

Understanding Service Dogs

A GUIDE FOR HOTEL GUEST SERVICE

by Gary Gobin, CHA



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FOR INDIVIDUALS WITH disabilities who rely on service dogs, navigating everyday life can be a challenge. Hotels are meant to be a place of relaxation and exploration but can sometimes become a source of unexpected hurdles. Through the eyes of Lon Hodge, a renowned service dog advocate and founder of Operation

Fetch, we can explore the unique experiences of service dog handlers and how hotels can create a more welcoming and inclusive environment for their guests.

The rise in service dog usage coincides with an unfortunate increase in people misusing the designation. Emotional support animals and pets are not service dogs. Service dogs are highly trained canines that perform specific tasks directly related to a disability. As Hodge emphasizes, "Service dogs are akin to medical equipment, just like a wheelchair, crutches, or an oxygen tank." Treating them with respect and understanding is key.

COMBATING COUNTERFEITS

Unfortunately, the rise in legitimate service dog teams has also led to an increase in fake ones. Here are some red flags to watch for:

- Disruptive behavior like barking, begging, or relieving themselves in inappropriate places.
- Ignoring the handler and paying attention to others.
- Not being housebroken or exhibiting aggressive behavior.

- Being very young (under 18 months) or exhibiting signs of inadequate training.

If a dog exhibits disruptive behavior, a hotel can politely ask the handler to remove the dog, but not the handler. While service animals can't be assessed a pet fee or deposit, emotional support animals can be assessed a fee.

Here are some key things to remember when encountering a service dog handler at your hotel.

1. **Respect the dog's work:** Service dogs are always "on duty." Avoid petting, talking to, or feeding the dog without permission. This disrupts their focus and can hinder their ability to assist their handler. Imagine a doctor mid-surgery being interrupted by a conversation – a service dog is just as focused on its job.
2. **Two questions and trust:** By law, hotels can only ask two questions: "Is that a service dog?" and "What work or task does the dog perform for you?" Once these questions are answered, legally, the dog must be allowed access. There are no certifications for service dogs. While some organizations may offer certificates or registration, these hold no legal weight. It's important to remember a genuine service dog will be highly trained and focused on its handler's needs.
3. **Educate yourself:** Hodge emphasizes, "Not all disabilities are visible." Don't question a handler's legitimacy based on appearance. Service dogs come in all shapes and sizes, and some disabilities are invisible.
4. **Welcome the team:** Service dogs and their handlers are a team. Respect their bond and avoid separating them. This could compromise the handler's safety and well-being.

CREATING A WELCOMING ENVIRONMENT

Hotels can contribute to a more inclusive environment for service dog handlers by:

- Educating staff on service dog etiquette.
- Providing designated pet relief areas with waste disposal bags.
- Offering a list of local dog-friendly restaurants and parks.
- Training staff to understand the nuances of service dogs vs. emotional support animals and pets.

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While the *Americans with Disabilities Act* provides legal protections for service dog handlers, hotels can go the extra mile to create a truly welcoming experience. Consider offering amenities specifically catering to service dogs, like a welcome pack with dog treats, waste disposal bags, and a list of nearby dog-friendly parks. Training staff to recognize the subtle cues between a service dog and an emotional support animal demonstrates a commitment to inclusivity.

Ultimately, fostering a positive experience for service dog handlers comes down to trust and respect. By understanding the unique bond between handler and dog, and by prioritizing clear communication and education for staff, hotels can create a haven for all guests, with or without canine companions. Remember, a little kindness goes a long way in making someone’s journey a little easier.

Gary Gobin is the Director of Operations for hihotels by Hospitality International, an Atlanta-based franchisor with five national economy hotel brands. He has been in the hospitality industry for 16 years with a focus on operations and development. He is also an avid animal lover and has a puppy named Sammy.

Established in 2013, Operation Fetch is a nonprofit organization providing education, training and support for service dog handlers as well as championing kindness and understanding toward service dogs, PTSD, and the support they offer for both visible and invisible disabilities.

