

Reporting guide: service dogs

If you want to craft compelling and responsible nonfiction stories involving service dogs, this guide will give you the info you need to do it right.

Target audience: Media professionals and amateur journalists reporting on service dog (or adjacent) stories.

- If you report on something unusual, provide realistic context

A woman tried and failed to take her emotional support peacock on an airplane. Unfortunate reporting on this in 2018 led many people to believe this story represents a common occurrence—and that exotic animals are frequently allowed on airplanes, rather than rejected on the rare occasion they show up.

Unusual and negative incidents are newsworthy, so not every piece can be a feel-good profile. If the incident would harm a marginalized community if it's the only image presented, ensure the story's context does not reinforce the negative stereotype, but serves as a reality check and counterpoint.

Sensationalized, context-poor reporting harms disabled people by reducing their drive to seek needed assistance and by encouraging harassment from others. Cherry-picking the worst examples and not clearly distinguishing them from what's normal creates an alternative, divisive reality for your audience.

Ask yourself:

Does my story reinforce negative stereotypes about disabled people?

Does my story clearly provide the context needed to understand how (un)common any sensational event is?

- Include the perspectives of disabled people

For stories involving service dogs, interview disabled people who use service dogs.

Avoid (only) using organizations that train service dogs or accredit service dog programs. They often have mostly non-disabled employees with different goals and perspectives than service dog users. There are peer-based advocacy groups that can serve as more appropriate sources.

When it comes to any marginalized group, especially, always try to respect the maxim of "nothing about us without us".

Stepping back from the individual story, the best scenario includes regularly hiring/paying disabled people to produce and edit content. This power-sharing is how to help fix the overrepresentation of non-disabled people reporting from the outside.

Ask yourself:

Does my story include the voices of service dog users?

How much am I treating disabled people differently from non-disabled subjects?

How can I support my newsroom incorporating more disabled people into the content production and management process?

- Use the terms already recognized

Sometimes you can coin a term to clearly describe something to your audience. When it comes to service dogs, making up your own alternative for an already common legal term confuses the public. So does mixing up existing terms. But you can avoid those mistakes by sticking to the names and meanings already in use!

In the US, a **service animal** or **service dog** is a dog *trained to do work or tasks* to help a disabled person. ("Work- or task-trained" miniature horses are given exceptional access, but aren't called "service animals" under the ADA.) Even though service dogs are usually beloved by their people, they are not accessories or pets. Service dogs have jobs to do and function as assistive devices, like wheelchairs and crutches.

Service animals tend to have 1–3 years of training for good public behavior. The duration and method of this "public access training" can vary widely among successful service dog teams, so the resulting behavior is more important than the exact training history.

A **support animal** (or **emotional support animal/ESA**) helps a *disabled person* by being there—usually only at home—but isn't necessarily trained to help or to behave. If an animal is exclusively a pet for a *non-disabled* person, it is not a support animal. An **assistance animal** is either a service dog or a support animal. "**Comfort animal**" has no (federal) legal meaning, nor does "**psychiatric support animal**" or "**psychiatric therapy animal**".

Therapy dogs are separate and not connected to disability laws. They are taken places (with special permission) to bring joy and comfort to multiple people regardless of whether the people are disabled.

There are different *types* and *sources* of service dogs. Types simply vary based on the person's disability—**guide dogs** for blind and low-vision people, **hearing (alert) dogs** for deaf and hard of hearing people, **psychiatric service dogs** for people with mental health disabilities, **mobility dogs** for those with mobility disabilities, etc. The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) does not treat service dogs differently based on their type or source.

Sources of service dogs include traditional programs/schools (like "The Seeing Eye", which is the only program that produces "**seeing eye dogs**"), independent trainers, owner-trainers, and combinations of these. An **owner-trainer** is a disabled person who trains their own dog to be their service dog, usually with the help of a professional trainer. They are actually a large portion of the service dog community, but are less visible in media because traditional service dog programs have a much bigger P.R. presence!

Use "disability", "disabled person" or "person with a disability", rather than any euphemism or outdated term (like "handicapped", "differently abled", "special needs", etc.). Disabled people have varying opinions on using "disabled person" vs. "person with a disability", but "disabled" and "disability" are not bad words. Many disabled people view their disability as part of who they are, not a problem to be overcome, and take pride in how it has shaped their character!

Ask yourself:

Does my story use only recognized terms?

Do the terms in my story fit with the existing definitions?

Does my story present service dogs more as pets or as assistive devices?

Does my story avoid outdated terms that most disabled people view as disrespectful?

Does my story treat being disabled only as a medical problem to be fixed?

- Acknowledge the diversity of disability communities

Using a service dog—or being disabled, more generally—doesn't magically make someone

think the same way as all other disabled people. If you've met one disabled person, you've met *one* disabled person!

There are some trends and there are some controversies in how some of the service dog community tends to feel about particular topics. Different disability types and service dog sources can affect individuals' and groups' perspectives.

The key is not to assume—not to treat service dog users as a monolith.

Ask yourself:

Does my story rush to generalize from one disabled person to all?

Will my audience understand disabled people come from all backgrounds and each has their own opinion?

Does my story accurately identify trends among disabled people?

- Getting laws right can help and avoid harm

Your audience depends on you for accurate information, and service dog laws are often a significant part of the story. Getting a service dog can be the saving grace for someone, yet misinformation or misleading information in stories so often gets in the way.

When people misunderstand the laws, they might miss out on an opportunity to get help or help someone else through a service dog, or they might wrongly take a pet out as a service dog and create trouble. When the media get the laws wrong, they create the conditions for illegal access denials from businesses and street harassment from ill-empowered strangers.

Respect audience trust and the impact you have in the world by making sure you've got the relevant laws right. State and local laws can vary—especially because state laws tend to give different access to service dogs in training—but some of the federal guidance that applies across the US is linked toward the end of this guide. State and local laws cannot take away any of the rights granted by federal laws, but they can add to them.

Ask yourself:

Does my story convey the relevant laws accurately?

Will my audience understand the basics of their legal rights and responsibilities?

Are there any federal, state, or local laws my story needs to reference?

- Disabled people are not "inspirational" just for existing

A common complaint from disabled people is that they're used as "inspiration porn" in the media. Disabled people are presented in stories as a prop to make others feel good, often just because they're living their lives (and not ending them!). This narrative approach reinforces the impulse to treat disabled people in ways they prefer not to be treated.

Instead of being seen as objects of pity or inspiration, most disabled people just want to be treated like the fellow humans they are. This does not mean disabled people cannot be featured for unusual accomplishments, but it does mean they should not be fetishized or separated through stereotypes or stigma.

It's fine to do a feel-good community profile on an average person with a disability. Just be as matter-of-fact about the disabled person as you would be about anyone else, not fawning over them just for existing.

Ask yourself:

Does my story present a disabled person as inspirational just for living?
Do I include disabled people in my stories with the same framing I use for non-disabled people in similar situations?

- Encourage good public behavior and point out good resources

Many people would think it's wrong to seek out and challenge others on their right to be in public. Unfortunately, that's exactly what happens to service dog users that don't fit people's narrow image of a service dog team.

Once again, consider the impact of your approach to reporting on disabled people and their service dogs. Most audiences need little encouragement to reinforce their prejudice in ways that harm others.

Good reporting is mindful of this and informs the audience about ideas like "service dogs come in all sizes", "not all disabilities are apparent", and "distracting a service dog can put the handler in danger". The media can reinforce or counteract negative culture; this is up to you.

You can help the public, future service dog users, and current service dog users by sending them in the right direction for more information. Be careful not to vouch for any old service dog organization or program, because anyone can set up a service dog business and there are a lot of scams! Peer-based groups—those run by experienced service dog users—tend to be the best sources of guidance.

Ask yourself:

Does my story increase or decrease the prejudice that harms disabled people?
Did I link to a peer-based service dog group, like www.psych.dog?

—Resources—

- Reporting on disability

National Center on Disability and Journalism's *Disability Language Style Guide*—this guide is mainly a glossary of disability terms and whether/how to use them. It is notable for being an extensive consolidation, but some of its determinations are arguable or outdated. If your story focuses on one type of disability, we advise you to consult a peer-based advocacy group for guidance on the language or terms that community prefers.

<https://ncdj.org/style-guide/>

Respectability's *Terminology Tips: Using the Appropriate Lexicon*—this webpage is not so much of a glossary guide like the above, but has a few more overall tips and resources.

<https://www.respectability.org/inclusion-toolkits/terminology-tips-using-the-appropriate-lexicon/>

- Guidance on federal laws

The main federal laws about service dogs are the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), the Fair Housing Act (FHAct), the Air Carrier Access Act (ACAA), and the Rehabilitation (Rehab) Act. These laws apply to different places due to the history of when each was passed, with some overlap in places of application.

The ADA applies in most places the public goes—"places of public accommodation" and state and local governments. The FHAct applies to most housing, except in small places where the owner also lives. The ACAA covers airlines. The Rehab Act applies to federal and federally-funded places. Its regulations do not mention service dogs, but it is generally interpreted in court in line with ADA regulations.

Below are links to guidance on these laws.

Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA); Department of Justice (DOJ) service animal FAQ:

http://www.ada.gov/regs2010/service_animal_qa.pdf

Fair Housing Act (FHAct); Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) assistance animal guidance document:

<https://www.hud.gov/sites/dfiles/PA/documents/HUDAsstAnimalNC1-28-2020.pdf>

Air Carrier Access Act (ACAA); Department of Transportation (DOT) webpage:

<https://www.transportation.gov/individuals/aviation-consumer-protection/service-animals-including-emotional-support-animals>

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