



Position Statement on Terminology Use to Streamline Public Access for Assistance Animals

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Introduction

The use of consistent and precise terminology is crucial in reducing confusion and discrimination when discussing animals with public access rights. Just as scientific taxonomy provides clarity in naming species—where some species share many names others have one name for multiple species, and the classification evolves over time—standardizing terminology for assistance animals helps ensure that everyone is on the same page, reducing ambiguity and promoting inclusivity.

The Challenge of Diverse Terminology

In current discussions about working animals, a variety of terms are used, including "service dogs," "guide dogs," "therapy animals," "support animals," and "emotional support animals," among others. While each of these terms may describe animals that assist individuals, they are not all legally recognized as having public access rights. For instance, "therapy animals" and "emotional support animals" do not have the same legal rights to public access as "assistance animals." This inconsistency leads to confusion, especially when individuals face discrimination or barriers in public spaces because of differing perceptions of what rights their animals have.

A Unified Term: "Assistance Animals"

To streamline the conversation and ensure clarity, we recommend using the term "assistance animals" to describe all animals with public access rights. This term is inclusive of various breeds and species—such as dogs, miniature horses, and even other animals like pigs, macaws, or rabbits—that may serve individuals with disabilities. "Assistance animals" also covers a wide range of functions and tasks, including mobility assistance, medical alert, seizure response, emotional support, and psychiatric support, among others. By using one unified term, we create a clear, singular definition that aligns with legal standards and promotes understanding across various sectors.

Just as in scientific taxonomy, where the evolution of classification systems reflects our growing understanding, terminology for assistance animals should evolve to be more inclusive and clearer. The use of "assistance animals" over terms like "service dogs" or "therapy animals" is a step toward standardization that reflects the diverse functions these animals perform, as well as the wide range of species that can fulfill these roles.

Reducing Discrimination and Promoting Equity

By adopting a single term for all animals with public access rights, we can decrease instances of discrimination and exclusion. When all animals with public access rights are referred to as "assistance animals," businesses, institutions, and the general public will have a more consistent understanding of the rights these animals are entitled to. This clarity can help reduce confusion when individuals with disabilities seek to enter public spaces with their assistance animals and can protect against the denial of access based on incorrect or incomplete understandings of the law.

For example, consider the varying perceptions surrounding dogs, miniature horses, and even animals like pigs that may serve as assistance animals. Currently, a dog is far more likely to be granted access to public places than a pig, even if the pig is trained to perform specific tasks for a person with a disability. This inconsistency contributes to stigma and unequal treatment.

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Adopting "assistance animals" as the preferred term removes this ambiguity, ensuring all animals, regardless of species or function, are equally understood as having the same public access rights.

Conclusion

In conclusion, just as scientific classification helps ensure that all are referring to the same species with a common language, the consistent use of the term "assistance animals" for those with public access rights will streamline communication and protect the rights of individuals with disabilities. This approach is inclusive of various breeds, species, and functions, ensuring that all assistance animals—whether dogs, miniature horses, pigs, or any other species—are recognized for their vital role in supporting individuals with disabilities. By using a unified and clear term, we can reduce discrimination, increase understanding, and create a more inclusive society where the rights of individuals with disabilities are respected and supported by their assistance animals.

Document Control

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