

## Things to Consider Before Writing a Letter or Prescription for an Emotional Support Animal

An Emotional Support Animal is a household pet that provides comfort and companionship to a person with a disability (these are sometimes mistakenly referred to as therapy animals). A disabled owner of an emotional support animal is legally given reasonable accommodation for:

1. Housing (Fair Housing Act, Rehabilitation Act)
2. Domestic Air Travel (Air Carrier Access Act)

*These animals are not allowed into public places where pets are not allowed, even with a letter or prescription from a medical provider.*

- Only service dogs — trained to perform tasks, reliably and on cue, to assist a handler with the functional limitations of a disability — have public access rights. Comfort, therapy, and companionship are not trained tasks. Because of this training, a service dog can accompany its handler to public places where dogs are not allowed. Training makes a dog a service dog, not a letter from a medical provider.

### Things to consider when asked to write a letter:

1. Is your client's condition severe enough to be legally considered a disability? Legally, a disability is a physical or mental impairment that substantially limits one or more major life activities. Major life activities include walking, talking, hearing, seeing, breathing, learning, performing manual tasks, and caring for oneself.
2. How long have you been treating this client? Is getting a letter for the pet one of his first requests?
3. Does your client understand that an emotional support animal should be an adjunct to, not a substitute for, professional treatment?
4. Is the request either for air travel (either during travel or at the destination the client is visiting), or for a reasonable accommodation in no-pets housing? These are the only two situations for which you can write the letter.
5. Reasonable accommodation under the law does not apply to all situations, and even where it does, the granted accommodation only has to be "reasonable." Your client is responsible for understanding and complying with the relevant laws and regulations.
6. As a medical provider, you:
  - **CAN** validate a person's medical condition, and how the animal alleviates the disability. There must be a direct nexus between the disabling condition and the alleviation the animal provides.
  - **CANNOT** evaluate the dog's temperament or training. This why a doctor's letter cannot give the animal public access privileges. ***It should be very clear to your patient that your letter is not giving permission to take the dog everywhere.***
7. If the client's animal leads to a legal dispute, your letter will become part of the patient's evidence and you may have to discuss your decision in court. The resources listed at the end offer further advice on the ethical and legal considerations of writing these letters.

## Things to know if you do decide to write the letter

- There is no such thing as “certification” for an emotional support animal, and there are no legally valid registries, identification cards, or vests. Your letter does not “certify” the pet.
- The information required from the medical provider for housing accommodation requests differs from air travel requests.

A **housing** provider is allowed to request reliable documentation from a physician, psychiatrist, social worker, or other mental health professional that:

1. Verifies that the person meets the Fair Housing Act’s definition of disability (*i.e.*, has a physical or mental impairment that substantially limits one or more major life activities),
2. Describes the needed accommodation, and
3. Shows the relationship between the person’s disability and the need for the requested accommodation.

**Air travel** requires current documentation (*i.e.*, not more than one year old) on letterhead from a licensed mental health professional, including a medical doctor that is treating the passenger’s mental or emotional disability stating:

1. That the passenger has a mental health-related disability listed in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM IV);
2. That having the animal accompany the passenger is necessary to the passenger’s mental health or treatment;
3. That the individual providing the assessment of the passenger is a licensed mental health professional and the passenger is under his or her professional care;
4. The date and type of the mental health professional’s license and the state or other jurisdiction in which it was issued.

## More Resources

### **Examining emotional support animals and role conflicts in professional psychology.**

Younggren, Jeffrey N., Boisvert, Jennifer A., Boness, Cassandra L.  
Professional Psychology: Research and Practice, Vol 47(4), Aug 2016, 255-260

### **Writing letters to help patients with service and support animals.**

John J. Ensminger LLM & J. Lawrence Thomas PhD  
Journal of Forensic Psychology Practice, Vol 13(2), Feb 2013, 92-115

### **Is that a pet or therapeutic aid? What should you do if your patients ask you to write letters certifying that their pets are emotional support animals?**

Rebecca A. Clay  
APA Monitor on Psychology, September 2016, Vol 47 (8); Print version: page 38  
<http://www.apa.org/monitor/2016/09/pet-aid.aspx>

### **Recommendations for certifying emotional support animals.**

University of Missouri-Columbia. (2017, May 18). *ScienceDaily*. Retrieved September 2, 2017 from [www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2017/05/170518140223.htm](http://www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2017/05/170518140223.htm)

### **Unexpected Requests: Ethical Considerations Related to Support Animals**

Alann Dingle  
California Psychologist, Summer 2016  
[http://c.ymcdn.com/sites/www.cpapsych.org/resource/resmgr/Governance/Ethics\\_Committee/Summer\\_2016.pdf](http://c.ymcdn.com/sites/www.cpapsych.org/resource/resmgr/Governance/Ethics_Committee/Summer_2016.pdf)