

HABITAT

Scam Alert: Pet-Owners Who Falsely Claim Disability Buy Dog "Certification"

Frank Lovece in Co-op/Condo Buyers on January 1, 2013

The president of a roughly 160-unit Long Island co-op complex is incredulous. “There’s a website where you can buy a kit that ‘certifies’ your dog as a companion dog. It comes with an ID, looks very official, it has a little vest for the dog so it mirrors a service dog” like trained seeing-eye dogs. “So you call up, say I’d like to get my pet certified, fill out the form, send in the check. Do I need documentation? ‘No.’ So anyone can do it? ‘Yeah.’”

She’s not exaggerating: Several websites offer such official-looking but non-authoritative kits at prices ranging from \$24.95 to \$249. And even among these groups, there’s infighting over who’s legitimate or not. One organization — calling itself the National Association of Service Dogs — charged on its website that another site’s owner “left the U.S. and moved to Ecuador... Beware if you choose to send your money to ECUADOR and to a ‘for profit’ company who’s [sic] sole owner left the country to avoid taxes.” (By mid-November, the accusation had been removed from its website.) Confusingly, however, that association also uses a second website, RegisteredServiceDogs.org, which, unlike the first, states, “We are one of the very few legitimate organizations for registering and certifying service dogs” for the same \$69.95 to \$88.95 for annual membership or \$500 lifetime as the other website. Neither is forthcoming about what makes it any more “legitimate” than others. Phone and e-mail requests were not returned.

Justice Is Vocal

In any event, it’s an unnecessary service. Neither service dogs nor emotional-support dogs have to be registered or certified, affirms a spokesperson for the Department of Justice (DOJ), who says, “There is no requirement that an assistance animal that ameliorates a mental or emotional disability possess a certificate of its efficacy” — and a laminated card from some group that decides to start a “certification registry” has no official bearing whatsoever. The DOJ spokesperson adds, “For animals that perform work or tasks for a person with a physical disability, you can require either documentation that the animal has been trained to perform the tasks or documentation that, despite a lack of training, the animal is able to do the work or tasks for the disabled person.”

DIY ID

Of the several such sites we contacted, only one was forthright about itself: Service Dogs America responded to a potential customer’s inquiry by saying, “There is no such thing as a certification for a service dog.... We supply an identification package. There is no government database or regulations for a service [animal], other than the ADA [and other applicable] laws. You can create your own identification if you wish.” And why not? As another site, Service Dog Certification of America, says in a blatant come-on, “[E]very person in The United States of America may have some form of disability. The New York City MTA does issue legitimate ID cards to make it easier for disabled individuals to bring service animals onto public transportation.

But for condo and co-op boards, the takeaway from all this is that if someone shows you “certification” from some online company or elsewhere, it’s meaningless.