

# Leominster Disabilities Commission:

## *Who we are and what we do*

BY KATHRYN NEEL

Imagine combining the entire populations of both the states of Florida and California, that number (approximately 54 million people) is roughly equal to the total number of disabled people in the United States according to the 2005 Census.

1 in 5 Americans has some sort of disability serious enough to appear in government records and that number is growing as the population ages.

The goal of the Leominster Disabilities Commission is to make Leominster a user-friendly community to all individuals, but especially to those with disabilities. The Commission does this by raising public awareness through education and providing a resource for information. The Commission promotes the rights of all persons with disabilities, so that full inclusion to all programs and support services are realized.

In 2009 the Leominster Disabilities Commission, in conjunction with the Massachusetts Office on Disability, hosted a workshop on Emergency Preparedness for People with Disabilities. At this meeting,



members of the police, fire and rescue, and other community services, as well as disabled citizens and their families came together to discuss the special needs of the disabled during community emergencies and disasters. Over the years the Leominster Disability Commission has hosted a number of community-based and regional meetings in cooperation with the Massachusetts Office on Disabilities to help plan for the special needs of the disabled population.

The Leominster Disabilities Commission ~ consisting of seven board members appointed by the Mayor and the City Council ~ meets monthly to discuss and plan activities to raise awareness and promote equal opportunity, full involvement and accessibility for people with disabilities in all aspects of life in and around Leominster.

The Disabilities Commission exists to help citizens of Leominster affected by a disability. The Commission is here to help you, please contact the Leominster Disability Commission for assistance and to get the support and services you need.

The Leominster Disabilities Commission website is [www.leominster-ma.gov/disabilities\\_commission](http://www.leominster-ma.gov/disabilities_commission) and lists upcoming monthly meetings of the Commission.

*Kathryn Neel is a member of the Leominster Disabilities Commission, and writes this column to help broaden the horizons of people with disabilities and provide information to the general public on all the things that can be done by someone with a disability.*

# How is a service dog different than a pet?

BY KATHRYN NEEL

A service dog is a type of assistance dog specifically trained to help people who have disabilities. Service dogs do not require specific pedigrees, though desirable character traits, good



conformation and good health are critical requirements for an acceptable service dog. Service dogs are sometimes trained and bred by private organizations. In other cases, a disabled handler may train his or her own dog with or without the aid of a private dog trainer. The terms "service dog" or "assistance dog" are used interchangeably.

The Americans with Disabilities Act (1990) define "service dog" under its broader definition of "service animal". "Service Animal" (ADA Subsection 36.104): "Any guide dog, signal dog, or other animal that is individually trained to do work or perform tasks for the benefit of an individual with a disability, including, but not limited to, guiding people with impaired vision, alerting people with impaired hearing to intruders or sounds, providing minimal protection or rescue work, pulling a wheelchair or fetching dropped items, alerting."

Virtually any dog can be considered a "service dog" since there is no certification or formal training required, though a multitude of training schools, trainers, and certification programs exist. The only requirement that must be met is the dog must be able to provide a service for the disabled person that they would have had a difficult time doing without the service dog.

The majority of service dog owners choose to have their dogs wear special capes or insignia so people will not distract them from their "jobs" when they are working and to reduce questions as to whether a dog is or isn't a service animal.

Service dogs differ from a pet in that they are trained to perform specialized tasks at specific times. Just as we humans adhere to certain behaviors and perform certain tasks when we are "on the job" so to does a service dog. When a service dog is not wearing his cape or on the job he has a chance to relax and behave more like the family pet, not unlike humans when they are home and kick back with their friends and family.

In business situations, No Pets signs do not apply to Service Dogs. Service Dogs are viewed by the ADA as being in the same category as wheelchairs, crutches, and other assistive devices. No one would ask someone to not use their wheelchair or crutches when entering a business establishment; the same is true for Service Dogs.

For business owners unfamiliar with service animal's proper etiquette and legal responsibility can be rather confusing. Under the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990:

Business owners MAY ask: Is this a Service Dog? What tasks does the Service Dog perform?

Businesses MAY NOT: Require special identification for the dog. Ask about the person's disability. Charge additional fees because of the dog. Refuse admittance, isolate, segregate, or treat the person less favorably than other patrons.

A person with a disability cannot be asked to remove his service animal from the

premise unless: The animal is out of control and the animal's owner does not take effective action to control it. The animal poses a direct treat to the health or safety of others.

Any business that sells or prepares food must allow service animals in public areas even if state or local health codes prohibit animals on the premises.

Refusal to provide equal access to people with disabilities with service animals is a federal civil rights violation, provided by the American Disabilities Act of 1990. Violators of the ADA can be required to pay money damages and penalties.

The ADA overrides all state and local laws.

Anyone with questions concerning the ADA and service animals can call the U.S. Department of Justice Information Line at 1-800-514-0301 for more information.

Please remember that if you see a person with a service dog do not distract the dog from his task by calling to him or petting him or allowing your children to do so. A good service dog is expected to maintain focus at all times, but they are, after all living, breathing creatures and not machines. Feel free to talk to the handler if you wish, who usually will be happy to answer you questions regarding his or her dog.

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