

On the Positive Side

Law says service dogs not same as therapy dogs

By Kathryn Rosenthal / For the Sun-News

Posted: 06/26/2010 10:40:37 PM MDT

Is that a service dog or a therapy dog? I'm confused. Each summer, we grab our flip-flops and folding chairs and head to the Music in the Park series at Las Cruces city parks. Pets are not permitted at special events held at city facilities. So, why are assistance dogs allowed?

Most of us have seen guide dogs with blind or visually impaired people in "no pets" areas. Signal/hearing dogs that alert a child to an impending seizure, or a deaf mother to her baby's cry, are in the "no pets" areas too.

It's the distinction between service dogs and therapy dogs that seems to cause the most confusion. Sure, they're both four-legged, furry angels, but there are important differences between them.

Service dogs are legally defined by the Americans with Disability Act of 1990. They are individually trained to help a disabled person.

Service dogs are only one type of "service animal." Think: sturdy miniature horse to help you balance/walk or nimble fingered monkey to flick the light switch then go to the kitchen and get you a bottle of water.

Federal law protects the rights of disabled people to be with their service animals in public. That's why you'll see service dogs in public buildings (libraries, restaurants, theaters) and in public transportation (buses, planes, trains).

The dogs help people with mental or physical conditions that substantially limit major life activities, such as dressing, bathing, walking, seeing, hearing, etc. Some dogs are trained to pull wheelchairs. I knew one that was trained to do the laundry (seriously).

Therapy dogs are not legally defined by federal law. They are usually the personal pets of their handlers and provide services to others, such as visiting patients in hospitals or nursing homes. Therapy dogs are not trained to help one specific disabled person and their handlers must observe "no pets" policies.

Both service and therapy dogs help people in many ways, but not in the same ways.

This summer you may see a service dog at an event where pets are not allowed. The dog has been specially trained to perform tasks that allow a disabled person to enjoy the same experience that you are enjoying. Have a great summer. See you at Music in the Park!

Want to learn more? www.deltasociety.org

Kathryn Rosenthal is a former teacher, IBM retiree and proud "mom" to a service dog.