



COVID-19 Considerations: Support for Service animals in Human Shelters

Overview:

Disaster sheltering in a COVID-19 environment, both congregate and non-congregate sheltering, brings with it many challenges, including the need to institute and uphold social distancing practices and state/local health and CDC guidance. Shelters must permit a person with a disability to be accompanied by their service animal, even if the shelter has a “No Pets” policy. Under the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), a federal law, and New Jersey’s Law Against Discrimination, disaster shelters cannot discriminate against people with disabilities. (See document Key Facts About service animals for Disaster Shelter Workers.)

While the handler of the service animal is responsible for providing all the necessary care and feeding for their service animal, there may be times when the handler is not able to evacuate with their animal’s emergency supply kit/go-kit or supplies. The Shelter Manager is encouraged to work with their local County Animal Response Team (CART) for support regarding service animals and their handlers in the human shelters, such as for pet food/feeding support and supplies, veterinary care, and where to locate and configure the Animal Walk Area (aka defecation/urination and exercise areas). If the county does not have a CART, the sheltering entity can contact the NJ Department of Agriculture (609-671-6400) for guidance.

In addition to the regular COVID-19 sheltering guidance, the following are some points to consider and plan for, when handlers arrive and stay with their service animals in the human shelter:

NOTE:

- Do not put cloth face coverings or other face coverings on a service animal, even if they appear sick. Covering an animal’s face could harm them.
- Do not wipe or bathe a service animal with chemical disinfectants, alcohol, hydrogen peroxide, or other products not intended or approved for use on animals, such as hand sanitizer, counter-cleaning wipes, or other industrial or surface cleaners. There is no evidence that the virus can spread to people from the skin, fur, or hair of animals.
- Provide training for staff awareness on communication with people with disabilities.

Check that the shelter is safe for service animals (and/or other medical devices), such as from chemicals (i.e. cleaning, sanitizing, disinfectant products not properly applied and dried on surfaces where the animal might walk on or touch), toxins (i.e. certain plants, chocolate, etc.), and hazards. In addition, areas should be inspected for chemicals that may have leaked out of vehicles such as antifreeze which is deadly to dogs. During inclement weather such as snow or sleet dogs can get foot injuries from salt and other chemicals used for snow, in their feet and paws. There is an option for non-toxic snow melting salt which is not harmful to dogs’ paws.

Registration:

- The service animal handler should provide an emergency contact of a person who will take care of the service animal if the handler gets sick and has to be transported to the hospital.
 - If the animal was trained by an agency which retains ownership of the animal, the following information should be provided:

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- Agency name, address, phone number and a person of contact at that agency
- This agency could have an affiliated member that could house and care for the animal, temporarily, if the service animal had to be separated from its handler.
- The shelter staff should advise the handler to immediately report any signs of illness in their service animal to shelter staff.
 - The service animal handler should provide the name and contact information of the service animal's veterinarian, in case there is a need for veterinary care.
- The intake staff should ask the following:
 - In the last 2 weeks, has the service animal been exposed to a person with suspected or confirmed COVID-19? Exposure includes close contact with a known or possibly infected family member or other person (being within 6 feet of the person, direct contact, sleeping in the same bed, sharing food, kissing, snuggling, or being exposed to sneezes or saliva).
 - For service animals with a known history of exposure to people with COVID-19 (confirmed or suspected) but that are showing no signs of illness, the service animal and handler should be placed in a separate housing accommodations, so the service animal and handler can remain together with appropriate precautions. Separate housing may include more people than just the handler, (i.e. if a child is the individual that utilizes a service animal, or the handler has a child/children, etc.)
 - Hotel housing is the preferable option of separate housing
 - In the last 2 weeks, has the handler noticed any signs of illness in their service animal, particularly coughing, breathing difficulty, sneezing, runny eyes or nose, fever, loss of appetite, lethargy, vomiting or diarrhea?
 - The service animal should be examined by a veterinarian and a determination of the course of action should be made.
 - For service animals that may have a disease potentially transmittable to people or other animals, the service animal and handler should be placed in the isolation area or transferred to a medical facility.
- Service animal should not be handled or pet by anyone other than handler
- A private space separate from the other shelter clients should be designated for medical alert dogs and handlers, if needed
- In cases where a service dog is trained for PTSD it may be important to provide a separate area for the handler and the dog. A dog that is trained for people who are deaf may also do better to alert their handler if they are in a quiet area.
- The shelter staff should describe where the Animal Walk/Relief Area is located, the configuration of it, and how to access the area.
- If applicable or requested, shelter staff may assist or complete outdoor walks with the service animal instead of the handler. Especially in inclement weather where it may be difficult or dangerous for the handler
- The shelter staff should describe where the hand washing/hand sanitizer stations are located.

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- The shelter staff should describe where their service animal's food/water will be located and how to access it.
 - The shelter staff should ask if the person would require any assistance.

Extra supplies:

- Acquire the additional supplies/equipment needed.
 - If not on hand, then develop resource requests and submit to your County Office of Emergency Management (OEM) before a shelter is needed.

Examples of extra materials:

- Tactile floor tape/indicators
- Signage (in Braille and other languages), if possible/feasible
- Disposable bowls for food and water for the service animal
- Poop baggies
- Poop scoopers
- Pet mat for the service animal to sleep on
- Dog crate/kennel/cage
- Pet food (It is best to confer with the handler as to the type/brand of pet food they typically use, and obtain the same, as to avoid digestive upsets to the service animal.)
- Poop/pee pads

Animal Walk/Relief Area (poop/pee and exercise area):

- Should be easily accessible to the handler's specific needs with the service animal
 - Have a grassy area alongside a smooth paved/concrete walkway, sidewalk or area, free from obstructions, to enable the handler to traverse the area alongside their Service animal.
 - If disaster conditions prohibit going outside, designate an area away from others and provide poop/pee pads with plastic sheeting material underneath.
- It may be helpful to have a shelter staff member posted at this area to describe the layout and location of this area and the items in this area, to the service animal handler.
- Should be marked out and must have one-way directional designated lanes or blocks at minimum 36 inches wide outline to facilitate separation of handlers with their service animals.
 - A tactile component for the marking should be considered, such as tactile tape and physical markers
- Post signage (braille, other languages) to designate the Animal Walk Area.
- Post signage (braille, other languages) to remind service animal handlers of social distancing practices.
 - Walk service animals on a leash; maintaining at least 6 feet (2 meters) from other people and animals.
- Have lined garbage can(s) available to deposit poop bags and other trash.
- Have a hands-free hand wash station and/or portable automatic hand sanitizer station available.

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Veterinary care:

- If a service animal gets sick while in the shelter:
 - The Shelter Manager should collaborate with the handler to contact a Veterinarian, preferably the service animal's Veterinarian, to determine the course of action to take.
 - In cases where the handler's veterinarian is unavailable, the shelter should have a list of local emergency and nonemergency veterinary facilities.

Note: The veterinarian will determine if State public health authorities should be contacted.

The following signs are potentially consistent with, but not specific to, SARS-CoV-2 infection in any service animal and could represent a wide array of infectious and non-infectious diseases:

- Fever, lethargy
- Coughing, difficulty breathing or shortness of breath
- Sneezing, nasal or ocular discharge
- Vomiting, diarrhea

If the handler of the service animal gets sick while in the shelter:

- Depending on the severity of the handler's sickness:
 - If the handler is moved to the isolation area, the service animal should remain with the handler as long as the handler is able to take care of their service animal.
 - If the handler and service animal need to be separated from the rest of the shelter clients for whatever reason, by law, communication access must be provided.
 - A separate Animal Walk/Relief Area should be set up for use.
 - If the handler needs to be transported to the hospital:
 - Hospitals must allow the service animal to remain with the individual whenever possible.
 - If it is not possible, due to whatever circumstances, the handler must first be allowed to make arrangements for someone else to care for the animal.
 - If that is not possible, due to the person's health condition (too sick or incapacitated), the handler's emergency contact and/or service animal's agency should be contacted to pick up the service animal from the human shelter.
 - If the emergency contact is not able to be contacted, the shelter manager or hospital can arrange board at a nearby facility until the person is well enough to make other arrangements.
 - The individual is responsible for the cost of boarding the service animal.

Feeding:

- The service animal's food, and other feeding supplies, if brought by the handler should be labeled with the handler's name. Access to water for the service animal should be supplied by the shelter.
- The food and feeding supplies should be kept in an area that is easily accessible by the service animal handler.

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- If pet food is obtained by the human shelter, the handler should provide the feeding instructions for their service animal to the shelter staff, so that their animal's food can be readied by a shelter staff member, to avoid multiple people handling the same products. Many service animals may be on specific diets/brands, so it is important to obtain the same pet food as the service animal is used to if possible
- One shelter staff member should be assigned to the feed area to prepare all the service animals' meals.
- Use disposable bowls
- A table should be placed between the shelter staff member preparing the meals and the handler picking up the prepared food.
 - Pet food should be stored behind the table so just the staff member will have access to the food.
 - Keep food clean and dry and in sealed receptacles, to prevent spoilage and vermin.
- Canned pet food remaining after opening and use, should be kept covered and refrigerated, and used up before the "use within date after opening." The service animal should be fed away from where the service animal's food is prepared and socially distanced from others.
- Handler supplied food should be labeled with the handler's name and be kept behind the table for the staff member to utilize.
- The shelter staff member will write the animal's name on the bowl, fill the bowl, place it on the table in front of them and step back. Then the handler can come up to the table and pick up their service animal's food.
- Have hand-free portable hand washing station(s) and/or portable automatic hand sanitizer station(s) in this area, along with garbage cans and liners.
- A shelter staff member should monitor this area and clean up any spills and sanitize this area after use.
- Feeding is under the control of the service animal handler only.
- Shelter staff may inquire about any assistance that the handler may be needed for feeding.
- In non-congregate sheltering, the animal's food could be packaged individually by shelter staff and distributed to the handler in his/her designated dormitory space.

Sleeping:

- The service animal should be allowed to stay with their handler at all times. Typically, the service animal sleeps on the floor near its handler.
 - If the handler did not bring the service animal's crate and/or bed, and if available, provide a dog crate/kennel, sleep mat or other bedding material (blanket, towel, etc.), for the service animal to sleep in/on.

References:

CDC Guidance for Handlers of Service and Therapy Animals:

<https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/animals/service-therapy-animals.html>



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CDC's Recommendations for Disaster Sheltering of Household Pets, Service animals, and Support Animals during the COVID-19 Pandemic:

<https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/php/mass-animal-care.html>

Key Facts About Service animals for Disaster Shelter Workers

<https://s3.amazonaws.com/production-northeastada-org/local/en/NEADA+Fact+Sheet+-+Service+Animals+for+Disaster+Shelter+Workers.pdf>

This is a resource for service animal handlers before an emergency/disaster arises

<https://adata.org/service-animal-resource-hub/emergencies>