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# PUBLIC PERCEPTION OF SERVICE DOGS – PART IV



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## INTRODUCTION

Regardless of how a service dog assists a disabled person in their own home, a person needs to keep their service dog directly with them at all times in public spaces. Restaurants, stores, museums, entertainment venues, offices, and other public spaces, all represent places where people come together as a community to experience life. The Disability Discrimination Act 1992 (Herein, will be referred as DDA 1992) governs these public spaces to guarantee equal rights for the disabled in our communities. Service dogs are one component of our complex societies. When working, the dog can be as important as a wheelchair or other assistive technology, hence why the Disability Discrimination Act 1992 (DDA 1992) includes provisions for service dogs. Likewise, business owners, managers, and employees, who work in public spaces, play an important role in community growth and function. People who require service dogs, and members of the working public, all bring value, and diversity to our society.

Since the creation of the DDA 1992, politicians have created laws and guidelines to facilitate the use, and incorporation, of service dogs in our communities. Given the different, and sometimes conflicting laws, as well as the complexity of gatekeeper responsibilities, the room for improvement is apparent.

Gatekeepers are citizens who work as store assistants, security guards, receptionists, and building managers, and who, among their role-related responsibilities, allow or disallow public access for people and their service dogs. Gatekeepers are expected to make on-the-spot judgements regarding public access for the service dogs that are accompanying people who have or who claim to have disabilities. For this discussion, the term gatekeeper extends to include anyone responsible for allowing or denying a service dog team access to space.

Bremhorst, Mongillo, Howell, and Marinelli (2018) reviewed assistance dog legislation in the European Union and Australia, and concluded, “we lack comprehensive national laws in many countries,” and “even if laws covering assistance dogs exist, implementing these laws into practice is far less straightforward” (p. 129). As Bremhorst et al. (2018) explained, “...the clarification of rights covering qualified assistance dogs when they are accompanying their owners would be helpful” (p.129). Research studies like this one can provide valuable insight, and clarification for moving forward as an inclusive, and united society.

The objectives of this discussion are reflected in the following questions, which will be used to guide the discussion:

- 1. What are the experiences of the public with service dogs and service dog teams in public places?**
- 2. How does the public perceive service dogs?**
- 3. What are the public’s understandings of accessibility regulations as they relate to service dogs and public places?**
- 4. What, if any, are the issues the public identify in and around this topic?**
- 5. What are the important issues and areas that need addressing further?**

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Service dogs are afforded access to any public space according to the DDA 1992, and the working public is gatekeepers responsible for allowing or denying a service dog team access (Elliott & Hogle, 2013). Different and conflicting laws have resulted in confusion between federal-to-state, and state-to-state laws. Furthermore, numerous news articles paint a picture of social frustrations ensuing from pet dogs being misrepresented as service dogs (Elliott & Hogle, 2013; Huss, 2010; Stateline, 2017). The 44 Public Access-Challenge Report Form (C. Betancourt, personal communication, March 22, 2018) provided data on accessibility issues as perceived by service dog teams, and Schoenfeld-Tacher et al.'s (2017) work provided data on the public's perceptions of service dogs. Schoenfeld-Tacher et al. (2017) results showed misunderstandings of the public regarding service dogs, and lack of knowledge on the existing legislation. Additionally, Schoenfeld-Tacher et al. (2017) population did not perceive misrepresentation as an issue, and the researchers posed the question is a misrepresentation of service dogs in news a case of, "bad news sells" created by the media.

These identified concerns directly impact the service dog teams, the working public, and our society as a whole. Laws have been created, changed, and continue to pass, but to move forward as a unified society respecting the work of service dogs; and to create informed legislation protecting the rights of service dog teams, and facilitating their entrance into public spaces and public transport, we need to understand the public's perceptions of the phenomena. This research study was designed to understand the working public's experiences of service dogs and how those experiences shaped their perceptions.

Different from Schoenfeld-Tacher et al. (2017), this study focused solely on the public's perceptions of service dogs and did not exclude participants who had a service dog. Additionally, unlike any of the existing literature, this research study focused on the perceptions of the working public in our communities. The goal of this research was to contribute to the existing and growing literature on the public's perceptions of service dogs.

One benefit of developing deep understandings of the experiences from the public's perspective is so that as a society we can work to create legislation and cultural change that not only protects the rights of the disabled, but also those of the public. Additionally, insights into how the public feels and thinks about service dogs in public places and on public transport can aid in the development of informed training programs for service dog organizations, trainers and service dog teams.

## IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The overall respect for dog training represented in this subtheme supports the previously established respect for the work of assistance dogs. In all these examples, the co-researchers had personally witnessed a service dog, or service dog in training, which resulted in respect for the training process and works the dog has done. Therefore, there is value in educating the public about the processes involved in dog training, specifically assistance dog training. These results support the value in the existence of the service dog training programs discussed in the literature review on college and university campuses in Indiana, Kentucky,

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Ohio, Pennsylvania, and West Virginia (4 Paws for Ability University Program, n.d.; Humanimal Bond, n.d.; Susquehanna Service Dogs, n.d.). Given the fact that colleges and universities do not reach all populations, it should be encouraged for service dog training organizations and trainers to purposefully include members of the working public who may not have the opportunities to learn through existing programs. As represented here, awareness and respect for a dog's behaviour come from knowledge of training.

There is an overwhelming need for consistent education, across all social groups. This call to action for education is in line with the suggestions made in existing literature (Elliot and Hogle, 2013; Huss, 2010; Schoenfeld-Tacher et al., 2017; Schoenfeld-Tacher and Kogan, 2017). Furthermore, while the focus of education can vary depending on the audience, all members of the public need education on appropriate interactions with service animals. Additionally, business owners, managers, gatekeepers, and service dog handlers, need to be educated on each person's rights, and the regulations surrounding accessibility. Organizations can use the suggestions presented here to inspire and inform change within their businesses.

Recommendations for future research are to look into the feasibility, and effectiveness, of different teaching methods, and modes of delivery, as they relate to this topic. Furthermore, since the DDA 1992 provision includes service dogs, research needs to be done to develop educational materials for training, and teaching, business owners, managers, and gatekeepers on service dogs, accessibility, and the process of determining legitimacy, as well as the differences between the types of service dogs.

NB: These two questions will be answered simultaneously:

**Question 1. What are the experiences of the working public with service dogs and service dog teams in public places?**

**Question 2. How does the working public perceive service dogs?**

People have varied experiences with service dogs, and service dog teams in public places, and since their experiences greatly influenced their perceptions, it is valuable to discuss these two questions together. In general, experiences and perceptions go together.

Yet perceptions can be incorrect and based on non-experience, 2nd or 3rd hand info – whereas experiences are personal and factual and can contradict perception or enhance it.

The major findings related to these two questions are regarding misunderstandings, confusion, and lack of knowledge. Members of the working public's experiences with and perceptions of service dogs have both created and been affected by their widespread misunderstandings, confusion, and lack knowledge regarding these dogs. It can be found that many of the working public are confused and misunderstand how to differentiate service dogs from other dogs. Besides, they lack knowledge or have misunderstandings regarding service dog uniforms, and certification or accreditation expectations.

Moreover, they lack knowledge regarding the terminology used for labelling service dogs. It can be found that the working public, misunderstand a dog's breed or size is indicative of their

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legitimacy as a service dog, and that they do not perceive a small dog as a possible legitimate service dog based solely on its size. Furthermore, it can be concluded that members of the public are under the misunderstanding that service dogs only assist people with prevalent disabilities, which shows a lack of knowledge regarding invisible disabilities such as PTSD, ASD or epilepsy. These findings are consistent with the literature and are concerning for multiple reasons.

First, if a gatekeeper has inaccurate perceptions of what a service dog or a service dog team looks like, and a service dog team enters their place of business looking differently than those expectations, the gatekeeper could unintentionally discriminate against someone with a legitimate service dog, which is not only offensive to the disabled person, but also if they deny the person access based on their perceptions, it puts businesses of places of public access in breach of the DDA 1992.

Second, if gatekeepers are unable to differentiate and recognize service dogs from other dogs, they cannot consistently, clearly, and confidently enforce current accessibility regulations. Again, this is concerning because it puts the business in a precarious position of potentially breaching the federal accessibility provisions for service dogs.

Traditionally the service dog training industry has always tried for the public NOT to interact with any known service dogs, like Guide or Hearing dogs. You often hear parents saying to their children ‘No, you cannot touch that dog it is working – it is a guide dog’. Mostly the association is made to think that all service dogs are guide dogs. It may be questionable that not allowing interaction with the public, has put the entire service dog issue on a level that has some mystery about it, yet not something you want to interact with. In addition, it may avoid people having to interact with a disabled person and treat them as normal person. This unfamiliarity creates a tense and pressured interaction between parties – again where mostly the person with the dog and the disability is the one losing out.

## **DOGS IN SOCIETY**

Another conclusion related to these questions was found in the theme of public experiences with, and perceptions of dogs in society. Exposure to service dog training procedures increased public respect of service dogs and the work the dog performs for their handler. Furthermore, the working public with first-hand experiences with other types of service dogs shows the most clarity in differentiating service dogs from other dogs. Therefore, it can suggest that a person’s exposure to dogs in general, training procedures, and other service dogs, can impact their perceptions of, and level of comfort around service dogs, which could, in turn, influence their opinions on service dogs being welcomed into public spaces.

Dog ownership is not one of the qualifying factors for the working public, however, it is interesting to note that many of the public have had a pet dog at one point in their lives, and, even in the event of trauma, it is understood that they all can have at least one positive personal experience with dogs. Realizing this helps but makes one wonder if it would have been different with a public who had never had a pet dog at all, or if the positive experiences with dogs influenced their overall perceptions of service dogs. Certainly, more research needs

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to be done to determine the correlation of experiences with dogs in general as it relates to perceptions of service dogs.

People who have had a previous, positive experience with a dog will likely show more respect for working service dogs than people who missed out and/or come from a different cultural or religious environment where the dog is seen as outcast, rather than treasured for the unbelievable skills a quality service dog can bring.

### **Question 3. What is the working public's understanding of accessibility legislation as they relate to service dogs and public places?**

In general, the working public understands that service dogs\* are afforded public accessibility rights, however, given their confusion with differentiating service dogs from other dogs, they are unable to consistently determine which dogs are service dogs and which were not. Additionally, the majority of the working public have not received training on how to properly navigate a situation when a patron enters with a service dog, and they were unaware of the appropriate questions they could ask to determine if the dog was a service dog.

Organisations like Guide Dogs and Hearing Dogs – who have been around for a long time, and offer a consistent way in presentation, and training and therefore helping the perception of the public that they *can* have public access. This 'perception' may lead to applying a 'sheep-like' mentality and behaviour and allow access, rather than applying and knowing the law and understanding the relevant information.

Furthermore, it can be found that the working public lack knowledge regarding the DDA 1992, and workplace policies and procedures underpinned by the Act and how those differences impact their responsibilities versus what they hear about in the media. These conclusions on the working public's understandings of accessibility regulations\* further illustrate the component of confusion as it relates to the working public understandings of accessibility regulations. While it is encouraging that the working public understands service dogs have accessibility rights, the findings that gatekeepers have not received training, are unaware of the appropriate gatekeeper questions outlined in the DDA 1992 and are unable to determine service dogs from other dogs presents again, a concerning situation. \* It seems that like Guide Dogs, they have been around since WW1, and have been accepted worldwide since the fifties, but gatekeepers have no idea of why and how they got their access.

When a gatekeeper is tasked with the responsibility of determining whether a dog should be allowed on the premises or not, if they have not received training, and they lack knowledge of what they can legally ask to determine accessibility, they could easily ask inappropriate questions and/or discriminate against someone with a disability. In this manner, the answer to this question directly relates to the discussion of the first two questions.

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## **Question 4. What, if any, are the issues the working public identify in and around the topic?**

The working public identifies misrepresentation of a service dog, lack of national standardization, and the need for Australia wide education as the main issues in and around this topic.

### **MISREPRESENTATION**

Regarding misrepresentation of a service dog, the working public can perceive misrepresentation as an issue that is prevalent and not one over-represented in the news, as is suggested in the literature. Within misrepresentation, they perceived it as negative because of how it could harm legitimate service dogs, as well as negatively impact the reputation of the person doing the misrepresenting. Furthermore, the working public may feel misrepresentation negatively impact business involvement in community events because when they are responsible to act as gatekeepers, a number of people will try to pass their pet dog off as a service dog, which since they are unable to determine which dogs are service dogs and which are not, the gatekeepers are put into uncomfortable situations they do not feel prepared to circumnavigate.

In relation, the overwhelming response from the working public as to why someone would misrepresent their dog as a type of service dog was to obtain access to places the dog is not normally permitted such as public events, retail spaces, school campuses, and airlines. They also identify the desire to obtain housing as motivation for why they perceived someone would misrepresent their dog. The working public may not perceive the misrepresentation as being malicious, rather it is happening because people are not aware of how their actions could impact others. Nonetheless, some of the gatekeepers express strong negative opinions of anyone who misrepresents their dog as a service dog. This perception can further lead to negative impressions and interpretations – and spoil things for any handler/dog team that meets the highest standards required, to be part of and integrate into the community.

The gatekeepers may identify a variety of ways as to how people misrepresented their dog as a service dog, which includes verbal statements, use of uniforms, and documentation, including medical notes. In general, they may say people just lie to obtain the various means with which they are misrepresenting their dog. The availability of service dog paraphernalia for purchase online can be identified as an influencing factor in misrepresentation, as well as an issue that needs regulation. The working public may also identify lack of education on the part of the gatekeeper an issue because they perceived not knowing how to determine which dogs are service dogs and which are not has aided in the successful attempts of misrepresentation for accessibility purposes, reflecting badly on genuinely trained and assessed handler teams. It will become a label forced by perception and bad experience.



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## **LACK OF NATIONAL STANDARDISATION**

The lack of a nationally, standardised visual identifier is one component of issues in recognizing service dogs. Conclusions can be made that consistency is preferred in either what the dog would wear (the uniform) or the paperwork the handler carries (proof of certification or registration). As for the item, opinions vary but working public share the desire that it be a visual identifier that does not require additional questioning.

Additionally, the working public value standardisation to minimize the issue of misrepresentation because the uniforms and paperwork would be regulated, and therefore more difficult for someone without a service dog to obtain. Furthermore, some working public has expressed a desire for a universal monitoring system with punishments for those who broke the rules. Despite some pushback of government involvement, some working public feels that the standardized item or process needs to be regulated by a large governing body, like the government, that can enforce penalties.

Overall, they view standardization to help all gatekeepers in their responsibilities of making service dog accessibility decisions based on facts, not perceptions or past experiences.

Standardization will alleviate the embarrassment and stress of interactions because everyone would know the expectations and requirements related to obtaining access to public places with a service dog.

## **NEED FOR EDUCATION**

Through data collection and analysis, a significant need for education is revealed. Not only is education needed based on gatekeeper's misunderstandings, confusion, and lack of education, but the working public themselves also identify the lack of education as one issue regarding this topic. In describing what it is like for them to gain their knowledge, it was something they learn because they have the desire. Some gatekeepers may recall receiving information from an educational setting, and only some, mostly none of them receive training from their current employer. This shows that when they want to know about service dogs, they had to ask or do the research themselves. The majority of the gatekeepers or working public utilize internet web searches to find their information, which given the expansive amount of opinion-based information available through those searches, it was can be concluded that their information procurement methods could be one of the influencing factors of their misunderstandings.

The working public talks about how different groups of people can benefit from increased education on the different types of service dogs, their roles, and accessibility allowances. Suggestions can be made for various groups, and concerning the aspect of service dogs and gatekeepers, conclusions can be made that gatekeepers need to be educated on the existing legislation and appropriate questions they can ask regarding a service dog's legitimacy when determining accessibility. Related to the discussion of the issue of lack of education, the working public, discuss what they perceive as the best way to communicate this information

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with the public. No one outlet is suggested by all the stakeholders, however, the most popular suggestions were through social media and person-to-person interactions.

When a National Service Dog Act (**NSDA**) is created, this could lead to a national education programme, catering for all stakeholders, including communities with different cultural, social or religious perceptions about service dogs.

## **CULTURAL DIVERSITY**

Australia is a country with a huge cultural diversity – and whilst understanding for this is must and part of our acceptance – there must be understanding that Service Dogs are part of assistive technology used to help people with disabilities.

Whilst cultural diversity can show fear for dogs, have strong religious beliefs in which there is no room for dogs – accommodation needs to be made to cater for Service Dogs, highly trained and avoiding initiating contact/interaction with strangers whilst they are working. Risk reduction and minimization of contact should reduce any negative, cultural or religious hesitation or feelings about SD's. With a national educational campaign addressing these issues in their language and addressing their concerns, the new NSDA should great assist in reducing issues.

The examples of the Workcover national approach, in multiple languages, with tailored pamphlets, internet, and print comes to mind to offer targeted, factual, tailored resolve for this issue.

### **Question 5 Based on the data obtained, what are the important issues and areas that need a further address?**

Given the lack of literature and research on people's perceptions of service dogs, this is not surprising. Included below are recommendations for different groups in society. Here is a compiled list of recommendations for further inquiry:

1. Conduct a research study that asks service dog handlers what main tasks/work their service dog performs related to their disability. Results from such a large collection of data could be used to help create awareness and educate people on the various ways in which service dogs of different breeds mitigate disabilities.
2. Additional research is needed on the public's perceptions of service dogs, including;
  - a. Further research into the perceptions of the differences between the types of service dogs;
  - b. Research from a large population and sample;
  - c. An inspection into the perceptions of different demographic groups;
  - d. An inspection into the perceptions of how service dog is received in areas governed by DDA 1992 and airline policy (CASA);
  - e. Inquiry into how those perceptions were created;
  - f. Identification of what needs to change to provide clarity and increased awareness of service dogs;
  - g. Inquiry into how experiences with dogs in general influences perceptions of service dogs;

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- h. Inquire into how exposure to other types of service dogs' influences perceptions of service dogs.
  - i. Additional research needs to be done on the role service dogs for psychiatric, psychosocial and emotional disorders and how they need better recognition as disabilities:
  - j. NB: it is customary to accept a disability as genuine, when identified by a medical practitioner issuing a disability certificate identifying a Service Dog will be an assistive tool in reducing or eliminating the disability listed for the person concerned.

**We recognize four corner stones for a genuine Service Dog:**

1. Current and original Medical Certificate signed by a specialist medical
2. SD's need a single handler for the team to benefit from training
3. SD training by an Accredited professional – leading to passing a NPAT
4. SD needs to learn at least three (3) tasks to help alleviate disability

- There is existing literature on this topic that also states more research needs to be done; the findings of this research study support their statements.
  - A component of this query is the perception of service dogs for these disabilities.
3. Research in a standardised, certified and hacker-proof National ID card system, which goes hand in hand with the above holistic approach of integration of SD's. The ID card will be linked to a NPAT system to ensure standards are met and maintained. This offers relevance, fairness, and genuine risk management reducing resistance perceived from culturally sensitive parts of the population.
  4. Additional research needs to be done analyzing the existing legislation regarding assistance animals, determining which laws are conflicting and which further restrict those of the Disability Discrimination Act 1992 – DDA92
  5. Analyze the existing uniforms being used for service dogs to develop a holistic understanding of what is being used including:
    - a. The purpose of the uniform;
    - b. Why the handler decided to use a particular uniform;
    - c. How the handler decided on a particular uniform;
    - d. Service dog training organization influence on the uniform choice;
    - e. Why organizations use particular uniforms;
    - f. The public's perceptions of particular uniforms.
  6. Collect data on the existing service dog certification processes, including the organization/business behind the company and what is required of the service dog handler.
  7. Conduct a study to identify if there has been an increase in the number of service dogs seen in public places. Results from such research could be used to communicate with business owners the need for educating their employees on the company's policies and how to adhere to the DDA 1992 regulations.
  8. Conduct a study analyzing the proliferation of the representation of dogs in the media, including television shows, commercials, and advertisements.

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9. Additional research needs to be done on the complex topic of misrepresentation, including
    - a. Conduct a study analyzing the media's presentation of misrepresentation of service dogs.
    - b. Inquire if the misrepresentation is a widespread issue or centralized to demographic regions;
    - c. Collect data on existing arrests or fines with misrepresentation of service dogs.
  10. Conduct an inquiry into the costs related to obtaining the different types of service dogs. A review of both legally required and non-required, but necessary items, needs to be included. The results from those studies can be used to help educate organizations, and people, looking for service dogs on the financial aspect of the treatment.
  11. Analyze the feasibility, and effectiveness, of different teaching methods, and modes of delivery, as they relate to this topic.
  12. Using research, develop educational materials for training, and teaching, business owners, managers, and gatekeepers on service dogs, accessibility, and the process of determining legitimacy, as well as the differences between service dogs.

## RECOMMENDATIONS FOR SOCIAL GROUPS

The following is a list of recommendations for different social groups in our communities:

### **Service Dog organisations and service dog handlers:**

1. Openly share your knowledge and experiences with how service dogs help mitigate disabilities.
  - a. Share how service dogs mitigate a variety of disabilities, including invisible disabilities;
  - b. Share the various ways in which service dogs of various breeds and size mitigate disabilities;
  - c. Mark service dogs in-training so that when members of the public observe those dogs in the learning process, they will not see "mistakes" a dog in-training might make, and project those behaviours onto service dogs.
2. Continue incorporating different members of our communities into the service dog training process to increase awareness and respect of service dogs.
3. Adopt a standardized taxonomy. We need to ensure that any 'blocked learning' approach only applies to social groups and NOT training individual handler teams, which would be unrealistic
4. Working with politicians, create a nationally recognized standardized service dog uniform, ID card system, accreditation and registration process.

### **Business owners:**

1. Establish and incorporate an educational program to help gatekeepers and/or other individuals understand their role and responsibilities regarding service dogs and accessibility in your place of business;
2. Implement the use of on-site signage educating gatekeepers on questions they can ask according to the DDA 1992 regarding service dogs and determining accessibility.

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## Politicians:

1. Take into consideration both the service dog handler's and the gatekeeper's perceptions before and during policy development;
2. Amend existing legislation that conflicts or contradicts the federal regulations;
3. Identify areas in which legislation conflicts or contradicts nearby state legislation;
4. Implement fines for misrepresentation of a service animal, and educate law enforcement officers on how to determine which dogs are misrepresented;
5. Adopt a standardized taxonomy;
6. Working with service dog training organizations, create a nationally recognized standardized service dog uniform, or certification, or registration process;
7. After standardization, restrict the availability of non-standardized items available for purchase.

## Journalists:

1. Focus on positive stories of service dogs helping their handlers;
2. Use the outlet you have to create awareness of service, and how they benefit the people in our communities. Through education and increased awareness, people can learn about service dogs, and where they might see them. This awareness opens the door to respecting the work these dogs do for humans, and in turn, helps people realize the negative impacts misrepresenting a dog as a service dog can cause;
3. Be aware of potentially over-representing misrepresentation in the news.

## RECOMMENDATIONS SUMMARY

The existing literature is very limited on regarding perceptions of service dogs. Some of the results in this study supported the existing literature and others represented a different viewpoint. However, there is still a large gap in the literature. Increased research and education are necessary catalysts for change and further understanding of how we can incorporate service dogs into our communities.

Education will only be deemed effective with a National approach to the challenge, considering needs of all stakeholders. A targeted approach, like promoting safe work environments, catering for requirements of the multicultural population of Australia.

**NB:** Cost savings generated with a National approach should not be underestimated. Generating better acceptance, standards, quality – at a lower cost allowing for any funds the states would have used to run their own programmes, to be allocated to education.