

Don't pass your pooch off as a service dog



- 1 Dogs are amazing creatures – they can be lovable companions, robust playmates and help those with mental and physical challenges lead more fulfilling lives. But service dogs and “civilian dogs” are not to be confused – especially by deceitful owners. Representative Kimberly Ferguson filed a bill making it illegal to knowingly misrepresent a dog as a service dog or service-dog-in-training “for the purpose of obtaining any rights or privileges afforded to a person with a disability requiring the assistance of a service dog.” Sarah Peake explains why she is a supporter of Ferguson’s bill: she has run a bed-and-breakfast for 23 years and has encountered a number of guests who would claim their dog was a service animal after being informed that the inn was pet-free.
- 2 Defensive dog owners may ask: How bad can it be to have a pooch interacting with its owner in public, even if you have to tell a white lie about its qualifications so it can go wherever you do? In truth, that lack of consideration causes lively hounds in restaurants who bark and whine at the overload of amazing smells and new people, stressed poodles taking out their overstimulation by wrecking the office rug and bored terriers nipping someone’s pants for something fun to do.
- 3 And worse. Ellen Leigh of Arlington uses a mobilized wheelchair, and has a trained service dog named Ricky. She was out with Ricky last month when another dog wearing a working-dog vest tried to bite him. She said that was just one of many encounters she’s had with pets whose owners misrepresent them as service dogs.

4 The American Kennel Club states that training for service dogs can last up to two years. The dogs must be focused on their handlers and desensitized to distractions. They should not be distracted by the public. Pets without special training, Leigh said, can become stressed in hectic, public environments and become aggressive – a hazard for service dogs and the people who rely on their assistance.

5 Service dogs help with more than mobility. Sheila Goffe of the American Kennel Club said the role of the dogs has expanded to include aiding people with “invisible disabilities” like epilepsy and post-traumatic stress disorder. “11, increased success in the area of invisible disabilities, combined with a lack of penalties for abuse, has resulted in an epidemic of pets being misrepresented as service dogs by irresponsible dog owners seeking to benefit,” Goffe said.

6 “The bottom line is, this is legislation to combat fraud,” Ferguson said. Violators would be subject to a fine of up to \$500, 30 hours of community service at an organization serving people with disabilities, or both, for a first offense. An excellent move, long overdue. We love dogs, it’s just disheartening when some owners need lessons in obedience.

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