

SERVICE DOGS: A BUSINESS OWNER'S GUIDE TO THE LAW



This guide provides the legal clarity you need to handle service animal interactions with confidence, protecting your business while supporting legitimate handlers.

1. THE FEDERAL BASELINE (ADA)

Under the Americans with Disabilities Act, a service dog is individually trained to do work or tasks directly related to a person's disability.

- **Access:** Service dogs must be allowed in all areas open to the public (restaurants, hotels, stores, etc.).
- **Species:** Only dogs and, in rare cases, miniature horses qualify.
- **Documentation:** No vest, ID card, or "registration" is legally required. Most online "registrations" are scams; there is no official national registry.

2. THE ONLY TWO QUESTIONS YOU MAY ASK

If it is not obvious the dog is working, you are legally permitted to ask only:

1. **Is the dog a service animal required because of a disability?**
2. **What work or task has the dog been trained to perform?**

Strict Prohibitions:

- **DO NOT** ask about the person's specific medical condition or disability.
- **DO NOT** demand "papers," certification, or proof of training.
- **DO NOT** ask the handler to demonstrate the dog's task.

3. IDENTIFYING THE REAL VS. THE FAKE

Invisible Disabilities: Not all disabilities are visible. A handler may look healthy but rely on a dog for life-threatening allergies (like corn protein), seizure alerts, or spinal injuries.

Red Flags (Not Service Dogs):

- **Confinement:** A dog in a stroller, shopping cart, crate, or carrier at a table is **not** a service dog. They cannot perform tasks while confined.
- **ESAs:** Emotional Support Animals provide comfort but do **not** perform specific trained tasks. They are **not** protected for public access under the ADA.
- **Misconduct:** In Texas, misrepresenting a pet as a service animal is a misdemeanor punishable by fines up to \$1,000 and community service.



4. THE TWO GOLDEN RULES FOR HANDLERS

You have the right to ask a handler to leave if they violate these standards:

1. **No Disruptions:** The dog must be under control, tucked under a table or chair, and focused. It cannot wander, bark, whine, or visit other customers.
2. **Sanitation:** The handler is 100% responsible for cleaning up any "accidents" immediately.

5. SUMMARY FOR STAFF

- **Be Polite:** Ask the two questions professionally.
- **Control is Mandatory:** If a dog is out of control and the handler does not take effective action, you may ask them to remove the animal.
- **Allergies/Fear:** Being afraid of dogs or having allergies is **not** a legal reason to deny access.

Strength stands watch

And so do I.

Wendi Coffman-Porter | *Author & Professional K9 Trainer* Full resources and state-specific laws:
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