



EVERYONE'S INVITED

INCLUDING PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES

FAUX SERVICE ANIMALS,

WHAT CAN WE DO?



Pets Can Be Dangerous

Service animals provide critically important, sometimes life-saving, assistance to people with disabilities. We want all patrons with disabilities to feel comfortable bringing their service animals to events. It is a serious safety issue when patrons falsely represent their pet as a service animal so that they are then allowed to bring it into your festival. It is unsafe for patrons, for staff, and for other animals, including service animals!

Even a well-trained pet can become frightened and may act aggressively in unfamiliar, crowded, noisy surroundings. It might

protect their person from what they perceive as a threat, a child running by, another dog, or the mounted patrol on horseback. If a dog becomes lost in the crowd, imagine how terrified it could be.

I've seen dogs lunging at patrons and staff. I've seen a dog growling and barking at a horse ridden by mounted patrol. Security staff members have told me of their personnel and other staff getting bitten. One person was bitten in the groin. We freed a dog that was left in a zipped up and locked hot tent with a bowl of water that the dog had tipped over. Its whines alerted passersby. We cut the lock and called in animal control.

I am not revealing any secrets when I tell you that festival attendees and other people with pets have learned that they can go online to purchase fake service animal identification including vests, harnesses, collars, “certification” papers and the like.

Taking Advantage

Faux service animals have become a serious problem at events and other public places. People are so attached to their pets that they want to bring them everywhere. While many public places prohibit people from bringing pets into their establishment, the Americans with Disabilities Act protects the rights of people with disabilities to bring their trained service animals with them just about everywhere. The law falls short, however, as it doesn't give us a way to definitively identify a service animal.

I am not revealing any secrets when I tell you that festival attendees and other people with pets have learned that they can go online to purchase fake service animal identification including vests, harnesses, collars, “certification” papers and the like. Ironically, the law prevents staff from legally asking for any of this identification because there is no such officially sanctioned national certification or training facility. Additionally, the law allows people to train their own service animal which is why certification from a school is not required. These circumstances make it easier for people to falsely present their pets as service animals. By taking advantage of the laws that protect people with disabilities, these pet owners are taking advantage of people with disabilities!

Working with many festivals through the years, I saw this problem grow across the nation. At some events, the camping areas looked like a dog-fest, with many unattended dogs running free.

Developing a System

Some years ago, I developed a service animal screening system that I have applied to events in different states across the nation. We have significantly reduced the number of pets attending these events and it is much safer for all involved. The system components are listed here. If you need help, see my contact information below.

1. You must research the laws in your state, county, and municipality. The federal law requires that service dogs and miniature horses who have been trained to assist a person with a disability be allowed in places open to the public. In some cases, local laws cover emotional support or service animals in training. Look into it!
2. Develop a service animal policy for your festival and post it on your website. Does your state penalize those who falsely represent their pet as a service animal? What other local laws might apply?

3. Train your service animal screeners very well. The law narrowly restricts what questions can be asked of the person handling the animal. Help staff understand when they can ask follow-up questions. This is a potentially litigious area and you want to get it right.
4. Develop a record keeping system.
5. Train all of your staff what to do if there is a misbehaving animal.

Misinformation

I can't tell you the number of times I have heard poorly informed staff tell me that all they have to do is ask for certification papers or look for an official vest on the animal. The patrons who are bringing in their pets are happy to oblige by presenting the fake identification. Meanwhile, it is illegal to ask for any such identification! The patrons with pets don't report these infractions because they want to perpetuate the ruse. Persons with disabilities and their genuine service animals often present their legitimate identification even though they know it is not required, just to ease the process.

Protect All of Your Attendees

The pets are not safe either. One of the images seared into my memory is of a puppy, tied to a bumper on a short lead, at a camping festival on a hot summer's day. The pup was frightened, thirsty, and whimpering. Its owners had gone into the venue, leaving the puppy alone for the day. We brought it water and called animal control. They took the puppy to their facilities for safekeeping.

If a service animal is attacked and hurt or killed by someone's poorly trained pet, it can cost many thousands of dollars to replace or retrain a service animal. If a pet harms a person or animal at your event, will you be able to say that you have done all that you can do to prevent such an occurrence?

Laura Grunfeld writes a regular column helping producers make their events accessible to people with disabilities. Suggest topics to her by writing to Laura@EveryonesInvited.com. She has worked many festivals across the nation and readers can learn more about her event accessibility consulting, training, and production company at www.EveryonesInvited.com, www.linkedin.com/in/lauragrunfeld, www.youtube.com/lauragrunfeld, www.facebook.com/everyones.festival, www.instagram.com/everyonesfestival.

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