Emotional Support Animals

An emotional support animal (ESA) is a person’s pet that has been specifically prescribed as part of a treatment plan for a diagnosed disability by a licensed therapist, psychologist, or medical provider. An animal as part of the treatment plan is to bring comfort and minimize the negative symptoms of the person’s emotional/psychological disability – in other words, the presence of the animal serves to reduce functional limitations caused by the person’s diagnosis and disability that are not being addressed by therapy and/or medication. It is rare that an emotional support animal is prescribed as the only treatment for a mental health disability.

Due to dramatically increasing numbers of students requesting letters from our medical providers and mental health providers for emotional support animals, we have established some guidelines to manage this demand:

Our providers may provide such letters when there is an ongoing (greater than two semesters) patient/doctor relationship with one of our clinicians, when other treatment modalities have been utilized (i.e. therapy and medication) and when it appears that the student’s mental health condition may improve with the ongoing support of an animal. Prior to writing a letter of support, a student must be seen for an updated appointment by their clinician in order to evaluate and document the current diagnosis and disability causing functional limitations, the ongoing treatment plan and to document the actual need for an emotional support animal.

An ESA is not a “therapy” or “service” animal requiring specific training and legitimate trainer certification of the animal's ability to perform the tasks for which the animal has been trained. Legitimate service animals are very expensive due to extensive training and represent a very small minority of the animals used for accommodation of a variety of disabilities. Legitimate service animals are the only animals allowed to accompany a student into indoor public buildings on campus such as dining halls, libraries, labs and classrooms. An ESA is neither certified nor trained as a service animal and therefore is not allowed in public indoor buildings or public transportation. Please be aware there are potential regulations banning purchasing a vest for a non-service animal in order to gain access to public areas not legally available to an ESA.

Due to allergy concerns, an ESA is not allowed in the Health Center, only certified service animals are allowed.

Caring for any animal is a significant time commitment. There will be significant financial investment in providing adequate food, care and veterinary care for the animal. Many animals do not adapt to living in small indoor spaces such as dorm rooms. Some students have found that keeping an animal in dorm rooms or small apartments has resulted in more stress, not less.
Some students seeking a letter for an emotional support animal have already made the decision to bring an animal into their housing without landlord knowledge or proper documentation and find themselves needing documentation quickly before an inspection or they face fines, eviction or loss of the animal. We do not write ESA letters under pressure nor as an emergency.