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Assistance Animals in the Library

How One Academic Library Developed Best Practices

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Effectively addressing concerns about assistance animals in any library setting is often problematic due to a lack of awareness about assistance animals in general, which then leads to uncertainty on how to proceed in these situations.¹ Library personnel, regardless of library type, are often unaware of legal definitions of assistance animals. When compelled to respond to a patron complaint about “a dog in the library,” many library professionals are uncertain about which questions they may legally ask a patron who is accompanied by an animal. This uncertainty then creates concern about how to act in these situations, and thus, many library personnel may seek to avoid it entirely. However, with knowledge, time, some organizational development, and the appropriate legal vetting, it is possible to establish a best-practices protocol for handling complaints or concerns about patrons with an assistance animal in a library. This article details one such case study at an academic library in the Pacific Northwest.

A brief aside on what this article will not do is necessary before continuing: This article details the design, implementation, and results of an internal workshop, which subsequently led to the creation of a best-practices document intended for use by the staff at an academic library. This article will only provide an introductory overview of the legal classifications of service animals, emotional support/comfort animals, and therapy animals. Though the Civil Rights Division of the United States Department of Justice is very clear on the federal definition of service animals,² these definitions—and the corresponding legislation—can vary from state to state.³ Furthermore, the definitions for emotional support/comfort animals or therapy animals also differ across state and federal lines—one such example is found in Washington State.⁴

ASSISTANCE ANIMALS IN THE LIS LITERATURE (AND BEYOND)

Over the last two decades, universities and colleges have seen increased enrollment of students with disabilities, and these disabilities manifest in different ways, from mobility impairments to neurodiverse learning styles to mental health complications. For more evidence of this enrollment trend, see Lee; Snyder and Dillow; Watkins et al.; and Huss.⁵ Within these growing populations of students with disabilities, those students who meet the appropriate disability-related criteria are bringing their assistance animals. These assistance animals can be trained to accommodate a wide

spectrum of disability-related needs; furthermore, some of these animals are trained to perform complex tasks tailored to the distinct needs of a specific individual with a disability. Indeed, because of the complexities inherent in current categorizations of assistance animals, combined with the often disparate legal definitions of assistance animals between state and federal laws, Parenti et al. have argued for a substantial revision to the current legal definitions of assistance animals. Parenti et al. believe that the current legal categorizations of assistance animals do not sufficiently describe the diverse activities and tasks associated with assistance animals that are designed to address disability-related needs, and thus cannot subsequently outline appropriate legal rights and protections.⁶

Before continuing onto the case study, it is important to provide a few definitions for the sake of clarity. This article addresses two types of assistance animals (both of which can be found in most types of libraries). Assistance animals are, first and foremost, not pets. The United States Department of Housing and Urban Development defines an assistance animal as “an animal that works, provides assistance, or performs tasks for the benefit of a person with a disability, or provides emotional support that alleviates one or more identified symptoms or effects of a person’s disability.”⁷ One common type of assistance animal is a service animal. According to the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), the federal definition of a service animal is a “dog that is individually trained to do work or perform tasks for a person with a disability.”⁸ In a separate provision, the ADA does permit a substitution of miniature horses as a service animal when relevant.⁹

The second type of assistance animal discussed in this article is an emotional support animal (also called an ESA, comfort animal, or therapy animal). [QY: A brief web search seems to show that “comfort animal” is more common than “emotional comfort animal;” e.g. it is the preferred usage at the New York Times. Edit OK?] An ESA is an assistance animal intended to improve the emotional or mental well-being of its human counterpart.¹⁰ Furthermore, ESAs are *not* limited to only serving people with disabilities, whereas service animals are usually exclusively partnered with individuals with disabilities.¹¹ It is worth noting that, according to the ADA, ESAs are *not* considered service animals. Thus, the human companions of ESAs should not expect the same rights and responsibilities as those afforded to the companions of service animals.¹²

The scholarly literature on the benefits associated with all categories of assistance animals spans several disability types. Hubert et al.; Ostermeier; and Erin cover how assistance animals can help human companions with mobility-related disabilities.¹³ Assistance animals can also benefit individuals with an autism spectrum disorder, as Carlisle; Groomes et al.; Berry et al.; and Smyth and Slevin have documented.¹⁴ Helping with emotional or mental health difficulties and vision and cognition impairments is also within the purview of assistance animals; see Polheber and Matchock;

Sehretal; Hersch; and Gee.¹⁵ However, few of these articles provide an overview of definitions and practices associated with assistance animals, and almost none of them specifically reference library settings.¹⁶

The library and information science literature on assistance animals—scholarly and otherwise—is very limited, with much of it focused upon the presence of therapy animals in library environments. In these scenarios, therapy animals are introduced to the library environment at the specific request of library professionals in order to conduct a program or event. For example, Ann-Marie Biden’s article, entitled “Who’s the Four-Legged Librarian?,” examines the incorporation of a therapy animal in a children’s public library space, concluding that every party involved won something important: The therapy animals were successfully introduced to new environment and new behaviors while students were able to spend time with these animals.¹⁷ Other scholars have also commented on the value of having therapy animals in library spaces. For several case studies of this scenario, please see references “It’s All in the Delivery” and “Gone to the Dogs” as well as Jalongo and Inklebarger.¹⁸ Smith mentions an exchange about service animals on an electronic discussion list, suggesting that increased knowledge about this topic is desired among access services library professionals.¹⁹

However, the presence of assistance animals in library spaces introduces a new (to many professionals) set of difficult questions: What are the expected behaviors of an assistance animal? How do service animals differ from ESAs? What should a library professional do in a scenario where the “service animal” is clearly a puppy? Or if the animal is actively jumping upon and barking at another patron? The diversity of both disability types and assistance animal categories raise questions that many library professionals feel unequipped to answer. Amy Hale-Janeke’s article, “Pushing the Limits of PR,” succinctly summarizes many of ambiguities associated with assistance animals in libraries, concluding that the legal guidance afforded by the ADA does not adequately serve library professionals.²⁰ Implementing policies or practices that address assistance animal-related concerns is often left to individual libraries.

The inconsistent discussion and implementation of policy or practices around assistance animals can be problematic in multiple ways. It is true that developing a policy or practice requires knowledge, staff time, training (which requires both human and financial resources), legal vetting, and—lastly—persistence. But *not* having such a practice or policy may result in inconsistent, hostile, or confusing experiences for patrons with assistance animals, even at the same service point within the same library. And it was no different for one particular academic library in the Pacific Northwest of the United States. In early May 2014, the personnel at Western Washington University Libraries expressed many of these same questions and concerns to the library administration. In response, a team of library-based stakeholders attempted to address these concerns through the creation

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of an organizational workshop, which led to the eventual establishment of a best-practices protocol.

ASSISTANCE ANIMALS AT WESTERN LIBRARIES: AN ORGANIZATIONAL DEVELOPMENT OPPORTUNITY

Western Washington University Libraries (Western Libraries) is an academic library, featuring a main library encompassing two buildings totaling two hundred thousand square feet, and a collection of over one million volumes which serves over fifteen thousand students. Bellingham, Washington, the home of Western Libraries, is a pet-friendly city, and there are several residence halls that house undergraduate and graduate students nearby the Libraries. Thus, library staff members encounter patrons with service animals, ESAs, and pets. Furthermore, in Washington State, it is not easy to determine at a glance which animals are pets and which are assistance animals (which, by law, are *not* pets, and have legal rights and protections). Historically, personnel at the Libraries had expressed confusion and some frustration on how to identify whether an animal was an assistance animal or a pet, and, if necessary, how best to approach patrons with animals within the Libraries.

In order to respond to these questions, the Diversity and Disability Services Librarian volunteered to lead the development and implementation of an informational workshop at the Libraries. The desired learning outcomes for the workshop were:

- To introduce common terms and definitions in order to build a vocabulary around assistance animals, with the desired result of an increased understanding of how service animals serve people with disabilities;
- To review the Americans with Disabilities Act and Washington State legislation in order to increase understanding; and
- To use scenario-based activities, including suggested responses, to discuss best practices in order to develop consistent standards for interacting with patrons who have service animals.

Developing the workshop required addressing several considerations. First was the question of whether the university had a comprehensive and updated policy regarding service and emotional support animals on campus. As a potentially litigious issue, it was important to seek advice and approval from the campus experts and legal representation. Upon investigation, it was clear that there was a university policy that was in accordance with state law.²¹ However, while the existing policy was clear on its definition of a service animal and the corresponding rights afforded to the patron with a service animal, the policy did not provide specific advice on how to serve the staff awareness needs at the multiple service points found throughout an academic

library. Thus, another consideration required an assessment of personnel support needs. In short, what information did the Libraries' staff members need in order to respond to service animal inquiries or incidents at different service points? In this regard, it was important to examine the information needs of each public service point (e.g., the Circulation Services Desk versus the Research-Writing Studio) and to survey employee types (e.g., student employees needed different training opportunities than permanent employees) in order to create an organizational development plan.

FROM A WORKSHOP TO A BEST-PRACTICES DOCUMENT: A COLLEAGUE-CENTERED EVOLUTION

After a period of needs assessment and legal consultation, and after receiving library administrative approval, the Diversity and Disability Services Librarian developed a workshop which featured a brief overview on state and federal definitions of assistance animals; state and federal laws that governed assistance animals; and organizational policies and procedures (which in this case referred to Western Washington University's campus policy). After a brief presentation on this information, the attendees were divided into small groups, and each of these groups was given a scenario. Each group was advised to examine and discuss their respective scenario, then share the highlights of the discussion with all attendees. After some conversation, each group reported the highlights of this dialogue to the larger group.

The purpose of the scenario exercises was to illuminate the context-specific questions inherent in each setting. For example, do staff members have the right to ask human partners to bring their service animal under control if it is actively menacing another individual (i.e., barking at or jumping upon someone other than their human partner)? Furthermore, what does "actively menacing" look like in a library setting? The value of these group exercises lay in developing a collective consensus among library personnel through the critical (and public) examination of these scenarios. In being presented with a scenario, and with the subsequent critical examination, staff members could voice questions and receive answers on best or preferred practices in a public forum.

After the workshop, a common sentiment arose: "This is wonderful information—but how will I remember all of it?" Essentially, library staff members expressed a concern about being able to accurately recall the best practices two months or even two years later. In response, the Diversity and Disability Services Librarian developed a best-practices document to share with attendees, entitled "WWU Libraries Protocol for Interacting with Service Animals." This document, vetted by legal experts at the university and in compliance with state and federal laws, was made available to all library personnel as a PDF and contained highlights from the workshops in a simple display (readers can

find the document at http://libguides.wvu.edu/assistance_animals). Library personnel could refer to the document when specific (and admittedly infrequent) situations arose, rather than being forced to rely upon their memories from the workshop. In addition, supervisors could insist that a copy of this document be saved on strategic desktops at all public service points, and all staff members could save a copy of the document in their work inbox or on their personal computer.

EMERGING PATTERNS AND CONSIDERATIONS

Anecdotal feedback from post-workshop conversations indicated that library staff members felt that the trainings were very successful in alleviating the ambiguity and myths surrounding assistance animals in libraries. In the subsequent months, colleagues have contacted the Diversity and Disability Services Librarian with additional inquiries. The advantages of hindsight, which affords opportunity to evaluate what could be improved, have yielded several important considerations about the service animal conversation of which all library professionals should be aware:

- *Best Practices & Legal Counsel:* It is crucially important to review and vet all best practices documents associated with assistance animal interactions through legal counsel. For universities and colleges, that will consist of the Equal Opportunity Office and/or university legal counsel. For public libraries, consider submitting the materials to be vetted by local legal authorities, preferably those with a background and some competency in ADA legislation. While developing these practices will alleviate ambiguity and misunderstanding about service animals for library personnel, it is important that the library in question protect itself with appropriate and relevant legal counsel.
- *We're Library Professionals—Not Medical or Legal Experts:* It is important to remember that library professionals are not medical professionals, and thus are not qualified to judge whether a patron *should* have an assistance animal. Respectful dialogue, not judgment, is necessary in these situations.
- *No Formal Policy? Advocate for One!:* What if there is no formal policy available at the organization or library? It seems simplistic to write this, but it is important to ask the appropriate authorities for a governing document. While any resulting policy may only be a simple statement about respecting the needs of patrons with assistance animals, having that policy can alleviate the frustration associated with ambiguity in these situations. Furthermore, with overt guidance, personnel can develop suggested language and practices around a policy.
- *Partner with Library Administration:* For a successful experience, partner with the library administrative team on developing a best-practices document about assistance animals. Administrative support and official approval is an important step in this process, and will provide any resulting materials with the necessary credibility for these practices to manifest.
- *Institutional versus Organizational Policies:* In many instances in academic libraries, the library is merely one organization on campus and is only one stakeholder in the conversation about assistance animals. By and large, institutional policies are in compliance with local and national laws governing service animal interactions, and will likely trump any organizational policies implemented by a library. So while it is important to develop best practices designed specifically for libraries (because of the unique nature of library services and the sheer number of service points available throughout the library), it is equally important to bring those policies into alignment with institutional policies. This ensures that the library is protected, legally and politically, as well as ensuring equitable treatment for all patrons across campus. Furthermore, libraries are not policy-making bodies regarding patrons with disabilities because they lack the legal and medical background necessary for this role; therefore, it is important to partner with experts in this endeavor. For public libraries, it may be useful to examine assistance animal policies available at other public entities.
- *Conflicting Disabilities:* What if a staff member has a severe phobia of dogs, and thus is reluctant to approach patrons with service dogs? Or is allergic to most animal dander? Unfortunately, there seems to be little guidance available on the subject of conflicting disabilities (i.e., when the effects of one patron's disability adversely interact with another's disability). The ADA simply states that people with disabilities who qualify for service animals are entitled to bring them into most settings.²² However, libraries can develop intra-departmental strategies for serving patrons with service animals while maintaining the well-being of an affected employee. One example is simply asking another colleague to serve the patron with an assistance animal if one is afraid of or allergic to the animal in question. Also, consider reporting the conflicting disability to the organization's Human Resources department, as they may have additional resources or strategies to support affected personnel.

CONCLUSIONS

Throughout the process of developing these training materials and documents, it was important to share widely any resulting products with library staff—especially those who were most affected by these policies. In this specific case study, those were the public services staff. Upon completion of “Best Practices for Service Animal Interactions at Western Libraries,” this document was circulated to all employees in the Libraries so that everyone could have a reference sheet.

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Further trainings were requested during the subsequent months; when taught, these trainings were tailored to the specific audience (e.g., student employees).

Development of best practices at Western Libraries raised awareness about important issues for library personnel and yielded more consistent patron experiences across library spaces. The processes detailed in this case study were admittedly time-consuming, and required a library professional to lead the charge. Furthermore, Western Libraries was fortunate in having on-campus access to legal expertise in order to vet any employed practices—a privilege which some libraries may not have. Despite any potential drawbacks associated with engaging in this process (e.g., lack of time or expertise), it is important that libraries review their practices with regards to patrons with assistance animals. Libraries are in the service business, and thus, they should create inclusive spaces for all patrons, including those with disabilities.²³ In equipping library personnel with the knowledge and practices through these activities, library spaces can become welcoming environments with clear and consistent expectations about assistance animals.

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