



Assistance Dogs and Emotional Support Animals

If you've ever felt comforted by being with your pet, you know how special the connection between human and animal can be. In fact, science backs up the healing properties of pets. Studies show that interacting with a friendly animal lowers blood pressure and reduces anxiety. If you work with military families who might benefit from a pet, either for emotional support or as a service dog trained to help with a disability, here are some things to know.

The differences between an emotional support animal and an assistance dog

While both types of animals provide comfort, an assistance dog is trained in specific tasks to help someone with a disability. Only dogs, and in certain cases, miniature horses, can be assistance animals as defined by the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA).

Assistance dogs can be trained to do the following and more:

- Turn lights on and off
- Guide people who are blind
- Push elevator and handicap buttons
- Retrieve dropped items
- Alert their hearing-impaired person to important sounds, such as dropped keys or someone calling their name
- Alert their human to an oncoming seizure
- Provide balance for those who are unstable on their feet
- Calm a person with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) during an anxiety attack, or perform other duties, such as providing a physical barrier from crowds

The ADA gives people with assistance dogs the right to bring their animal into public places, such as restaurants, buses, and supermarkets.

Emotional support animals can be any species of animal that eases mental health symptoms, such as anxiety or depression. They don't have special training and are not allowed in public

places. However, airlines will allow some types of emotional support animals on commercial flights. They're also allowed into housing that otherwise bans pets. In both cases, their owner may need a note from a doctor or mental health professional.

Help military families decide whether a service animal is right for them

Ask your military family to consider the following:

- They may have the dog for 15 or more years. Can they give the dog the daily exercise and attention it needs to thrive?
- They may have to pay thousands of dollars for an assistance dog. Many organizations that train and place assistance dogs do not charge veterans. Some provide them for free to people who are disabled. Others expect civilian clients to pay outright or raise funds for their dogs.
- It costs money to care properly for a dog. Costs include paying for food, supplies, equipment, and boarding as well as routine and emergency veterinary care. The Veterans Administration (VA) will cover veterinary care and equipment for veterans who are approved for assistance dogs. The VA does not cover the cost of caring for emotional support animals, nor does it approve assistance dogs whose sole purpose is to help with PTSD.
- Assistance dogs require ongoing training. These dogs are highly trained when they are placed. They will quickly lose their skills and develop bad habits if the training is not kept up. Emotional support animals should have basic obedience training, too.

How to find an assistance dog

Emotional support animals can be found through shelters, breeders, or rescue centers. As long as they are good companions, it should not matter where they come from. That's not the case with assistance dogs. Often, assistance dogs are specially bred for their job and they are always individually trained to perform certain tasks. There are no federal or state licensing requirements to train assistance dogs. So, if your military family decides on an assistance dog, their next step is to find a trustworthy organization. They can start by checking out the following associations.

For guide dogs:

[International Guide Dog Federation](#)
[National Association of Guide Dog Users](#)

For assistance dogs:

[Assistance Dogs International](#)

Before settling on a provider, recommend that your military family look for the following:

- A long track record of training and placing assistance dogs for people with disabilities similar to theirs
- A thorough application process to match them with the best dog for their needs
- A period when the person and assistance dog are trained to work together as a team
- Ongoing support after training



By helping your military families think through their decision, they will be ready for the life-changing benefits of having an assistance dog or emotional support animal.

If you are interested in providing non-medical counseling to military service members and their families through Military OneSource, please email us at: mosproviderrelations@militaryonesource.com.