

# EMOTIONAL SUPPORT ANIMALS IN THE FIRE STATION

## EMOTIONAL SUPPORT ANIMALS

Firefighters see things no one should see. They are routinely exposed to incidents involving devastating injuries and tragic loss of life and property. The cumulative effects of these exposures can have a debilitating psychological impact. According to the [Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration \(SAMHSA\)](#), roughly 1 in 3 first responders develop Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD).

Despite the high rate of first responders suffering from mental health challenges, fears surrounding confidentiality or negative career impact may cause them to not seek help. An internal stigma of weakness may exist as well.

In recent years, the use of Emotional Support Animals (ESAs) has gained recognition for its positive impact on mental health. While there is no substitute for treatment by a mental health provider, adopting an emotional support animal may provide a calming presence to the station and help alleviate stress and anxiety.

## ESA vs. SERVICE DOG

It is important to know the difference between ESAs and Service Animals. ESAs are not considered service animals under the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA). They may have training for a specific owner, but they do not have specialized training to perform tasks that assist people with disabilities. Still, these companion animals have been found to ease conditions such as anxiety, depression, some phobias, and loneliness. In order to be considered an ESA, the animal must be prescribed by a mental health provider for a patient with a diagnosed psychological or emotional disorder, such as PTSD.



## BENEFITS

According to an article published in Zliving by Nicole Gibbs titled "[The many special benefits of Emotional Support Dogs](#)," there are several benefits of having an emotional support animal readily available to responders, including:

- Reducing Stress
- Relieving loneliness
- Lowering blood pressure and cholesterol
- Increasing activity
- Improving mental health
- Faster recovery from illness and injury
- Having a friend who loves you unconditionally

## CONSIDERATIONS

Some organizations have adopted an ESA as a pet for the station, where the animal lives in the station and the membership is responsible for the animal's well-being. Other organizations have adopted a much more involved process, especially in larger municipal government organizations where there is a full-time handler and the animal responds to stations and sometimes incident scenes to assist with support.

As your organization begins to look into this topic and possibility it is important to evaluate and address the following items:

### Purpose

What is the intended purpose of the animal? Will it just be a station pet to be a friendly face, or will this animal respond to calls and assist with emotional support on the scene?

### Financial, Legal, & Regulatory

- Who handles the financial aspects of this animal – Is this funded by the taxpayers, general membership, or donations from the residents you protect?
- Who has ownership of the animal, and how is that ownership obtained?
- Is your insurance provider aware of this animal, and do you have adequate coverage for the animal (animal liability, bite liability)?
- Is the animal permitted on emergency incident scenes, and if so, in what capacity and how close to the incident should they be?
- ESA certification - An ESA letter is a document written by a licensed mental health care professional that states your need for the animal and how it helps with your mental or emotional disability. It's important to note that an ESA letter is the only legitimate way to validate your emotional support animal ([usserviceanimals.org](http://usserviceanimals.org)).
- Determine if there are any state regulations or requirements for Emotional Support Animals concerning training requirements or registration within a state registry.

### Cost

According to the [American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals \(ASPCA\)](http://AmericanSocietyforthePreventionofCrueltytoAnimals.org), new dog owners can expect to spend about \$2,896 in the first year (excluding any adoption fees) and around \$1,866 in recurring annual expenses (food, health, grooming, etc.) not accounting for unexpected illness or injury.

### Exercise

Dogs need at least 30 minutes of exercise a day. Implement a workout schedule that integrates the animal's exercise needs with the crew's daily exercise requirements.



### Training

Emotional support dogs don't need as much training as service dogs, but they must be obedient and must be well-behaved in all places. This includes simple things like being housebroken. Who is responsible for training the animal? Obedience training and proper socializing is crucial so the animal can support you no matter what the circumstances.

### Health

Who ensures the animal is current on all shots and vaccines? The animal should be seen by a vet regularly, as determined by the vet, and all documentation must be appropriately filed and maintained. Who ensures the animal receives appropriate medical care upon acute illness or injury? Can any member take the animal to the vet?

### Transportation

How will this animal be transported to any appointments or other locations? Is there a specialized vehicle approved for transporting the animal? Will they be transported in a member's personal vehicle? Whenever transporting the animal, secure the animal using an appropriate securement process.

Dalmatians were the first ever unofficial mascot of the fire service, dating back to the mid – 1700’s. Dalmatians were used as stable guards and to assist in clearing the path for the horse drawn wagons. Once fire equipment began to move to motorized vehicles, the FDNY was attributed to keeping the breed alive and the attention drawn on Dalmatians (DCA 1905 – 2005 A centennial Celebration, 2005). In today’s world, we see organizations continue with the idea of having various different breeds and types of dogs within the fire station, however now for different reasons.



## Safety

Even the most docile animals can attack people or destroy property. Keep the animal on a leash or tethered whenever the general public is within the firehouse to prevent the dog from lunging at residents who might stop by. Keep the animal on a leash or tethered anytime the animal is out of the living quarters to prevent the dog from running away if bay doors are open. Ensure the dog is safe while crews are out of the station. Keep in mind that crating a dog might take time and delay emergency response.

## Pets in the Workplace

- Not everyone is a dog lover - Be mindful of other members and their feelings and experiences related to animals.
- Members with known pet allergies – Make sure to bathe the animal and launder its bed/pillow regularly to help prevent the transfer of allergens.
- Pets can be distracting - especially their need for walking, feeding, bathing, and exercising. Their presence might be counterproductive when too much time is taken away due to animal breaks.
- Sterile environment – Keep the animal isolated from medical equipment stored in the station and keep them out of the back of medical response units.

## **SUMMARY**

Firefighters regularly face immense stress and trauma leading to significant emotional and mental health concerns. An Emotional Support Animal provides its owner with therapeutic benefits through companionship, helping to limit the stressors associated with the fire services. Organizations looking to go this route should establish a well-defined and thorough policy related to the ESA - how it will be utilized and who will be responsible for the animal.