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Allergies and Fear of Service Dogs

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As service dog handlers, we often get asked "What do you do about people with dog allergies, or who are afraid of dogs?". If the allergy or fear is disabling, it must be accommodated, but the person with a service dog must also be accommodated. This is usually done by the two parties agreeing to stay away from one another. Even if the allergy or fear is not disabling, most service dog handlers will try to accommodate the person as best we can. This is all best accomplished by a combination of honest and open communication and mutual respect.

I will describe a few successful experiences I've had sharing spaces with people who are disablingly fearful or allergic to dogs. Hopefully these can be a model for accommodating both people with service dogs and people with allergies or fears of dogs.

I once worked with a man who was disablingly allergic to dogs. We didn't need to come into contact often, and it was very easy for us to agree to a protocol that kept both of us medically safe. Before every time I needed to work in the same small room as him, I would wash my service dog, Sabrina, that morning. I would also wash her gear. This eliminated a lot of dander, which is usually what causes the allergy. There is also a product called Allerpet which is said to reduce dander, and can also be used in this situation.

We had to work in close quarters, so we would split the room in half when we worked together. I would take one half of the room, and he would take the other half. The first few times we worked together he also took extra allergy medication. However, he soon stopped taking the allergy medication because he was never closer than 6 or so feet away from Sabrina with our room-sharing plan, and because of the bathing and washing of my dog and her gear before seeing him.

Another time, I was taking a class with another student who was disablingly fearful of dogs. The first day of class, she was afraid of Sabrina, so I told her I'd stay on my side of the room, so that she could exist in her side without fear of my dog. This worked out great until the professor (who had no idea of our arrangement) paired us up to work together on a project.

By that time we had been in class together for about a month, so she was perhaps feeling a little better about Sabrina. Still, I wanted to make sure she felt safe so that she and I could work together effectively. I made sure that every time we met, there was a large piece of furniture in between us so that there was no way Sabrina could accidentally touch her, much

less her accidentally seeing Sabrina. With a little respect and caution, we were able to become friends, even though she was terrified of my service dog. I have used the furniture blocking method many times since then with students I was teaching who were fearful.

Another time I was at the DMV and standing in line to get my ticket. A worker saw me and approached me. She informed me that there was a woman who worked there who was absolutely terrified of dogs. She asked me to stay on one side of the building so that she didn't get scared and have a panic attack. I was happy to oblige.

When my number was called, it assigned me to a desk on the other side of the room—the side that the fearful lady was on. I did what the worker had instructed—approached the check in person and explained that I had a service dog and that there was a fearful lady, and they immediately set me up with someone on my side of the room. I never even saw the lady, and she didn't have to see me or my dog. It worked out wonderfully because of our clear communication and mutual respect.

Finally, I will share a situation that I have video of. I was on a crowded bus with two other service dog teams. I was standing up with my service dog (Ollie was my service dog at the time) by my side when a seat opened up. I went to sit down, and the lady I sat next to said she was afraid of dogs. She didn't state it was a disability, and from her actions I am pretty sure it was not. That said, out of courtesy and respect, I accommodated her fear.

Since she was there first, I felt it was my responsibility to move. So I moved to another seat further away so that she would be comfortable. My husband Brad, who was filming, then positioned himself between Iris (the German Shepherd) and the fearful woman to better reassure her. If I had been seated first and she sat next to me, I would not have moved.

Here is the encounter on video:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uj0rEDj_bIA

In my over a decade of working with service dogs, I've had many instances of people being fearful of or allergic to my service dog. I've always been able to resolve them easily with a little mutual respect and communication. Other things that might help include air filters if the dog and allergic person must share a work space frequently.

So really, disabling allergies and fears of dogs don't turn out to be the big issues that people think they will be when you have a service dog. I've seen it easily work in practice, so I know we don't need to spend a lot of time worrying about whether it would work in theory.

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