Misuse of Service Dogs Hurts the Disabled & Responsible Dog Owners

Would you lie to get a handicapped parking placard? Would you fake an injury that required the use of a wheelchair to obtain special services? Would you feign a life-threatening illness to qualify for a *Make-A-Wish* trip?

Most people would never do these things because they harm those who are truly disabled and need special assistance. However, it appears that many people do not feel the same way when it comes to service dogs. Sales of fake service dog vests, patches, and backpacks have skyrocketed in recent years, allowing owners who outfit their pet with this gear to enter restaurants, ride with a dog in an airplane cabin, or claim other special accommodations intended for people with disabilities. This behavior is just as dishonest and damaging as the examples above.

The American Kennel Club has always been a strong supporter of service dogs and strongly condemns the misrepresentation of pets as service dogs. AKC club members initiated the use of dogs in wartime that led to the development of dogs to assist the disabled. AKC supports the Americans with Disabilities Act and other laws that assure special accommodations for individuals with service animals. Dog enthusiasts take pride in the accomplishments of these amazing animals and applaud their contributions to society that help disabled individuals live more independently. This makes the abuse of these laws all the more distressing. Bringing untrained dogs into situations for which they are ill-equipped puts everyone at risk. So much so, in the last two years, 21 states have passed laws cracking down on people who misrepresent service dogs.

Service dogs are trained to behave submissively when they encounter another dog. They are socialized to know to lie out of the way under a table in a restaurant or stay at their owner's side. They are trained to not react to noises and disturbances that upset other dogs. Untrained animals fraudulently presented as service dogs in public places have been known to start fights, get up on restaurant furniture, relieve themselves in stores, and damage property.

Perhaps the most disturbing effect of this trend is that it is those with legitimate service dogs are being denied access to public places where they have the right to go because of the poor behavior of pets and their owners who fraudulently attempt to pass them off as service dogs. It's easy to understand how a business owner who has had bad experiences with ill-disciplined fake "service dogs" can become wary of all dogs and resist allowing legitimate service dogs into their place of business.

Due to the broadness of the federal Americans with Disabilities Act, it is difficult to address this problem legally and few of us would want to see additional impediments for those with service dogs. Therefore, it's up to dog owners to behave with integrity and honesty. AKC looks to those who compete in AKC events and belong to our clubs to be leaders on all issues related to responsible dog ownership and this is no exception. Please think about the benefit that service animals bring to those with disabilities and the potential problems that misrepresentation of a dog as a service animal can create. Let's be the first to honor specially trained service dogs by respecting the laws that enable them to do their jobs.

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