

A Guide to the Types of Animals that Help People

What is a Service Animal?

The term “service animal” is defined by the Americans with Disabilities Act as any animal individually trained to do work or perform tasks for the benefit of an individual with a disability. Their work benefits their handlers, who have disabilities themselves. Service dogs have been trained to provide services directly related to their own handler’s disability. Examples of service dogs include those who guide people who are blind, alert people who are deaf, provide mobility assistance, communicate seizure alerts, support individuals with post traumatic stress disorder and remind a person with mental illness to take prescribed medications. 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. These pets must be prescribed by a licensed medical professional who deems that the animal is necessary for an individual’s mental health. According to the Americans with Disabilities Act, emotional support animals (unlike service dogs) can only accompany their owners in public areas with express permission of each area or facility. They can travel on airplanes and live in some apartments with “no pets” policies.

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 normally 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 Activities?

Animal assisted activities, or “AAA,” provide opportunities for motivational, educational and/or recreational benefits to enhance a person’s quality of life. Animal assisted activities are delivered by professionals, para-professionals or volunteers who demonstrate knowledge about animals and the human populations with which they interact.

What is Animal Assisted Therapy?

Animal assisted therapy, or “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 interactions.

What is Pet Therapy?

“Pet therapy” is a term that is no longer in use. Instead, we now use “animal-assisted activities” or “animal-assisted therapy.” Animal-assisted therapy is when we work directly with a licensed healthcare or human service provider to help a patient meet specific goals. Animal-assisted activities are when we meet and greet people to brighten their day, visit a school or other facility, or do a demonstration in front of a group of people.

The information for this handout was obtained from the Pet Partners official website, which can be accessed at <http://www.petpartners.org>. For more information, please visit the Pet Partners website or contact Tufts Paws for People by email at PawsForPeople@Tufts.edu.