

Animal Policy for the RHC



I recently provided an Annual Evaluation Report for a RHC client in a very rural area, with a lot of farmers as patients. While there I noted a lap dog with a patient in the waiting room and asked them about their policy. The discussion was very enlightening.

Do you ask the patient to leave? Remove the dog? What if the dog has mange, parasites, or doesn't have all its vaccinations and poses a risk to staff and patients? Is the dog on a leash? If not, how do you respond to any dog behavior problem? Does your policy cover "service animals" that might include a pig or rooster?

These are good questions that aren't as unreasonable as they may sound. Not all service animals are dogs or cats, especially in a farming community where access to all types of critters is easy. The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) prohibits public facilities from requiring certification or proof of an animal's training or of a person's disability.

A service animal may be lawfully prohibited from entering the facility if the animal is a direct threat to the occupants of the facility or if the dog is out of control or not housebroken. Restrictions may be placed on service animals entering particular areas of the facility, such as an area housing immunocompromised patients.

Most policies I've seen indicate the reasons allowed for asking the handler to remove the animal from the clinic, and they usually include the animal "toileting" in the building, being not well controlled, is unclean or ill, or perceived as aggressive. This perception cannot be based on the staff person's previous experience with animals. Each situation must be handled as a separate event.

The policy generally indicates a staff person is not permitted to bring animals to work, unless the employee requires the use of a service animal. On occasion I'll find a fish in a bowl at the nurse's station and usually recommend moving it to a non-patient service area, like a provider's office, or out of the clinic entirely.

All policies should also give the individual with a disability who does use a service animal, the option of continuing services without having the service animal on the premises.

I suggest clinic Administration does more research on the legal requirements of the ADA and review the clinic's policies regarding the presence of animals in the clinic. You never know when you might see a pig waltz in the front door!

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