Things to Consider When Asked to Write a Letter or ‘Prescription’ for an Emotional Support Animal

An Emotional Support Animal (ESA) is a common household pet that provides comfort and companionship to a person with a disability (also referred to as comfort or companion animals; mistakenly referred to as therapy animals).

- ESAs are only recognized in the U.S. by the Fair Housing Act.
- Common household pet means a domesticated animal such as a dog, cat, bird, rodent, rabbit, fish, or turtle (no other reptiles), that is traditionally kept in the home for pleasure.

These animals are not allowed into public places where pets are not allowed, even with a letter or ‘prescription’ from a medical provider. They are also not allowed on public transportation (including air travel).

- Only service dogs have public access rights. Service dogs are trained to perform tasks, reliably and on cue, to assist a handler with the functional limitations of a disability.
- Comfort, therapy, and companionship are not trained tasks. Task 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 considered a disability — a physical or mental impairment that substantially limits one or more major life activities, which include walking, talking, hearing, seeing, breathing, learning, performing manual tasks, and caring for oneself?

2. Is the request for a reasonable accommodation in housing? Letters do not apply to public access or air travel.

3. Does your client understand that an emotional support animal is not a substitute for professional treatment?

4. Your client will be responsible for all of the expenses of obtaining and owning the pet, and must have the ability to responsibly care for an animal. If the person is having difficulty maintaining emotional or mental stability or sustaining ADLs, the animal may suffer neglect.

5. Fair housing laws do not apply to all housing situations. Even where they do, the 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 or caseworker, you:

- CAN validate a person’s medical condition, and how the animal alleviates the disability. There must be a direct relationship between the disabling condition and the alleviation the animal provides.

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- **CANNOT** evaluate the dog’s temperament or training. This is why the letter cannot give the animal public access privileges. Address the letter to the housing provider, and make it clear to your client that your letter is not giving permission to take the dog everywhere.

7. A housing provider is allowed to request:
   - Appropriate and reasonable documentation of disability. This can be from a healthcare provider, caseworker, or even proof of receipt of disability benefits.
   - The disability-related need for the animal (if it is not obvious).

8. 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.

9. If the client’s animal causes a legal dispute, your letter may become part of the patient’s evidence and you may have to discuss your decision in court. This can include your assessment of whether the person is disabled. The resources listed at the end offer further advice on the ethical and legal considerations of writing these letters.

**More Resources**

**Examining emotional support animals and role conflicts in professional psychology.**
Younggren, Jeffrey N., Boisvert, Jennifer A., Boness, Cassandra L.

**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

**Recommendations for certifying emotional support animals.**

**Unexpected Requests: Ethical Considerations Related to Support Animals**
Alann Dingle
California Psychologist, Summer 2016