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DOMESTIC ANIMALS HEALTH

## Regulation May Punish Competent Service Dog Trainers Alongside Fraudsters

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Felix, a Japanese Chin, is a trained service dog. May 19, 2025. (Bradley Morris)

By DANIELLE BONGIOVANNI  
Community Sentinel

After paying thousands of dollars for a service animal, it is far too common for disabled Americans to be stuck with dogs that are [too young](#), cannot [follow basic commands](#), or even [attack](#) other dogs.

The [Americans with Disabilities Act](#) (ADA) mandates public access for any service animal, defined as “a dog that is individually trained to do work or perform tasks for a person with a disability.” No federal laws exist for sourcing or training, or for who can market themselves as service dog trainers.

Any buyer-beware market has a level of risk. The lack of industry-specific legislation can lead to trainers who fail to provide the quality services they advertised not being prosecuted unless they meet the legal definition of fraud or violate other laws.

For example, Merlin’s Kids, a nonprofit that offered service dogs for disabled children and veterans, allegedly [provided clients](#) with untrained dogs. Such accusations were made during the course of a lengthy trial, but ultimately the order for Merlin’s Kids to [shut down](#) this past January was in response to the determination that the founder, Janice Wolfe, violated charity laws by misappropriating funds.

Organizations such as Psychiatric Service Dog Partners (PSPD) and Assistance Dogs International (ADI) were founded to help people avoid similar situations.



Veronica Morris navigates through a retail store. Felix by her side. June 17, 2025. (Bradley Morris)

PSPD provides education on topics related to service animals, including finding the right trainer. PSPD’s president, Dr. Veronica Morris, said most incidents of trainers failing to help clients are rooted in inexperience instead of ill-intent. “I would say at least ninety-percent of the time, they’re not setting out to be fraudulent. They think they’re helping. They think they’re doing the right thing. They just don’t know how to and are, as a result, not producing dogs of the caliber that they should be.”

ADI helps trainers avoid this by creating industry-specific protocols that ensure the best possible outcomes for all people and animals involved.

“ADI determined very early on in our history that we really needed to establish standards for the training of assistance dogs, [and] the ethics for working with clients,” said ADI Executive Director Chris Diefenthaler.

Accreditation by ADI requires a trainer or training organization to follow guidelines such as maintaining contact with each client for the lifetime of their service animal in case additional support is required, and to “make sure that [the service animals] are continuing to uphold standards of proper behaviour.”

Trainers or training organizations may vary in which disabilities they train dogs to accommodate, which dog breeds they offer, and how much they charge clients, but the accreditation provides a consistent assurance of professionalism and quality.

Veronica recommended looking for accreditations like ADI’s if someone is interested in using a training organization specializing in service dogs. “It’s more likely that the dog trainers who get those accreditations are going to be good trainers,” she said.

However, PSPD opposes laws that would only apply the ADA to service animals carrying an accreditation.

“You’d be hard-pressed to find someone who would describe the current state of affairs with the service dog industry as good, but then people assume that any solution must be an improvement. I don’t think that’s the case,” said Bradley W. Morris, Secretary, Treasurer, and Director of Government Relations at PSPD. “You’ve got the evils, if you will, on both sides and that the lesser evil is on the side of less regulation.”

In 2021, Veronica and Bradley addressed Michigan legislators with [concerns](#) over how the proposed [House Bill No. 4256](#) would have required trainers to be “employed by a service animal agency that is accredited by ADI or the International Guide Dog Federation.” The stipulation was removed.



Bradley Morris and his wife Veronica pose with Veronica's service dog, Felix the Japanese Chin. July 26, 2025. (Bradley Morris)

Misunderstandings on what a service animal can look like have led to Veronica facing public accusations that Felix is simply a pet.

PSPD’s core argument is that more regulations lead to fewer options for how to acquire and train a service animal. The diversity of disabilities, needs, and circumstances demands equally diverse methods.

Many ADI-accredited training organizations offer to fully raise and train a service dog before delivering it to a client. This is often more convenient than working with a client to train their own dog, especially if the client doesn’t live within commuting distance.

“To train their own service dog, there are some of our member organizations that will work with owners and their personal dog for training as an assistance dog. Unfortunately ... there is the requirement that the individual attend training with their dog for that minimum six months time. It may even be longer depending on the age of the dog and the skills of the dog, and so that requires the person to live in close proximity to an organization that offers that kind of service,” Diefenthaler said.

Buying a fully-trained service dog can be expensive. The National Service Animal Registry [estimates](#) an upfront cost of \$15,000–30,000. Certain nonprofits, such as Guide Dogs for the Blind, are able to provide trained service dogs at no cost due to the generosity of donors. However, there are not equivalent charities for every disability.

Nonprofits’ success at supplementing costs with donations varies. Diefenthaler said, “Some organizations charge a very small or low cost application fee or equipment fee, and then some organizations do have to charge more because they just don’t have that funding base yet.”

Veronica discussed how certain disabilities may receive fewer donations due to stigma. “If non-disabled folks feel pity, they’re more likely to donate to the organization. ... Schizophrenia, bipolar disorder, agoraphobia — those are not ‘cool’ disabilities. Those are things that a lot of people think you should be ashamed of.”

Veronica described how most well-funded charities offer large dog breeds such as poodles and golden retrievers, whose needs may conflict with their prospective owners’ disabilities. “For a lot of people, especially with psychiatric illnesses, a large high energy dog is not going to work with our lifestyle,” she said.

All of Veronica’s service animals have been small breeds she trained with the help of a non-specialized trainer. “I have agoraphobia. It’s very difficult for me to leave the house, and then I’ve had a lot of health issues lately. ... I need a dog that is low energy because I may not be able to walk that dog regularly.” she said.

Under many circumstances, a non-specialized trainer is cheaper and more convenient. Legally-mandated accreditations threaten this option if a small business or independent trainer cannot afford to meet the requirements.

“If there were legislation penned so that it had all this in mind, and it was targeted to organizations that provide more than 50 dogs a year, and then you need to do this record keeping, you need to do all these health checks, you need to have this licensing, then that might be okay. That’s how a lot of laws have been written. ... It’s a level of bureaucracy,” Bradley said, citing how even the ADA does not apply to businesses with fewer than 15 employees.



Veronica Morris, Ph.D., President of PSPD with her service dog, Felix, a Japanese Chin. June 4, 2025. (Bradley Morris)

PSPD’s mission is not opposed to ADI’s. PSPD’s advice for finding the right training organization includes checking for an accreditation. However, accredited specialists are not the only option, and all are valid. “Another way to do it is to ask your local humane society. They usually know some good trainers,” Veronica said. “The third way is going to dog training clubs. Usually, dog training clubs are a good source of trainers, because usually those trainers are doing it for the love of dogs and not for a lot of money.”

Like PSPD, ADI also engages in advocacy, with a focus on protecting public access. When asked if ADI supports their standards becoming legally mandated for a service animal to be recognized under the ADA, Diefenthaler said, “ADI advocates for standards in all areas of an assistance dog operation for all entities that are considering regulation of the assistance dogs sector. ADI welcomes the opportunity to be involved in the conversation.”

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