

Assistance or therapy dog – what's the difference?

By Doris Dressler

Service dogs, therapy dogs, seizure response dogs, guide dogs, hearing dogs, diabetes alert dogs, emotional support dogs – the list of working dogs goes on and on! What's the difference, and does it matter?

Assistance dogs

The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) defines assistance dogs as “dogs that are individually trained to do work or perform tasks for people with disabilities.” The ADA further clarifies that the “work or task a dog has been trained to provide must be directly related to the person's disability.”

There are many types of assistance dogs. My former employer, Canine Assistants, primarily trains service, balance and seizure response dogs.

Service dogs provide physical assistance and are trained to perform tasks such as picking up dropped items, opening and closing doors, getting help, turning light switches on and off and pulling manual wheelchairs.

Balance dogs assist individuals with mobility impairments; these dogs are fit with a special balance harness to provide stability and assist in transfers (for example, getting out of chairs or vehicles).

Seizure response dogs are trained to provide assistance once a seizure occurs; a dog may be trained to call 911 by pushing on a large button on the floor with his front paws. Often seizure response dogs learn to alert their owner before the seizure occurs, allowing the individual to prepare and get to a safe place.

Other common types of assistance dogs include guide dogs (Seeing Eye dogs), hearing dogs (dogs for the deaf) and diabetes alert dogs.

Some emotional support dogs also fall into the assistance dog category; the ADA makes a differentiation between psychiatric and emotional support assistance dogs. If a dog performs a specific task that would prevent an anxiety attack to occur, this dog would qualify as an assistance (psychiatric) dog. A dog whose mere presence provides comfort (emotional support) would not.

There is no one agency that certifies assistance dogs. Most assistance dog organizations, particularly the larger ones such as Canine Assistants or Canine Companions for Independence, have their own certification process. An individual may also train his own assistance dog

Public access

One key difference between assistance and therapy dogs is public access. Assistance dogs are allowed public access by law; therapy dogs are not.

Therapy dogs do not have the same legal designation as assistance dogs and therefore are not granted legal public access. Therapy dogs must be invited into public places to perform their therapy work.

Assistance dogs are protected by the federal Americans with Disabilities Act which allows access to assistance animals in any area where the public is permitted. This includes but is not limited to restaurants, grocery stores, places of business, theaters, hotels, public transportation, parks and shopping malls.

The DOT's Air Carrier Access Act allows individuals with disabilities to travel with their assistance dogs by air.

The DOJ/HUD Fair Housing Act and Federal Rehabilitation Act ensures that assistance animals may live in housing designated as “no pets allowed.”

Therapy dogs

Therapy dogs are trained to provide comfort to multiple individuals in various environments. They do not just help or work with one specific person.

Therapy dogs are used in therapeutic environments. Reading programs are popular in schools and libraries and can assist children with learning disabilities. Individuals (particularly children) undergoing physical therapy are encouraged to move by exercising with, walking, petting or grooming a dog.

Therapy dogs can also help reduce stress with residents in assisted living facilities, nursing homes and memory care facilities; they also provide comfort to victims of accidents, crimes and natural disasters.

As with assistance dogs, there is no one agency that certifies therapy dogs. Therapy teams can operate independently or as part of a larger organization. The advantage of becoming affiliated with an established organization is that these organizations provide training, access to service opportunities, assistance in establishing new programs and most importantly, liability insurance.

Several of the major therapy dog organizations are listed below in the resources section. Additional information about therapy dogs can be found in the March 2015 online Smoke Signals at bigcanoenews.com/outdoors/outdoors-col-1/pets-and-wildlife/6932-is-your-dog-therapy-dog-material.

	ASSISTANCE DOGS	THERAPY DOGS	EMOTIONAL SUPPORT DOGS
Specially (task) trained	X		
Allowed by federal law to accompany handler to restaurants, stores, movie theaters, places of business, etc.	X		
Allowed by federal law to reside with handler in housing that have “no pet” policies	X		X
Allowed by federal law to travel with handler by air	X		X

Trained to assist just one person	X		
Provides emotional support to more than one person		X	