



What Makes an Emotional Support Animal? — An Interview with Matthew Carlson of Challenger Point

Tea



by Melody Keilig

What does it mean to have an Emotional Support Animal? This term gets tossed around a lot, but sometimes trusted sources don't have an accurate representation of how certain animals receive the title of ESA. That's why we spoke to Matthew Carlson of [Challenger Point](#) to get the full explanation behind disability-related services and emotional support animals.

"Primarily what I do is I'll work with people who have disabilities of any sort, really. Most of it is psychiatric in nature, so some kind of mental health concern that might be disrupting at least one daily living activity, work, sleep, concentration, food, socializing, that kind of thing, and then help them to establish any kind of accommodations they might need for housing or work or school or travel," Carlson says.

Carlson is a licensed mental health provider in Colorado, Texas, and Florida. Although he has clients in these states, his home base is Colorado. He attended graduate school in 2012 and received a Master's in Counseling. Then he worked in advanced human behavior and disaster crisis intervention Ph.D. programs.

Most of Carlson's job today involves working with animals and recommending using them to help their owners with various tasks and situations. ESAs may be needed in housing accommodations to make their owner feel supported in the home.

Carlson's licensure allows him to diagnose and treat psychiatric conditions, which means most of his work is related to mental health concerns. But he also works with people who have medical conditions, mobility challenges, and trauma history. Some of these clients include military veterans who seek help for the trauma they have endured in the service.

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When the pandemic occurred, Carlson met with his clients virtually. Even now, he still has a few in-person clients in Colorado that he helps with dog training and counseling. But Carlson says that speaking with clients virtually works out much better for everyone involved.

Because he's not required to meet with clients in person, Carlson says his job has become much more stress-free now that virtual meetings have been approved post-pandemic. Previously, he could speak with clients virtually or over the phone, but this type of meeting was discouraged at the time. Plus, Carlson wouldn't be able to bill it to insurance, which caused some roadblocks.

"It's like, why meet in person when you can just do it real quick on video? So we do an assessment on the video or over the phone, and then I'll draft up a recommendation letter and I'll summarize everything," he says.

Because of the misconceptions about ESAs and service animals, Carlson says that education is a massive goal in his line of work. Many people don't understand the differences between these labels, which causes confusion among them and people who need these animals.

For instance, Carlson says that there is a misconception that ESAs require identification by law. However, he says this isn't true because these animals don't need to have an ID or a vest at all.



The law recognizes only service animals who help with a specific task, such as a seeing-eye dog for people with vision impairment, a dog trained to provide tactile stimulation for people with anxiety, etc. Service animals can access any public space so long as it does not cause an "undue burden" on the facility and the animal is under control at all times. Therefore, ESAs can be denied access to public spaces because they do not have a specific task they perform. They are considered "support animals" not "service animals."





Although Carlson says that ESAs can receive an ID and a vest if the owner chooses, he would never want his clients to believe that they can take their animal anywhere if approved as an ESA. He says it's crucial to work with a provider who knows the law well and can advise clients about various situations they may encounter.

“The people who get vests and stuff, it's a personal preference. If it were me, I'd probably put something on them just so that people know that this is why I have this dog and it's for a purpose. And I probably would put on there ‘Don't Pet’ just to keep the dog focused on me, not on everybody else, and just keep it very straightforward,” he says.



Carlson is an advocate for his clients in housing situations where a landlord is attempting to prevent a tenant from having an ESA in an apartment complex or other housing situation. He says that many property managers have significantly increased their revenue and ability to charge people for having animals as pets.

Typically, tenants with pets must pay pet fees on top of the usual rent and utilities. It's become challenging when Carlson has to advocate for clients who need an ESA due to a mental health condition.



However, an ESA and service animal is a legal description. This label means that the animal is not considered a pet once the person's disability is established. Carlson says that the only significant difference between the two descriptions is what tasks the animals perform.

“Emotional support animals are primarily good for housing and permanent housing, whether it's your house or it's a visitor. You can't be restricted and you can't be charged fees because of the use of an emotional support animal,” he says.

Most properties, such as apartment buildings, either don't allow pets or have strict rules about pets. These restrictions include dog breed restrictions, weight restrictions, animal restrictions, or pet fees and deposits. Due to these specific rules, it can be difficult for someone with an ESA or service animal to find housing.



That's where Carlson comes in and helps the person needing approval for their animal as an ESA. Carlson says this situation then becomes an accommodations request, where he requests that the property manager waive any pet fee or other restriction.

“There are a lot of unethical things happening with emotional support animals and service dogs,” Carlson says.

Some of these things include businesses that sell items not required by law. These businesses convince people they need certain things for their ESA or service dog. Carlson says he advocates and acts as a middleman between his clients and the property managers or landlords.



Approval for a client to have an ESA and service dog lasts for one year, so the disability has to be re-established yearly. The client has ongoing treatment and steps to continue having their ESA.

“I definitely advocate and middleman in a way, but it's really more so professional advocacy for people who have disabilities in housing,” he says.

Carlson has done over 10,000 approvals for his clients and says he's stopped counting the number of these approvals he has had to go through over the last ten years.



“I do advocate for clients to be able to establish their rights when they have a disability. They have the right to have a home just like anybody else, but maybe with some accommodations, and usually, the accommodations include the use of animals without any restrictions or fees involved, but it does have to come from the provider's office,” he says.

Carlson says that having an animal nearby has several benefits if someone is living with mental health conditions. The company from the animal is not only for someone living alone, it can also provide comfort to people dealing with negative thought processes. Plus, if the ESA is a dog, they can encourage outdoor activities like going for walks.



Because dogs tend to be more vocal and expressive, someone struggling can get comfort from them. Dogs and humans usually bond more, so a dog that is an ESA can get their owner's attention if they're going through a rough time. The dog can then provide a moment of pause, which can be an intervention for the person in need.

Carlson says he can relate to some of the challenges he helps his clients through because he has encountered his own mental health struggles. A firefighter EMT for ten years, Carlson was diagnosed with PTSD in 2008. During this difficult time, Carlson went into treatment and became a counselor.

“I came from being traumatized by work and not being able to sleep and not knowing what to do about it, to a client or a patient and then became a provider,” he says.

Before practicing disability-related services, Carlson primarily worked in trauma therapy. Now, he combines these methods to help people through their struggles more personally.

“So most of what I do is help people with their reactions and try to process through, not just adapt, to what you're feeling and thinking and doing. But to kind of go back and start to heal and recover from some of those events that you've been through. And that's pretty intense to work in that way,” he says.

At Challenger Point, it typically takes at least twelve sessions for a client to get started in this type of therapy. Depending on the client's trauma history, they may need more sessions. The treatment consists of working on reactions, which Carlson keeps track of during the sessions. He uses specific assessments to measure his client's reactions and track them over time.

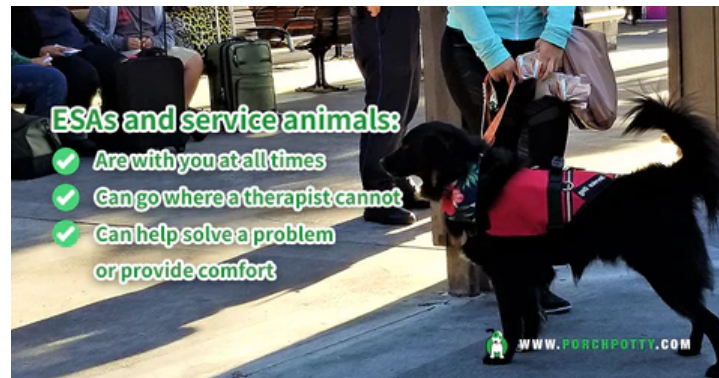




The therapy also goes into coping skills and strategies, where ESAs and service animals come in to help the client with their disability. Once they have enough practice in those coping skills, the client can handle more intense reactions.

Carlson says that he doesn't have clients relive anything traumatic. Instead, he uses different techniques to help people process traumatic events and learn how an ESA or service dog can help them counteract their reactions.

Because an ESA or service dog can always be with the client, Carlson emphasizes the work these animals do. For instance, a therapist can't always be there for the client when they're having a moment of struggle. But their ESA or service dog is with them at all times and can help in moments when the therapist is out of reach.



“Some people train their dogs to step in front of people when they're in a crowd just to give them that space to feel more comfortable. Such things like that, I would never be able to do that as a therapist,” Carlson says.

Within Carlson's practice, he refers to these coping skills and strategies as “resourcing.” He says that being able to process traumatic events with the help of a trained animal can help in learning to heal and grow from those experiences.

Because there is a lot of misinformation regarding ESAs and service animals, Carlson says that people are welcome to reach out to him through the phone, email, or text with questions. He also says that the most reliable information about ESAs and service dogs is from the Americans with Disabilities Act.



For reliable information on ESAs
and service animals, check out the

ADA AMERICANS WITH DISABILITIES ACT

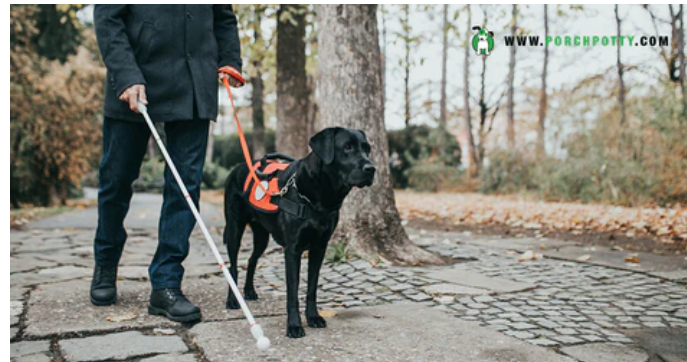
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Unfortunately, U.S. airlines are not required to accommodate ESAs. If someone would like to travel with their dog, and they have an established disability, they will need to have their dog approved as a service dog in order to be able to fly without restrictions or fees.

If someone has questions about traveling by plane, check out the U.S. Air Carrier Access Act. It's also important to check the laws in other countries regarding ESAs and service animals because every country has different rules on how they handle these working animals.

For employment, check out the U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission and establish accommodations at work and school. Licensed mental health providers and physicians can help with assessments and referrals to receive approval for an ESA or service dog.

Carlson says that going back to the source is the best way to separate the truthful legal information from the misinformation.



Because Challenger Point wants the best for everyone seeking help, Carlson strives to provide a welcoming environment where people can be open about their struggles and never feel alone.

At Challenger Point, their motto reads, "To the stars through adversity." Inspired by the Challenger Point mountain in Colorado, this motto speaks to their mission of inspiring people no matter their mental health struggle or disability. With the proper guidance and unconditional love from the animals in our lives, Challenger Point proves that anything is possible.

