

Roles of emotional support animals examined

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Airlines are not the only organizations grappling with the complexities surrounding emotional support animals. Colleges and courts are also questioning the need for these animals and the effects they may have on students and juries, respectively, according to research presented at the annual convention of the American Psychological Association.

The recent, rapid rise of emotional support [animals](#) has left colleges and universities struggling to understand the laws and how they can be applied to best support their communities, said Phyllis Erdman, Ph.D., professor at Washington State University, who chaired a symposium on emotional support animals and service dogs.

College and university counseling centers are seeing an uptick in the number of students seeking mental health services, as students report anxiety, depression and stress about relationships and academic performance, she said.

"It's not surprising that many schools are confronted with the growing phenomenon of emotional support animals. For many, the topic is a contentious one centered on whether students are taking advantage of the laws," said Erdman. "This is further compounded by the fact that laws pertaining to emotional support animals are different from those governing disability service animals and therefore schools may need to develop new policies."

A service animal falls under the Americans with Disabilities Act and is usually a dog that is trained to do work or perform tasks for the benefit

of an individual with a physical, sensory, psychiatric or intellectual disability, Emotional support animals are not trained in specific tasks and are not recognized under the ADA. Although emotional support animals are allowed in campus housing, they may not necessarily be allowed in classrooms or elsewhere on campus, according to the study Erdman presented.

Erdman and her colleagues wanted to understand the state of emotional support animal requests on campuses and how colleges and universities are responding. They surveyed 248 university counseling centers about student requests for letters to allow them to have emotional support animals. The survey questions included how often the counseling centers received requests from students, how the schools handled those requests and how they handled requests to diagnose a disability in order to obtain an emotional support animal. It also asked counseling centers if they had emotional support animal policies in place.

Fifty-seven percent of the centers reported almost never receiving such requests. Thirty-one percent did several times a year and only 2 percent got requests more than once a week, according to the study.

Despite the lack of an overwhelming demand, a majority of university counseling centers reported concern about having policies in place to handle such requests, according to Erdman.

"Even a limited number of requests for emotional support animals can cause stress for student affairs offices, housing offices, counseling centers and disability offices," she said. "Most schools wanted guidance and support for developing guidelines and navigating requests that come through."

Erdman suggested that schools establish general definitions of the terms disability, service animal and emotional support animal when crafting a

policy. The definition of a disability should adhere to ADA guidelines, she said. Any policy development must follow federal and state laws and should include the perspectives of various campus constituencies, including counseling centers, accessibility services, general counsel's offices, campus safety departments and students themselves, according to Erdman.

"College students today are facing a great deal of stress and emotional support animals may help some students," said Erdman. "We hope our study can serve as a guide for colleges and universities to develop policies that help students thrive."

Uncertainty about emotional support animals is also occurring in courts, according to Dawn McQuiston, Ph.D., of Wofford College, who presented her research at the symposium. While objects such as dolls or teddy bears have been used for decades to calm vulnerable witnesses, courts began to include dogs in the mid-1990s to provide [emotional support](#) to alleged victims of child abuse. At least 144 courthouse facility dogs are now included in about three dozen states, she said. These dogs are provided by the court at the request of prosecutors to assist victims with the anxiety of testifying and reliving traumatic events.

Supporters say the dogs have made a huge difference in helping children and vulnerable adult witnesses open up on the stand, but some defense attorneys say having a friendly, sweet-looking canine in the witness box can prejudice a jury against a defendant by making the witness appear more believable and sympathetic, according to McQuiston.

"The concern is that the presence of a courthouse dog emphasizes that the witness is a victim, thereby playing to jurors' sympathies. As a result, witnesses may be viewed as even more vulnerable or likeable, thus conflicting with a defendant's right to a fair trial," said McQuiston.

She cited two notable appeals cases involving courtroom dogs. In both cases, the victims had a [support](#) dog during testimony, the defendants were convicted and the convictions were subsequently appealed on the grounds that the presence of the dog led to undue sympathy for the victim and violated the defendant's right to a fair trial. In both cases, the courts found no sign of prejudice due to the dogs' presence.

McQuiston and her colleagues investigated whether courthouse dogs, compared to inanimate comfort items, resulted in more prejudice against defendants involved in two hypothetical crimes: a child sexual abuse case and a robbery of a child. They set up mock trials in which participants, in the role of jurors, read transcripts of the testimony and were shown several pictures depicting the child witness with a dog, with a teddy bear or with nothing.

They found that the presence of the dog had no significant effect on the juries' outcomes, which McQuiston called surprising because the researchers had expected the dog to prejudice the jury against the defendant. Interestingly, their findings showed some biasing effects when the child clutched a teddy bear.

"Across two studies utilizing mock jury paradigms we found that, contrary to popular beliefs and our own predictions, courthouse [dogs](#) did not exert undue influence on juror decision-making regardless of the severity of the crimes tested, and did not differentially impact perceptions of child witnesses," she said.

More information: Session 1034: "Emotional Support Animals and Service Dogs: Prevalence and Impact in Universities" and "Dogs in the Courthouse: Current Research and Implications," Symposium, Thursday, Aug. 9, 8 a.m. PDT, Room 157, Upper Mezzanine-South Building, Moscone Center, 747 Howard Street, San Francisco, Calif.

Provided by American Psychological Association

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