While people may be familiar with many of the rules relating to the admission of service animals into public venues, do the same rules apply when a patient or visitor seeks to enter a hospital, medical office, or other healthcare facility accompanied by a service animal?

Most healthcare facilities, particularly hospitals, have “no pets” policies that forbid patients and visitors from bringing animals into the facility. Given the requisite sterile environment at healthcare facilities and the ongoing treatment of patients with varying degrees of medical ailments, one might easily presume that a different
standard and different requirements apply to the admission of service animals. Generally speaking, however, a hospital must allow disabled patients and visitors to be accompanied by their service animals just like other places of public accommodation. This includes allowing service animals access to patient rooms and anywhere else in the facility where the public and patients are allowed to go. Service animals must even be permitted to accompany their handlers in an ambulance unless it would interfere with the ability to treat the patient effectively. Notably, a healthcare facility cannot exclude service animal access on the grounds that staff can provide the same services. If a patient is admitted to a hospital but unable to care for their service animal, the hospital is required to permit a family member or friend to come to the hospital to provide care for the service animal so that the handler and service animal are not separated. Under limited circumstances, the healthcare facility can place the service animal in a boarding facility until the patient is released, but must first give the patient the opportunity to make alternate arrangements for the service animal’s care.

Even within this framework, there are limits on what types of animals must be permitted. For public access purposes, a service animal is limited to a dog or miniature horse that is trained to perform a task or take a specific action when needed to assist the disabled individual. A person who has epilepsy, for example, may have a dog that is trained to alert at the onset of a seizure and to keep its handler safe during the seizure. Emotional support, therapy, comfort, or companion animals are not considered to be service animals under the ADA, unless they have been trained to perform a specific job or task for a disabled person. The handler cannot be required to provide any sort of registration or certification documentation to establish that the animal is a “service animal,” but the healthcare facility may ask the handler two questions:

1. Is the dog (or miniature horse) a service animal required because of a disability?

2. What work or task has the animal been trained to perform?

Some state or local laws and ordinances may extend coverage for public access purposes to emotional support animals under certain circumstances. Those laws should be considered before denying access to healthcare facilities by patients and visitors with service animals.

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