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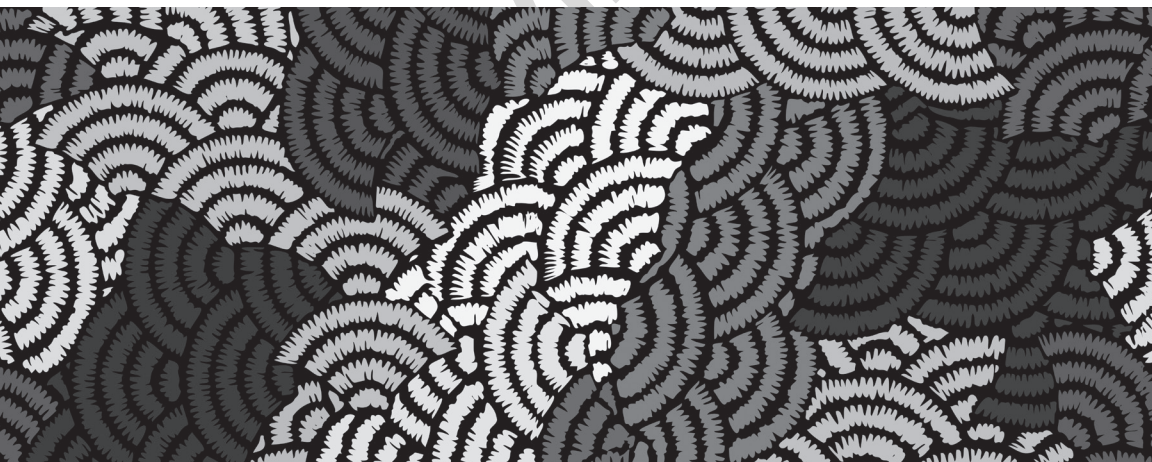# PATRONS
with
DISABILITIES

Perspectives and Insights from People with Disabilities

EDITED BY KODI LASKIN

ALA
Editions

KODI LASKIN, a graduate of Rollins College, has used her unique position as both a library assistant and a service animal handler to develop a training geared for libraries and businesses to learn about laws regarding service animals and their place in society that is available through SEFLIN and NEFLIN. She and her service animal, Piper, can still be found frequenting any and all libraries they come across.

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INTRODUCTION
Disability Is Not a Bad Word

Kodi Laskin

We, as a society, have a problem talking about disability. Part of this issue has to do with lack of understanding, and part of it has to do with people's discomfort talking about the subject. But what if there was an easier way? What if there was a way to bridge the gap between people with disabilities and those without so that no one feels like they don't have the information they need to interact with patrons regardless of ability?

The purpose of this book is to give those who work in libraries the tools they need to provide excellent customer service and a safe environment for all patrons regardless of ability. Accessibility has been a hot topic issue of late, including the final ruling on Section 508 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 regarding website accessibility and the emergence of service animals and the abuse of service animal law. The best way to be sure that everyone is not only upholding the law, but also making their library open and accessible to all is to be well informed.

This book is written by people with disabilities, and the stories within give a brief look into what it's like to be in the shoes of someone with a disability. The goal is not only to encourage a more empathetic staff, but also to open the lines of communication and provide better

understanding for why a patron might have an odd request, or why compassion and understanding are paramount. This book will show, through real examples, why these extra steps are important.

An important thing to keep in mind when interacting with patrons is person-first vs. identity-first language. When speaking to a person, they might prefer being referred to as a person with a disability or as a disabled person. Person-first language is meant to show that even though the person might have a difference from the norm, they are a person first. Identity-first language, in contrast, is used as a way to show that the disability is nothing to be ashamed of and can instead be an empowering fact. In general, this is a personal choice for the person, but there are some groups who tend to prefer one or the other. If you aren't sure, the best practice is to ask. Most people would rather answer a question you might find awkward then be identified in a way that makes them uncomfortable. We all want to make sure our patrons feel comfortable not only being in the library, but also asking us for assistance when needed.

Americans with Disabilities Act: At a Glance

Throughout this book, we'll refer to the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA). Here's some brief information that covers the basics of what ADA is. The ADA

- was ratified in 1990 with an amendment in 2008 that changed the definition of *disability*,
- is a civil rights law that prohibits discrimination against people with disabilities in all areas of public life, and
- is divided into five sections, each of which focuses on a different area of public life.

For more information, please visit www.ada.gov.

SERVICE ANIMALS

Kodi Laskin

I walk into the restaurant with my fiancé and my service dog, Piper. It's our first time at this place, so I feel a spike of nervousness. The room is relatively small with tables crowded in, barely enough room to walk single file down the row. The hostess bustles through; she's an expert at avoiding all the waiters milling about. I see her eyes fall on Piper and my heart stops. What's going to happen next? Will she ask us to leave? Will I have to explain the law? I don't want to have to do this.

Her eyes flick between Piper and I for a second before her hostess smile graces her face and she asks, "Table for two?" We nod and follow her as she leads us past five, six, seven empty four-top tables to a small, two-top table in the back corner completely isolated from any other patrons. Of course, Piper can fit anywhere without issue, but I usually prefer the bigger table to let her stretch out. My fiancé settles in, but I don't feel

right. I can't prove it, but it feels like we were put here deliberately, and the thought of that puts me on edge.

Piper settles in at my feet under the table, her head resting on the top of my shoe. It takes a second for the waiter to notice us, but the experience after that is relatively pleasant. Piper falls asleep before our entrees are delivered, her tongue sticking out on my ankle. The patrons who were seated when we arrived have since left, and none of the tables around us have been filled.

After our check is returned, we stand, and Piper emerges from the table to stand next to me. The waiter stops, staring at her. "Oh, wow. I didn't even know she was there. Are you training her?"

"Oh no," I reply, "I'm not that good. She was trained by a professional."

"Oh . . . so she's for you?" he asks.

"Yep," I nod, feeling uncomfortable.

"She must be the real deal; it's like she wasn't there at all."

"She was very well trained," my fiancé cuts in. "Just doing her job."

With another smile we both head out, snaking our way through the tables, ignoring the comments of people who hadn't seen us walk in. It's a relief to be back in the car; Piper settled into the back seat, on our way home. ☙

What You Need to Know about Service Animals

If you google the words "service animals" you'll find hundreds of links ranging from copies of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) to websites offering a full package of materials to make your dog a legitimate service animal. Even in the profession of information literacy it can be difficult to discern fact from fiction. This section will break

down everything you need to know about service animals, including how they're trained, what they're trained to do, and the logistics surrounding the laws covering service animals and their handlers.

The ADA

The ADA, enacted in 1990 to preserve the rights of people with disabilities, has a section on service animals. In this section, service animals are defined as "dogs that are individually trained to do work or perform tasks for people with disabilities."[1] Broken down, this law means that for this dog to be considered a service animal, the handler must have a disability, and the dog must be trained to do something to help the handler who has a disability. This is why, while working, a service animal is considered a medical device. There is no list of accepted or rejected disabilities. Because there's no doctor involvement, it's at the discretion of the handler to decide if their disability could benefit from the use of a service animal. The handler, usually in partnership with either a trainer or a nonprofit organization, determines if their condition would benefit by having a trained dog. There is a tradeoff that must be considered as well. As much as I hope this book and my trainings help, there's a lot of attention that comes with having a service animal, not all of which is kind or wanted. I no longer have the opportunity to go places unnoticed. People with service animals aren't able to blend into the background. It also adds a layer of difficulty preparing to go anywhere. Much like leaving the house with a child, a handler must pack for themselves and for their dog.

These animals are not required to wear a vest, have an ID tag, or have any identifying badges or features to prove that the dog is a working animal. In general, I have my dog in a vest while she's working because it's easier for other patrons to identify her, but there are simple reasons why a vest can be an inaccessible requirement. There are people who,

due to any number of impairments, might not have the fine motor skills required to put a vest on a dog. Another example is dogs used for autism support; while performing deep pressure therapy, the buckle of a belt could be uncomfortable on the handler. The ADA allows two questions if the dog can't be immediately identified as a service animal: (1) Is the dog a service animal required because of a disability? and (2) What work or task has the dog been trained to perform?[2] Essentially these two questions are there to make sure the two conditions are met.

As a library employee, these questions can be awkward and uncomfortable, but they are essential; it's the only tool provided to ensure the animal is a service animal. Of course, someone could lie, but according to the law, the two questions are what we have to use. On the other hand, as a service animal handler, I love answering questions. When library staff approach me and ask them, I feel more at ease knowing that I won't have to fight for the right to have my medical device with me. They know the law, I answer the questions happily, and go about my day.

Training

A service animal must be trained, either by handlers themselves if they feel capable, a nonprofit organization, or a professional trainer. Their training can take anywhere from one to three years and cost up to $40,000 depending on what service the animal is being trained to provide. None of these costs are covered by insurance and oftentimes the waiting list for a dog provided free of charge from a nonprofit organization can be one to three years.

Training can start as early as six months with basic commands and socialization. It's important that these dogs are exposed to as many types of people and places as possible, so they'll learn they're safe in all situations. Public access training is determined by the dog but will start at dog friendly locations like parks and pet supply stores before

moving into other areas like grocery stores and libraries. Up until this point, which can take anywhere from three to nine months, the animal can't be considered a service animal; it's just a very well-trained dog. It's not until the dog is task trained, learning the specific task or tasks it will do to alleviate the person's disability that the animal shifts to service animal status.

The choice that a service animal would be beneficial isn't taken lightly by those in the disabled community because of the time and financial burden incurred. From experience, the benefit of having Piper with me, and knowing that I'm safe even if something unexpected happens, has been well worth the cost.

Tasks

When you ask a handler what service their animal provides, it's important to know that there can be a variety of answers. Service animals can learn more than 100 commands ranging from "sit" to "grab my meds." The types of tasks can be grouped into five major categories each with tasks and training that is more specific to the handler's disability. The five categories include: medical alert, mobility assist, autism support, seeing eye, and psychiatric. When a handler answers the second question, a response of "medical alert" is just as acceptable as a more specific answer like "seizure alert." These simple statements cover a vast array of specific tasks that can be life changing to a disabled patron.

A note to remember: when a patron walks into the library and states that their dog is a mobility assist animal, we can't disagree because we don't see a wheelchair or a cane. The animal might pick up dropped items or function as a stability device. Not all disabilities are visible, and when we ask the two questions, it's not to determine what the person's disability is. We ask to verify that the animal has been trained to perform a task to help with a disability.

The only unacceptable answers to what task an animal is trained to perform include emotional support, therapy, and assistance. The last example is too vague and doesn't describe an actual task. We'll discuss emotional support and therapy in a later section.

Breeds

It's never our place as employees to determine if a dog is suitable for the job it's been trained to perform. While most nonprofit organizations will use golden retrievers or Labradors for their temperament and ease of training, there is no list of acceptable and unacceptable breeds for service work. The only limitations are what jobs a dog can and cannot do. For example, it would be almost impossible for a Chihuahua to work as a mobility assistance dog. In fact, that type of work requires clearance from a vet due to the pressure being put on the animal's joints. The breeds you'd be more likely to see in your library working as mobility assistance dogs would be retrievers or German Shepherds. Other popular breeds include poodles and poodle mixes due to their hypoallergenic fur.

I'm often asked if small dogs can be real service dogs, and the short answer is yes. Some people have noticed that Papillons are unusually good at detecting seizures. It can be convenient to have a smaller dog work as a diabetic alert dog because they can be carried in a pouch, keeping them close to the handler's mouth, where the scent of high and low blood sugar can be detected, though large dogs can be used for this task as well.

It's important to note that a breed cannot be discriminated against if it's a trained service animal. Even if there's a countywide restriction or a restriction at an apartment complex, a person cannot be denied access for having their animal with them. The only reason to deny access due to the kind of breed is if the animal is too large to fit into the space,

therefore hindering the activity of the business or store, for example. Libraries generally don't face these issues. As a handler with a service dog who looks like a pit bull from the front, I have had interesting reactions from people when Piper and I are out in public—from people screaming and running away to people asking me if I really think a pit bull is a safe choice for the public in general. A dog's temperament isn't breed specific regardless of the stigmas that exist.

A quick note about service animals that I think is wonderful and interesting. Miniature horses can also be service animals. They must be housebroken, under the control of the handler, and like their dog counterparts, perform a task to assist a person with a disability. Miniature pony service animals have been known to be seeing eye and mobility assist animals. They can be preferable to dogs due to their longer life span and larger build. They are very rare, and in my time working, I've never seen one, but they do exist and are legally covered by the ADA.

Handlers and Trainers

There's a misconception that service animals are only used for those with sight impairments, so anyone who can obviously see or doesn't seem to fit into that category must be a trainer instead. Service animals can be used for a wide array of tasks, from cardiac arrest or diabetic alerts to mobility assist to Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder assistance. The assumption that service animals are only used by the sight-impaired population demonstrates a lack of education and knowledge by the general public. This can be a red flag for handlers and could possibly lead them to hesitate making return trips to your library. When faced with a handler and service animal in your library, assume the person is a handler unless you're told otherwise. While people don't normally offer up this information readily, they might when asked the two questions. Whether or not a service animal in training is given the right

of public access is outlined in state law and is therefore not covered in the ADA. For example, in my state, Florida statute 413.08 section 8 gives trainers who are actively training an animal for service the same public access afforded to a fully trained service animal with their disabled handler. So, when asked the two questions, an answer of, "I'm training the animal" could be an acceptable answer depending on the state. In general, a trainer will know when an animal is ready to be out in public and will be equipped to manage any challenges the animal might face in unknown circumstances. A trainer wouldn't knowingly bring a dog into an unsafe situation, but public places can be unpredictable. Trainers are well equipped to handle the dog's anxieties and uncertainties in a new situation. It's always a good idea to keep an eye out to make sure a service animal and handler are okay in the same way we keep an eye on all our patrons to make sure they're okay. In my experience, I don't think it's necessary to watch service animals in training any closer than their fully trained counterparts.

Emotional Support Animals

With the questions come responses such as "emotional support" and "therapy." As neither of these are considered tasks covered by the ADA, neither should be given the right of public access. To have a proper emotional support animal, the person must have a note from a doctor stating need. These animals are not service animals. Not only are they not limited by the ADA because they're not covered by it—meaning they can be any animal (including peacocks)—they also aren't required to have any training. None. The only places that aren't pet friendly, where emotional support animals are legally allowed, are the cabin of an aircraft and in a residence regardless of policy and without fees. The ADA specifically states, "These terms are used to describe animals that provide comfort just by being with a person. Because they have not been

trained to perform a specific job or task, they do not qualify as service animals under the ADA."[3] In general, the hope is that a person with an animal trained to perform a task to mitigate a disability wouldn't say emotional support as an answer to the second question because that disqualifies the animal from public access.

What to Do with Service Animals in Your Library

It's easy to read about law and accessibility; it's another thing to actually put it into practice. This section will break down the steps to take when a service animal team walks into your library.

Know the Guidelines

Read the questions out loud until they feel comfortable to ask. Is this dog a service animal required because of a disability? What work or task have they been trained to perform? That can be a mouthful. I've found it helpful to print out the two questions and tape them to the staff computers; having them easily accessible can help in the moment. It can also be helpful to have copies of the ADA guidelines on service animals at the desk in case a patron has a question or is uncertain of why you're asking them what service the animal provides. In my experience, people will have no problem saying "yes" to the first question but might push back on the second, believing you're asking them the specifics of their disability. In this circumstance, it's easier to explain that these are the questions allowed by the ADA with a copy of the document readily available if you need it.

The unfortunate truth about having a service animal is that you give up a certain level of privacy. My disability is no longer invisible while I'm with Piper because her presence alone confirms that I have

a disability; if I didn't have one, she wouldn't be with me. The second question only asks what the dog does. So, for example, I could say that Piper is a seizure alert service animal, or, if I want to be more vague, I could say she's trained as a medical alert service animal. The task she performs is alerting me to an impending medical occurrence. Some patrons might be upset at the perceived invasion into their privacy. But, to assure that the two qualifications that define a service animal are met, both questions must be answered satisfactorily. If they aren't, we can't identify the animal as a service animal and as such, need to ask the person to remove the animal from the library.

Ask the Right Questions

As a service animal handler, I understand the inclination to look at her and smile and to want to pet her. My hope is that after that initial reaction of seeing a dog, the next choice is to not comment on it. One of the hardest things about being a handler is being treated like Piper's mouthpiece, constantly telling people about her breed and age and how her day is going. When you come across a service animal team in your library, it will be tempting to ask about their dog. Resist. Ask them if they need help finding a book or would like information on your programing. By acting as though the dog isn't there and engaging the handler with questions common to the library, you can make them feel welcome and they'll likely feel comfortable returning. The only thing that should be different in your interaction with the handler and any other patron is asking the two questions first. After that, they're just another person coming to take advantage of the resources of the library.

Spot Out-of-Control Behavior

While we do need to accept an appropriate answer, we also need to watch for out-of-control behavior from the animal. This clause within the ADA is vague on purpose. It's imperative to remember that at the end of the day, they're dogs, not robots; sometimes they'll make mistakes. Every once in a while, Piper will be startled and bark, just once, and will almost always lay down afterwards and look up at me. This isn't out-of-control behavior. I've also been known to exclaim when I'm startled. I can't blame her for doing the same thing. If, however, she started barking and didn't stop no matter how many times I told her to, that would be out-of-control behavior. Other examples include jumping on people or furniture, lunging at people, or any disturbing action that can't be stopped by the handler. If the dog displays any of these behaviors, it is appropriate to ask the handler to remove the animal. If the dog has been identified as a service animal based on the answers to the two questions but displays out-of-control behavior leading to its removal, the handler must be given the same goods or services they would have received, but without the animal present. One way to accommodate this in a library setting would be to ask the person what books they were looking for and bring the items to them outside.

Much like when asking the two questions, I would recommend bringing a copy of the ADA guidelines with you when confronting a patron with an out-of-control animal. It's important to state that you are asking them to remove the animal due to the behavior of the dog, but that you would be happy to help in any way possible without the animal present. It's never acceptable to offer to hold the animal as that puts the responsibility of safety for the animal and those in the immediate vicinity on you. It's also important to insist that the person remove the dog, even if they just want to do one quick thing. By maintaining a standard, you're showing that the library is a safe place for everyone, and inappropriate behavior won't be accepted regardless of species.

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