Emotional Support Animals See Rising Demand Amid New Housing Rules

Rising demand, evolving housing rules and new federal guidance are putting a spotlight on ESA owners

SAN JUAN, SAN JUAN, PUERTO RICO, September 10, 2026 /EINPresswire.com/ -- Emotional support animals (ESAs) are companion animals that provide comfort and emotional support to people with mental or emotional health conditions. Unlike service animals, ESAs are not specifically trained to perform tasks for a person with a disability, but their presence can help individuals with conditions such as anxiety, depression, loneliness and other mental health challenges.

For those who need documentation to support an ESA-related housing request, an ESA letter from a qualified mental health professional may be an important part of the process. At the same time, changing housing rules and growing demand for professional support are making it increasingly important for ESA owners to understand their rights, responsibilities and the steps involved in requesting accommodations.

High Demand for ESAs
The growing role of animals in Americans' emotional well-being is reflected in several recent surveys and studies. In a 2025 national poll, the American Psychiatric Association found that 81% of pet owners said their pets had a positive impact on their mental health, while 65% said their pets helped reduce stress or anxiety and 61% said they provided companionship. Another 62% said their pets provided a calming presence.

That connection is also reflected in the number of people who identify their animals specifically as emotional support animals. An American Psychiatric Association poll conducted with the American Veterinary Medical Association in 2024 found that 18% of pet owners said one or more of their pets was a certified emotional support animal. The same survey found that 88% of ESA owners said their pet had a mostly positive impact on their mental health.

More recent data from MetLife Pet Insurance points to the continuing importance of animals during periods of emotional difficulty. Its 2026 survey of 2,000 U.S. dog and cat owners found that 85% viewed their pet as a main source of happiness in 2025, while 30% said their pet was there for them during mental health challenges. Nine in ten respondents said their pet gives them something positive to focus on when things are not going well.

The need for emotional support is not limited to younger adults. A 2025 University of Michigan National Poll on Healthy Aging found that 83% of pet owners age 50 and older said their pets gave them a sense of purpose, while 71% said their pets helped them enjoy life.

Together, the findings show why questions about emotional support animals are increasingly relevant to housing and mental health. For people whose animals play a documented role in managing a disability or related symptoms, understanding the rules and having appropriate professional documentation can be an important part of requesting an accommodation.

2026 HUD Changes

The legal landscape changed on May 22, 2026, when the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development's Office of Fair Housing and Equal Opportunity (FHEO) issued new internal enforcement guidance concerning assistance-animal accommodation complaints under the Fair Housing Act.

The memorandum rescinded HUD's previous 2020 assistance-animal guidance and instructed FHEO that, for animal-related complaints, it would find reasonable cause and recommend charges only when the animal was individually trained to provide disability-related assistance. In effect, this narrows the types of cases that federal housing officials will pursue and makes the distinction between trained service animals and untrained emotional support animals more consequential.

The memorandum did not amend the Fair Housing Act itself, it is an internal enforcement policy rather than a new federal statute or regulation. State and local fair housing laws may provide additional protections, and the memorandum itself does not change the separate standards that can apply under laws such as Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act.

That makes documentation particularly important for ESA owners navigating housing questions. A legitimate letter from a qualified healthcare professional can provide evidence of a person's disability-related need for an animal, although the legal effect of that documentation can depend on the housing provider, the applicable law and the specific circumstances.

In other words, obtaining documentation does not automatically guarantee approval of every accommodation request. It does, however, give an owner a clearer basis for explaining the disability-related need and following the applicable accommodation process.

What ESA Owners Should Do

The first step for ESA owners is to understand which rules apply to their particular situation. Federal housing protections, state fair housing laws and rules governing public accommodations do not necessarily treat emotional support animals in the same way. An animal that may qualify for a housing accommodation, for example, does not automatically have the same access rights as a service animal in restaurants, stores or other public spaces.

Owners should also keep their documentation current and make sure any supporting letter

comes from a qualified healthcare professional who can legitimately evaluate their mental health needs. Avoiding questionable certificates, registrations or online certifications is particularly important because these do not by themselves establish a legal right to an accommodation.

Finally, owners who believe a housing provider has improperly rejected their request should keep copies of their accommodation request, supporting documentation and any communication with the property manager or landlord. They can then determine whether the matter should be addressed through the appropriate state fair housing agency, HUD or another applicable enforcement channel. HUD continues to provide a process for filing and investigating housing discrimination complaints.

For people seeking professional documentation, specialized services can connect individuals with licensed mental health professionals and provide educational resources about emotional support animal requirements.

As the 2026 policy shift continues to generate questions, staying informed may be just as important as obtaining the right documentation. For ESA owners, understanding their rights, following housing procedures carefully and keeping up with changes in federal and state law can help them navigate an increasingly complex legal environment.

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