

At Your Service

Apartment communities must accommodate service animals of all stripes.

BY NADEEN GREEN

The number of service animal fair housing cases has increased lately, including ones related to student housing, homeowner associations and mobile-home communities.

One point worth making is that those in the multifamily housing industry will likely encounter dogs and cats, as well as animals they don't consider to be traditional service animals—such as miniature horses, monkeys and iguanas—providing assistance to the disabled in ways that are unfamiliar and intriguing.

Dogs, for example, can alert epileptics before they have a seizure and warn diabetics if their blood sugar is too low.

Which brings us to Mr. Gibbs...

Fox News recently featured a darling, curly-headed 3-year-old named Alida, who lives in Loganville, Ga. Alida has a rare lung condition that affects her breathing. Her dad describes it as having too many filters in an air-conditioner—it will have to work too hard to cool and the compressor will likely give out.

Alida's lungs have growths that force her to work hard to breathe, which is taxing on her heart. The solution is to be on oxygen, provided from tanks through tubing to her nose. But when you are a 3-year-old and your parents want you to have as normal a childhood as possible, being tethered to tanks isn't ideal.

Enter Mr. Gibbs, Alida's service dog, who wears a specially designed "jacket" with pockets to carry the oxygen tanks that Alida needs. Mr. Gibbs' job is to carry those tanks and to go with Alida everywhere—and I mean everywhere, including to the top of the slide and down! Alida can run, jump, play and enjoy life just like any other 3-year-old.

If Alida, her parents and Mr. Gibbs show up on your apartment doorstep, remember that Mr. Gibbs can move in with this family, no matter what your pet policies may be. For example, you may have weight limits for pets—which is fine—but Mr.

Gibbs needs to be big enough to carry those tanks. He is not a Chihuahua! In addition, you may require pet deposits—which also is fine—but Mr. Gibbs is not a pet. He is so much more.

As I was thinking about service animals—and in particular, dogs—I dug up an article written 15 years ago by Mindy Williams, based on research by Rob Foellinger.

The article has little to do with fair housing, but demonstrates our industry's tendency to stick to certain policies not necessarily because they make sense, but because that's just the way we've always done things.

The essence of the article—called "Doggone It"—is that, according to veterinarians and dog trainers who were asked to name the top 10 dog breeds that fare best in apartments, only one breed weighed under 20 pounds. Of the 10 worst dog breeds, seven weighed less than 20 pounds.

More recently, the Massachusetts Animal Coalition (MAC) poo-pooed the misconception that small dogs make better apartment dwellers.

"Wrong," says MAC. "Weight and breed have little to do with a dog's suitability for apartment living. Small terriers, toy and miniature breeds are often high-strung barkers and chewers. Toy breeds are frequently harder to houstrain. Some of the largest dogs are the biggest 'couch potatoes.'"

MAC also debunked the myth that multiple animals cause more trouble and, consequently, should be prohibited.

"Two's often company, resulting in less boredom when left home alone, and thus fewer behavioral problems—less whining, barking, crying, scratching, destructive chewing, etc.," say experts at MAC.

Just something to chew on. 



For more information on Fair Housing, visit the Fair Housing Library at <http://bit.ly/K4cej2> on NAA Community (NAA login required).

Nadeen Green is Senior Counsel with For Rent Media Solutions™. The information contained in this article—which originally ran as a blog on multifamilyinsiders.com—is not to be considered legal advice, and the author and FRMS strongly suggest that you consult with your own counsel as to any fair housing questions or problems you may have.

IN CASE OF FIRE
DO NOT USE ELEVATORS
USE STAIRS

