

# Editorial: Service dog certification law may reduce confusion for business owners

Spokesman-Review Editorial Board

People are increasingly taking their dogs to stores, restaurants and public events, and it's creating problems for on-the-job service animals, business owners, and customers who don't appreciate pooches sniffing around the groceries.

The answer may be some sort of certification to distinguish legally recognized service dogs from mere pets.

Under the federal Americans With Disabilities Act, service animals are dogs leading the blind, detecting seizures and assisting people with other health issues. So-called therapy dogs that provide companionship and comfort are not considered service dogs, but some owners believe they are. So do some store and restaurant workers.

As a result, more people are showing up at public places with pets they do not need, and do not control.

Some business owners have gotten so fed up they've banned all dogs, which is illegal under the ADA. Other businesses have decided to become pet friendly, even handing out treats, so more shoppers are encouraged to bring their dogs along. But merchants should consider the impact on service dogs and their owners.

The problem is determining which dogs are legal.

Under federal law, owners with "service animals" can only be asked two questions: Is the dog required because of a disability? What work or task has the dog been trained to perform? No documentation is required, and most clerks and other workers don't know what tasks the law stipulates. "Service animal" vests – which are unnecessary – can be purchased in stores and online by anyone.

If a dog is being carried or is riding in a grocery cart, it's a sure sign it isn't a legitimate service animal. Most shoppers don't want to use carts previously occupied by dogs; nor do they want dogs nosing around food or creating other unsanitary situations.

Many trainers and other advocates for service dogs have come to the realization that certification may be the only way to diminish the impact of fake service animals. If the federal law were rewritten to require documentation that dogs have undergone extensive training, business owners could easily separate the animals that belong from those that don't.

Some service dogs have been forced into early retirement after repeated attacks from other animals. They become too reluctant to perform their tasks or become aggressive themselves.

Robert White, a blind Navy veteran, told The Spokesman-Review that his service dog refused to board buses after being attacked by other dogs at the downtown Spokane transit center and aboard a bus.

At the behest of the restaurant industry, Florida adopted a law this year that makes it a misdemeanor to pretend a dog is a service animal. Voluntary registration of service dogs is another idea.

But neither approach is as straightforward and easy to enforce as adding certification to federal law. It would establish the reasonable expectation of pets being left at home.

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