

A Guide to the Types of Animals that Help People

What is a therapy animal?

A therapy animal is an animal that has been trained to provide specific human populations with animal contact. Therapy animals are typically personal pets. Their work is not focused on their own handler like a service animal; instead, their work provides benefits to other people. A therapy animal is not specifically defined by federal law, nor is a therapy animal granted any special privileges or provisions by federal law. This means that a therapy animal is not allowed to enter any facility that does not normally allow pets, except when they have been invited.

What are animal-assisted interventions?

“Pet therapy” is a once commonly used term that is no longer in use. Instead, we now use the term animal assisted interventions (AAI). AAIs are goal-oriented and structured interventions that intentionally incorporate animals in health, education, and human service for the purpose of therapeutic gains and improved health and wellness. Animal-assisted activities (AAA), animal-assisted therapy (AAT), and animal-assisted education (AAE) are all forms of animal-assisted interventions. AAA provides opportunities for motivational, educational and/or recreational benefits to enhance a person’s quality of life. AAA is delivered by therapy animals and professionals or volunteers who demonstrate knowledge about animals and the human populations with which they interact. AAT is a goal-directed intervention in which an animal is incorporated as an integral part of the clinical healthcare treatment process. It is delivered or directed by a professional health or human service provider who demonstrates skill and expertise regarding the clinical applications of human-animal interventions. AAE is a goal-oriented, planned, and structured intervention directed by an education professional. The focus of the activities is on academic goals, prosocial skills, and cognitive functioning with student progress being both measured and documented.

What is a service animal?

The term “service animal” is defined by the Americans with Disabilities Act as any dog or mini horse trained to do work or perform tasks for the benefit of an individual with a disability. Their work benefits their handlers, who have a physical or mental health disability. Service animals have been trained to provide services directly related to their handler’s disability. Examples of service dogs include those who guide individuals with visual impairments, alert people with hearing challenges, provide mobility assistance, communicate seizure alerts, and support individuals with post-traumatic stress disorder. They are permitted by the Americans with Disabilities Act to accompany their handler in most public places including restaurants, businesses and on airplanes.

What is an emotional support animal?

An emotional support animal, sometimes called an ESA or comfort animal, is a pet that provides therapeutic support to someone with a mental illness. An ESA must be prescribed by a licensed medical professional who deems that the animal is necessary for an individual’s mental health. Unlike service dogs, an ESA can only accompany their owners in public areas with permission of each area or facility. They can travel on airplanes, although specific policies vary by airline carriers. An ESA can live in some apartments with “no pets” policies through the Fair Housing Act, which requires housing providers to make reasonable accommodations for individuals with disabilities, including the presence of an ESA.

Does Tufts Paws for People train service animals or emotional support animals?

Tufts Paws for People does not train or provide service or emotional support animals. Our group focuses on evaluation and registration of therapy animals through the Pet Partners® organization.

Tufts Paws for People

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	Service Animals	Therapy Animals	Emotional Support Animals
Allowed Access in Public Places			
Allowed Access in Airplanes			
Allowed in "No-Pet" Housing			
Training or Evaluation Required (Standards May Vary)			
Primary Role is to Assist Handler			
Primary Role is to Help Others			

The information for this handout was obtained in part from the Pet Partners® official website, which can be accessed at www.petpartners.org.