

Some abuse service dog designators

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The Americans with Disabilities Act guarantees that people with service dogs can bring their animals to any public facility where people normally are allowed to go – restaurants, grocery or clothing stores, movie theaters, etc.

But many people point to loopholes in the ADA law that allow pet owners to buy service animal vests or ID tags for their dogs, whether or not they are actually service animals, so they can take their animals just about anywhere.

Under the law, a service dog does not have to be professionally trained. In addition, a business can ask a person with a service dog what the animal does, but cannot ask about the owner's disability or ask to see any other certification.

“Service dogs should be able to maintain a standard of behavior, should be able to go into a business and behave and be a good citizen,” said Linda Samulski, student services coordinator at Guide Dogs of the Desert.

Samulski is blind and has had three guide dogs, including her current dog, Buster.

“A lot of people who say they have service dogs, their dogs are not well-behaved,” she said. “It discounts us, people that have real disabilities. It's like taking advantage of the goodness of society and the system.”

The ADA defines service animals as “dogs that are individually trained to do work or perform tasks for people with disabilities,” but does not require the animals to be professionally trained or certified.

The definition does not cover so-called emotional support or companion animals that may, in fact, provide comfort to their owners but are pets and do not perform disability-related tasks.

Caren Singer of Palm Springs admits she has, in the past, gone online to buy a fake service animal vest for a dog that recently died.

She has no dogs now. But, she said, the animal was very well-trained and had provided emotional support to her mother when she was in a nursing home before she died.

“When I put that service dog jacket on the dog, it's a shortcut to “Leave me alone. My dog is not going to bother you,” she said. “I didn't want to deal with the hassle.”

The ADA's vagueness and flexibility has been a double-edged sword, said Bill Kueser, vice president of marketing for Delta Society, a Bellevue, Wash., nonprofit that promotes the legitimate use of service and companion animals.

On the one hand, it recognizes that the role of service animals has expanded well beyond the traditional seeing-eye dog. "Diabetics are using glucose alert dogs," Kueser said. "The dogs, because of their acute sense of smell, they can smell biochemical changes and alert those people" if their blood sugar is at dangerous levels.

The downside is the growth of online businesses selling generic service dog vests and ID tags. "People who take liberties because of the lack of regulation are really costing those people who really need that animal," he said.

The online merchants say the ADA also ties their hands because even though passing a pet off as a service animal is a violation of federal law, they are prohibited from asking for any certification from people buying a vest or ID tag.

"Anybody that orders tags from me, the first thing I ask them is do they have a doctor's note," said Sussie Due, a customer service representative for ServiceDogTags. com.

But, she said, she can't require them to provide a copy of a note, even if they have one.

"I discourage people in a sense; that's all I can do. I can't argue with them," she said. "We have to take people's word."

Again, it comes down to responsible ownership, said Bob Wendler, director of canine operations at Guide Dogs of the Desert in Whitewater. "When you sign on to get that pet, you sign on to take full responsibility for that dog, its well-being, its behavior," he said.

"People who don't pick up after their dog, don't care about their dog, it's the same thing across the board. Responsible owners have to clean up after non-responsible owners."

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