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Life and style

Counterfeit canines: the air travelers with fake service dogs

The number of passengers taking pets on planes has surged – but since anyone can get an emotional support animal certificate, good dogs and bad dogs qualify

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Victor Hurtado, a staff member for the secretary of the army, was waiting for a connecting flight in the San Francisco airport when he was suddenly

attacked by an aggressive brown poodle. The dog, teeth bared, lunged in his direction, ready to bite.

A bloody outcome was only avoided because Hurtado's mobility dog, a black labrador named Holly, had been trained to avoid escalation when confronted with violent behavior.

Holly was paired with Hurtado nearly three years ago to assist him in living with a cognitive disability and trauma associated with his time in the army. She has undergone years of training to not only address his specific needs, but to behave appropriately and safely in public spaces.

Yet, despite the vast difference in the two dogs' behavior, they did have one characteristic in common: both wore service dog vests.

The incident left Holly shaken and unable to perform her life-saving duties even after boarding the airplane, momentarily leaving Hurtado without his disability assistance support - all because someone felt the need to pretend their pet dog was a service animal. "It breaks my heart, really," says Hurtado. "I feel like they think our animals are a joke."

An epidemic in the sky

Hurtado's story is not uncommon. In the past two decades, the number of passengers taking their dogs on planes has surged due to growing awareness of the [Americans with Disabilities Act](#), which states businesses are restricted from asking for proof that a service dog is indeed a service dog.

This legal protection was designed to safeguard the most basic dignities of disabled people - imagine a wheelchair user being questioned about the legitimacy of their chair - but led to widespread exploitation of this loophole.

These days, unscrupulous pet owners obtain [emotional support animal](#) (ESA) certificates, which allow them to travel with their pets, who help ease symptoms of depression, anxiety and phobia. The number of delivered certificates has [risen by 1,000%](#) between 2002 and 2015, and a [further 200%](#) between 2015 and 2019.



📷 Good boys: assistance dogs in training. Photograph: Pluto/Alamy

While pets inarguably **provide emotional support** simply by being themselves, they are not trained to help someone with a disability navigate life, or taught how to behave appropriately in public. And since anyone can get an ESA certificate - all it requires is a note from a doctor, though buying them online is easily done - good dogs and bad dogs, sweet dogs and aggressive dogs all qualify for the title.

The problem became so severe that in December 2020, the Department of Transportation (DoT) **stiffened their rules** to allow only trained service dogs on planes, stating that it no longer considered an emotional support animal to be a service animal.

Dishonest pet owners were not deterred. Instead of declaring their animal to be an emotional support animal, they now fully lie and call it a service dog.

Theresa Stern, vice-president of interdisciplinary client services and engagement for **Guide Dogs for the Blind**, is seething. She navigates life with her eight-year-old yellow labrador, Wills, and can't digest the fact that people are impersonating disabled people to get their pet dogs to fly for free.

"I think of them as checking [their] integrity at the gate. Airlines are requiring you to fill out federal attestations that you are a person with a disability, and that your dog has

been specifically trained to mitigate your disability. That’s what makes it a service animal.”

The DoT’s language is clear: a service animal is a dog individually trained to do work or perform tasks for the benefit of a person with a disability, including those trained for psychiatric support.

This means no cats, iguanas, peacocks, llamas - all of which have been taken on planes before - or any other non-dog animal.

 A service dog strolls through the aisle on a United Airlines plane. Photograph: Julio Cortez/AP

As for what tasks service dogs do perform, the answer is much more varied. Many mistakenly believe all service dogs are seeing-eye dogs, but today they can be trained to assist a range of disabilities. Organizations often breed and train dogs to take on specific programs generally at no cost to the client. The cost to these organizations to train one dog ranges from \$20,000 to \$30,000 and takes an average of two to two and a half years.

Service Dogs of Virginia, where Holly was trained, has five programs. “We train autism dogs for young children and young adults on the spectrum; we train physical assistance dogs - the majority of them are trained for individuals who use powerchairs,” explains Sally Day, the director of development. They also train PTSD dogs for veterans and first

responders, medical alert dogs and facility dogs working in schools or in counseling settings.

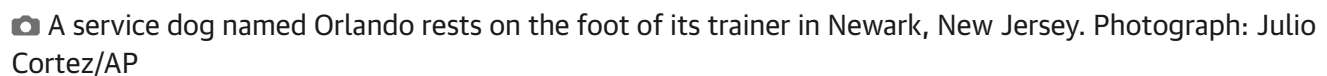
As part of their training, service dogs are taken to airports and on airplanes to acclimatize. “Airports are incredibly complex environments in which you’re going to have to use an escalator or an elevator,” says Day. Planes are a whole other level of complex, with their compact space, strange noises and smells, and so many strangers packed together. A fake service dog would be immediately overwhelmed.

Day sounds frustrated as we talk on the phone: “That someone would take their dog that they say means so much to them into an environment like that without any training - what does that tell you?”

Fake service dogs muddy the waters

Travel writer Becca Blond was traveling in the bulkhead seat with her medical alert dog, a pit bull named Bobbi, when an untrained dog across the aisle began barking, snarling and lunging at them.

Bobbi remained quiet, but the flight attendant said she couldn’t have a dog fight on her plane. After the other dog’s owner admitted she had purchased an illegal service dog license weeks prior, Blond assumed they would be relocated. Instead, it was her who was moved to the back of the plane due to Bobbi’s breed, even though she never made a noise.

 A service dog named Orlando rests on the foot of its trainer in Newark, New Jersey. Photograph: Julio Cortez/AP

Disabled travelers with service dogs are also affected indirectly by the proliferation of fake service dogs. Hurtado says Holly is regularly approached by children and adults alike reaching out to pet her. “They completely ignore the fact that [her vest] says do not touch, do not disturb, do not distract.” But because fake service dogs can’t be interrupted - since they aren’t working - people have become accustomed to being allowed to pet dogs with vests on.

The service dog community at large is fearful that increasing bad behavior from fake service dogs will force lawmakers to create restrictive legislation targeting service dogs. “At the end of the day what happens is the airlines get frustrated, the public is frustrated, and then laws can change,” Stern explains. “And it could change to be: no dogs [allowed]. And then that makes it so that I can’t go where I need to go to live my life.”

Are more liberal pet policies the answer?

Despite what some may believe, faking service dog status isn’t always about getting dogs to fly for free.

Stephanie Brown lives abroad but travels back to the US with her pomeranian, Penny, finding limited options for her to safely bring her dog along. (Both owner and dog are

using a pseudonym.)

Brown had Penny registered as an ESA before the DoT removed them from the service dog definition. “At one point last May in 2021, [American Airlines] even paused pets in the hold because of the constant flight changes due to Covid,” she says. With no options for bringing the well-behaved Penny in the plane - cabin or hold - Brown registered her as a service dog with the airline. American Airlines maintains [their restriction](#) against checking dogs in cargo for regular travelers, as do [Delta Air Lines](#) and [Southwest](#).

There’s clear evidence that more liberal pet policies on planes would reduce loophole exploitation. “With a zero-tolerance policy, of course owners are going to find a way for their pet to safely travel in the cabin,” Brown argues. “Even charging more for a pet, but making the experience a more comfortable one for the owner and pet would reduce the need to claim a pet as a service or emotional support animal.”

Similarly, large-breed dogs have limited options to fly until cargo shipping of pets resumes - and that’s only if they don’t exceed weight, size and breed constraints - so a solution is needed to ensure they too can travel. If a global service dog accreditation system was implemented and enforced, it would not only guarantee a dog’s service status, but perhaps it could also include a way for companion dogs to be verified as safe to fly in the cabin.

In the meantime, both Blond and Hurtado have had their service dog’s legitimacy questioned, which is exhausting for them. They feel they shouldn’t have to defend themselves just for having a disability.

“I don’t think the world owes me anything because I’m disabled,” Hurtado says, “but I do feel like it’s a right that we have that needs to be taken seriously. People who buy the fake jackets and have the fake service dogs, it’s just really disheartening. I see that as no different from somebody parking in a handicapped spot, [who’s] not handicapped.”

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