



Pets Are Wonderful Supports... Usually.

Ethical, Legal and Practical Issues for Social Workers

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Image of three beagles at the beach

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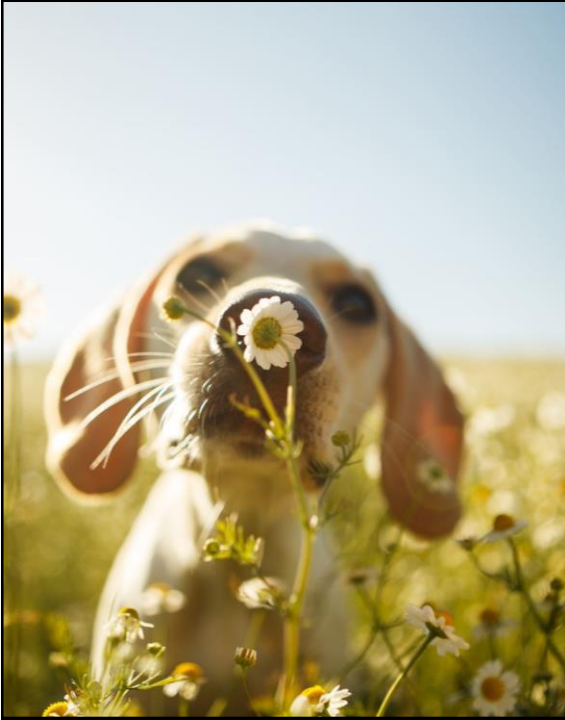


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Program Overview

- The human-animal bond.
- The impact of animals on our lives.
- Why are pets good for us?
- But...it's not all sunshine and rainbows.
- Some animals have jobs.
- Why does this matter for social workers?
- Animals and the law.
- So...You are asked to write "the letter."
- Case examples, discussion and questions.

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Learning Objectives

After attending this session, participants will be able to:

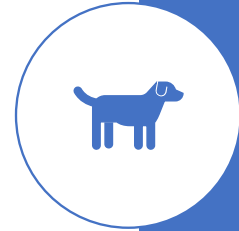
- Differentiate between service, therapy and emotional support animals and provide education to patients, caregivers and staff about the important differences between each of these classifications.
- Describe the ethical and legal challenges posed by emotional support animal verification letter requests.
- Develop a plan for addressing emotional support animal requests with their own clients as well as work with their agency and the local veterinary community to build interprofessional relationships that support patient's needs and the human-animal bond.



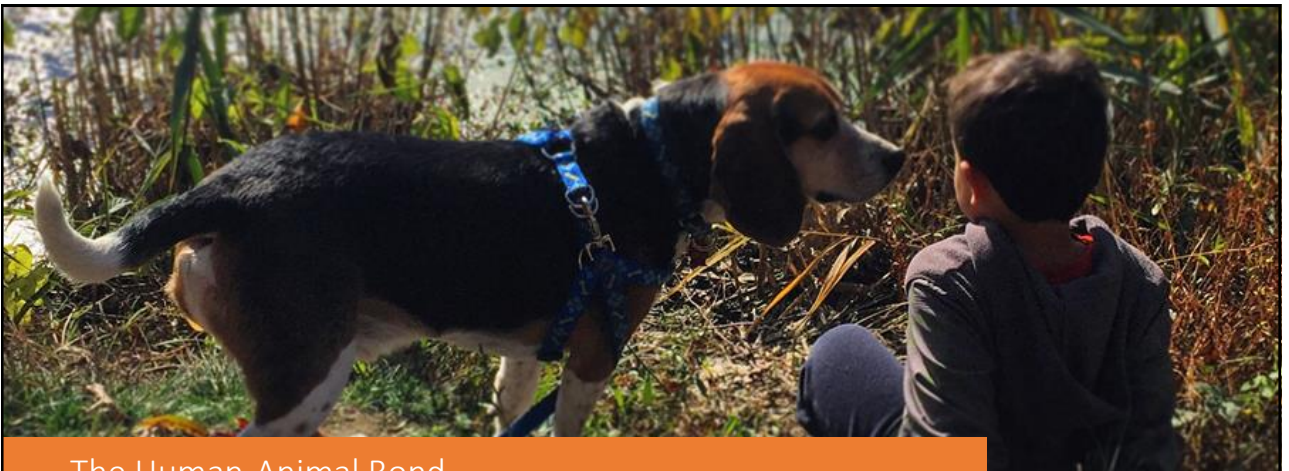
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Disclosures

- Consents for disclosure/usage of personal information and images obtained and on file.
- Gus and Finn were registered therapy dogs through Therapy Dogs International (TDI®). Huckleberry and Linus are registered therapy dog through Comfort Caring Canines Therapy Dogs, Inc.
- This presentation will primarily focus on the use of service, emotional support and therapy DOGS. Other animals, including cats, horses, and birds are also used in service and therapy animal work.



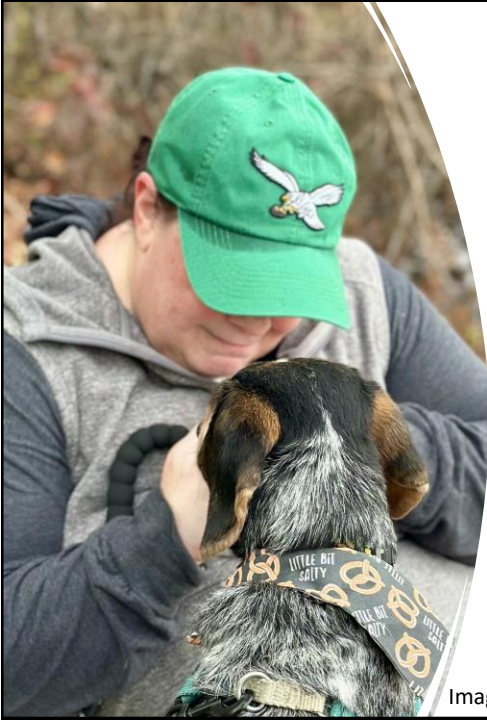
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The Human-Animal Bond

- Image of a medium size dog (a beagle), next to a young boy sitting on the banks of a pond. The dog is looking at the boy and standing close to him as the boy stares out onto the water.

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The Human-Animal Bond

- Grounded in affection, trust, companionship and emotional connection.
- The mutually beneficial relationship between humans and animals.
 - Humans: emotional support, stress reduction, overall improvement to mental and physical health.
 - Animals: benefit from care, attention, and affection.

Image of woman in baseball hat face to face with a dog.

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The Impact of Animals on Our Lives (trigger warning)



Image of a middle-aged white man holding a dog.

https://youtu.be/jj_A2BKCNDs?si=t7y0LqaGOH1UdzwE

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Why Are Pets Good For Us?



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Physical Benefits

Image of boy walking a dog



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Emotional/Psychological Benefits



Image of woman wearing winter clothes, holding a dog and kissing his head.

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Social Benefits



Image of many children sitting and standing around a dog and petting his head. They are at a summer camp.

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Research Supports the Benefits of Interacting with Dogs on Mood

Psychophysiological and emotional effects of human-dog interactions by activity type: An electroencephalogram study (2024).

<https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0298384>



Image of dog resting.

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- Study measured brain waves in the prefrontal, frontal, parietal and occipital lobes during activities with test dog.
- Activities includes meeting, playing, feeding, massaging, grooming, photographing, hugging and walking a dog.

Image of two dogs sitting on a bench.

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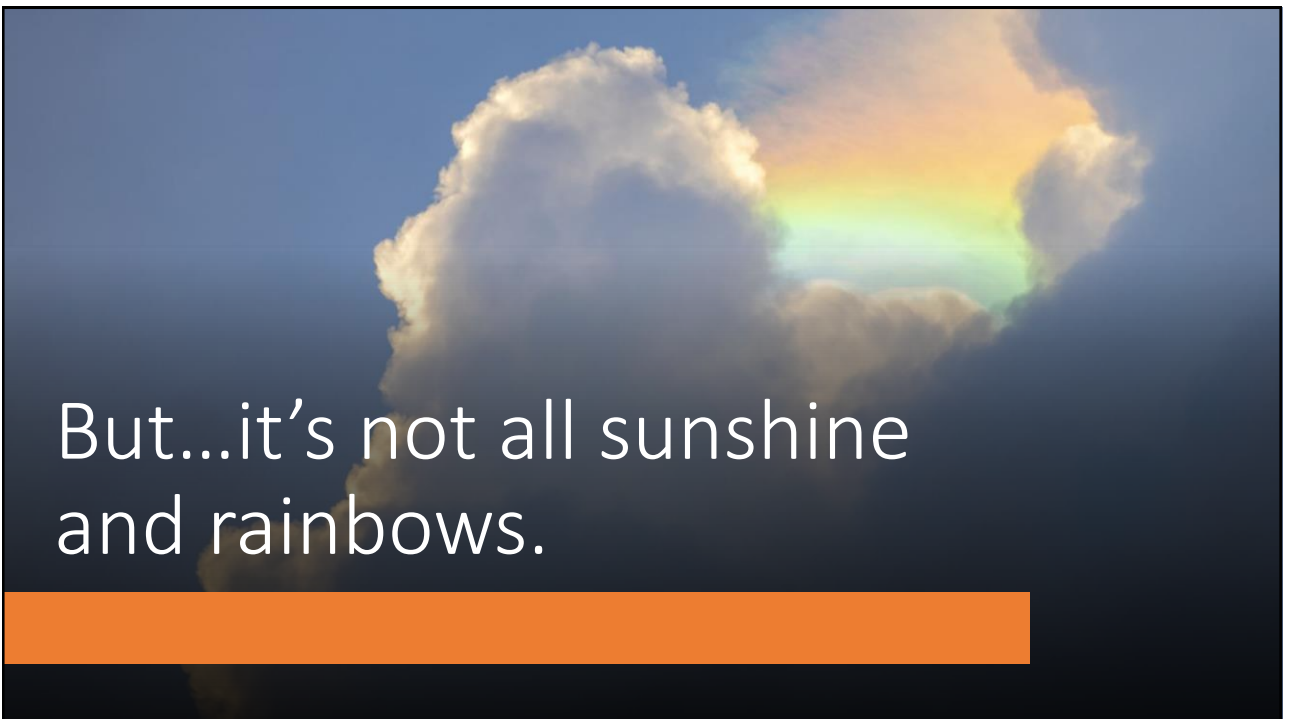


Results

- Animal interactions have a positive effect [on mood].
- These interactions influenced brain activity.
- The activities activate relaxation, emotional stability, attention, concentration and creativity.
- Playing with a dog specifically influenced relaxation and concentration.
- Mood assessment (subjective) after interaction showed that interaction with dogs can decrease stress and increase positive emotional responses.

[Yoo, O., et al.\(2024.\)https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0298384](https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0298384)

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Potential Challenges to Pet Ownership

Financial

Caregiving abilities and coordination

Behavior

Safety

Housing

Travel

Human sickness/death (i.e. what happens to the pets?)

Evacuation in case of disaster

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Some Animals Have Jobs

Image of dog at a computer.



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Poll Questions 4 – 7 (True/False)

4. Service dogs must be registered.
5. You can ask a person if an animal is required because of a disability.
6. Emotional support animals must be registered, wear a vest and have liability insurance.
7. Service dogs must wear vests to identify themselves.

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Service Animals



Any dog that is individually trained to do work or perform tasks for the benefit of an individual with a disability, including a physical, sensory, psychiatric, intellectual, or other mental disability.



Under Title II and III of the ADA, service animals are limited to dogs.



However, entities must make reasonable modifications in policies to allow individuals with disabilities to use miniature horses if they have been individually trained to do work or perform tasks for individuals with disabilities.

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What Do Service Dogs Do?

Guide Dog/Seeing Eye Dog

Hearing or Signal Dog

Psychiatric Service Dog

SSigDOG (sensory signal dogs or social signal dog)

Seizure Response Dog

Diabetic Alert Dog

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(LEGAL) Rights Of The Service Dog & Handler



Public Facilities



Employment



Housing



Education



Transportation

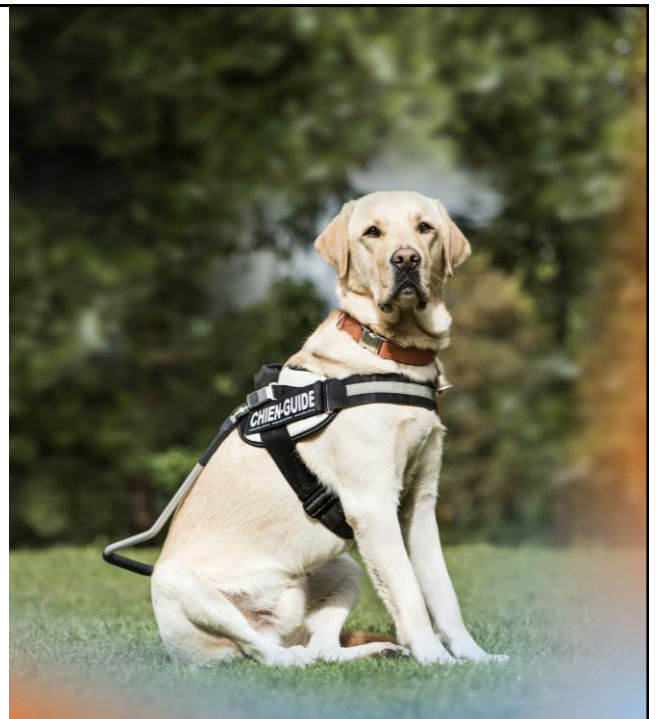


Air Travel

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What can be asked about service animals?

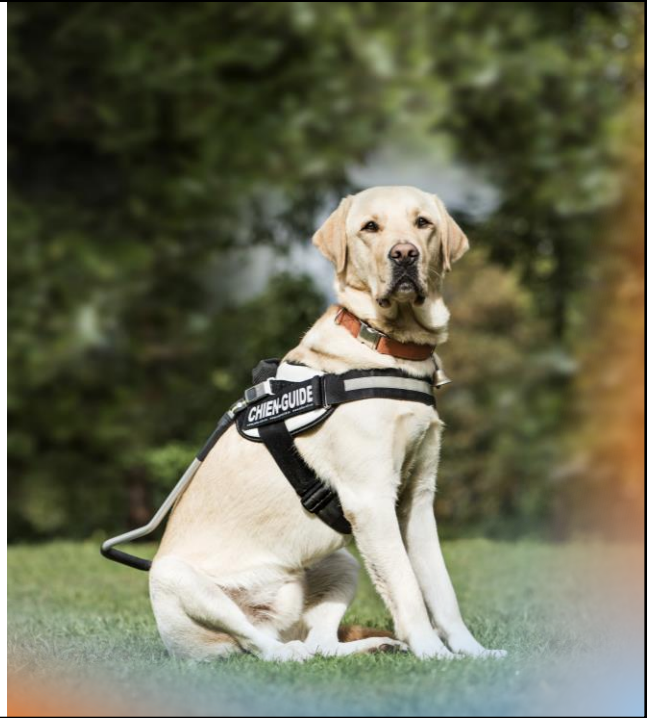
- Is the animal required because of a disability?
- What task(s) has the animal been trained to perform?



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What cannot be asked about service animals?

- What is your disability?
- Can I see documentation or certification for the animal?
- Does the animal have a license or ID?
- Can you provide proof of training?



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Therapy Animals

- Registered/certified pets and their handlers.
- Therapy animals are used in a variety of settings including nursing homes, hospitals, mental health treatment facilities, schools, libraries, and in disaster response.
- Therapy animal interactions
 - Increase emotional well-being.
 - Promote healing.
 - Improve the quality of life.
 - Provide distraction/recreation.



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(Legal)
Rights of the
Therapy Dog

—
NONE

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Therapy Dogs and Social Work Practice

- Does having a certified therapy dog mean I can have my dog on site at my agency/practice as a member of the “treatment team?”
- Therapy dog teams are **VOLUNTEERS** at agencies where they visit; not employees.
 - Insurance/liability concerns.
 - Animal assisted therapy is different than animal assisted interventions/interactions.
- Learn more Association of Animal-Assisted Intervention Professional (AAAIP)
www.aaaiponline.org

Image of beagle with thought bubble.

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Poll Question # 8:

What populations may NOT benefit from animal-assisted activities/interventions?



Image of 2 dogs sitting next to each other smiling.

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Emotional Support
Animals (ESAs)



After hearing her owner's story, Dolly suddenly realizes she was NOT cut out to be an emotional support dog after all.

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Emotional Support Animals

- A pet that is “prescribed” by a licensed mental health professional to a person with a disabling mental illness.
- A **social worker**, therapist, psychologist, or psychiatrist must decide that the presence of the animal is needed for the mental health of the patient/client.
- For example, owning a pet might ease a person’s anxiety or give them a focus in life.
- Do not require any specific training.
- Are NOT service animals.









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Poll Questions #9 and #10(Yes/No)

- I have been asked by a patient/client to provide a letter of support for an emotional support animal.
- I have written letters of support for patients/clients and their emotional support animals.

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 <p>Service Dog ID Cards \$29.99 USA Service Do...</p>	 <p>Emotional Support Dog - ... \$34.95 ESA Registratio... ★★★★★ (130)</p>	 <p>Emotional Support Animal... \$109.00 USA Service Do...</p>
 <p>Basic Emotional Support Dog Ki... \$79.99 Working Service.. Special offer</p>	 <p>Service Dog Credential... \$69.99 USA Service Do...</p>	 <p>Therapist Reference Lett... \$125.00 FreeMypaws.com Free shipping</p>



US Support Dog Registry. | Registration In 3 Easy Steps
[Ad www.usdogregistry.org/](http://www.usdogregistry.org/) ▼
 Register Emotional Support Dog. Emotional Support Dog Registry.
 Emotional Support Dog Kit · Any Dog May Qualify · Register Your Dog Now · Service Dog Kit

Emotional Support Animal? | Make Your Pet an ESA in 24hr
[Ad www.therappet.org/](http://www.therappet.org/) ▼
 Get Your Emotional Support Animal Letter From Our Therapists Now! Quick Process. No Airline Fees. Get ESA Letter in 24hrs. No Landlord Fees. Licensed Therapist. Qualify Your Pet.
 FAQs · About Us · Pricing Plans · Contact Us

Emotional Support Dog | Official US Registry | USServiceAnimals.org
[Ad www.usserviceanimals.org/](http://www.usserviceanimals.org/) ▼ (985) 284-3198
 Lifetime Emotional Support Dog Registration Takes Less Than 24 Hours
 Emotional Support Reg. - \$79.95 - Lifetime Registration · More ▼

USA Service Dog Registration | Emotional Support Animal Docs
[Ad www.usaservicedogregistration.com/](http://www.usaservicedogregistration.com/) ▼
 We Offer A Wide Variety Of Service Dog Kits. Full Access For Your Dog!
 Free Registration - \$0.00 - Register Today it's Free · More ▼





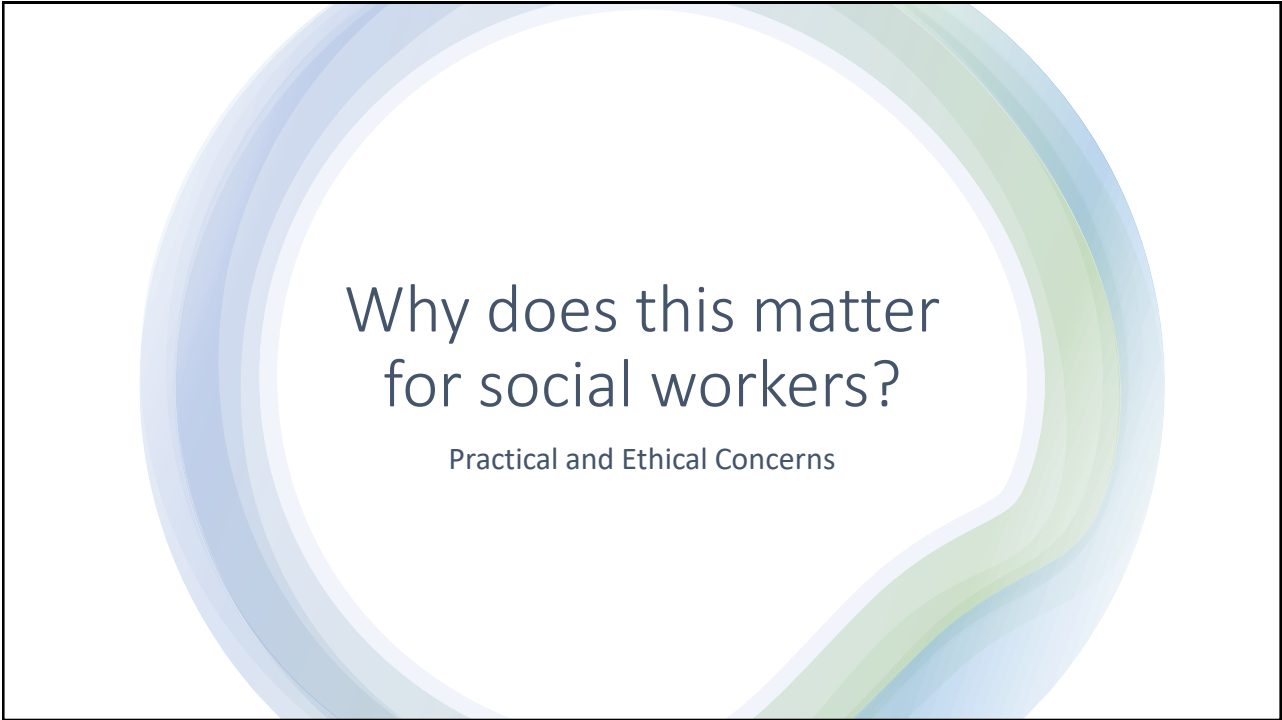
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Public Safety: Ripped from the Headlines

An ‘emotional support’ pit bull mauled a 5-year-old girl in an airport terminal, lawsuit says.

WASHINGTON POST, FEBRUARY 28, 2019

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Practical Concerns

Aren't most pets emotional support animals? (think back to human-animal bond)

Lack of consensus, guidelines, testing, and certification of animals.

Are they simply a “work around” to bend “no pet” policies?

Interference with service dogs and their ability to perform their tasks with and for their handlers.

Insurance and liability.

Animal well-being.

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Ethical Concerns

Scope of Practice

Competence

Integrity

Dignity and Worth of Persons

Length & Context of the Therapeutic Relationship

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Ethics and Animals in Health/MH Settings

- Embrace your roles and functions within your setting.
- Remember: we aren't trained to assess animals.
 - This doesn't mean we shouldn't have some discussions with veterinarians, trainers, landlords etc. about this animal and their history.
- If we aren't providing treatment for a diagnosed MH condition, can we (should we) provide these letters?
- Knowledge of agency policy regarding animals.
 - Risk management?
- Comfort level with asserting limitations within healthcare settings.
- Am I at risk for litigation if something happens with the animal? With my patients? With other staff? With other persons?

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Beware Of

Emotional support animal registries.

Online services.

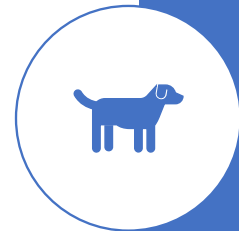
Abuse of “your letter.”

Solicitations from online registries for your professional services.

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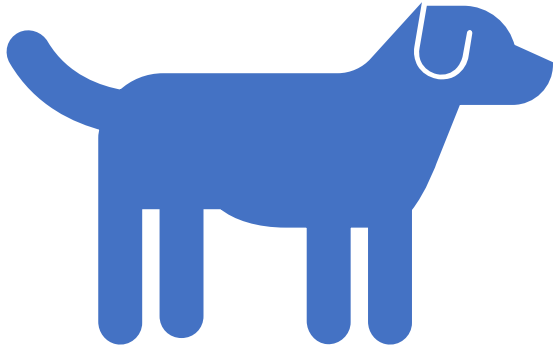
Animal Welfare

- Not all animals can (or should) be a(n):
 - Service animal
 - Therapy animal
 - Emotional support animal
- This is WORK for them-
 - Animals get stressed too.



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Animals and The Law



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The Big Three

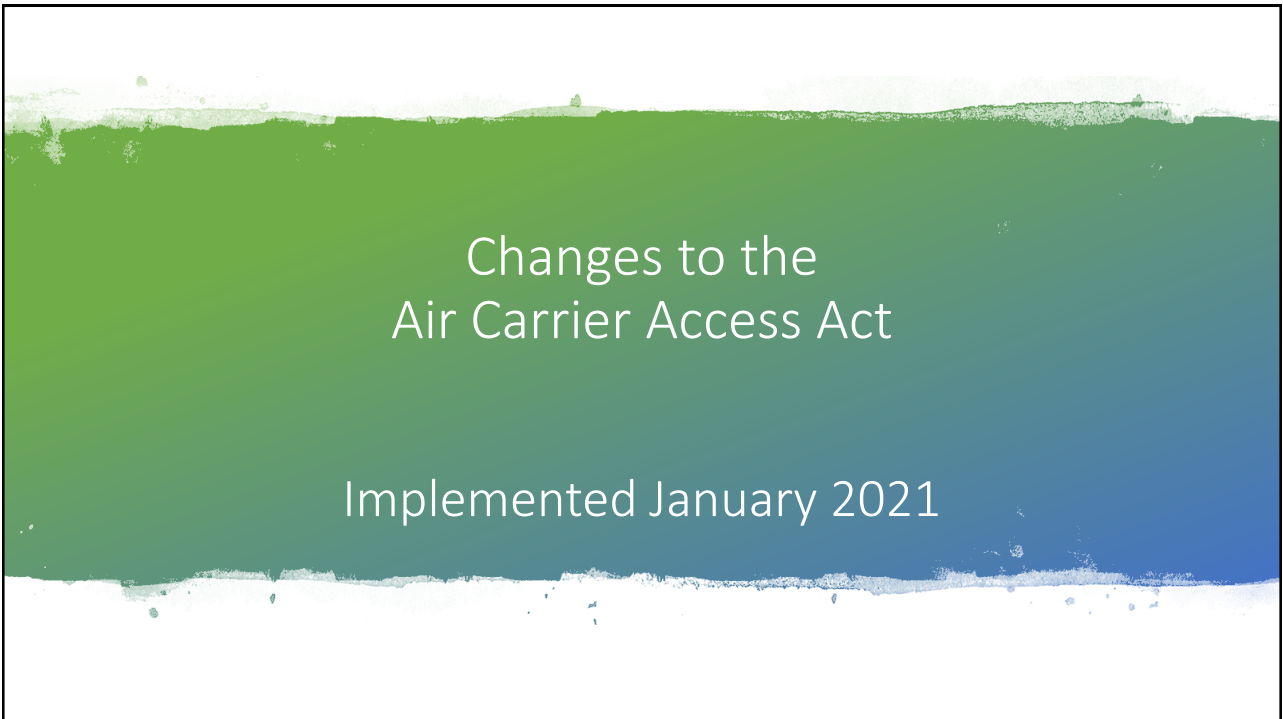


- ADA
- Fair Housing Act
- Air Carrier Access Act

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	Service Animal* Dog	Therapy Animal Any Animal	Emotional Support Animal Any Animal**
Receives specialized task training	X		
Trained to assist one person	X		
Protected by the ADA	X		
Protected by the Fair Housing Act	X		X
Protected by Air Carrier Access Act	X		
Undergoes obedience training	X	X	
Certified or Registered		X	
Encouraged to interact with people while working		X	

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Revision to Air Carrier Access Act, enacted 2021

- Defines a service animal as a dog that is individually trained to do work or perform tasks for the benefit of a person with a disability.
- No longer considers an emotional support animal to be a service animal.
- Requires airlines to treat psychiatric service animals the same as other service animals.
- Allows airlines to require forms developed by DOT attesting to a service animal's health, behavior and training, and if taking a long flight attesting that the service animal can either not relieve itself, or can relieve itself in a sanitary manner.
- Allows airlines to require individuals traveling with a service animal to provide the DOT service animal form(s) up to 48 hours in advance of the date of travel if the passenger's reservation was made prior to that time.



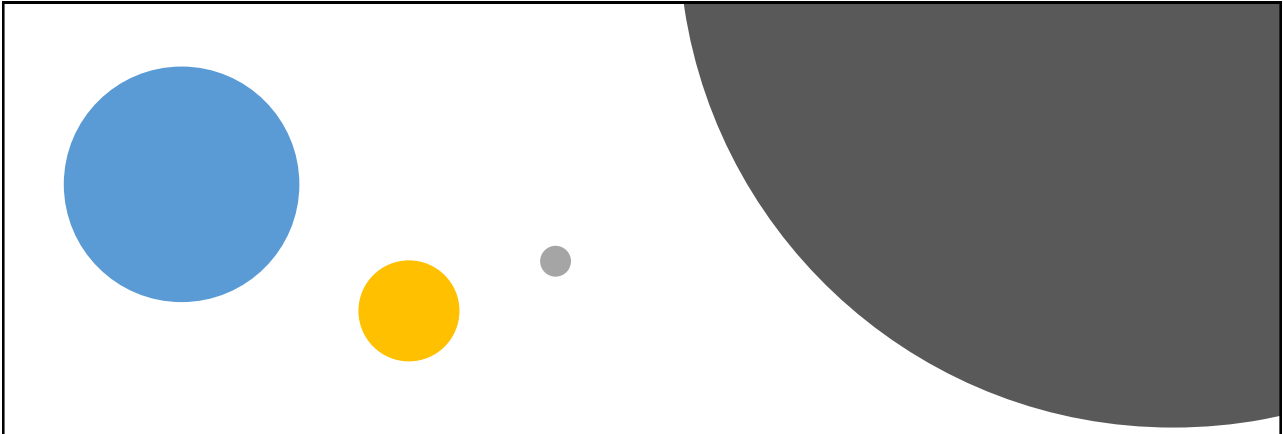
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Revision to Air Carrier Access Act, enacted 2021

- Allows airlines to require a person with a disability seeking to travel with a service animal to provide the DOT service animal form(s) at the passenger's departure gate on the date of travel.
- Allows airlines to limit the number of service animals traveling with a single passenger with a disability to two service animals.
- Allows airlines to require a service animal to fit within its handler's foot space on the aircraft.
- Allows airlines to require that service animals be harnessed, leashed, or tethered at all times in the airport and on the aircraft.
- Continues to allow airlines to refuse transportation to service animals that exhibit aggressive behavior and that pose a direct threat to the health or safety of others.



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So... | You are asked to write "the letter."

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Roles of the Social Worker

Assess	Educate	Support
Collaborate	Advocate	Innovate

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Assess

What are the client's/patient's goals for having an emotional support animal?

What is the client's/patient's personal pet history?

What roles have animals played in this person's life?

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Educate

- Teach clients about the roles, functions and limitations of the emotional support animal.
- Provide information about parameters being put into place by airlines.
- Offer information about so-called "online certifications."
- Offer services of therapy animals-if available-in your setting.



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Support

Validate

The importance of the human-animal bond.

Offer

Alternatives, especially in treatment settings.

Explain

Your scope of practice and decision.

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Collaborate



Veterinarians



Animal Trainers



Other MH Professionals



Risk Management



Airlines



Landlords

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What To Include In The Letter

- Letterhead (Yours? Agency? Facility?)
- (Name)is my patient and has been under my care since (DATE).
- Their emotional support dog is named...and is a (breed).
- (Name) is being treated by me for mental health issues (anxiety, depression, social phobias).
 - OSWs are these the issues you are TREATING?
- The presence of an emotional support animal (in the home/apartment/during air travel) will alleviate mental health symptoms.
- I have collaborated with “XYZ Veterinarian/phone number” and “XYZ trainer” to verify this animal (Name) is up to date on routine veterinary care and has received basic obedience training/socialization.
- Expiration date.
 - How long will you be caring for this patient and providing mental health care?

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Advocate

Within your own teams and institutions for policy development and formal visiting animal programs.

For the needs of the “non-animal” population (who are also our clients).

For the health and well-being of service, therapy and emotional support animals.



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Innovate: Establishing a Therapy Animal Program

- Start with a needs (and wants) assessment.
- Where does this modality fit with other integrative/recreational therapies at your facility?
- What resources do you need (financial, environmental, human)?
- What kind of buy-in do you need from administration, staff, clients and families?
- Who will partner together to make this program successful?
- Who will manage the program?
- Who will recruit, and train volunteers?
- What are your facility's volunteer policies?
- How will you handle grievances, problems, or issues?

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Case Examples

- You are a social worker in a cancer center. You have seen Marlene twice before; once for assessment after distress screening and once for a referral for transportation assistance.
- She is being treated for lung cancer and has regular outpatient infusion visits for chemotherapy.
- She has good local social supports and appears to be coping well with her diagnosis and treatment.
- She wants to travel by air to visit her daughter in Florida while on a treatment break.
- She wants to take her 50lb mix breed dog with her and asks you to write a letter supporting her need for emotional support animal.
- What do you do?

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Man's Emotional Support Alligator Loves To Give Hugs

"When I'm down it's almost like he can sense it ... He has climbed into my bed with me."



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Case Examples

- Joe has a trained service dog that alerts him for possible seizures.
- Joe arrives to the agency with his service dog. The staff are concerned about the dog being in the facility and are thinking about postponing Joe's scheduled appointment until he can come without the dog. They figure they can monitor him for seizures and get help if needed.
- Joe is angry and asks to speak with the social worker for assistance in navigating this dilemma.
- What do you do?

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Case Examples

- Sandra is a 70-year-old widowed woman with COPD, diabetes, depression and anxiety.
- You see Sandra bi-weekly for therapy. She also attends a monthly bereavement support group which you facilitate.
- After a recent fall, she realizes she needs to move to an elevator accessible apartment since she can no longer safely ambulate up and down stairs.
- Sandra has had two cats for several years. Sandra is very connected with her pets and feels they provide companionship and purpose to her life.
- Sandra has found an ideal apartment, but they have a strict "no pets" policy. Sandra asks you to support her request for her cats to be recognized as emotional support animals and a reasonable housing accommodation.
- What do you do?

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Case Examples

Mark arrives to the center with his mom, the client. She has several sessions with various care team members and Mark will be there to wait with her for some time.

Mark arrives with his dog, an 8 lb. chihuahua. The dog is leashed and wearing an ESA vest but barking and growling at other folks in the waiting room and chewed a magazine. Mark is letting the dog go up to other people and interact with them in the waiting room.

The social work administrator is called by the staff as the dog is being disruptive and other clients are complaining.

Mark is shown the agency policy on emotional support and service animals but becomes angry when he is asked to leave after being asked what tasks the dog is trained to perform to assist mark with his disability.

He demands it is "his right" to have his ESA with him in the waiting room. What do you do?

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Case Examples

Gina is the adult daughter of your client Martin. She lives in another state but would like to visit her father and potentially move in with him short term.

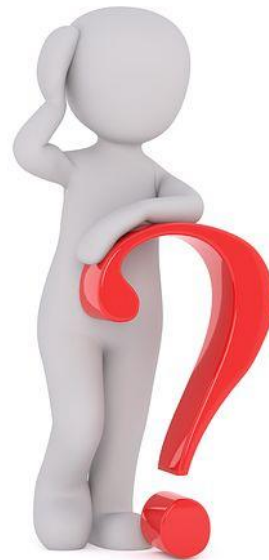
However, Gina has a guinea pig she needs to bring with her, as there is no one else to provide care for her pet while she is away. Also, Martin's apartment building has a strict no pet policy.

Martin asks if you will write a letter for Gina to have her guinea pig be her emotional support animal so that she can travel with the pet AND live with him short time.

What do you do?

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Questions & Discussion



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Resources

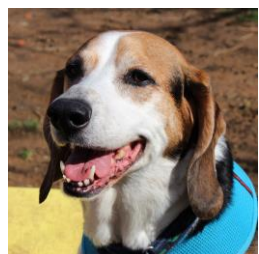
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In memory
of Gus Bach

In memory
of Finn Bach



Thank You!

Christina.bach@penmedicine.upenn.edu



In memory
of Linus Bach

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