Guide Dog Users, Inc. Announces Position Statement on the Misrepresentation of Service Animals

The organization's statement is a direct response to the growing epidemic of members of the public passing their pets off as service animals, impeding on the civil rights of those who are blind and rely on legitimate service animals to gain access to public venues.

For Immediate Release

Silver Spring, MD - Guide Dog Users, Inc. (GDUI), the leading organization of blind and visually impaired people who rely on guide dogs as mobility assistants in the United States, has announced its official policy regarding people who attempt to misrepresent their pets as service animals in venues where pets are not generally allowed. The statement aims to inform members of the general public about the civil rights which people who are blind and visually impaired rely upon to guarantee their access to public venues with their guide dogs and to inform business owners about their obligations under the law as well as their rights to deny admittance to animals who do not qualify as legitimate service animals.

"It makes it hard for all of us who depend on our legitimate service animals for independent travel when business owners question our right to visit their establishments in the company of our guide dogs or when untrained or uncontrolled pets masquerading as service animals distract our dogs or make it unsafe for us or our dogs to share the same space," says Penny Reeder of Montgomery Village, MD, president of Guide Dog Users, Inc.

Continuing, "The frenzy of nationwide news reports stating that businesses are being inundated with people passing off their pets as service animals has heightened suspicions which makes it even more difficult for individuals with legitimate service animals to access public places. That is why GDUI's Legislative and Advocacy Committees will be focusing on the issues related to the misuse of pets as service animals during coming months."

Businesses are often unsure of their legal rights and responsibilities when confronted with the need to authenticate whether a service animal is legitimate or "fake." The number of people with hidden disabilities who use service animals has been increasing. And, many people with Emotional Support Animals believe -- mistakenly -- that they have the right to be accompanied by their dogs in all public areas. All of these factors have led to confusion about who has a right to bring a service animal where, what qualifies a dog to be called a service animal, and a steady erosion of public trust.

According to Penny Reeder, "GDUI has developed this official position statement to help businesses and the general public better understand the scope of the problem. The statement includes recommended actions. In addition to helping to educate business owners, GDUI members and affiliates hope to help reduce the number of unruly and aggressive pets in public places by advocating for tougher state laws. There is evidence showing that when businesses post signs warning patrons that fraudulently misrepresenting service animals is a misdemeanor, complaints about "fake" service animals are significantly reduced. Currently sixteen States have either criminal or civil laws against misrepresenting a pet as a service animal. GDUI members and affiliates will be advocating to increase that number.

For more information, visit: http://gdui.org

About Guide Dog Users, Inc.:

Founded in 1972, as an affiliate of the American Council of the Blind (ACB), Guide Dog Users, Inc. is the largest advocacy organization for guide dog users in the United States and strives to promote civil rights and enhance the quality of life for working guide dog teams. Drawing on the experiences and varied knowledge of its members, GDUI provides peer support, advocacy and information to guide dog users in every region of the country. For more information on GDUI's position statement, its mission and activities, please send an email to President Reeder at president@gdui.org.

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