

SFRCNA Guidelines for Service Dogs in Narcotics Anonymous Meetings

Disclaimer: Narcotics Anonymous does not enforce the law. This listing of the law, and the consequences for groups not complying with the law, are included so that your group can make a fully informed choice. This is in line with Chapter 4 in the Basic Text: “We believe that the sooner we face our problems within our society, in everyday living, just that much faster do we become acceptable, responsible and productive members of that society.” Additionally, Narcotics Anonymous supports the right of every addict to find recovery through Narcotics Anonymous. To assist Groups and the NA Service Structure to fulfill Tradition 3 and Tradition 5 in reaching out to those with Additional Needs, the following guidelines are being provided. This guideline is only a general guidance on a complex set of issues. Groups and Service Entities may find that their situation may not be covered in these guidelines. In these cases, or at any time, it is highly encouraged to contact your Area, Region, SFRCNA Additional Needs Point of Contact (POC) or NAWS to obtain further assistance.

Some NA members with disabilities may have a service dog to medically assist them and bring these dogs to meetings. A service dog is a dog that has been individually task trained to assist a person with disabling impairment that substantially limits one or more major life activities. These service dogs may do a variety of tasks. Some examples are guide, hearing, mobility and detecting seizures, pulling wheelchairs or other specialized tasks. The work or task must have been trained and relate directly to the person’s disability. A dog whose sole function is to provide comfort or emotional support is NOT a service dog and does not qualify for access, nor do therapy animals. Service dogs are working dogs and considered medical equipment. They are not pets. Additionally, the only animals allowed to be service animals, by both Federal and Florida State law, are dogs and miniature horses. No other animals are allowed.

Under the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA revised 2010), a Federal law, businesses and organizations that serve the public must allow people with disabilities to bring their service dogs into all areas of a facility where the public is normally allowed to go. NA meetings (in fact all 12 Step meetings) are included in this definition. The ADA law covers the person with a disability, not the dog itself. (Most times, the person and dog together are referred to as a service dog team.) To deny a service dog team access to a meeting is in violation of Federal law and, in many states, may also be a criminal offense. Florida is one of those states in which it is a criminal offense.

Here are 2 questions that groups can use to determine if a dog is a legitimate service dog when it is not obvious what job the dog does:

1. Is the dog a service dog required because of a disability?

This is usually a yes/no question and does mean that the one person that can be with the service dog is the person with a disability. (Note: some states do allow trainers to bring the

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dog to public places, so please check your state laws. Florida is one of the states that does allow both trainers and service dogs in training public access. All the same standards for service dogs apply, to include proper behavior.)

2. What work or task does the dog do that mitigates the disability?

Please remember, groups cannot ask what the disability is. They may only ask what trained task the dog does to mitigate the disability. Examples of behavior that are not trained tasks would be providing comfort or petting the dog. Additionally groups cannot ask for certification and/or registration, nor may ask for a demonstration of the task. Again, the work or task must have been trained and relate directly to the person's disability.

Additionally, a service dog needs to be well behaved and potty trained. If a service dog exhibits behavior that disturbs the atmosphere of recovery, it is expected that the handler take action to control the dog immediately (just like parents are expected to control their children at a meeting). A service dog may only be requested to be removed if 1) the handler does not take effective action to control the dog or 2) the dog is not housebroken. If it is determined that a legitimate reason occurs to ask that animal needs to be removed, please do everything possible to assist the member to attend the rest of the meeting. (Note: a onetime occurrence of misbehavior or potty accident, especially due to illness of the dog, is not a reason to permanently exclude the service dog.)

Many members will state that fear of a dog or allergies give them a reason to exclude the service dog from a meeting. Some states have laws that make excluding service dogs a crime up to and including a felony. However, like any other situation that a NA group may encounter, this can be worked out. Seating arrangements, such as keeping the person with fear or allergy and the service dog team across the room from each other, can easily handle most of these situations. Common sense and our unity of purpose should prevail.

Lastly, please remember that a service dog is a working dog. Please do not pet nor distract the dog when working. Distracting a service dog could endanger the life of the handler and is, in many states, a crime.

Again, this guideline is very general. Some groups may come across situations where they are not sure what to do. This can include a problem with the landlord. Your Area, Region, SFRCNA Additional Needs POC or NAWs be contacted at any time for any help needed.