

SPECIAL NEEDS TRANSPORTATION

What You Need to Know About Transporting Service Animals

Source: Jean Zimmerman and Kathy Furneaux via Facebook



Students with disabilities have the right to bring their service dogs not only to school with them, but also on the school bus. Our newest passengers pose few problems once they are on the bus, but it is important to have procedures in place prior to transporting these four-legged companions.

There are several key aspects to think about as you prepare or modify your transportation policy to include transporting service animals. These areas include definitions, laws, possible roles, school bus logistics, emergencies and evacuations and behavior issues.

Defining the situation is the first step. According to the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) 28 CFR Part 36, a service animal is "...any guide dog, signal dog or other animal individually trained to do work or perform tasks for the benefit of an individual with a disability."

According to the ADA, a "disability" is a mental or physical condition that substantially limits a major life activity. Examples of major life activities include caring for one's self, performing manual tasks, walking, seeing, hearing, speaking, breathing, learning and working. Obviously, many of these activities become critical to transportation on a school bus.

Service animals are a type of assistance animal that helps children with disabilities in various ways. The types of assistance animals comprise service, therapy, companion and social/therapy animals. Service animals are those trained to meet the disability-related needs of their handler. They can assist the person with mobility, hearing and vision difficulties or deficits. They also can identify the onset of seizure and solicit an alert/response action.

The most predominant animal serving in this category is the dog. Service animals are not considered “pets,” and federal laws protect the rights of individuals with disabilities to be accompanied by their service animals in public places.

Knowing the law is the next step in addressing special needs transportation. Areas of concern are laws related to transporting service dogs on the school bus. These laws include the following:

- ADA of 1990
- Air Carrier Access Act of 1986
- Fair Housing Amendments of 1988
- Rehabilitation Act of 1973
- State laws where applicable
- Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA)

The consensus among those knowledgeable about these laws is that service animals must be treated in the same way that guide dogs are treated. These animals are to be allowed access everywhere except possibly a surgical suite. Service dogs must be allowed on the school bus with the student. We cannot require that the student or the dog have a special identification, nor can we ask the student what disability they have. We can, however, ask what service the dog will provide for the student.

Health laws present yet another area of concern. According to the Delta Society National Service Dog Center (DSNSDC), service dogs must follow any state and local health laws, such as rabies vaccinations. Other immunizations, such as distemper, can be recommended for the dog. However, if for whatever reason the dog’s owner refuses to follow these recommendations or to give you these records, you cannot deny school bus transportation for the student or the dog. Alternative choices in transporting the child and dog to school may need to be considered while details are worked out.

Fear of dogs on the part of the staff or other passengers is not an acceptable reason for denying transportation. A severe allergy to animals has to be dealt with in a sensitive manner. Bus routes for the driver, attendant or other students may need to be changed in response to their allergic condition. This is where pre-planning and procedures must be in place before a service dog ever enters the picture at your operation.

Understanding the role of the animal is crucial to this special need. Transportation staff not familiar with the concept of a child with a disability using a service dog may question why they must transport the dog. The obvious reason is that the law affords this obligation. However, there are many reasons these service dogs are so important to

students with special needs. Here is an overview of services that dogs can provide for students:

- For those students who are physically weak or experience fatigue, service dogs can actually pull them in their wheelchairs, providing longer periods of independent mobility.
- For those who have visual or memory problems, the dogs can help lead them throughout the school and bus area.
- For those with seizure activity, the dogs can actually give the student a warning that they are going to have a seizure. This gives students an opportunity to find a place to sit before they actually go into the seizure activity. Also, in case a student who is alone has a seizure, service dogs are trained to go find help.
- For those with balance and walking difficulties, the dogs can provide physical support to aid with walking, balance and coordination.
- For students with limited upper extremity movement and strength, the service dogs can pick up objects that might be out of the students' reach or ability.
- For those who use motorized wheelchairs, service dogs have often been trained to pick up the students' arms if they drop and actually place them back on the wheelchair joystick box.
- For those with phobias or emotional disturbance disorders, the dogs provide a calming effect.

In many cases, the dog provides a social opportunity for the child where one would not have occurred otherwise. Other children are drawn to dogs and begin to chat with the child about the dog, creating important and sometimes therapeutic social interaction. The dogs become constant companions and best friends. All adults who interact with both the dog and the child must demonstrate proper respect for this animal.

Loading logistics need to be addressed. Let's look at some common issues for loading the dog and student. According to the DSNSDC, the service dog can be separated long enough to safely board the school bus. So how does the dog safely board the bus?

The best policy is that the dog never be allowed on the bus lift. There is often not enough space on the lift platform for some of the larger wheelchairs and the dog itself. Another concern is that the dog could lose its footing and actually slip off the lift.

The best practice is to lead the service dog up the steps while the student is on the lift and the lift is still on the ground. This separation is brief and provides maximum safety for the dog and child.

For ambulatory students, dog and student should ascend the steps separately, with the

dog boarding first so it doesn't block or trip the child during boarding.

Riding position and safety are very important to everyone riding the bus. Once the student and dog are on the bus, the best position for the dog is between the wheelchair and the bus wall. There are varying opinions about whether the dog should be restrained.

The dog should never be allowed to block the aisle. Depending on space available, an ambulatory student's dog may be placed on the floor near the student's immediate seating area.

Emergency procedures must be in place and in practice. As we become prepared to transport service dogs, we must establish evacuation plans. Depending on the emergency, the dog could be briefly separated from its master and taken off the bus via the steps. Most service dogs are large, so in the case of an emergency, the dog could be allowed to jump off the back of the bus without assistance.

Should the student be unable to give the dog commands, the dog has been trained to follow basic commands from another person. This, however, is where pre-training must come into place. Students or their parents should train bus staff in these commands.

Should a service dog become injured in a collision, two people should lift the dog onto an evac-ramp, fire blanket or other material and "drag" the dog off the bus. If only one person is available to carry the dog, the safest method is the two-handed fireman's carry. Remember to hold the dog close to your abdomen to protect your back from strain.

Dog behavior management is extremely important. Actually, when service animals are on the bus, the joke is that they are often better behaved than some of the students! The minimum number of hours for training a service dog, as established by Assistance Dogs International, is 120, but many are trained for up to 360 hours.

If a service dog begins to bark, growl or whine, question what is causing it to act this way. The most immediate concern is that something is wrong with the student. If unacceptable behavior continues, you may ask the handler to remove the dog from the bus — but only be if its behavior poses a direct threat to the safety of others.

Upon witnessing how these wonderful service animals assist our special students, any fears or concerns will quickly subside. We should welcome these new riders on our buses as just one more exciting challenge that we face during transportation. Who knows — maybe our next raise will be in the form of a dog biscuit!