

Therapy Dog? Service Dog? Working Dog? Companion Dog?
? I'm confused! ?

There are a lot of terms that describe what our dogs are and do. Some are legal; some are not. Some make sense; some do not. For some people, like volunteers with therapy dog programs, it's important to understand the differences and how they apply to us.

Working dogs are those that perform actual duties to enable the completion of one's career or to complete activities of living. These dogs are found in the military, public service departments (police, fire, security), government agencies (FBI, TSA, etc.), professional search and rescue groups and helping persons with disabilities.

Though commonly, and incorrectly, called working dogs, those in protection, sports, and therapy work, are not legally working dogs.

Only those dogs legally recognized as working dogs have public access rights. Our therapy dogs enjoy special access only in the facility in which they are working. It is illegal to attempt to gain access to places dogs are not normally accepted unless your dog is a working dog. Even those legally recognized have limitations. It would not, for example, be legal for a person to bring a search and rescue dog into a restaurant or in-cabin on a plane unless that dog was actively involved in or on its way to or from an active search event. It is illegal and immoral to misrepresent your companion or pet dog as a working dog. Doing so could damage the rights of those who have and need legal access.

Service dogs (those working to mitigate a disability) are accorded the most access rights. They are covered by the Department of Justice Code of Federal Regulations which define Public Access in accordance with the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA). Documentation is not required.

There are some in-between cases such as emotional support animals that are not covered by the ADA but are covered for living arrangements with the Federal Housing Commission and on flights per the rules of TSA. Documentation must be carried.

Search and Rescue, police dogs, fire dogs, security dogs, government dogs and the like all require documentation for their limited access. Access is allowed only during working hours or travel to and from work.

So where do companion dogs and therapy dogs fit in? They are our pets. Therapy dogs have received some certification and, hopefully, extra training so they can perform their animal-assisted interactions in the numerous places they are welcomed. But they are still pets. A companion dog is just another name for a pet dog.

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Thank-you, Leslie Horton, chair of the IACP Service Dog Committee, for providing information and definitions to assist with this article.