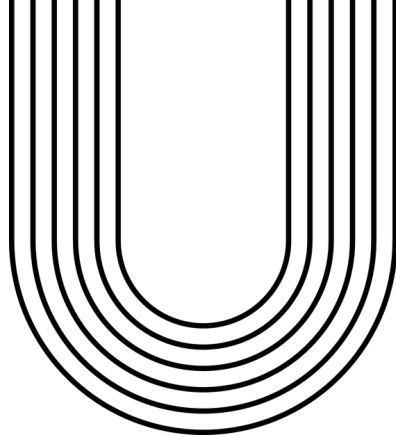




SERVICE ANIMALS GUIDE

A STORE GUIDE TO HANDLING SERVICE ANIMALS IN YOUR STORE

Featuring

What does/doesn't count as a service animal
The only two questions your team can legally ask
What you can never ask or require
What's at stake when you get it right, or wrong

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*This guide reflects my experience, not legal or accounting advice.
Always seek professional counsel.*



SERVICE ANIMALS

A TITLE III/ADA GUIDE



WHAT COUNTS AS A SERVICE ANIMAL

Under Title III of the ADA, a service animal is a dog trained to do a specific job for one person with a disability, guiding, alerting, retrieving, or interrupting a medical episode.

Comfort and companionship alone do not count as a trained task, no matter how much the animal helps.

Miniature horses get a reasonable modification review, not the same automatic right of access as dogs.

THE ONLY TWO QUESTIONS

If it is not obvious what the dog does, staff may ask only these two things, nothing more.

1. Is the dog a service animal required because of a disability?
2. What work or task has the dog been trained to perform?

Never ask about the person's diagnosis or for a demonstration.

QUICK RULES FOR YOUR STORE

- Let the dog go everywhere the public goes, fitting rooms included
- Never charge a pet fee, deposit, or added cleaning charge
- No breed, size, or weight restrictions are allowed
- Allergies or a fear of dogs are not valid reasons to deny entry
- You may ask a dog to leave only if it is out of control or not housebroken, and must still offer service without it

NEVER REQUIRED, EVER

- Proof of registration, certification, or licensing
- A special vest, harness, cape, or ID tag
- A doctor's note or disability documentation
- A demonstration of the trained task

DEFINITIONS

Service Animal

A dog trained to do one specific task for one person with a disability. Full public access under the ADA.

Emotional Support Animal (ESA)

Offers comfort just by being present, no task training. No ADA access, only housing protection.

Therapy Animal

Visits many people through a program, not one owner. No ADA access rights.



Allowed Activity	Service Dog	ESA	Therapy/Comfort
Legal right to enter all public areas of your store	YES	NO	NO
Individually trained to do a specific task for one person	YES	NO	NO
Provides comfort or companionship just by being present	NO	YES	YES
Protected cabin access under federal air travel rules	YES	NO	NO
May live with a disabled owner despite a no pet policy*	YES	YES	NO
Must be allowed on the sales floor despite a no pets policy	YES	NO	NO
Store may require ID, certification, or proof of training	NO	NO	NO

Housing access comes from the Fair Housing Act, a different law than the ADA. As of the 2021 DOT rule, ESAs no longer get automatic cabin access on flights, they fly under the airline's standard pet policy.

Service Animals In Your Store

A Staff and Store Guide

Purpose

Your team members are the ones standing at the door when a service animal question comes up. This guide gives them the words to use, the steps to follow, and the reasons behind each one, so they can handle the moment with confidence instead of guesswork. A store owner or team member who knows exactly what to say feels braver, more capable, and more at ease with every customer who walks through the door.

What Counts As A Service Animal

Under Title III of the ADA, a service animal is a dog trained to do a specific job for one person with a disability. Guiding, alerting, retrieving, and interrupting a medical episode are all examples of a trained task.

Comfort and companionship alone do not count as a trained task, no matter how much the animal genuinely helps its owner. That distinction is what separates a service dog from an emotional support animal or a therapy animal, and it is the reason the two questions below matter so much.

The Two Questions Your Team Can Ask

These questions only come up when it is not obvious what the dog does. A guide dog in harness or a dog pulling a wheelchair needs no questions at all, your team simply welcomes them in.

- **First question:** Is the dog a service animal required because of a disability?
- **Second question:** What work or task has the dog been trained to perform?

That is the full list. No follow up about the disability itself, no request to see the task performed, no paperwork of any kind.

What a Genuine Answer Sounds Like

There is no required script, but a real answer almost always names a specific trained behavior instead of a general feeling. Train your team to listen for the difference.

- “He alerts me before a seizure.”
- “She picks up items I drop and opens doors for me.”
- “He interrupts panic attacks by applying pressure.”
- “She guides me around obstacles.”

Compare that to “He calms me down” or “She makes me feel safe.” Those describe comfort, not a task, and comfort alone does not qualify under the ADA.

Service Animals In Your Store

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What Your Team Does With the Answer

- Listen for a task, not a feeling. A specific trained action is enough. Your team does not get to decide whether the disability itself sounds serious enough.
- Stop at the two questions. No asking what is wrong with the person, no asking the dog to perform the task on demand, no requesting proof.
- Welcome the pair in. Once a task is named, treat the dog as a service animal and let them go anywhere the public goes, fitting rooms included.
- Handle a comfort only answer differently. If the answer only describes companionship, with no task named, that animal does not carry ADA access rights. Your store can decline entry the way it would for any pet, or choose to welcome it anyway if that fits your culture.
- Keep records disability free. If an incident ever needs documentation, note only that the two questions were asked and answered, never what was said about the person's condition.

What You Can Never Ask or Require

- Proof of registration, certification, or licensing
- A special vest, harness, cape, or ID tag
- A doctor's note or disability documentation
- A demonstration of the trained task

When You Can Ask a Service Animal to Leave

- The dog is out of control and the handler does not correct it
- The dog is not housebroken

Even then, your team must still offer the person the chance to shop or receive service without the dog present.

When Your Team Gets It Wrong

Turning away a genuine service animal, or asking questions the law does not allow, is a Title III violation. The consequences reach further than a single uncomfortable interaction at the register.

- Federal penalties. The Department of Justice can pursue civil penalties that are adjusted for inflation each year. As of the most recent adjustment, the maximum is roughly one hundred eighteen thousand dollars for a first violation and roughly two hundred thirty six thousand dollars for each violation after that.

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- Private lawsuits. A turned away customer can sue directly, and the store is often responsible for the customer's attorney fees on top of its own, regardless of whether the discrimination was intentional.
- A public record. DOJ settlements and court cases are posted publicly, and local news covers store level ADA disputes more often than owners expect.
- Lost trust. A customer who is turned away rarely comes back, and the story travels through disability communities quickly. That kind of trust is slow to rebuild.

When Your Team Gets It Right

The flip side matters just as much. A team that knows this material well creates a moment that builds real loyalty, and it protects the store at the same time.

- A confident, calm interaction. The customer feels respected instead of interrogated, and your team member feels sure of the ground they are standing on.
- A story worth telling. Customers with disabilities remember which stores get this right, and they tell other people, both online and in their own communities.
- A protected store. Following the two question rule consistently is one of the simplest, lowest cost ways to stay out of a Title III complaint entirely.
- A team that feels capable. Clear steps replace guesswork, and a team member who is not afraid of getting it wrong shows up braver for every customer, not just this one.

Quick Recap

- Ask only the two questions, and only when it is not obvious what the dog does
- Listen for a named task, not a description of comfort
- Never request paperwork, ID, a vest, or a demonstration
- Welcome the pair anywhere the public goes once a task is named
- Keep the printed infographic near your register as a quick visual reference for the whole team