this includes dining and eating areas, restrooms, and areas where food is sold. A place of public accommodation cannot request that the service animal be removed unless it creates a risk of harm. This risk must be actual, and cannot be speculative or based on a fear of dogs. In addition, if an animal exhibits disruptive, poor or unsanitary behavior, it would not be considered a trained service animal, and can be removed.

#### **Questions a business can ask:**

First a business can ask if the animal is a pet. If the animal is a pet, the business can exclude the animal. If the handler answers that the animal is a service animal, the business can proceed to a second question

Second, the business can ask a task or training question, such as, “What is this animal trained to do for you?” The answer to this question will determine if the business needs to allow the animal or if it can exclude the animal.

- If the handler refuses to answer, the animal can be excluded.
- If the handler discloses their disability, but refuses to disclose what the animal is trained to do for them, the animal can be excluded.
- If the handler provides documentation or certification that the animal is a service animal, but neither the documentation nor the handler can explain what the animal is trained to do, the business can exclude the animal. (There is no state or federal service animal registry or certification process, so such documentation has no legal meaning and is often purchased on the Internet.)

- If the handler answers only that the animal can sit, stay, lie down, come when called, or do something else related to obedience and good manners, this does not indicate the animal is trained to provide services for a disability, and the animal can be excluded.
- If the handler answers that the animal makes them feel better, helps them calm down, eases their depression, or something similar, this would indicate that it is the animal's presence alone that helps the handler, and that the animal is not trained to do a task or provide a service. Because the animal does not meet the training requirement, the business can exclude the animal.
- If the handler answers that the animal is trained to guide them, help with balance or mobility, alert them to a condition (either physical or situational), pick up or carry items, remind them to take medication, get help, stabilize them during a seizure, redirect their attention from a trigger, or do some other task or provide some service that the person is unable to do themselves or helps with a disability, then the animal is a trained service and must be allowed.

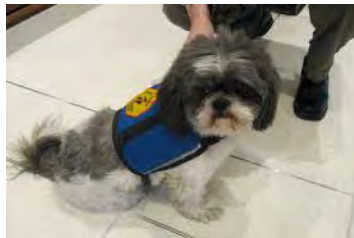
Points to keep in mind:

- Service animals are not pets, so a “no pets” policy does not apply.



NO PETS  
Except Service Animals

- A business cannot charge a fee for the service animal.
- Service animals are not limited to large dogs; small dogs and miniature horses often work



as service animals.

- Service animals will often be identified with a harness or vest, but there is no requirement that the service animal have any identification.



- The business cannot ask the customer about his or her disability, as this is private information, and the business cannot ask for proof of disability or a medical note.
- If an animal is identified as a service animal, the business must allow the animal into all public parts of the business, including where food is sold and eaten. The business cannot segregate the service animal and its handler to a particular part of the place of public accommodation.
- It is reasonable to expect that the service animal should remain in physical or voice control of its handler at all times, that the animal not defecate or urinate inside, and that the animal not bark excessively, be disruptive, run to people or jump on them, or act aggressively toward people. Keep in mind, however, that sometimes it is a service animal's job to warn its handler of surroundings or impending events, and it might do so



with a bark or a growl.

- The service animal is there to provide a service; it is working. Therefore it should not be wandering around, socializing, eating at the table, or being fed. If this type of behavior occurs, the business can ask that it stop, and if the behavior continues, the business can ask that the animal leave. Service animals are highly trained, and the majority of service animal handlers will be very conscientious about their animal's behavior, and would not allow it to engage in inappropriate or disruptive behavior.

- Do not pet or speak to the service animal unless invited to do so by its handler. The



animal is working and should not be disturbed.

## **Food Establishments**

Food establishments are included in places of public accommodation, but recent legislation imposes additional restrictions on the type of service animals allowed in food establishments.

The types of service animals that must be admitted to food establishments are limited to:

1. Miniature horses that have been individually trained to do work or perform tasks for the benefit of a person with a disability.
2. Dogs that have been individually trained to do work or perform tasks for the benefit of an individual with a disability.



The law specifically omits from the definition of service animal as related to food establishments:

1. Any other type of animal, wild or domestic, trained or untrained.
2. Dogs that provide crime deterrent effects.
3. Dogs that provide emotional support, well being, comfort or companionship.

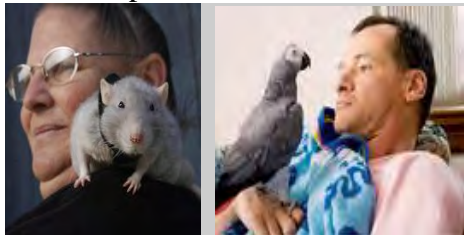
Food establishments include: Supermarkets and grocery stores, convenience stores and food marts (except those with fueling services), meat markets and delicatessens, fish and seafood

markets, fruit and vegetable markets and stands, baked goods stores, confectionery and nut stores, specialty food stores, warehouse clubs and supercenters, restaurants (including full services, take-out, fast food, cafeterias, grills, and buffets), snack or beverage bars, bars, taverns, and night clubs.

The same behavioral criteria as outlined above apply to service animals in food establishments, and food establishments can ask the same questions outlined above.

## **Housing**

The U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) is the federal agency in charge of enforcing housing laws throughout the country, including anti-discrimination laws. Under the federal Fair Housing Act, a housing provider (including landlords, property managers, and home owner and condominium associations) cannot discriminate against persons with disabilities, and must reasonably accommodate persons with disabilities. The Fair Housing Act does not have a training requirement for service animals. It defines a service animal as an animal that is a necessary reasonable accommodation for a person with a disability. The person must have a disability, must request the animal as a reasonable accommodation for that disability, and must be able to show that the animal is necessary because of the person's disability. Emotional support animals and comfort animals would be included as a reasonable accommodation under HUD rules. Therefore, if a person with a disability has a guide dog, service animal or an emotional support animal, that animal should be allowed into that person's dwelling despite a "no pets" policy. There should be no charge or "pet fee" for the service animal. HUD does not limit the species of service animals; service animals could include dogs, cats, and other animals.



If you believe that you have been discriminated against in housing because of your service animal, you will need to file your complaint directly with HUD.

## **Employment**

WAC 162.22.100 states, "It is an unfair practice of an employer...to request that a trained dog guide or service animal be removed from the workplace..."

If the animal is trained to provide a disability-related service to a person with a disability, an employer needs to allow the service animal in the workplace. These animals are not pets, so a "no pets" policy in the workplace does not apply. You can refuse to allow the service animal only if the animal poses an immediate or reasonably foreseeable risk or danger to people or property. Speculation that the animal poses a risk or danger is not enough to refuse the animal.



Fear of dogs by other employees or by customers is not a valid reason for not allowing a service animal. If allergies are an issue, an employer must balance the need for the service animal with reasonably accommodating the person with allergies, often by separation if possible.



Service animals should be under the control of their owners. Service animals should not create sanitary problems or make loud noises. There are certain very specific types of medical and food service operations where certain animals can be excluded under certain circumstances. There is no requirement that the employer provide food, water, or toileting facilities for service animals.

If you need additional information, have additional questions, or wish to have training for your organization, please contact the WSHRC at 360-753-6770 or 800-233-3247 (TTY 800-300-7525). Additional information on this and other civil rights issues can be found on our website at [www.hum.wa.gov](http://www.hum.wa.gov). **This document does not constitute legal advice;** if you have a particular situation about which you need legal advice, you should contact your attorney.