Hello,

My name is Anna Williams, and I am a Resident in Counseling counselor at VipCare. I have taken some time to put together this letter to provide information about service dogs to help guide you in your journey. I will cover basic things such as what service dogs are, laws around them, who benefits from them, and the specific typse of service dogs. I will also provide several organizations that train service dogs. If you have any questions about the information below, I am happy to set up a time to speak with you.

Now, let’s jump right into the topic. You might be wondering “what is a service dog?” According to the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), a service dog is a dog trained specifically for your needs with at least one task. For example, one task my service dog is trained to do is stop at curbs so I don’t fall or trip. Other examples are dogs that alert their handlers to a diabetic episode, seizure, panic attack, etc. The individual must have a disability in order to qualify for a service dog.

There are several types of service dogs. You have medical alert and response, mobility, and psychiatric. From these categories, many additional subcategories exist. An example of a medical alert and response for a person with seizures would be the following: dog senses an oncoming seizure, goes to the individual and “alerts” them with a nudge, paw, etc. which might give the individual a small window of time to get to safety (i.e. lay on the ground). Once the person is having the seizure, the dog can lay under their head, lay on top, or go get help. After the seizure, the dog helps orientate the person. An example of a mobility dog would be a dog trained to help someone stand up after they fall. A psychiatric service dog helps someone with severe anxiety stay safe. Many dogs are cross trained. For example, seizure alert dogs may be trained for mobility tasks to help the owner stand after their seizure.

How amazing is this? You may ask,“But Anna, can other animals can be service animals right?” According to the ADA, only dogs and miniature horses can be service animals. Some states recognize other animals as service animals, but the federal government does not. This type of training takes 1-3 years to train. Not all animals are cut out for the job. You see, these animals have to be very well behaved in public. Some people only need a service dog at home, but many need them in grocery stores too. That is why not many dogs make the cut. So how exactly are they protected and allowed in public?

As mentioned above, the ADA is a federal law that overrules any state laws allowing service animals into public areas. This means if a business is open to the public, they must allow the service animal. What about houses and planes? The Fair Housing Act (FHA) allows service animals in rented homes and apartments that are not pet friendly. Airlines have their own federal law called the Air Carrier Act (ACA) which allows them to overrule the ADA and make their own rules. This is why airlines made changes recently regarding emotional support animals.

What are those you may ask? An emotional support animal or ESA, is an animal that provides comfort. They are NOT tasked trained nor do they require any specialty training. These animals are there to provide comfort for those experiencing medical or psychiatric episodes. For example, an animal sitting with a person after a seizure or anxiety attack. These animals can be cats, birds, squirrels, etc. Yes, they have a benefit for the owner and there is proven research behind this, but they are not protected by the ADA and not allowed in public. The only law that protects them is the FHA. You may have seen a dog in the hospital or at the library sitting with children or adults. Those are called therapy dogs. They only go into libraries, hospitals, group homes, etc. to provide therapy to those in needs. There are no laws that protect them.

You might be thinking, “Wow these are special dogs! Could I benefit from one?” The answer in short is yes! If your medical or psychiatric condition is disabling, a service dog just might be the right fit for you. Before I go into why you can benefit from one, let me explain some of the responsibilities of having one. Yes, service dogs give many people freedom, independence, and safety. However, they come with work. You have to be strict and follow the trainer’s rules of how to handle the dog. It is like having a toddler with you. You have to feed them, take them to the vet, give them time off, etc. People will try and distract the dog, cause access issues/discrimination, and randomly stare at you or take pictures. People who should not get a service dog are those who cannot handle conflict, have severe social anxiety, or if the thought of having the dog makes the disability worse.

People who benefit from service dogs share story after story of how they got their life back. Someone like yourself would benefit from a dog trained in medical alert/response and mobility. This dog would give you an alert to allow you to know when a seizure is coming on. They can wake you at night, go get help, call 911, etc. and help you stand up and get your body going after the seizure. Please see the recourse section below for a link that provides tasks for seizure alert dogs. You might be wondering how to acquire such a dog?

Well, there are two ways. The first is owner training (which I did) where you and a trainer work together to train the dog, or through a program. For programs, there are for profit and non-for profit. I advise to be very careful of for profit programs, and if possible stay away from them. Many organizations have been in lawsuits because those dogs require a large payment from the client. Non-for profits provide their dogs at no cost. Be advised, many programs have a wait list, so it is best to find several and apply. You will need to interview each program to see if they are a good fit. Many breeds of dogs make good service dogs. If you are looking for a small, non-shedding dog, you can request. Don’t worry if you have pets. These dogs are raised by families who have pets and are well socialized. See the recourse section for a starter list of service dogs. I suggest going to Assistance Dogs International (ADI) website and tailoring your web search. This will pull up organizations all over the country that offer dogs for what you need.

I know this journey will be overwhelming and lots of work. Trust me, I’ve gone through it, but I want you to know in the end, it is well worth it. I encourage you to look at YouTube videos of service dogs as well as doing a google search to read more about the process and hear other’s journeys. The more knowledge you have, the less overwhelming it is.

Sincerely,

Anna Williams M.A. Resident in Counseling

Recourses

Laws:

ADA <https://www.ada.gov/service_animals_2010.htm>

FHA <https://www.hud.gov/program_offices/fair_housing_equal_opp/assistance_animals>

ACAA <https://www.transportation.gov/individuals/aviation-consumer-protection/service-animals-including-emotional-support-animals>

Service Dog Tasks:

General List <https://totalk9focus.com/the-giant-list-of-service-dog-tasks/>

Programs:

ADI <https://assistancedogsinternational.org/>

List of ADI accredited programs. Note PTSD-Millitary means only PTSD for military personal. You can custom the searchyou’re your needs <https://assistancedogsinternational.org/index.php?src=directory&view=programs&category=Virginia>

Other programs:

<https://www.starfleetservicedogs.org/>

<https://k94life.org/seizure-alert/>

<https://4pawsforability.org/seizure-assistance-dog/>

<https://www.epilepsy.com/learn/seizure-first-aid-and-safety/seizure-dogs>

<https://can-do-canines.org/our-dogs/ourdogs/seizure-assist-dogs/>

<https://amazingtails.org/?cmp_id=691350678&adg_id=48821207701&kwd=seizure%20assistance%20dog&device=c&gclid=EAIaIQobChMIvK7e2ZaW6gIVhgiICR3cAQhdEAMYAiAAEgI4AvD_BwE>

When looking at programs on your own and from my list, make sure they train seizure alert not just seizure response. Seizure alert are natural and something not trained. These programs can help guide you in this. They will train response so the dog can help after or during the seizure.

*To see other service dog programs, simply type in the specific type of service dog you need. For example, Psychiatric Service Dog Programs, PTSD service dog programs, Mobility Service Dog Programs, Guide Dog Programs. There are specific programs just for military and vets, and the VA can also help*