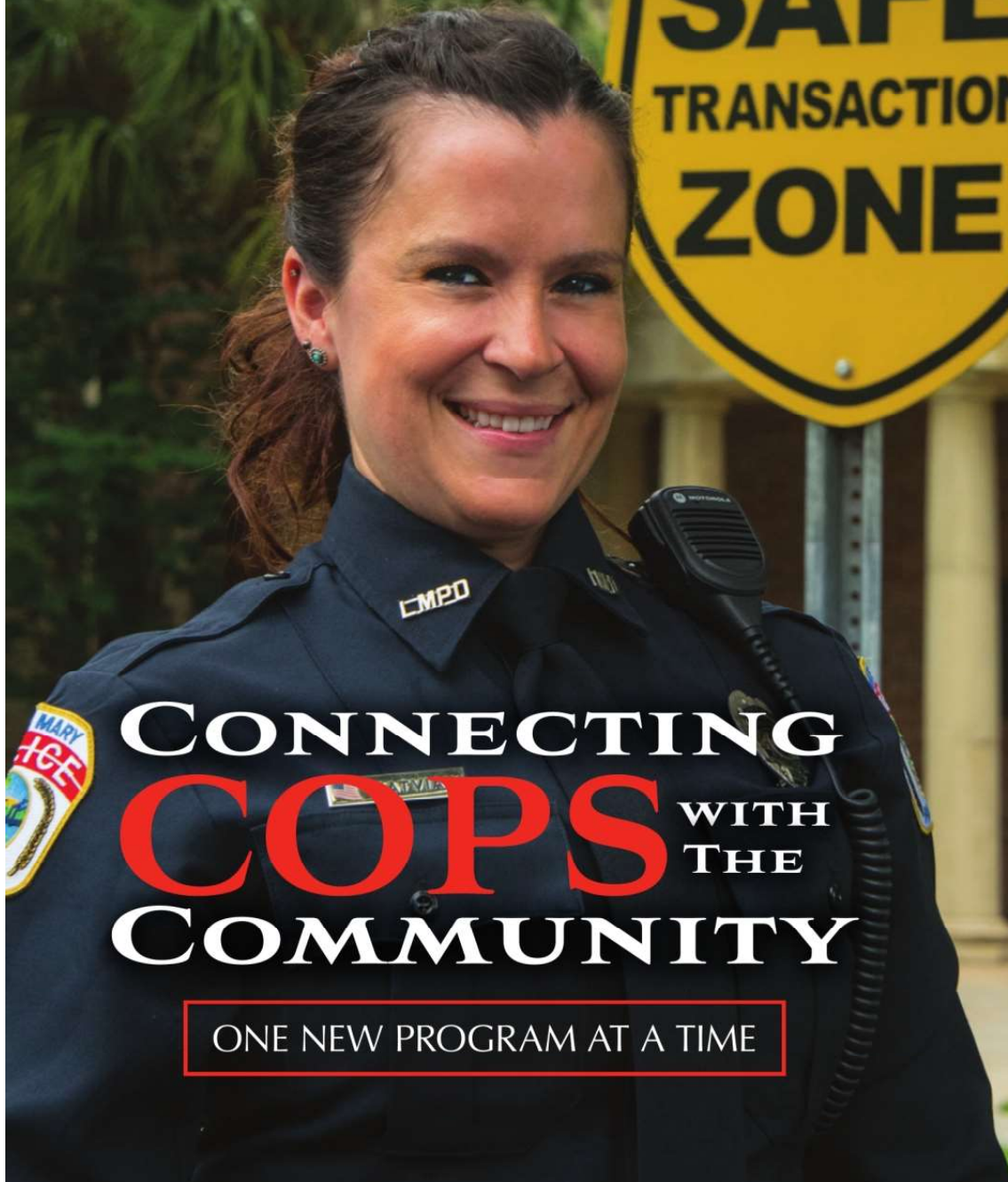


LAKE MARY *Life*TM

Lake Mary • Heathrow • Sanford • Longwood

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Service and Therapy and Support Animals, Oh My!

by Rebecca Stone, LMHC



Understanding the differences between service, therapy, and support animals

Have you been out and about and seen animals sporting service, therapy, or support animal badges or heard someone refer to their animal as a service, therapy, or support animal? Are you unsure what that means? If you answered yes, you are not alone. It is becoming increasingly common to see animals in places they previously did not frequent.

SERVICE ANIMALS

Covered under the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), a service animal is an animal that has received specialized training to perform a specific task or set of tasks for a person with a disability. They may perform overt tasks, such as guide dogs for someone with

low vision or blindness, or covert tasks, such as sensing blood glucose levels for people with diabetes, or sensing or reducing symptoms of panic attacks for people with anxiety or panic disorders.

Due to their work, service animals are permitted to accompany people with disabilities in all areas where members of the public are allowed to go (e.g., restaurants), but may not be permitted in places that may pose a health or safety hazard, such as in a public pool, although they must be permitted on the pool deck. They usually wear a vest or a special harness. However, it is not required if it impedes the animal's ability to perform

its tasks. Legally, if it's not readily obvious that the animal is a service animal by identifiers, behavior, or otherwise, there are only two questions that can legally be asked to determine if an animal is a service animal: 1) Is the dog (or miniature horse) a service animal that is required because of a disability? and 2) What work or task has the animal been trained to perform?

THERAPY ANIMALS

A therapy animal is an animal which is used within a therapeutic setting by a health or mental health professional or by an individual who is trained to handle therapy animals. Therapy animals typically have behavioral training and are often certified through an Animal Assisted Therapy program. Generally, therapy animals are permitted only in facilities, such as retirement homes or specific areas within facilities like common areas of in a hospital or a therapy office after review and invitation by the facility owner/operator. The facility owner/operator has to consider things like insurance coverage, allergies/fears of other people in the facility, and facility cleaning needs. There should be times where therapy animals are not in the facility to ensure everyone can access the facility/services.

EMOTIONAL SUPPORT ANIMALS

An Emotional Support Animal (ESA), AKA Comfort Animal,

is an animal that is prescribed by a licensed mental health professional to an individual with a disability. The ESA's purpose is to alleviate one or more identified symptoms or effects of an individual's disability (e.g., a person's depression symptoms being reduced by having to get out of bed and walk the dog in the morning). Ideally, the person with the disability should have an established relationship with a mental health provider prior to being prescribed an ESA, and the person should be receiving some sort of ongoing treatment (therapy or medication) in addition to the ESA.

Any type of animal could be considered an ESA – a dog, cat, rat, snake, etc. They do not have any special training and there is no centralized ESA registration, so don't be fooled by websites that say your ESA must be registered. They're unnecessary and invalid. Per the Fair Housing Act, ESAs are only permitted within the owner's dwelling. However, airlines may permit certain types or sizes of ESAs to travel on an airplane and only to certain locations. Since an ESA does not carry out tasks associated with daily living, it is not required to accompany a person with a disability at all times. Because ESAs are only permitted within the handler's residence, vests or badges are not usually necessary.

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REBECCA STONE, LMHC is an experienced mental health professional with a specialty in emotional support animals. She lives in Lake Mary and owns/operates a private practice in Winter Springs. Rebecca can be reached at 407-358-6599 or Rebecca@StoneCCS.com.