

Myths and Realities about Guide and Service Dog Use

I am an attorney and triathlete. I live a very active and fulfilling life. I happen to be blind. In order to travel independently, blind people use canes or guide dogs. Guide dogs are a subcategory of service dogs. Whether to use a guide dog is a very personal choice. I made the choice to travel with a guide dog and trained with my black Labrador golden retriever cross named Lava at The Seeing Eye, a school in New Jersey. I gave this choice much thought, though I had traveled with a cane for many years prior. Lava is a great companion and mobility aid, but the public makes false assumptions about her and other service dogs. Below is some information about the myths and realities of working with a service dog.

Myth: My service dog is my savior;

While dogs are man's best friend and are important to many people, I personally feel that Lava does not 'take care of me.' While she does perform tasks to keep me safe, she is not my lifeline or my savior. Although she does enrich my life in many ways, I have the skill to travel using a cane without her. This is important because in the event she got sick or had to retire, I would need to be able to travel independently without her. Working with a service dog is a reciprocal team effort, and the handler's contribution is equally as important as the dog's work. Each handler must endeavor to keep their dog healthy and focused, which includes providing high quality food and medication, grooming the dog, and continued obedience training to ensure the dog is on their best behavior. Although service dogs are trained to be professional, they are not perfect. Lava loves food and it is sometimes hard for her to resist food on the ground in public places. This is something that is difficult to completely train out of dogs. I frequently have to work with her to minimize this behavior.

Myth: My dog has a built-in GPS;

Many people believe a guide dog is like a GPS system – in that you can give the dog a destination and they will take you there. This is baseless and inaccurate. Just as with using a cane, a blind person must know how to get from one place to another or have the tools to learn how to get to their destination. Lava does not know exactly where we are going. I am responsible for orientation and for giving Lava cues regarding which way to turn. If I do not direct Lava we will not get to our destination. I cannot just say 'home' and expect Lava to get me there from anywhere in the city.

Myth: My service dog uses streetlights to know when to cross the street;

Members of the general public believe that guide dogs can see the color of changing streetlights. This is a false assumption. The human handler is responsible for listening for traffic and commanding the dog to proceed when the handler believes it is safe to cross. If the handler gives a 'forward' command and the dog sees or hears a car

coming at them, the dog disobeys the command. This is called *intelligent disobedience*. Both the handler and the dog focus only on the cars, not on traffic lights. At times, this means I will cross against the light, because there is no traffic coming and Lava knows there are no cars endangering us. If you see a blind person crossing against the light, do not be alarmed. Blind pedestrians are diligent about listening for traffic. Yelling at them to alert them that they are crossing against the light only distracts them from listening to traffic and could put them in danger. If you feel you must communicate with a blind pedestrian, wait until they have finished crossing the street and are on the sidewalk.

Myth: Guide dogs want your attention;

Distracting a guide dog while it is in harness could potentially put the dog and their handler in danger. My dog is medically necessary. When you see my partner and me in public, please understand that she is doing vital work for me, even if it appears to you that she is not working. Just as most of us seek to avoid distraction when we are working, she just wants (and needs) to be left alone to do her job. Just as you would not go up to a stranger and push their wheelchair or fiddle with their oxygen tank, do not interfere with a service dog. Please don't distract Lava from her job by yelling at her, talking to her, using baby talk, touching her or her equipment, crowding her, whistling at her, barking at her or otherwise doing anything except politely ignoring her. If you distract her and she isn't able to respond appropriately, I could sustain an injury. Please just ignore her entirely and let her focus on her job, which is keeping me safe.

Myth: I can pass off my pet as a service animal;

Nothing bothers me more than hearing members of the general public say things like "I don't have a disability but I should get a harness for my pet dog so that I can bring it everywhere with me." A service dog must be individually trained to perform tasks that mitigate the disability of their handler. Without an actual disability, there is no disability to mitigate, and no tasks that can be trained that mitigate the non-existing disability. Without trained tasks that mitigate the disability, the dog is not a service dog. The ADA wasn't meant to create a privileged class that has rights over and above those of other citizens. On the contrary, it was created to reduce discrimination and move toward equity for people with disabilities. Allowing service animals in public is one step toward this goal. Most pets are not as well behaved as service dogs, because service dogs undergo strict and rigorous training. When a pet disguised as a service dog behaves badly, it sours business owners on dogs and they begin illegally restricting entry. Those business owners then begin barring dogs from their premises in violation of the Americans with Disabilities Act. Because of this discrimination, legitimate service dog teams face barriers to full community participation. This is a growing problem that can be avoided by encouraging nondisabled people to stop abusing the law.

Myth: Service animals are stressed from overwork;

Although it may appear that my dog's life is all work and no play, our serious work gives way to well-earned playtime, treats, and lots of love when the harness comes off. Please don't tell me you "feel sorry" for my service dog because she has to work all the time. She enjoys significant time off, at which time she can just be a dog. When off duty, she loves going on pack hikes with other dogs and enjoys Pup Cups, the free treats given out by small ice cream shops. She has been known to enjoy a "Puppacino" from Starbucks or "Puppy Latte" from Caribou Coffee from time to time. Sometimes, she enjoys getting the "zoomies," running around in tight circles. She is very well taken care of and is well-adjusted, highly trained and well socialized.

Myth: All service animals act the same;

Fake service dogs are relatively common, and they do a lot of damage to legitimate service dog teams. Please don't judge my obviously well-trained, well-mannered, quiet, well-groomed, highly responsive service dog based on the behavior of ill-behaved fake service dogs you have seen. Behavior tells all, and I ask that you not compare me to any other service dog handlers or teams you have met, because not all service dogs are the same.

Myth: Service animals are a luxury accommodation;

The Americans with Disabilities Act requires that service dogs be permitted to access all government programs and services and all places of public accommodation. This includes hospitals and restaurants. The Iowa Civil Rights Act provides similar protections for service dog teams. The Fair Housing Act permits service dogs in almost all housing, with limited exceptions. Service dogs can only be excluded from public places if they are not housebroken and have multiple relieving accidents, if they are out of control, and if the handler does nothing to address the problematic behavior. If you have further questions about service dogs, contact [Disability Rights Iowa](#) at (800) 779-2502.

Myth: Service animals are only for people with physical disabilities;

While the most prominent service animals seen are guide dogs, there are service animals for many different types of disabilities, and mental illnesses. There are 'hearing' dogs for the Deaf and hard of hearing, there are service dogs that help veterans and others with PTSD and other conditions. In addition to service animals, there are also emotional support or therapy animals, which aren't under the same category of the ADA as service animals, but are protected by the Fair Housing Act. Emotional support and therapy animals are most commonly dogs or cats, but can be a wide variety of species. Their general purpose is to help people with different conditions, like anxiety or depression that would benefit from constant and unconditional companionship. Emotional support animals are not psychiatric service animals, and have different access rights. Therapy animals are trained to help many people, and have even fewer access rights than emotional support animals. Service animals are allowed to go where

emotional support and therapy animals cannot, which can be confusing to an outside observer. However, under the Fair Housing Act, emotional support animals are allowed to live with their owners, even if they might normally not be allowed to. For further clarification, Service Dog Certification wrote a comprehensive [article](#) on the differences between service, emotional support, and therapy animals.

Myth: Disability is a taboo topic;

Most of the time, I enjoy educating the public about blindness and disability. However, it is frustrating when people take this as free license to ask invasive personal questions about my disability. While I am happy to talk about my blindness most days, the manner in which you ask to speak about it does affect my response. The best thing to do is to ask whether I mind discussing my disability. If I say that I would rather not discuss it, please do not get offended. Consent is important in all contexts, and asking me to disclose my private medical history is rude. All people have the right not to disclose this information. Just because I have a disability doesn't mean I am obligated to disclose medical information.