

SFRNA GUIDELINE FOR SITUATIONS WITH SERVICE DOGS AND HANDLERS IN NARCOTICS ANONYMOUS MEETINGS

Disclaimer: Narcotics Anonymous does not enforce the law. This listing of the law, and the consequences for groups not complying with the law, are included so that your group can make a fully informed choice. This is in line with Chapter 4 in the Basic Text: “We believe that the sooner we face our problems within our society, in everyday living, just that much faster do we become acceptable, responsible and productive members of that society”. Additionally, Narcotics Anonymous supports the right of every addict to find recovery through Narcotics Anonymous. To assist Groups and the NA service Structure to fulfill Tradition 3 and Tradition 5 in reaching out to those with Additional Needs, the following guidelines are being provided. This guideline is only a general guidance on a complex set of issues. Groups and Service Entities may find that their situation may not be covered in these guidelines. In these cases, or at any time, it is highly encouraged to contact your Area, Region, SFRSC Public Relations Additional Needs Point of Contact (POC) or NAWS to obtain further assistance.

SFRSC has a guideline for service dogs (SD) in meetings. However, several situations have occurred across the Region that the guideline did not cover. Therefore, this additional information is being supplied to further aid groups.

First, who should ask if the dog is a service dog? It is highly suggested that only trusted servants use these guidelines to inquire, and insure, that a dog coming into a NA meeting is a service dog and that the dog is potty trained and displaying quiet, obedient behavior that is conducive to an atmosphere of recovery. Trusted servants would be the equivalent of a store employee, as in cases involving ADA law, as ADA law does pertain to NA groups. So, greeters, room openers, GSR, etc., are all group trusted servants.

The most important thing to remember is that it is the HANDLER that has the access rights of having a service dog that accompanies them, not the dog. The dog has NO rights.

It is best if the handler is met outside the door to the room by the trusted servant. If it is not obvious what the dog’s task is (for example mobility, guide dog, etc), the trusted servant can then ask the following 2 questions (word for word is best so that there is no mistakes):

- 1) Is the dog a service animal required because of a disability?
- 2) What work or task has the dog been trained to perform?

If the handler replies “no” to the first question, then the dog is a pet and, according to the group and building/landlord/rental policies, can be excluded from the meeting. The handler is free to come back into the meeting without the dog/pet.

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If the handler replies “yes”, then ask the 2nd question. The handler should reply with tasks the dog does, such as “brings my medicine, counterbalance, sees for me, hears for me, diabetic or medical alert, etc”. If the handler states the dog is for “comfort” or “anxiety” and gives comfort, that is an Emotional Support Animal (ESA) and not a service dog. ESAs are NOT covered by ADA nor Florida State law for public access and therefore are considered pets. Again, emphasize the dog cannot be admitted to the meeting and the handler is free to come back into the meeting without the dog/pet. Remember that certifications/registrations are not any proof of the dog being a service dog. Only answering the trained tasks the dog does to mitigate the disability.

How to respond to other answers:

1) HIPPA says I do not have to answer: We are only asking what trained task the dog does to mitigate the disability. We are NOT asking their medical diagnosis. By both Federal and Florida State laws, the handler is required to answer the question. However, if the handler still chooses not to answer, the dog can be denied access.

2) Who are you to ask me? This is why it is highly suggested it is a trusted servant that does the asking. Trusted servants do have the right, given to them by the group, to represent them. Therefore, the handler does have to answer the trusted servant. Please do not have any group member ask. First, they may not know the right things to say and cause a situation that could turn into a legal situation. Second, they do not have the group’s elected representation and therefore cannot represent the group.

3) I have a doctor’s letter and my dog has a right to be here! It seems that some folks bringing animals have doctor letters claim that gives the animal the right to be there, the animal is registered/certified etc.

There are 2 types of doctor prescriptions. 1) is for an Emotional Support Animal. 2) is for a service dog. The first is prescribing a pet to alleviate a mental health condition. It does NOT certify/register or in any way state that the doctor said that THAT particular animal is an ESA. Just that the Patient can have one. The doctor does not approve of any particular animal. The second prescribes a Service Dog to mitigate a major life system illness or injury. Even that letter does NOT certify/register or in any way approve of that particular dog. So, doctors’ letters only prescribe an ESA or Service Dog can be used by the Patient. It does not cover the dog or animal whatsoever. ESAs are pets - they cannot go to non-pet friendly places. Service Dogs are medically task trained dogs that assist with a major life system illness/injury.

Again, the handler may still choose not to answer the question. Inform the handler that, by not answering, the dog can be excluded from the group meeting place.

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If it is determined the dog is not a service dog, do remember to tell the handler that they are welcome without the dog.

What if the handler has already entered the building? Attempt to ask the handler to please come outside to discuss a “matter”. Then follow the steps given above.

What if the handler does not want to step outside? Get another trusted servant (or any group member if no trusted servant is available) and calmly, quietly and privately as possible ask the questions and follow the steps.

If the person is inside the building and the dog is determined not to be a service dog: Advise the person that, in accordance with group policy and the rental lease, no pets are allowed in the building. They will need to remove the dog and feel free to return to the meeting.

What if the person refuses to remove the dog: First, attempt to have the person understand that bringing a pet into a no pet building can jeopardized the ability of the group to continue to meet there. Emphasize that the lease/rental agreement specifically states “no pets”. If the person still will not remove the dog, 2 spiritual considerations can be done:

1) For that meeting only, have a few members go outside and hold a meeting for the handler. At the end of the meeting, restate that the dog no longer can come into the meeting building.

2) The whole group goes outside until the handler leaves (no more than a 5 minute wait). If the handler still refuses to remove the dog, police may need to be contacted to escort the person out.

What if the dog is determined to be a service dog and later growls, bites, barks or causes other disruptive behavior during the meeting or while in the building:

If the handler does not take immediate corrective action, a trusted servant, on the spot, can ask the handler to please take the dog outside and settle the dog. Then the handler may return with the dog. If the handler chooses not to correct or settle the dog, the dog can be excused for the rest of that meeting only. Again, if the dog has been determined to be a SD, the handler will be allowed to return to the next meeting with the dog. DO take video of the dog’s misbehaving (remember, the dog, not the people in the room) as proof. If the dog does the same bad behaviors each meeting, please contact your Region Additional Needs POC immediately for further guidance. Please remember that, if the dog has been determined to be a SD, it could be the dog just has a bad day. Addicts should well understand that!

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Anything after this, or if the handler causes a commotion or uses the words, do call your Additional Needs POC, Rose Marie B, at 321 567 4112. The words "lawyer/lawsuit" being used is an immediate call to Rose Marie. DO NOT handle it yourself! You will get guidance on how to proceed. Rose Marie has been trained to handle those situations.

Two additional points to remember: A NA meeting is considered a "business" by ADA Federal law. Therefore, we should abide by the law as much as possible. And, a church is exempt from ADA law. So, insure the church is ok with having a SD in the building. The majority of churches nowadays have no problem but will ask you to ensure that the dog behaves and is potty trained. If the church declines service dogs, contact Additional Needs for further guidance.

Last but not least: A NA meeting should insure that the atmosphere of recovery is present. A misbehaving dog does interrupt that atmosphere. At the same time, any situation that occurs in a NA meeting should be met with spiritual principles in mind. Many times, a spiritual solution will resolve a situation prior to it becoming a legal one.