

## Service Animals in Schools

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### *Position Statement*

#### **NASN POSITION**

It is the position of the National Association of School Nurses (NASN) that service animals allow some students with disabilities access to their education while enabling greater independence. The registered professional school nurse (hereinafter referred to as school nurse) as a member of the school planning team, facilitates the integration of service animals into the school by leading the development of inclusive policies and practices. As school health care professionals, school nurses ensure the health and safety needs of all students are met, while conforming to federal accessibility laws.

#### **BACKGROUND AND RATIONALE**

Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) regulations, Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, Individuals with Disabilities in Education Act, as well as state and local laws, support children who may require a service animal in school (Brennan & Nguyen, 2014). The Americans with Disabilities Act regulations define a service animal as “a dog that is individually trained to do work or perform tasks for the benefit of an individual with a disability” (United States Department of Justice [USDJ], 2011, para 3). A separate provision includes miniature horses in the definition of a service animal (USDJ, 2011). Disabilities for which service animals are used include physical, sensory, psychiatric, intellectual, or other mental disability. Service dogs and horses can be especially beneficial in improving the educational experience of children with special needs (Harris & Sholtis, 2016).

The service animal must be trained to take a specific action when needed to assist the person with a disability (USDJ, 2015). These actions include, but are not limited to, guide dogs for sight impaired, hearing or signal dogs for alerting those with hearing loss, Psychiatric Service Dogs (PSD) to detect the onset of psychiatric episodes, Sensory or Social Signal Dogs (SSig) trained to assist a person with autism, Seizure Response Dogs trained to assist a person with a seizure disorder, and service dogs trained to identify low blood sugar levels (Catala, Cousillas, Hausberger, & Grandgeorge, 2018). There is a distinction between psychiatric service animals and emotional support animals. If the service animal has been trained to sense the onset of an anxiety attack and takes a specific action to help avoid the attack or lessen its impact, that would qualify as a service animal (USDJ, 2011; Krause-Parello, Sarni, & Padden, 2016). If a dog’s mere presence provides comfort, the ADA would not consider this performing work or a task (USDJ, 2015; Schoenfeld-Tacher, Hellyer, Cheung, & Kogan, June 2017).

Schools have a legal responsibility to provide planning and services for children with special healthcare needs, including allowing service animals into schools (Towle, 2017). School nurses provide care coordination for students with service animals to ensure the smooth transition of a service animal to school, as well as monitoring the effectiveness of the animal for the task it is to perform.

## SUMMARY

Students with disabilities utilize service animals for a variety of tasks, allowing greater access to education (Harris & Sholtis, 2016). Communication and planning with all stakeholders is essential in supporting the student with a service animal. The school nurse plays a key role in facilitating this communication and planning process.

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