



# Paws, People, and Policy

## Managing Service Animals in Hurricane Shelters

A comprehensive guide for emergency managers, shelter managers, and support staff on lawfully and safely accommodating service animals during hurricane sheltering operations.

# Why This Matters Now



## The Reality of Evacuation

When hurricanes or other natural disasters threaten, thousands of evacuees—including those with service animals—seek shelter. Without proper preparation, service animals can create operational, legal, and safety challenges that impact the entire shelter. This workshop provides the knowledge and tools to ensure smooth, lawful operations while maintaining dignity and safety for all evacuees.



# Understanding Service Animals



## Definition Under Law

Dogs, or a miniature horse, trained to perform tasks for people with disabilities. Tasks include guiding the blind, alerting to sounds, pulling wheelchairs, and more.



## Medical Necessity

Service animals are assistive devices, not pets. They enable independence and are protected under ADA and Fair Housing laws.

# Service animals are NOT required to:

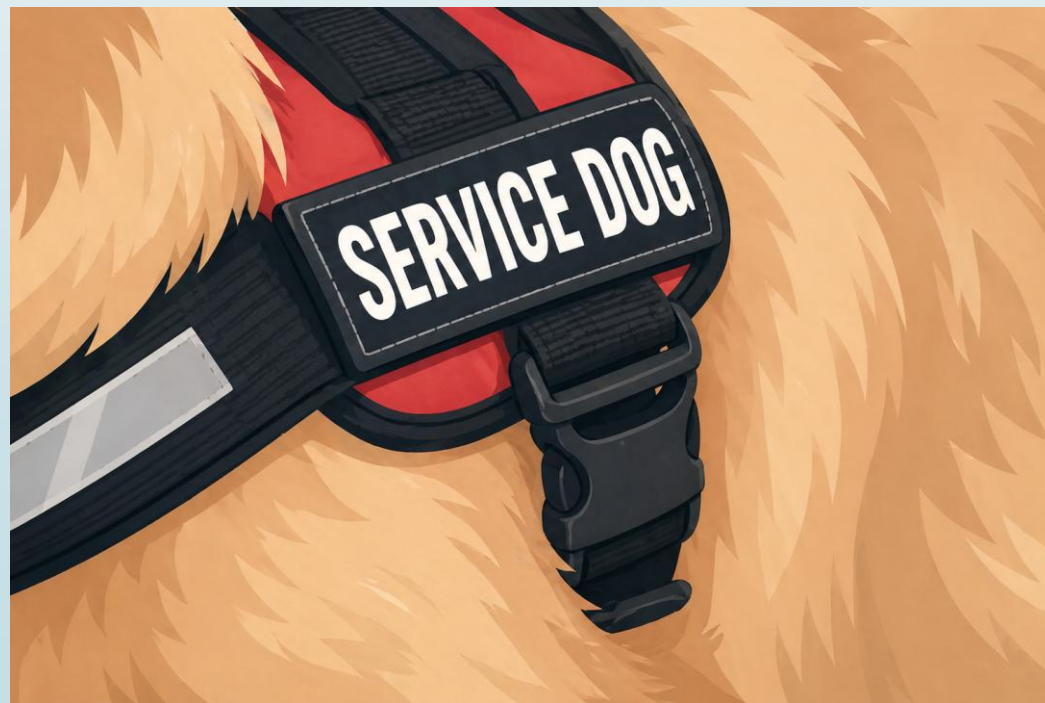
Wear a vest  
or harness, or  
patch

No  
registration or  
certification

Staff cannot  
require  
identification

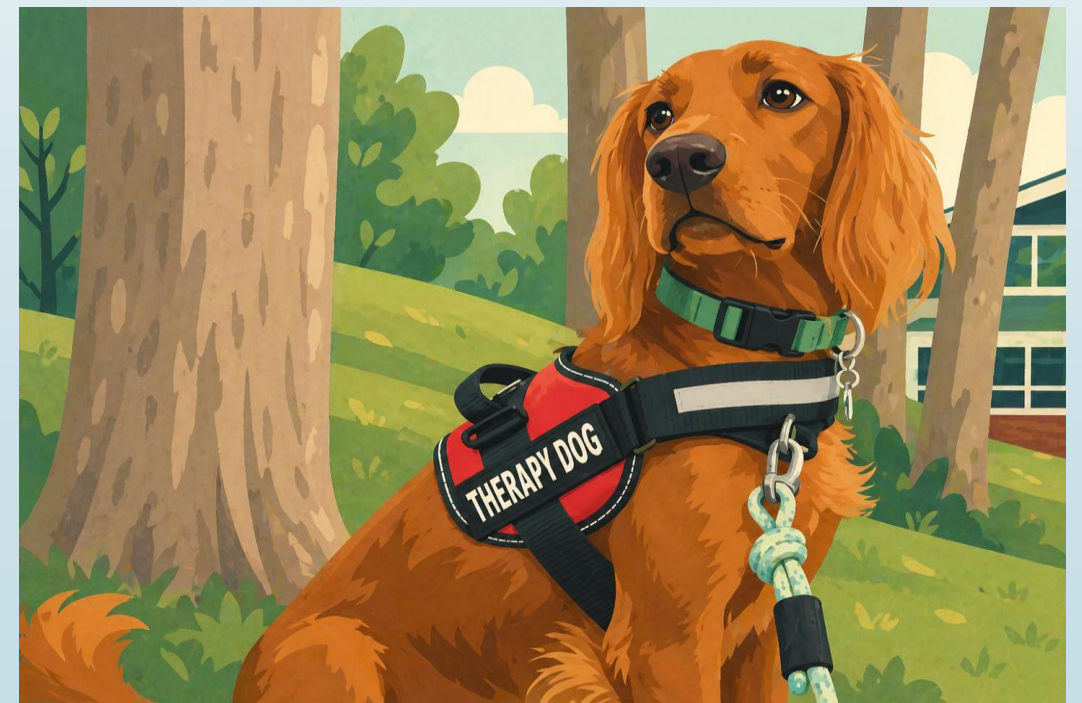
## What is a service animal?

- ▶ Can be any breed dog
- ▶ A miniature horse
- ▶ May or may not have a vest
- ▶ Does not need a license



## What a service animal is not?

- ▶ Emotional support animals
- ▶ Therapy animals
- ▶ Comfort animals
- ▶ Any pet, well trained or not





# Legal Framework You Must Know

---

## Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA)

Requires equal access to emergency shelters. Service animals must be permitted unless they pose a direct threat or fundamental alteration.

---

## Fair Housing Act

Applies to temporary housing and congregate shelters. Evacuees with service animals cannot be denied housing or segregated.

---

## FEMA Guidelines

Emergency shelters receiving federal assistance must accommodate service animals. Denial can result in loss of federal funding.

---

## State and Local Laws

Many states have additional protections. Know your jurisdiction's requirements to avoid legal liability and ensure compliance.

# Two Critical Questions

---

Staff may ask only these two questions to determine if an animal is a service animal:

## Question 1

**"Is the dog a service animal required for a disability?"**

Evacuees must answer affirmatively for the animal to be considered a service animal under ADA.

## Question 2

**"What work or task has the dog been trained to perform?"**

Valid responses include guiding, alerting, retrieving, pulling, or other specific disability-related tasks.

**Important:** Staff cannot ask about the nature of the disability, require documentation, demand demonstrations, or impose breed restrictions.

# Creating Your Shelter Plan



## Designated Relief Areas

Establish outdoor relief zones away from food service and sleeping areas. Provide waste bags, disposal bins, and clean water access.



## Buffer Zones

Create space between service animals and other evacuees with allergies or fear. Use visual barriers when possible.



## Medical Station Coordination

Ensure service animal handlers can access medical care with their animals. Coordinate with nursing stations for animal health needs.



## Evacuation Routes

Plan secondary evacuation routes that accommodate mobility devices and service animals. Practice drills with animals present.



# Handling Common Challenges



## Aggressive Behavior

If a service animal poses a direct threat, document specific behaviors and give the handler a reasonable opportunity to control the animal.



## Unclear Status

When unsure, presume the animal is a service animal. Ask the two permitted questions and consult your shelter manager if concerns persist.



## Health Emergencies

Coordinate with veterinarians or animal control for animal medical needs. Ensure handlers can access veterinary care without abandoning their animals.



# When You Can Deny Access

## Assessing Significant Risk

Decisions to deny access must be based on objective evidence of actual behavior, not speculation or general fears about a breed.

- ▶ **Nature:** What is the specific behavior posing a risk?
- ▶ **Duration:** How long will the potential risk persist?
- ▶ **Severity:** How serious is the magnitude of potential harm?
- ▶ **Probability:** Is it likely that injury will occur?



# Managing Animal Behavior

## Handler Control

The animal must be under the handlers control via harness or leash, unless the disability prevents its use

## Right to Correct

If an animal is disruptive (barking/whining), staff **must** give the handler an opportunity to regain control.

## Accommodations

If the animal is removed, the shelter must try to provide the person all regular services through alternative arrangements.

# Staff Training Essentials

- **Legal rights and responsibilities:** ADA requirements and consequences of non-compliance
- **Communication protocols:** How to respectfully interact with handlers and ask permitted questions
- **Emergency procedures:** Evacuation protocols with service animals
- **Conflict resolution:** Addressing concerns from other evacuees while protecting rights
- **Documentation:** Recording incidents and accommodation measures





# Practice Scenarios for Staff Training

- Scenario 1: The Questionable Service Animal
  - Evacuee arrives with small dog in purse, no vest or identification
  - When asked if it's a service animal, says 'yes, for emotional support'
  - Decision: Emotional support is NOT a trained task - not a service animal under ADA
  - May be required to accommodate under Fair Housing in some situations - consult manager
- Scenario 2: The Allergic Evacuee
  - Evacuee with severe dog allergy arrives, shelter already has 5 service animals
  - Demands all dogs be removed or placed outside
  - Decision: Cannot remove service animals. Assign allergic person to farthest zone possible
  - Provide air purifier if available, monitor for medical emergency
- Scenario 3: Animal Altercation
  - Two service animals in adjacent areas begin barking at each other
  - Handlers cannot immediately quiet their animals
  - Decision: Separate animals to different zones, document incident, give handlers opportunity to regain control

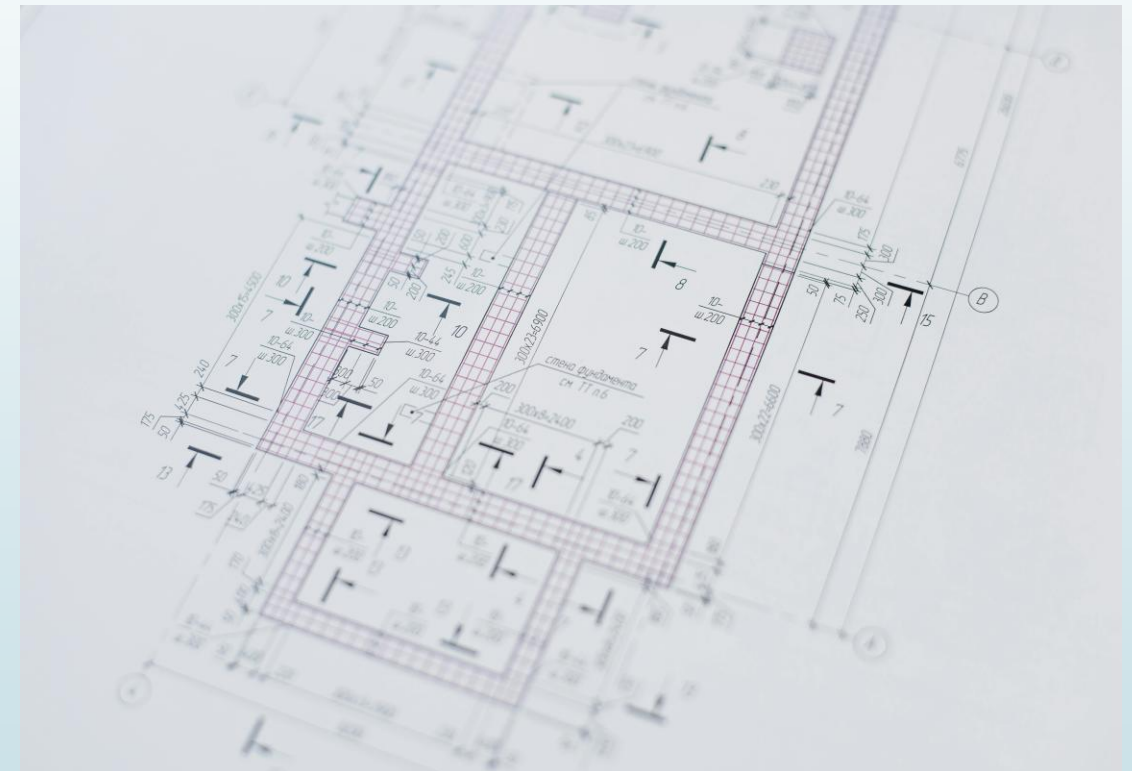


# Best Practices for Smooth Operations

- **Pre-Storm Preparation**  
Stock extra supplies: waste bags, leashes, food bowls, and emergency animal care kits. Identify nearby veterinary resources.
- **Intake Process**  
Ask the two permitted questions at intake. Document animal information and handler contact details. Assign buffer zones proactively.
- **Ongoing Communication**  
Check regularly with handlers about animal needs. Address concerns from other evacuees promptly and professionally.
- **Documentation**  
Record accommodation measures, incidents, and any restrictions imposed. Detailed logs protect your shelter legally.

# Designing Effective Relief Areas

- ▶ Location Options
  - ▶ 100 feet from food preparation and dining areas
  - ▶ Routes clearly marked (i.e. entrance, animal relief areas)
  - ▶ Well-lit for nighttime use with emergency lighting backup
  - ▶ Staff always present
- ▶ Maintenance Protocol
  - ▶ Empty waste receptacles every 4 hours minimum
  - ▶ Sanitize water stations twice daily
  - ▶ Monitor for hazards (broken glass, contamination)
  - ▶ Document maintenance activities





# Intakes



- ▶ Have a selected area near the entrance for intakes
- ▶ Intake one animal, with owner, at a time
- ▶ Receive most recent medical paperwork (Ensure rabies vaccinations are current per state laws)
- ▶ Have owner bring animal to selected kennel that is marked and document on intake paperwork



# Critical Documentation Requirements

## Intake Form Should Include

- ▶ Handler name and contact information
- ▶ Service animal type, breed, and identifying features
- ▶ Answers to the two permitted questions
- ▶ Assigned location/zone within shelter
- ▶ Any special needs or accommodations provided

## Incident Report Elements

- ▶ Date, time, and location of incident
- ▶ Specific behaviors observed (objective facts only)
- ▶ Witness names and statements
- ▶ Actions taken by staff and handler response
- ▶ Resolution and any follow-up required

# Ready for the Next Storm

## Your Action Items

1. **Review and update shelter policies** to ensure ADA compliance
2. **Conduct staff training** before hurricane season
3. **Stock relief area supplies** and identify veterinary resources
4. **Run practice drills** with service animals present

**Questions?** Let's discuss your specific shelter challenges and solutions.



*Service animals save lives. With proper preparation, your shelter can accommodate them safely and legally while maintaining smooth operations for all evacuees.*



# Post-Storm Transition Planning

- Discharge Planning
  - Verify handler has pet supplies for next 72 hours minimum
  - Provide list of local veterinarians and animal services
  - If returning home is unsafe, coordinate temporary housing that accepts animals
  - Offer information on disaster assistance programs for pet care
- Follow-Up Data Collection
  - Survey handlers about shelter experience and accommodation quality
  - Document total number of service animals accommodated
  - Record any incidents and resolutions
  - Identify system improvements for future events
- After-Action Review
  - Conduct staff debriefing within 2 weeks of shelter closure
  - What worked well? What needs improvement?
  - Update policies and training materials based on lessons learned
  - Share findings with regional emergency management network



# Key Takeaways



## ► **Operational Excellence**

- Stay flexible – things change fast.
- Maintain clear communication and reports.
- Prioritize a designated relief area for cleanliness.

## ► **Legal Readiness**

- Stick to the two legal questions at intake.
- Judge the behavior, never the breed.
- If the animal leaves, the person stays.



## Walton County Animal Shelter Manager

- ▶ Patty Weingartner is the Shelter Manager at Walton County Animal Services, where she oversees daily operations and leads efforts to care for lost and abandoned animals. She works closely with staff, volunteers, and community partners to promote adoption, responsible pet ownership, and strong local engagement.

# Any further questions?

For more information about the ADA, please visit [ADA.gov](https://www.ada.gov) or call their toll-free number.

[ADA Information Line](https://www.ada.gov) 800-514-0301 (Voice) and 1-833-610-1264 (TTY) Monday through Friday to speak with an ADA Specialist. Calls are confidential.