

So you think you want an Assistance Animal?

Things to consider...



What kind of Animal do you want?

Assistance Animal – task trained to alleviate your disability. This animal, usually a dog, is trained in tasks that help you to participate in daily living and your community. For example, placing washing into a machine for you, detecting changes in blood sugar levels or helping you to stand. These animals can accompany you in public where pets are prohibited, with few exceptions.

Emotional Support Animal – an animal that provides emotional support to you at home. These animals are not task trained to alleviate your disability and cannot accompany you into public spaces. ESA are not recognised in Australian law.

Therapy Animal – these animals are trained to visit facilities such as hospitals and nursing homes to provide emotional support to residents. They are not task trained to alleviate disability.

Companion Animal – another name for a pet.

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How do I get an Assistance Animal?

An Assistance Animal (AA) is task trained to mitigate your disability. To be eligible for an AA you must have a disability that fits the definition provided by Part 4 of the *Disability Discrimination Act 1992 (Cth)*. It is best practice for to work with an occupational therapist (OT) to determine whether an AA is the best support for you. AA's may be funded by the NDIS, Aged Care, DVA or another agency, or may be self funded.

Virtually any species can be trained to be an Assistance Animal, including dogs, cats, parrots and miniature horses. However, the animal must be carefully selected for its purpose.

Assistance Animals can be trained and placed by organisations such as Assistance Dogs Australia or Guide Dogs NSW/ACT, or you can self-train your own AA with help from an organisation like In Paws We Trust, or an independent trainer. Do NOT simply select an animal based on its looks, temperament or perceived ability without the assistance of an experienced and qualified trainer. Very few Animals are suitable for Assistance Animal work.

Training an Assistance Animal is not quick, cheap or easy. An AA must meet the requirements set by Section 9(2) of the *Disability Discrimination Act 1992 (Cth)* to accompany you in public.



Where do I start?

The first step to sourcing an AA is engaging with a suitable Occupational Therapist (OT). Before recommending an Assistance Animal they will undertake a number of assessments to ensure an Assistance Animal is right for you.

Before prescribing an Assistance Animal the OT will first recommend alternatives including low-cost aids or therapies. The OT will check in with you regularly every few weeks while you trial these.

After approximately 6 months, the OT will undertake additional assessments to determine whether they are helping you. If they are not, the OT will assist you in exploring alternative supports which may include an Assistance Animal.

Assistance Animals are considered to be a high-cost, last-resort option. Therefore, it is considered once all alternatives have been exhausted. This is the same as high-cost bathroom modifications that would only be considered if all other alternatives had been exhausted.

Completing the prescription process takes many months of assessments and ongoing work with an OT. It cannot be completed in a single sitting. Although working with an OT is not a legal requirement, it is considered to be best-practice.

What else do I need to consider?

You need to consider the impact having an Assistance Animal will have on your life. For example, in public people are more likely to take notice of you and approach to pat your animal without realising they should not interfere with an Assistance Animal.

You need to think about how an Assistance Animal will fit into your day-to-day life. Can you accommodate their feeding, exercise, enrichment and toileting schedules?

If you enjoy taking holidays, you need to consider how your Assistance Animal will travel with you. Assistance Animals should not be kenneled unless in an emergency, for example. Their purpose is to be with you at all times to assist you.

If you live in an apartment, rental or with flat mates you will need to consider whether an Assistance Animal can easily reside in your home. Assistance Animals need appropriate environments and for a dog, this means access to a secure garden for exercise and toileting.

Although Assistance Animals do not need to be listed on a leasing agreement, most people find it easier to make their landlord aware of their Assistance Animal prior to moving in.



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Anything else?

Do you work? You will need to consider whether your Assistance Animal can attend your place of employment with you. If you work as a baker this may not be appropriate, for example, as Assistance Animals cannot enter food preparation areas.

What about schools, TAFEs or Universities? Assistance Animals may accompany you to these places, however, this may not be realistic in all circumstances. For example, a student doctor who spends a lot of time in dissection laboratories or a zoo keeper who works in a quarantine zone will be unable to be accompanied by their Assistance Animal due to the potential of disease transmission to their Animal.

One of the most important considerations that needs to be made is whether you can afford an Assistance Animal. Some of the costs involved are shown on the next page.

How expensive is it?

Initial Costs

- Trainer costs to source and select an appropriate animal
- Purchase price of the animal
- Desexing, microchipping, registration, grooming
- Work Equipment such as harnesses, leashes and collars (remember you will need to upsize regularly as your pup grows!)
- Husbandry Equipment such as beds, bowls, toys, crate, etc
- Fees to provide early socialisation and training
- Increased transport fees to attend training
- Veterinary and/or medical paperwork
- plus much more!

Ongoing Costs

- Public liability insurance
- Enrichment and exercise equipment (e.g. toys, puzzles)
- High-quality diet
- Grooming and bathing
- Vaccinations, parasite prevention
- Regular veterinary check-ups
- Organisation or training fees
- Public Access Test
- plus much more!

Guess what the average total is?

How much does it cost?

This may cost upwards of \$40,000 for the initial 2 years.

What does the NDIS cover?

The NDIS funds some Assistance Animals which MAY include:

- Prescription of an Assistance Animal by an OT
- Selection and Purchase of an Assistance Animal
- Training of an Assistance Animal
- Annual Accreditation of an Assistance Animal
- Ongoing Maintenance of an Assistance Animal.

They MAY also fund a pre-trained Assistance Animal from an organisation.

Assistance Animal maintenance funding is reconsidered at each planning meeting and can be withdrawn in later plans.

Therefore, you should not assume that your Assistance Animal will receive continuous funding for life. Although it is possible to appeal decisions, this can be a complex process.



How does an Assistance Animal work?

Once they are fully trained, an Assistance Animal will usually be required to pass a Public Access Test (PAT). They will then re-take this test every year to maintain their public access rights.

Once they have completed their PAT they are considered to be a fully-fledged Assistance Animal and can accompany you in public spaces where pets are prohibited **EXCEPT** - quarantine facilities (e.g. working farm), sterile surgical suites (e.g. operating theatres), and - food preparation areas (e.g. cafe kitchen). There may be other exceptions where the dogs safety is at risk (e.g. rollercoasters).

Your Assistance Animal should not be taken out in public if they are sick, pregnant or have an ailment or injury. It is also best practice to desex Assistance Animals.

Australian law requires an Assistance Animal to be hygienic. This means that they must be clean and well groomed. They must also exhibit appropriate behaviour. This means they must not pull, push, run or jump on people or objects. An Assistance Animal who lunges, growls or is aggressive must not be taken out in public.

What is the Law?

The law does not require Assistance Animals to undertake an annual Public Access Test (PAT). However, it is considered to be best practice. Section 9(2) (c) of the *Disability Discrimination Act 1992 (Cth)* (DDA) requires that an Assistance Animal meet standards of hygiene and behaviour that are suitable for presence in a public place. It also requires that the AA is trained in at least 1 task to mitigate your disability. You must also have a disability that fits with the definition of disability described in the DDA. In public areas, you may be asked to provide proof that you have an Assistance Animal with you and not a pet.

Proof may include any combination of the following:

- PAT
- Letter from a medical or allied health professional
- Letter from a veterinarian or trainer
- ID card of harness from a training organisation
- Any other form of suitable proof.

Some states and territories have their own laws, however, federal law supersedes state/territory laws where the two deviate.



What about Discrimination?

Many people accompanied by an Assistance Animal face issues with public access. This is a way of life, unfortunately. You may wish to apply to the Working Animals Federation of Australia for some free information cards which include a QR code directly to federal law. You can hand this card to people who question you. The card outlines your rights and their responsibilities and is a quick way to explain that they must let you enter with your Assistance Animal. These cards also provide access to free short courses and educational materials.

If you are refused access, you can make a complaint to the Australian Human Rights Commission (AHRC) about the person or business who refused you access. You may also wish to seek help from a disability advocate or lawyer.

You and your Assistance Animal have a legal right to access pubs, clubs, restaurants, hotels, AirBNBs, Ubers and Lyft, hospitals, National Parks and anywhere else that a member of the public is allowed to enter.



What do I say if someone challenges me?

If you feel threatened or at risk of harm, call the police (Triple Zero - 000) to attend. Otherwise, you can try this trick. Ask the person, "Would you make me leave my wheelchair outside if I had one?"

Once the person says "No", you can explain to them that a wheelchair, walking frame or a walking stick are all like an Assistance Animal. They are all forms of Assistive Technology (AT). If they would not refuse access to a wheelchair, they cannot refuse access to your Assistance Animal.

You can also suggest that the person call the Australian Human Rights Commission (1300 369 711) for advice.

Still have questions?

Check out our free Assistance Animal Ambassador Course and free downloadable fact sheets at www.workinganimals.com.au

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