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There Are No Fake Service Dog Vests

Some people do a lot of good in this world, but sometimes they get it wrong. That's okay, because often the only way to improve is to learn from our mistakes.

It's time for Canine Companions for Independence (CCI) to learn from their mistakes—and it looks like they've started to.

In 2013, CCI started [a petition](#), aimed at the U.S. Department of Justice, to stop the online sale of what they called “fraudulent service dog products”. CCI used scare tactics to convince potential signers (who have no reason to know any better) that the only reason someone would purchase service dog gear online is to get an “all-access pass to grocery stores, restaurants and other places where family pets are otherwise not allowed.”

The truth is that there are many thousands of legitimate service dogs handlers who want or need to use gear other than what CCI or any similar organization provides, and the only place for them to get the equipment they need is through retailers filling this need.

We have a community member with a program-trained service dog that was simply uncomfortable working in the attire provided by the program. When she tried a new harness she purchased online, her dog was much happier providing the work and tasks that allow her independence in the world.

It's not just program-trained service dogs that legitimately benefit from the online working dog apparel trade. There are many more “owner-trainers” out there: people with disabilities who trained their own service dogs, usually with the assistance of a professional trainer. Often, individuals cannot afford the cost or years-long indefinite wait for a program-trained dog—or after [starting their research](#), they simply realize that for many types of disabilities, [owner-training is a more effective way to go](#).

These owner-trainers, who have equal protection under the [Americans with Disabilities Act](#) (ADA), also deserve to outfit their service dogs with the gear that is appropriate and comfortable for them.

A call to restrict access for disabled handlers of either program-trained or owner-trained service dogs to the equipment they need is a strike against disability rights. It is confusing that a nonprofit set up to help those with disabilities would act in this way, but it looks like CCI is starting to change its tune.

While CCI has not yet taken down its 2013 petition (as of this writing), and numerous news stories and powerful organizations like the American Kennel Club (AKC) [still refer people to it](#), in late 2014 CCI has updated its approach to include a pledge to help stop service dog fraud.

Thankfully, in [this new pledge](#) the organization is no longer lobbying to make life harder for

people with disabilities by preventing them from outfitting their service dogs with the gear that works best for them. Unfortunately, now CCI is using their scare tactics to convince the public that—and we're not making this up—“fake service dogs are everywhere.”

It's certainly not the case that service dogs are everywhere, let alone that “fake service dogs are everywhere.” In fact, as CCI recognizes in their separate and more reasonable [“Guidelines” for their new pledge](#), “It is important to know that disabilities are not always visible and legitimate service dogs come in all breeds and sizes.” Additionally, since the ADA does not even require a service dog to wear any identifying equipment, there are actually service dog teams in which the person's disability is not visible, and the person chooses not to mark their dog as a service dog. The person with a disability is given the autonomy to decide how to best work with their partner and move through life with minimal interruptions.

All of this means that the traditional ways members of the public identify service dogs are not reliable. The best way to identify whether a dog in a business is likely to be a service dog is its behavior: if the dog is clearly well-behaved and not causing a disruption by its actions, it could easily be a service dog. Service dog or not, businesses have the right to have the handler remove the dog if it is either not housebroken or is actively causing a disturbance (though not just because of its presence).

CCI, you are a big corporation with the ability to do a lot of good. Well, to do a lot *more* good, and to avoid misinforming the public. So instead of using scare tactics in your new pledge to encourage the public to have an antagonistic attitude toward people they may accidentally perceive as faking service dogs, we recommend focusing on having better-informed education efforts to make things easier for everyone, because goodness knows we all need it.

Don't get us wrong. We're as against service dog faking, both intentional and not, as the next guy. We also appreciate that your new pledge and guidelines are a significant improvement over your previous call to “Stop Fake Service Dog Products”. But when you say things on your pledge page like “Service dogs are more than a vest purchased for a few dollars online”, and “Help us expose service dog fraud and stop the discrimination it can cause”, you're encouraging the very kind of suspicion and discrimination you say you're trying to stomp out.

We'd like it if you were to consider the damaging schisms you have the power to create in service dog communities and the general public before you launch surprisingly well-publicized campaigns that purport to help our communities. There's more to being good than good publicity.

Our communities have a saying to help us remember how to have the most positive impact we can when facing public access challenges: “Education, not litigation.” Well here's what we think a similar slogan would be for the present situation, to help business owners and the public keep in mind what's important about service dogs: “Behavior, not belongings.”

We sincerely hope this helps; we just couldn't in good faith let a sister organization keep at these campaigns without saying anything. Oh, and in case it wasn't clear, it's not the vests that are fake or not, it's the way they're used.

–Board of Directors, Psychiatric Service Dog Partners
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Psychiatric Service Dogs Partners' purpose is to promote the mental health of people using service dogs for psychiatric disabilities by educating, advocating, providing expertise, facilitating peer support, and promoting responsible service dog training and handling.

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