PROJECT RECOVERY

dba GOD'S DOGS

ESA vs. SERVICE DOG

Education • Public-Access Boundaries • Candidate Acknowledgment

THESE ARE NOT INTERCHANGEABLE TERMS — AND THE DIFFERENCE MATTERS

Why Project Recovery requires this education. Companion animals can be profoundly important in recovery, stability, housing, and emotional well-being. At the same time, an Emotional Support Animal (ESA) does not automatically have the public-access rights of a service dog. Misrepresenting an ESA or pet as a service animal can create safety problems, legal consequences, and unfairly damage public trust in legitimate service-dog teams.

IMPORTANT LANGUAGE CORRECTION

There is no federal government "ESA certification" or national ESA registry that turns a pet into an ESA, and the ADA does not require service dogs to be certified or professionally trained. For housing, an ESA may qualify as an assistance animal when there is a disability-related need and applicable reasonable-accommodation requirements are met. Project Recovery may set its own behavior/readiness expectations for animals it assists; those program standards do not create service-dog status or broader legal access rights.

Why the Human–Animal Bond Matters

Project Recovery protects the bond because we understand what a companion animal can mean during recovery, grief, instability, and major life change. An ESA or beloved companion does not need to be a service dog for that relationship to be deeply meaningful. The legal categories are different, but the human–animal bond itself can still be powerful, stabilizing, and worthy of protection.

- Reduce feelings of grief, loss, loneliness, and isolation by providing a familiar, steady presence.
- Help a person feel loved, accepted, and wanted without judgment, stigma, or shame.
- Offer affection and companionship that can feel unconditional during a time when human relationships may be strained or rebuilding.
- Provide comfort during fear, sadness, stress, transition, housing instability, treatment, or separation from family and community.
- Create routine and purpose through feeding, walking, grooming, training, play, and daily responsibility.
- Give a person a reason to get up, move, go outside, care for another living being, and remain connected to everyday life.
- Provide a sense of home, family, identity, safety, and continuity when many other parts of life have changed.
- Support connection and trust. For some people, their animal may be the relationship in which they feel safest being vulnerable.
- Encourage responsibility, patience, empathy, consistency, and healthy attachment while a person rebuilds stability.
- Help motivate someone to seek treatment, accept help, pursue housing, maintain recovery, or make safer choices because protecting the animal matters to them.

THE BOND IS REAL — AND PROTECTING IT IS PART OF OUR MISSION. We never want education about legal access to minimize what an ESA or companion animal means to a person. Our goal is the opposite: protect this extraordinary bond while making sure it is represented accurately and responsibly. Respecting the distinction between an ESA and a service dog protects the participant, the animal, housing opportunities, businesses, and legitimate service-dog teams.

The rule we want every participant to remember

ESA = SUPPORT. SERVICE DOG = DISABILITY-RELATED TASK WORK.

A psychiatric service dog is still a service dog. The distinction is not whether the disability is physical or psychiatric. The key ADA distinction is whether the dog has been individually trained to perform specific work or tasks related to the person's disability. Comfort or emotional support from the animal's presence alone does not make the animal a service dog.

Project Recovery's expectation

- We expect every animal connected to our program to be handled responsibly and safely.
- We may require strong manners and training progress before supporting ESA-related housing documentation or referrals through our program partners.
- No Project Recovery document, training evaluation, vest, tag, letter, or referral may be used to claim that an ESA is a service dog.
- Participants must follow the law and the rules of each housing provider, business, transportation provider, treatment program, court facility, or other location.

Educational packet only; not legal advice. Rights can depend on the setting and applicable federal, state, and local law.

1. Know the Difference

QUESTION	SERVICE DOG	EMOTIONAL SUPPORT ANIMAL (ESA)
Core purpose	Individually trained to do work or perform specific tasks for a person with a disability.	Provides emotional support that alleviates one or more effects/symptoms of a disability; task training is not the defining requirement.
ADA public access	Generally yes in places open to the public, subject to ADA rules.	No general ADA right to enter restaurants, stores, salons, gyms, treatment facilities, or other public places that prohibit pets.
Housing	May qualify as an assistance animal under fair-housing rules.	May qualify as an assistance animal and reasonable accommodation under fair-housing rules.
Certification/registry	ADA does not require certification, registration, professional training, vest, ID card, or special harness.	No federal registry/certificate creates ESA status or public-access rights. Housing providers may seek appropriate information in qualifying circumstances.
Air travel	DOT rules recognize task-trained service dogs; airlines may require DOT forms.	Airlines are not required to recognize ESAs as service animals and may treat them as pets.
Behavior	Must remain under control and generally housebroken; a business may require removal in certain circumstances.	Good behavior is essential, but good manners alone do not convert an ESA into a service dog.

Examples: support vs. trained task

EMOTIONAL SUPPORT / COMFORT	TRAINED SERVICE-DOG TASK
My dog helps me feel calmer by being beside me.	My dog is trained to detect an oncoming episode and perform a specific response that mitigates it.
Petting my dog reduces my distress.	My dog is trained to interrupt a disabling behavior with a specific learned action.
My dog gives me motivation and companionship.	My dog is trained to retrieve medication, guide me to an exit, alert me to a condition, or perform another disability-related task.

A WELL-TRAINED ESA IS STILL AN ESA.

Obedience, calm behavior, Canine Good Citizen-type skills, a vest, an ID card, an online registration, or excellent public manners do not by themselves create service-dog status. Service-dog status depends on the handler's disability and the dog's individualized disability-related task training.

2. Where Can the Animal Go?

Public places: the biggest point of confusion

An ESA does not have a blanket right of public access under the ADA. Unless the location independently allows pets or gives permission, an ESA should not be presented as entitled to enter a non-pet public setting simply because the handler has an ESA letter, vest, tag, online certificate, or registration.

- Restaurants, grocery stores, and other food establishments
- Retail stores and businesses that do not allow pets
- Medical, treatment, recovery, or program spaces where pets are not otherwise permitted
- Workplaces, schools, government buildings, and other settings unless another law, policy, or approved accommodation applies

Housing is different

Fair-housing law uses the broader concept of an "assistance animal." This can include a service animal or another animal that provides disability-related assistance or therapeutic emotional support. A qualifying assistance animal is not treated simply as a pet for purposes of a reasonable accommodation. When a disability or disability-related need is not apparent, a housing provider may be permitted to request reliable supporting information consistent with applicable law.

HOUSING RIGHTS DO NOT EQUAL PUBLIC-ACCESS RIGHTS

An approved housing accommodation allowing an ESA to live with you does not mean the animal may accompany you into every store, restaurant, workplace, treatment facility, or other public location.

Air travel is also different

Under U.S. Department of Transportation rules, airlines are required to recognize qualifying service dogs, not ESAs, as service animals. Airlines may treat an ESA as a pet and may apply their pet rules and fees. Airlines may also require designated DOT forms for service-dog travel.

What businesses may ask about a service dog

When it is not obvious what service a dog provides, ADA-covered staff generally may ask only:

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

They generally may not require an ADA service-dog certificate, demand a task demonstration, or ask for the person's diagnosis.

Even a legitimate service dog must be controlled

A service dog can be required to leave if it is out of control and the handler does not take effective action to control it, or if it is not housebroken. Service-dog status is not permission for dangerous, disruptive, or uncontrolled behavior.

3. Protecting Legitimate Service-Dog Teams

Project Recovery takes this distinction seriously because misuse affects more than one handler. When an unqualified animal is represented as a service dog and then barks, lunges, eliminates indoors, approaches other dogs, damages property, or disrupts a business, the public may become more suspicious of every service-dog team.

DO NOT CLAIM RIGHTS YOUR ANIMAL DOES NOT HAVE

Participants must NOT:

☐ Tell a business that an ESA is a service dog when it is not.

☐ Use an ESA letter, Project Recovery document, online certificate, registration, ID card, tag, patch, or vest to imply ADA service-dog status.

☐ Claim that obedience training alone makes the animal a service dog.

☐ Invent, exaggerate, or misstate a disability-related task to obtain public access.

☐ Assume housing approval gives the animal access to restaurants, stores, airplanes, workplaces, or other non-pet settings.

☐ Allow the animal to interfere with, approach, distract, threaten, or attack a working service dog.

☐ Use Project Recovery's name or partner relationships to pressure a business or housing provider into rights that do not legally apply.

Colorado warning regarding misrepresentation

Colorado law prohibits intentional misrepresentation of a service animal. Colorado's Legislative Council explains that the offense can apply when a person attempts to obtain service-animal rights or privileges, has previously been warned that intentional misrepresentation is illegal, and knows the animal is not a service animal or service animal in training. State law provides escalating fines for violations.

PROJECT RECOVERY PROGRAM STANDARD

If a participant knowingly misrepresents an ESA or pet as a service dog, Project Recovery may address the conduct under applicable participant expectations, safety rules, ethics requirements, or service-planning procedures. Nothing in this packet authorizes Project Recovery to determine a person's legal disability status or to replace advice from a qualified attorney, healthcare professional, housing authority, or government agency.

Our standard for ESA-ready behavior

This is a Project Recovery program expectation — not a legal definition of an ESA. We want animals we support to demonstrate responsible companion-animal behavior, including:

- Reliable leash control and safe handling
- No uncontrolled aggression, lunging, or threatening behavior
- Appropriate house-training
- Ability to settle and remain reasonably calm
- Respect for people, animals, property, and facility rules
- A handler who understands the animal's needs and takes responsibility for supervision and care

4. Candidate Knowledge Check

Participant name: _____ **Animal:** _____

1. An ESA letter or housing accommodation gives my animal the same public-access rights as a service dog.

☐ TRUE ☐ FALSE

2. A service dog must be individually trained to perform disability-related work or tasks.

☐ TRUE ☐ FALSE

3. A vest, ID card, registry, online certificate, or obedience class can by itself make a dog a service dog.

☐ TRUE ☐ FALSE

4. An ESA may have important housing protections even though it does not have general ADA public-access rights.

☐ TRUE ☐ FALSE

5. A psychiatric service dog can qualify as a service dog when it is trained to perform specific disability-related tasks.

☐ TRUE ☐ FALSE

6. If my ESA behaves perfectly, I may call it a service dog in order to take it into a no-pet business.

☐ TRUE ☐ FALSE

7. Airlines may treat an ESA as a pet rather than a service animal.

☐ TRUE ☐ FALSE

8. Even a legitimate service dog may be required to leave a business if it is out of control and the handler does not effectively control it, or if it is not housebroken.

☐ TRUE ☐ FALSE

ANSWER KEY FOR STAFF REVIEW

1 False • 2 True • 3 False • 4 True • 5 True • 6 False • 7 True • 8 True

Questions I still have

_____

_____

_____

_____

5. Participant Acknowledgment & Agreement

PLEASE READ EACH STATEMENT. INITIAL EACH LINE.

Initials: _____ I understand that Project Recovery recognizes the importance of the human–animal bond and that an ESA or companion animal may provide meaningful comfort, connection, routine, acceptance, and emotional support even though those benefits do not by themselves make the animal a service dog.

Initials: _____ I understand that an Emotional Support Animal (ESA) and a service dog are not the same legal category for public access.

Initials: _____ I understand that an ESA does not have general ADA public-access rights simply because I have an ESA letter, housing accommodation, vest, ID card, registry, or certificate.

Initials: _____ I understand that a service dog is individually trained to perform work or tasks related to a person's disability; emotional comfort from the dog's presence alone is not an ADA service task.

Initials: _____ I understand that the ADA does not require a service dog to be professionally trained, certified, registered, or vested.

Initials: _____ I understand that Project Recovery's training or behavior expectations for an ESA are program standards and do not convert an ESA into a service dog.

Initials: _____ I will not knowingly represent my ESA or pet as a service dog, invent a trained task, or use Project Recovery materials to obtain service-dog public-access privileges.

Initials: _____ I will ask permission or verify the applicable rule before bringing my ESA into a place where pets are not ordinarily allowed.

Initials: _____ I understand that housing accommodations are governed by rules that differ from ADA public-access rules.

Initials: _____ I understand that airline rules distinguish service dogs from ESAs and that an ESA may be treated as a pet.

Initials: _____ I will keep my animal under control, respect facility rules, protect the safety of others, and prevent my animal from interfering with a working service dog.

Initials: _____ I understand that intentional misrepresentation of a service animal can have legal consequences in Colorado.

Initials: _____ I understand that Project Recovery may address knowing misrepresentation, unsafe animal handling, or misuse of Project Recovery documentation under its participant policies and service-planning procedures.

By signing below, I confirm that this packet was explained to me, I had the opportunity to ask questions, and I understand the distinction between an ESA and a service dog. I agree not to misrepresent my animal's status or access rights.

_____ **Participant Signature**

_____ **Date**

_____ **Printed Name**

_____ **Animal Name**

_____ **Project Recovery Staff/Witness**

_____ **Date**

_____ **Interpreter/Support Person (if applicable)**

_____ **Date**

6. Staff Reference & Authoritative Sources

Use this page when a participant, landlord, business, or partner asks why the packet draws these distinctions. Because animal-access law can vary by setting and may change, staff should use current government guidance for difficult cases.

U.S. Department of Justice — ADA Service Animals

ADA guidance explains that emotional support, therapy, comfort, and companion animals are not service animals under the ADA when they have not been trained to perform a specific disability-related job or task. It also explains the two permissible questions, lack of certification/vest requirements, and control/housebreaking rules.

https://www.ada.gov/resources/service-animals-faqs/

U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development — Assistance Animals

HUD guidance addresses reasonable accommodations for assistance animals in housing, including service animals and animals that provide disability-related therapeutic emotional support.

https://www.hud.gov/helping-americans/assistance-animals

U.S. Department of Transportation — Service Animals

DOT guidance explains that, for air travel, a service animal is a dog individually trained to do work or perform tasks for a qualified individual with a disability, and that emotional support animals are not service animals under the ACAA rule.

https://www.transportation.gov/resources/individuals/aviation-consumer-protection/service-animals

Colorado General Assembly — Service and Assistance Animals (Legislative Council Staff, Dec. 19, 2025)

Colorado's state memorandum explains service and assistance animals, rights, verification, and offenses related to intentional misrepresentation.

https://content.leg.colorado.gov/publications/service-and-assistance-animals

STAFF NOTE ABOUT THE WORD “CERTIFICATION”

Avoid telling participants that Project Recovery “certifies” an ESA or service dog unless you are referring only to a clearly defined internal program credential. A safer description is: Project Recovery may assist with ESA-related education, behavior readiness, referrals, and housing-accommodation support where appropriate. Do not imply that Project Recovery grants federal ESA status, ADA service-dog status, or universal public-access rights.

Legal disclaimer: This educational material summarizes general federal and Colorado principles as of September 2026 and is not legal advice. Specific facts, local ordinances, housing programs, employment rules, educational settings, transportation systems, and other laws may affect an individual's rights and responsibilities.