

# Anger over fake service dogs has people snarling

By Michael D. Bates, AP

Cassie gets plenty of stares as she walks down the aisles of Home Depot, taking an occasional sniff at some of the items on the shelves or standing still while people stroke her long black hair.

Her handler, Lorraine Clark, maintains a firm grasp on Cassie's leash. Sometimes she gently tugs it to keep the Australian Shepherd walking straight and not running into customers or their carts.

Clark, owner of Suncoast Service Dogs in Homosassa, is an expert in training service and therapy dogs. Cassie is the latter, and Clark often takes her out in public to make sure she behaves correctly and follows directions. Clark takes her dog to area elementary schools during reading time, where students are eager to read to Cassie. Sometimes Cassie goes to nursing homes, where she is greeted with smiles by patients and residents who need therapeutic help.

But even though Cassie is properly leashed, she's not always met with smiles, Clark said. Other customers rarely confront Clark, but she says their body language suggests they are not at all pleased with Cassie's presence.

That friction occurs much more often these days – especially since, Clark says, many people are passing off untrained canines as therapy dogs or, worse, as service dogs. That gives trained dogs a black eye, Clark said.

“It is getting out of hand,” she said.

Many customers agree.

What is a service dog?

It wasn't always this way. Under federal law, the only kinds of dogs allowed in public places are service dogs – though some stores, such as Home Depot, have “dog-friendly” policies. Service dogs are what most people think of when they think of support animals – properly credentialed, mitigating a physical disability and more well-behaved in stores than many toddlers.

Today, the lines have blurred. Now, you hear about therapy dogs and emotional support dogs. Clark said some people try to pass off their dog as a “companion dog,” even though the label is entirely bogus. The animal need not even be a dog – because of the legal distinction between service animals and therapy animals, people can call their cat, rabbit, hamster, rooster or even snake a therapy animal. While there are therapy animals that have undergone training for their roles, certification is not legally required to call an animal a therapy animal.

Store managers and business owners are largely powerless to act when customers object. While only service dogs and miniature horses are allowed in public places under the Americans with Disabilities Act, there are just two questions people can legally ask when they see one of the animals in a store or restaurant: “Is that a service animal?” and “What task is that animal trained to do?”

Therapy animals are not allowed in stores, but unscrupulous pet owners have begun leveraging the fear of litigation to ensure Fido never has to leave their side.

What is a therapy dog?

For someone subject to panic attacks or post traumatic stress disorder, peace often comes with a hairy face and four legs.

Therapy dogs are more in vogue these days than ever before, thanks in part to an explosion of online stores that sell fake

certificates and vests – and it's not just therapy dogs.

Tim Wayne of Citrus Hills and his bull mastiff, Josie, were standing inside Home Depot on a recent Tuesday morning talking with a friend when a man seated in a wheelchair attempted to pet the dog.

As his hand neared Josie's head, Wayne stopped him: "No, no. She's working right now. You can't touch her."

The man apologized and Wayne thanked him for his consideration.

The same day, Nancy Doak of Inverness was walking her 140-pound Great Dane, Tolkien, through the aisles of the home improvement store when another customer tried to give Tolkien a pat. Doak, who has post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and mobility issues, gently admonished the man, who then walked off.

Wayne and Doak have service dogs. Unlike therapy dogs, service canines are off limits to friendly touches from strangers.

"They don't understand," Doak said. "(The dog) is a piece of medical equipment. (People) shouldn't touch, they shouldn't talk and they shouldn't make eye contact with the dog in any way. I tell people, 'Talk to me and I will tell you all about it.' "

Most people are considerate, Doak said. Some aren't.

Wayne, a disabled Air Force veteran suffering from spinal injuries, puts it this way: "You wouldn't go up to someone and start playing with his oxygen unit."

Wayne was in a grocery store recently when a young girl tried to pet Josie. When he told her not to, the girl's father got huffy and stormed off.

It's the life of a handler and his or her dog, Wayne said.

A couple years ago, before he had Josie, Wayne said was walking with a non-certified dog in the parking lot of a grocery store when a man in a white van drove up to him and asked him if he wanted to get his pet "certified" as a service dog.

He could provide the proper papers for \$79, Wayne said.

After consulting with Clark, he found out the man was a con artist. Such scams represent a threat to legitimate dog owners, Clark said.

Her advice: Be careful.

"Education of the public is needed," Clark said.

Clark still bristles when she sees animals of any kind riding in a shopping cart. Arizona, she said, recently passed a law outlawing that practice.

"I wish Florida had that law, too," she said.