

Emotional Support Animals Adjust to New DOT Regulations in 2021

Pretty much everybody likes dogs, right? Well, maybe not if they're on an airplane and someone's emotional support animal won't stop barking.

This problem is at the center of the issue that led to the Department of Transportation's new regulations for Emotional Support Animals (ESAs) and air travel. Airlines could have handled an increased volume of animals on planes, but not if those animals didn't know how to behave themselves. As the number of incidents with ESAs rose and customer satisfaction fell, airlines put increasing pressure on the DOT to step in. A couple of years ago, they started investigating the matter; this resulted in brand-new rules for service animals and ESAs alike in January of 2021.

By far the most significant change is the one regarding ESAs. According to the [National Service Animal Registry](#), instead of accompanying their owners into the plane cabin, now they'll have to observe whatever regulations the airline has for ordinary pets. Not only does this feel like a snub for ESAs, it could actually be a problem for the people who need their support animal in order to get onto the plane.

While the changes that apply to ESAs are getting most of the attention, service animal owners have some new rules to observe as well. They mostly have to do with their animals' size (they have to fit within the personal space of their owner), and how they're restrained (with a leash or harness, unless this would get in the way of their normal tasks). One person can bring no more than two service animals, and they have to be dogs – no more miniature horses. The DOT took advantage of the wide sweep they were already making with the new regulations, and published updated documents that service dogs would need before boarding a plane. There are two forms: one states that the animal has been trained to complete a certain task, and the other assures the airline that the animal has been trained to relieve itself appropriately. They can both be downloaded from the DOT website, and they apply to psychiatric service dogs as well as all other types of service dogs.

Back to emotional support animals – why was such a drastic change needed? When the DOT first decided to allow ESAs to board planes with the same freedom as service animals, nobody could have anticipated what would happen. Looking back at what did happen, though, it's tough to say if anything could have been done differently.

The issue of badly behaved ESAs has already been mentioned, but passengers weren't just dealing with barking dogs. They also had to watch out for support animals that were permitted to walk throughout the cabin, or even defecate on the floor. In a few instances, passengers were actually injured by panicked or aggressive ESAs. Airlines started getting complaints that they were prioritizing the needs of a small minority over the well-being of the rest of the passengers. While this was pretty much true, it wasn't the airlines' choice – they were just complying with DOT regulations.

There would still have been a negative reaction if these ESAs were all animals that people were used to seeing, but there's very little doubt that part of the backlash was due to the

staggering variety of species that was spotted on planes. There were pigs, kangaroos, raccoons, turkeys, monkeys, and more. These animals might not have been responsible for any more incidents than cats or dogs, but the novelty of it just contributed to the general feeling that the situation was out of control.

To complicate matters even further, many of these ESAs were flying under false colors. They weren't support animals at all, but rather ordinary pets with fake documents. In order to board a plane as an ESA, an animal needs just one document – a letter written by a psychiatrist. It's written specifically to satisfy the airline's requirements, and the gist of it is "I've been treating this person, they needed an emotional support animal as part of their treatment, and here's the animal they selected". There's no ID number for the ESA, no training requirements, and no registration like a service animal would have – just a letter that's actually very easy to duplicate.

Once pet owners started catching onto the loophole, there was no stopping it. Not only did it save time and money to get one of these fake letters, but it gave them peace of mind as well. There have always been stories here and there about pets passing away while in an airline's custody, and concerned pet owners jumped at the chance to keep their animal close by for the duration of the flight. It might have been a quick-fix solution for them, but it had consequences for the real ESAs that they probably never anticipated.

Even though most people put service animals and ESAs in different categories, the DOT actually classified them both as service animals where airlines were concerned. It made the technical language of the regulations more concise, but it resulted in vague requirements that were easy to cheat – like unverifiable letters from mental healthcare professionals. It's not clear that they could have done any better, though; since ESAs don't actually need training in order to help their owners, there's usually no point in making sure it happens. 9 times out of 10, an untrained ESA will never step foot on a plane, so the issue will never come up.

If you've booked a plane ticket for future travel with your ESA before January 11, 2021 (when the new rules went into effect), you should double-check with your airline to see if you'll still be allowed to bring your ESA onto the plane with you. Certain airlines are giving passengers with ESAs a grace period of a few months, provided the ticket was purchased while the old regulations still applied. For some that period has already passed; for the rest, they'll probably only allow exceptions until May 2021. After that, ESA owners will just have to adapt and get creative.