Emotional Support Animal Partnerships: A Multimethod Investigation

Jillian Ferrell
Utah State University

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.usu.edu/etd
Part of the Psychology Commons

Recommended Citation
https://digitalcommons.usu.edu/etd/8543

This Dissertation is brought to you for free and open access by the Graduate Studies at DigitalCommons@USU. It has been accepted for inclusion in All Graduate Theses and Dissertations by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@USU. For more information, please contact digitalcommons@usu.edu.
EMOTIONAL SUPPORT ANIMAL PARTNERSHIPS: A MULTIMETHOD INVESTIGATION

by

Jillian Ferrell

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

in

Psychology

Approved:

____________________________  ______________________________
Susan Crowley, Ph.D.            Gretchen Peacock, Ph.D.
Major Professor                Committee Member

____________________________  ______________________________
Scott Deberard, Ph.D.          Aubrey H. Fine, Ph.D.
Committee Member               Committee Member

____________________________  ______________________________
Sara Boghosian, Ph.D.          D. Richard Cutler, Ph.D.
Committee Member               Vice Provost of Graduate Studies

UTAH STATE UNIVERSITY
Logan, Utah

2022
Emotional Support Animal Partnerships: A Multimethod Investigation

by

Jillian Ferrell, Doctor of Philosophy

Utah State University, 2022

Major Professor: Dr. Susan L. Crowley
Department: Psychology

Emotional Support Animals (ESAs) are federally recognized assistance animals of any species that are given access to non-pet-friendly housing via the Fair Housing Act because of the symptom-alleviating support they provide to persons with disabilities. Despite being popular in the media, little is known about ESAs and their human partners, their contexts, or experiences. Health professionals are often uncertain how to respond to increasing requests for letters of support giving individuals and their animals ESA partnership status. Three studies utilized quantitative, qualitative, and theoretical methods to begin increasing our knowledge about ESAs and to inform recommendations for support.

Study I presents guidance for clinicians faced with requests for a letter of support for ESA accommodations in housing. Grounded in human-animal bond research, a decision tree walks clinicians through multiple considerations including animal welfare, positive ethics, legal regulations and animal selection. Collaborative and competent conversations with clients are emphasized as crucial to the ESA decision making process.
Study II gathered survey data from 77 participants who reported having an ESA. The survey covered multiple domains including human and animal demographics, human-animal bond quality, health professional involvement, animal welfare and behavior, and incidents of fraud or misrepresenting ESAs as service animals. Descriptive and correlational data are shared to highlight areas of needed further research or areas of concern and provide a first picture of individuals with ESA.

Study III is a three-dimensional narrative inquiry into the lived experiences and meanings that three students hold regarding their ESAs in on-campus housing. The most essential parts of each of their stories are shared, along with common themes of meanings about their ESAs. Special attention is given to the impact that the university setting has on the meanings participants make about their ESAs and the experiences they find important.

Taken together, these studies provide data on the experience of ESAs from multiple perspectives, each of which is vital to understanding the current state of emotional support animals and identifying the best directions for research and action to support ESAs in being effective and safe for persons with disabilities, animals, and communities.

(189 pages)
Emotional Support Animals (ESAs) are increasing in prevalence and awareness, though not all the publicity and attention have been positive. Many people, including housing officials, persons with disabilities, health professionals, and the general public are confused about the roles and rights of ESAs. Misunderstandings, lack of awareness, and fraud have led to dangerous and inappropriate situations for humans and animals alike despite overwhelming evidence of powerful therapeutic benefits of the human animal bond.

Three studies provide insight into various perspectives involved in ESA partnership experiences and development. Each study provides a theoretical, quantitative, and qualitative approach, respectively, to explore the interactions between persons with disabilities, animals, health professionals, and policymakers/enforcers. Special attention is given to animal welfare, professional involvement, and protecting rights of persons with disabilities. Study I provides a decision making framework that helps health professionals make thoughtful and ethical ESA determinations and facilitate compassionate and competent conversations with clients about ESAs. Study II explores of the current contexts of ESAs in the Unites States. Understanding more about ESA partnership situations and behaviors can focus efforts for education and research that can
best support safe and effective ESA partnerships. Study III shares the narratives of three students with ESAs on a university campus and highlights the interactions between persons with disabilities and university setting policy and policy enforcement.

A greater understanding of each stakeholder and their impacts on each other could reduce fraud, animal welfare concerns, problematic ESA behaviors, and disability discrimination. Awareness, education, and compassionate dialogue may be the key to using the powerful human-animal bond to help better support persons with disabilities and their animal partners.
DEDICATION

This work is dedicated to my Sugar Bear, my best friend, my constant companion, my study buddy, my co-therapist, teaching assistant, lifesaver, and heart monitor. Sugar attended every class I attended and taught, was present with nearly every client, and was there with big eyes and a whole lot of drool and hair for every late night, early morning, boring days, and the hectic to-and-fro ones. She taught me to care for us both, to say no, to say yes, to ask for help, to slow down, to look out for others, to shake off the last thing to make room for the next, the joy of a stretch between tasks, and a patch of good grass. Now more than ever, she is teaching me how to be a better leader to myself and others, to be okay with myself enough to be attentive to and appreciative of the needs and nature of the ones who have less power around me. She has earned her PoochD ten times over. As she retires from her day job and gets to enjoy what this part of life offers her, I aspire to offer the kind of loyal support and patience to her as she has given to me.

Also, to Shyloh, my very quirky, long-hair, fluffy, adopted, diluted calico cat. For always trying to be so helpful when I’m trying to use my computer, especially around five p.m. – or three p.m. if she’s feeling particularly lucky. She taught me in the most effective way that unflinching and strict boundaries doesn’t mean I’m not important and loved immensely. She taught me how to love in a way no critter ever has – to love others for the uniqueness of who one is, and not so affected by my insecurities. Shyloh loves me, but shows it in ways that are authentic and honest for her, not always how or when I want her to show it. I’ve come to honor and adore her loving me on her terms. When she is not with me, my thighs (and thumb she likes to hold with her paws) feel forlorn.

Jillian Ferrell
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

First, I don’t even want to guess where I’d be without the patience, care, and guidance that Sue has offered me from the first phone call offering me an interview to the program. Sue, your realness, honesty, interpretive dancing, and ad-libbed dog songs mean the world to me. You have been so much more to me than a major professor, though you have fulfilled that calling with expert knowledge, nuance, and consistency. You have made me so much of who I am as a professional, but also as a person. You saw my heart and have patiently taught me how to work from it and make space for it in my professional and personal life, teaching me how to integrate them together into a more whole person on this planet. There are few places better to be than in front of your fireplace with you and the critters. Particularly at the final push for this dissertation, you’ve gone above and beyond to be there for me through the process, even as we were both sending out “the call of my people.” No matter where I go from here, you will always be with me and part of any good I ever do.

Thank you to Carolyn. You have been the kind of support I needed in so many ways. I could not have continued on this path without your heart, your strength, wisdom, and intuition to know when I need a hug, a story, food, shoes, a coat, horse interaction, or a shovel for the shit. I really do think the ranch is a magical place – as healing as it is beautiful. But most especially, it is powerful because the ranch is partly you. You are the strongest woman I know. Of all the fields to be outstanding in, I like to be out standing in yours with you best. But don’t worry, I’ll be working, not just standing there...

Thank you to my family, especially my parents, who have been so supportive in so many ways. You have understood the many times I had to prioritize my research and
training and teaching over the activities going on. Mom, you have been there to listen to my frustrations and stress to and to cheer me on with each milestone. Both of you never miss an opportunity to tell me you are proud of me. I’m lucky to have parents as supportive as you. Dad, our special talks during the time I’ve been working on this dissertation have been transformative for me. I owe much of my thoughtfulness to you.

Thank you to each of you on my committee for your kindness, knowledge, experience, and compassion through this process. Dr. Fine. I’ve been so blessed (and a little star-struck) to be able to work with you and have you take me under your wing with your classes and writing opportunities. Your dedication and value of quality research, theory, and practice is powerful to watch, and I’m so grateful to benefit from your dedication to training and supporting the next generation of animal-assisted professionals. Gretchen, you have always responded to me with a friendly smile and interest, and I appreciate your willingness to serve on my committee. Scott, I’ve enjoyed getting to know you through therapy animals with Buddy and through staff meetings at CAPS. You’re a good man and I believe I owe the knowledge of my new puppy to you! Sara, I have loved getting to work more closely with you the past couple of years. You’ve taught me so much professionally and have been a support, checking in on me when it got particularly stressful. The love of our work led us to connect, and the love of doggies sealed the deal. Your skill and presence are noticed by all who have met you.

Jillian Ferrell
LIST OF TABLES

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Table 1</td>
<td>Demographic summary of select Participant, Professional, and Dog Characteristics</td>
<td>77</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Table 2</td>
<td>Frequency of Professional Involvement Variables</td>
<td>78</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Table 3</td>
<td>Descriptive Statistics of Human-Animal Bond Quality</td>
<td>79</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Table 4</td>
<td>Relationships Between Welfare and Bond Quality</td>
<td>80</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Table A1</td>
<td>Relationships Between Welfare and Professional Involvement</td>
<td>142</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Table A2</td>
<td>Frequency of Welfare Variables</td>
<td>142</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1  Study 1: ESA Decision Making Framework, Decision Tree, and Client Conversation Outline .................................................................49
CHAPTER I
INTRODUCTION

Many people agree that healthy bonds with animals have a meaningful place in the human experience. Researchers have studied the power of interaction and relationships with pets on human wellness and found a number of positive findings including physiological processes such as lowering stress hormones like cortisol (Kertes et al., 2017), increasing levels of the stress-reducing hormone oxytocin (Nagasawa et al., 2009), helping to regulate emotions (Shiloh et al., 2003), and increasing individuals’ social networks (Arkow, 2019; McNicholas & Collis, 2000), buffering against the negative effects of social rejection and isolation (Brown et al., 2016; Fine & Friedmann, 2018; Wood et al., 2015), social anxiety (Bryan et al., 2014; O’Haire et al., 2015), and developing connected communities (Wood, 2009). In addition to the benefits of the human-animal bond, some animals are recognized by the United States government for their ability to alleviate symptoms of disabilities or assist in therapeutic activities. Emotional Support Animals are one group of government-recognized assistance animals that have garnered attention, criticism, and interest from the public, government, and professionals.

Definitions: What Are Emotional Support Animals?

Under the umbrella of “assistance animals” are service animals (SAs), therapy animals (TAs), and emotional support animals (ESAs). There is often much confusion surrounding the roles, standards, and access rights provided to each of the designations.
SAs are specially trained dogs and miniature horses who are trained to perform tasks related to a person’s disability. SAs are covered by The Americans with Disabilities Act (1990), Fair Housing Act (1968), and Air Carrier Access Act (2003) and are consequently permitted to enter any space where the public is invited, including classrooms, shopping centers, and public transportation. TAs are domesticated animals who work with their handlers to provide therapeutic benefits to others in various settings. TAs receive no special access rights from the government, however, they may be invited and welcomed into spaces where their services are requested, such as schools, health care settings, or assisted living centers. Since they have no special legal access status, TAs may or may not have special training, however most have undergone training and evaluation with their handlers through various organizations (Linder et al., 2017).

Although each organization may have different requirements, best practices include training for the handler as well as an evaluation of the animal-handler team covering obedience, handler’s ability to communicate with and support their animal teammate, and the animals ability to navigate unique situations, sounds, and people (International Association of Human-Animal Interaction Organizations White Paper, 2018).

ESAs are animals that aid with mental- or emotion-related symptoms of disabilities (e.g., depression, anxiety, PTSD, isolation due to physical disabilities) and are believed to do so primarily through providing comfort, companionship, or motivation for caring for oneself (U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, 2020). There are no legal limitations to the species or breed allowed for ESA status, and no legal requirement for special training or registration/certification. The primary role of ESAs is to provide disability-related emotional support that may be provided simply from the
bond that exists between the animal and their human partner. ESAs have legal access to non-pet-friendly housing through the Fair Housing Act (1968). Until 2020, ESAs were also included under the definition of a service animal by the Department of Transportation (DOT) and were allowed to travel in passenger cabins on trains and planes through the ACAA. Recently, however, the DOT removed ESAs from their definition of “service animals” (US Department of Transportation, 2020). They are not allowed in non-pet-friendly public spaces.

To obtain ESA status, residents must provide housing administrators with a signed letter from a health professional that includes the following, as stated in a guidelines document by the Department of Housing and Urban Development (2020): “1) the patient’s name, 2) whether the health care professional has a professional relationship with that patient/client involving the provision of health care or disability-related services, 3) the type of animal for which the reasonable accommodation is sought, 4) whether the client has a mental/emotional/physical impairment that substantially limit[s] at least one major life activity or major bodily function, and 5) whether the client needs the animal because it provides therapeutic emotional support to alleviate a symptom or effect of the disability of the client, and not merely as a pet” (p. 17).

**Legal History of ESAs**

The legal story of ESAs begins with Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973. This act sought to protect persons from discrimination in federally funded housing based on disability status and therefore opened the door for accommodations to be provided for persons with disabilities (Animal Legal & Historical Center, 2022). Animals were not expressly mentioned as a potential accommodation that could be requested;
however, potential accommodations were very broad to be protective and supportive of
people with all sorts of needs and circumstances. In 1981, Whittier vs. Hampshire in
Appeals Court of Massachusetts determined that waiving a no-pet policy could be
considered a reasonable accommodation for a person with a disability when indicated to
assure equal ability to enjoy a residence (Animal Legal & Historical Center, 2022b).
When ESAs first arrived on the scene, these animals were known as assistance animals
for which a landlord would be required by law to waive a no-pet policy for persons with
disabilities.

Seven years later, in 1988, Title VIII, The Federal Fair Housing Act,
Amendments to the Civil Rights Act, included disability protections for all housing,
private and public, and not just federally funded housing (Brewer, 2005). Until this point,
the Civil Rights Act of 1968 did not include disabilities in the list of protected identities
(race, color, national origin, or gender). Animals were then included as potential reason
for waiving a no-pet policy and accommodating an individual with a disability who
wanted to live in no-pet housing with their pet who provides assistance in some way
related to their disability (service animals and animals who provide assistance or
support). In 1995, Bronk vs. Ineichen, Court of Appeals, Seventh Circuit clarified that
there needs to be an articulated nexus of the disability and the animal. Here began the
strong push for a need for a letter from a health professional that asserts the presence of a
disability and articulating that a certain animal helps to alleviate, ameliorate, or provide
emotional support for symptoms of the disability (Animal Legal & Historical Center,
2022a).
The law states that the animal’s *role or purpose* must function “not merely as a pet” (p. 17, U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, 2020). While almost all pets may provide benefits and emotional support, it is the disability status and need for an accommodation that creates the necessary context for an ESA to exist legally. The emphasis of the current law is on placing an “assistance animal” in two categories: 1) a service animal which is defined by the animals specific training related to alleviating symptoms of a disability, and 2) “other animals” that focuses on effects of the animal on the person who has the disability (p. 3, U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, 2020). The legal history has shaped the 2020 guidelines for assessing reasonable accommodations for persons with disabilities making requests to waive no-pet policies (U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development).

There is a dearth of research on the efficacy of ESAs as helpful adjuncts or alternatives to mental health treatment for persons with severe and/or chronic mental disorders or physical disabilities. Most of the research on ESAs that does exist is qualitative or anecdotal in nature (Aneson, 2021; Gaughan, 2021; Hoy-Gerlach, Vincent, & Lory Hector, 2019; Saunders, 2020). However, there is substantial evidence that pets and companion animals can provide powerful health and wellness benefits to individuals, and even some research addressing individuals with disabilities (Brooks et al., 2018). Additionally, there is research on the emotional and social impacts of a service dog for persons with physical disabilities (Duncan & Allen, 2006; Hall et al., 2017). Research on the human-animal bond, its effects, and animal-assisted therapy support the hypothesis that, engaged with thoughtfully, ESAs may be effective adjuncts to treatment of mental health disorders, though a body of research has yet to address this hypothesis.
The Human Animal Bond

Research on the benefits of the human-animal bond provide a rationale for ESAs. Many have contributed to a pool of proposed definitions of the bond in literature. Of the many definitions, many themes include: the bond is continuous or persistent, voluntary, bidirectional, of mutual benefit, and promotes well-being for both parties (Beck, 1999; Russow, 2002; Tannenbaum, 1995). The most widely used definition comes from The American Veterinary Medical Association (AVMA) and states that the human-animal bond is a “mutually beneficial and dynamic relationship between people and other animals that is influenced by behaviors that are essential to the health and well-being of both. This includes, but is not limited to emotional, psychological, and physical interactions with people, other animals, and the environment” (Journal of the American Veterinary Medical Association, 1998, p. 1975). When discussing ESAs, of particular importance is the aspect of voluntary engagement and mutual benefit.

Three main theories may explain the importance of the human-animal bond: social support theory, attachment theory, and Biophilia Hypothesis (Fine & Mackintosh, 2015). These theories most likely work together to provide context for each other and to provide a more complete understanding of the human-animal bond through a “joint model” (Fine & Ferrell, 2021). Most relevant to emotional support animals provide, the social support and attachment theories (Meehan, Massavelli, & Pachana, 2017) address the importance of being needed and unconditionally cared about. The Biophilia Hypothesis will not be discussed given the focus of this dissertation, though this theory may include overlapping biological understandings with social support and attachment theories.
Attachment theory emphasizes the importance of having a secure emotional and physical place from which to explore the world. The theory asserts that humans naturally evolved to have a need to be connected to others and also care for others (Bowlby, 1969). Bowlby, one of the greatest contributors to attachment theory, suggested that the drive to care for and nurture helpless beings is based in biology and was evolutionarily advantageous. Human-animal relationships often parallel parent-child relationship because of the dependency that some animals’ may have on humans for safety, necessities of life, and to make up for animals’ lack of clear abstract language (e.g., humans talking to a vet on an animal’s behalf; Finka et al., 2019). A relationship with an animal may stir feelings of attachment and elicit powerful biological and emotional desire to care for the dependent animal. Much like stuffed animals, pets can also serve as “transitional objects” for children, creating a symbol of safety in the absence of other attachment figures (Barlow et al., 2012). Animals can provide a secure, non-judgmental, and consistently available emotional base from which to explore other relationships or face challenges like loss or daunting uncertainty, particularly in times of transition (Fine & Eisen, 2008; Melson, 2003).

Some research has supported attachment theory related to the human-animal bond including increased oxytocin when humans and their pet dogs gaze into each other’s eyes (Nagasawa et al., 2015); that dogs demonstrate attachment styles similar to humans (Thielke & Udell, 2020); and that feeling needed and having purpose with a strong human-animal relationship can provide motivation and feelings of personal fulfillment (Kanat-Maymon et al., 2016). Animals may provide support through deep and
meaningful attachment particularly for individuals with severe social anxiety, depression, generalized anxiety, and in the aftermath of trauma (Strand, 2004).

The Social Support Theory focuses on the hypothesis that relationships with animals may combat loneliness, spark conversation among humans, and human-human interaction, and unite communities together (Arkow, 2019). Animals provide some of the social interaction that humans need, which may moderate negative physical and mental health outcomes linked to social exclusion and isolation (Holt-Lunstad et al., 2010; Lynch, 2000). Pet-ownership has demonstrated positive social benefits across the lifespan such as more prosocial behaviors, social competence, increased social networks and interaction, and decreased social isolation (Purewal et al., 2017; Wells, 2009). Furthermore, simply thinking of a beloved pet was shown to stave off the negative effects of social rejection (Brown et al., 2016). Dogs can act as a buffer against negative effects of social exclusion and facilitate neutral and positive interactions with others in their communities (Hall et al., 2017; McNicholas et al., 2001), particularly for older adults (Fine & Friedmann, 2018; Johnson & Bibbo, 2015) or have disabilities or illness (Duncan & Allen, 2006; Jenkins et al., 2012; O’Haire et al., 2015) who may experience more isolation than less marginalized individuals. On a broader scale, friendly neighborhood pets can enable community members to experience an increased sense of solidarity (Wood, 2009, 2011; Wood et al., 2005, 2015). Finally, dogs can facilitate human relationships much like a social lubricant McNicholas & Collis, 2000).

In addition to empirical evidence supporting social and emotional benefits of companion animals (Brooks et al., 2018; Hoy-Gerlach, Vincent, & Hector, 2019; Yamamoto & Hart, 2019), a substantial and growing body of research has documented
physical health benefits to humans associated with companion animals including lower rates of cardiovascular disease (Levine et al., 2013; Vormbrock & Grossberg, 1988); increased exercise engagement (Mein & Grant, 2018); lower heart rate, blood pressure, and breathing rate (McGreevy et al., 2005, Shiloh et al., 2003); decreased cortisol levels (Beetz et al., 2012; Krause-Parello, 2008); and lower rates of diabetes (Friedmann, 2019; Friedmann & Son, 2009). However, the link between general health or overall risk for illness and pet-ownership has been mixed in the literature (Herzog, 2018; Mein & Grant, 2018).

At this time, no empirical research addresses the effectiveness of standardized and legally recognized ESAs in treating or ameliorating emotional symptoms of disabilities. There are, however, a several anecdotal and qualitative accounts of ESAs providing support which was helpful for improving day-to-day functioning. Due to these qualitative findings, some individuals make a controversial argument for the inclusion of ESA in the definition of an SA (Bourland, 2009; Hernandez-Silk, 2017). Importantly, there is also no research on the impact of becoming an ESA on the animal, reflecting the historical focus on understanding what animals can do for humans with little focus on animal welfare concerns.

Despite the lack of ESA-specific research, the extant literature is clear that companion animals can have a profound impact on individuals emotional health, particularly for those who struggle with emotional or mental health concerns (Brooks et al., 2018). However, like many helpful processes, ESA decisions must be made thoughtfully and in accordance with best practices that are available in order to avoid complications or negative outcomes. Irresponsible ESA letter-signing has a well-
publicized history of the potential to cause danger to others, damage to property, poor quality of life for animals, and increase stigma and dangerous situations for other assistance animal and human partnerships (CNN, 2019; Foster, 2018; Witz, 2013). Clearly a disability and a companion animal are not the only ingredients required for positive outcomes for animals, individuals with disabilities, and their communities. And perhaps good intentions are also not enough to facilitate positive benefits from animal companionship in general (Fine et al., 2015, 2019). And yet, many report that ESAs have been extremely helpful and even life-changing for many individuals with mental health disorders (Bourland, 2009; Hernandez-Silk, 2017).

As ESAs have gained attention in popular culture and requests for ESA accommodations have increased in multiple settings around the country, confusion about ESA roles, relevant laws, and reported problematic ESA partnership behaviors have also increased. Media tends to focus on negative events involving ESAs (e.g. bites, barking on airline flights), atypical ESA species (peacocks, snakes, ducks), and cases of fraud (CNN, 2019; Foster, 2018; Witz, 2013). Online companies offer to “register” an ESA with a letter from a “mental health professional” to most anyone for a relatively small fee. Legal guidelines have since clarified that a letter obtained from an online company is no longer sufficient to support ESA status (U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, 2020). However, on-going confusion among multiple stakeholder groups may result in clarifications being unknown or not acted upon, and therefore continuing the use of online documentation.

University counseling centers, student health centers, and university training clinics are one set of service providers receiving increasing numbers of requests to sign
ESA letters for college students, and university housing ESA requests are also becoming more common (Kogan et al., 2016; Salminen & Gregory, 2018). Mental and medical health professionals everywhere may be sought out to obtain a letter needed for ESA status, with or without intention of receiving treatment. And those professionals may or may not have an understanding of the differing types of assistance animals, the laws pertaining to ESAs, or the relevant understanding of individuals’ history, disability, or the animal to make an informed decision regarding when and if to write a letter in support of an ESA.

University and college campus housing settings highlight complexity involved in understanding ESA partnerships and their interface with law and the wellbeing of all. Dormitory settings complicate the definitions of “dwelling” versus public spaces and include the need to consider other individuals who live in close proximity to the ESA partnership (Hutchens, 2014). Therefore, within the FHA there is more flexibility and ambiguity for universities to develop additional policies and restrictions on ESAs than other housing settings would be allowed (Salminen & Gregory, 2018). However, the line between helpful policies and disability discrimination is often unclear and as a result many universities do not have clear ESA policies (Lanning et al., 2022). Education regarding ESAs on campus, fostering awareness with the campus community and support for all members of the community are generally lacking (Kogan et al., 2016; Lanning et al., 2022; Taylor, 2016).

**Gaps in the Literature**

The gaps in the literature regarding ESAs are innumerable. There are so many gaps that it is hard to know where to begin a discussion on ESAs and how to form
questions, decisions, and guidance surrounding them. Little is known about the common characteristics of humans or animals in an ESA partnership, professional involvement or decisions, or the knowledge about ESAs among landlords and in the general public. There seems to be stigma and an assumption of fraud surrounding ESA partnerships, but it is unclear how common fraud is in the United States or how stigma plays into perceptions in the public. There are also gaps specifically associated with university policies, which are a particularly complex and must consider many different situations and people. Even if the current context of ESAs was known, an understanding of what is most clinically effective and safe is lacking.

**A Multi-Paper Multi-Method Project**

The present multi-method dissertation presents a series of studies that begins to address a few of the gaps in the literature on ESAs. Study I provides a clinician-friendly overview that professionals can use to consider ESA requests using clinical judgment, legal awareness, and animal-assisted intervention best practices. The paper reviews basic information regarding the human-animal bond; and legal, clinical, and welfare-related considerations involved in ESA requests. The paper highlights both the importance of and process involved in having collaborative conversations with clients during the decision-making process.

Study II involved obtaining survey data from a sample of 77 participants with ESAs. Informed by current research on aspects that affect the health and efficacy of human-animal interactions, the survey also collected information on the identified disability of the participant, the nature and quality of the individual’s bond with their ESA, professional involvement with the ESA process, welfare of the ESA, and negative
behaviors of the ESA. The study also considered the relationships that may exist among these variables to inform hypotheses about ways to increase welfare and bond quality and decrease fraud, misrepresentation, and risk in ESA partnerships clinically, legally, and socially.

Study III provides a deeper understanding of lived experiences of individuals with ESAs in one on-campus housing in a university setting. The university context is one where ESA policies are present, clearly stated, enforced, and where administration usually controls the narratives about ESAs. The lived experiences of three ESA partnerships are given a voice, and each individual is considered within their own unique context. Themes regarding the meaning of ESAs to students with disabilities are shared, and special attention is given to meanings that are highly influenced by the university housing context.

All three studies together provide information for a broader and deeper understanding of the reality of ESA partnerships, their behaviors, meanings, and a research-based framework from which to assess them. The three different approaches triangulate information on ESA partnerships through reality as it is subjectively lived, factually reported, and theoretically interpreted from the framework of human-animal bond literature.
CHAPTER II

STUDY I


**Emotional Support Animals: A Framework for Clinical Decision Making**

Jillian Ferrell and Susan L. Crowley

Department of Psychology, Utah State University

**Author Note**

JILLIAN FERRELL received her MS from Utah State University. She is currently a doctoral student at Utah State University. Her areas of professional interest include animal-assisted intervention, human-animal bonds, and qualitative approaches to identity research. jillferrell.psych@gmail.com

SUSAN L. CROWLEY received her PhD in counseling psychology from Texas A&M University. She is currently a Professor at Utah State University. Her professional interests include animal-assisted interventions, the human-animal bond, outcomes of chronic pain treatment, and training of therapy intervention skills.

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Jill Ferrell, email: jill.ferrell@aggiemail.usu.edu, or to Susan Crowley, Department of Psychology, Utah
Emotional Support Animals (ESAs) should be considered an accommodation and adjunct to ongoing treatment for chronic mental health disorders. The present article provides a clinician-friendly overview of welfare, clinical, and legal aspects of ESA decisions and potential ESA selection from a human-animal bond research perspective.
Abstract

An emotional support animal (ESA) is a type of legally recognized assistance animal that purports to provide emotional support to individuals with mental and emotional disabilities. Due to their no-cost access to housing that is ordinarily not pet-friendly (and previously no-cost access to airline travel), ESAs have increased in popularity, reflected in media attention highlighting problems that occur when individuals obtain ESA verification fraudulently, or without critical thought and legal considerations. Given recent legal clarifications by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, (HUD; 2020), ESAs should be considered an accommodation and adjunct to ongoing treatment for chronic mental health disorders. The present article approaches ESA decision issues from a human-animal bond research and positive ethics perspective and introduces an ESA Decision Making Framework. The framework provides clinician-friendly overview of welfare, clinical, and legal aspects of ESA decisions and potential ESA selection. The framework can structure beneficial conversations about ESAs between providers and clients in order to facilitate collaborative treatment planning and to strengthen therapeutic alliances regardless of the outcome of the ESA decision.

*Keywords*: emotional support animals, ESA, ethics, disability, animal-assisted intervention
Emotional Support Animals: A Framework for Clinical Decision Making

Emotional support animals (ESAs) are recognized by the Fair Housing Act (1968) and previously by the Air Carrier Access Act (2003) as animals who provide emotional support or comfort to individuals with emotional or mental disabilities. ESAs are growing in popularity and with that popularity has come confusion about ESA roles and law, problems resulting from some ESA decisions, and growing fraud in ESA support letters. Not surprisingly, complaints regarding ESA accommodations are increasing (U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, 2020). The popular media perception of ESAs has been predominantly negative primarily related to problematic animal behavior on airplanes (e.g., barking, bites), atypical species identified as ESAs, and pets that claim to be ESAs reportedly in order to avoid paying for pet travel or housing. As knowledge and popularity of ESAs has grown, an online “market” for fraudulent ESA letters developed. Anyone can go online, pay a small fee (e.g., $49-99), and get a signed letter by a “mental health professional” supporting an ESA. Until recent legal clarifications and guidelines replaced the Fair Housing and Equal Opportunity notice of 2013 (U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, 2013) a letter obtained from an online company could give an animal ESA status for use in housing and transportation (U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, 2020). Other clients may present to mental health professionals and clinics for the sole purpose of obtaining a letter needed for ESA status without intention of receiving treatment. At this time, no available data addresses where individuals obtain their ESA letters.

University counseling centers, student health centers, and university training clinics are receiving increasing numbers of requests to sign ESA letters for college
students to allow them to live with their ESA in housing that does not allow pets (Kogan et al., 2016; Salminen & Gregory, 2018). Private practitioners, primary care physicians, and psychiatrists also receive requests for ESA letters. Confusion regarding ESAs, as well as limited time and energy to investigate the current law and best practices, makes it difficult for clinicians to know how to respond to requests for ESA letters. With a lack of clear and consistent guidance, some professionals may view ESAs as helpful and sign the requisite paperwork, others make the decision to deny all ESA paperwork or letter requests, and finally some seek to make a case-by-case decision based on their own perspective or clinical assessment.

Many mental health professionals may lack the information to feel confident about making ethical and legal ESA decisions and/or having thoughtful discussions with clients regarding ESA requests. The present paper seeks to provide a clinician-friendly overview and framework for professionals to use when considering ESA requests and guidance for discussing ESA decisions collaboratively with clients. We begin by presenting an overview of the human-animal bond, followed by an introduction to the ESA Decision Making Framework, and guidance for having collaborative conversations with clients during the decision-making process.

In seeking to provide guidance to clinicians regarding writing an ESA letter, we want to intentionally broaden previous conversations in the literature in two important ways. First, we intend to broaden the conversation to include the well-being of the animal. Previous discussions have focused primarily on the welfare of the client and community members (e.g., other housing residents, aircraft passengers), with little acknowledgement of the wellbeing of the animal. We believe that consideration of the
animal, a sentient being unable to advocate for their own needs, must be included in these decisions to truly engage in best practices for all involved. Second, we want to explicitly state that making an ESA decision is complex and must be individualized and contextualized in each case. Given this, we have sought to ground our discussion in positive ethics. Rather than broad statements about the ethics of any given decision, we invite clinicians to engage thoughtfully, seek best practices within their individual contexts, and respect the needs of multiple stakeholder groups including the client, the community, and the animal - all of which are valuable and important to the final outcome of a decision.

**Definitions: What is an ESA?**

Confusion often surrounds the terms and roles that animals can play in society, and this is especially the case in regard to emotional support animals (Schoenfeld-Tacher et al., 2017). “Assistance animals” is the umbrella term that encapsulates various special roles that animals can play in the lives of humans. Under the umbrella of assistance animals, there are service animals (SA), emotional support animals (ESAs), and therapy animals (TA). Each category has different legal access rights, roles, and standards.

SAs are specially trained dogs (and miniature horses who fit special additional provisions) who perform specific trained tasks related to a person’s disability. Based on the American with Disabilities Act (1991), disabilities are defined in law as “any physical or mental impairment that substantially limits one or more life activities.” Some examples of service animals are dogs who are trained to lead a person who is blind, alert a person who is deaf to important sounds, retrieve objects for a person in a wheelchair, or to interrupt panic attacks for an individual who has Post-traumatic Stress Disorder
(PTSD). Tasks SAs perform must be trained; behaviors that the animal engages in naturally are not sufficient to qualify as “disability-related tasks.” SAs are the only assistance animals allowed anywhere the public is invited including university campuses, restaurants, shopping centers, and public transportation. SAs are covered by Americans with Disabilities Act (1990), Fair Housing Act (1968), and Air Carrier Access Act (2003). Importantly, SAs are not required to provide proof of their specialized training beyond verbal confirmation from the animal’s human handler.

Therapy animals (TAs) are domesticated animals (e.g., dogs, cats, rabbits, horses) who work with their handlers to provide support to others. TAs only have legal access where pets are welcomed and in facilities where they are explicitly invited to perform support or animal-assisted activities or therapy, such as in schools, health care settings, or assisted living centers. No legal protections extend the settings in which TAs are permitted (e.g., housing or transportation rights). TAs may or may not have special qualifications/training that ensure their trustworthiness to perform the activities they are invited to participate in. However, several organizations register therapy animals (Linder et al., 2017). Although each organization may have different requirements, the “gold standard” requires training for the handler as well as an evaluation of the animal-handler team covering obedience, handler’s ability to communicate with and support their animal teammate, and the animal’s ability to navigate unique situations, sounds, and people (International Association of Human-Animal Interaction Organizations, 2018).

ESAs are any animal species or breed able to help primarily with mental-related disabilities (e.g., depression, anxiety, PTSD) and do so primarily through providing comfort, companionship, or a reason for living or caring for oneself (U.S. Department of
Housing and Urban Development, 2020). ESA status has no species or breed limitations. ESA status does not require any training, certifications or the ability of the animal to perform trained tasks needed for or related to the disability. The primary role of ESAs is to provide disability-related emotional support that may be provided simply from their presence and relationship with the human. ESAs have legal rights through the Fair Housing Act (1968) to live in residences that otherwise do not allow pets. Until recently ESAs were included under the definition of a service animal by the Department of Transportation (DOT) and were allowed to travel in passenger cabins on trains and planes through the Air Carrier Access Act (ACAA; 2003). However, in a recent ruling, the DOT defined service animals to no longer include emotional support animals (US Department of Transportation, 2020). Unlike service dogs, ESAs are not given special access to aircraft travel or public spaces outside of those provided to a pet. New barriers to travel for ESAs may increase safety for fellow travelers and trained service dogs as well as protect some ESAs not well suited for airline travel. However, the new ACAA regulations place a great burden on individuals with emotional disabilities who benefit from the presence of their animals during travel and in their destinations. Safe and affordable air travel for pets is largely unavailable.

All that is needed for an animal to be given ESA status is a signed letter from a mental health professional that includes the following, as stated in a guidelines document by the HUD (2020): “[1] the patient’s name, [2] whether the health care professional has a professional relationship with that patient/client involving the provision of health care or disability-related services, [3] the type of animal for which the reasonable accommodation is sought, 4) whether the client has a mental/emotional/physical
impairment that substantially limit[s] at least one major life activity or major bodily function, and 5) whether the client needs the animal because it provides therapeutic emotional support to alleviate a symptom or effect of the disability of the client, and not merely as a pet” (p. 17).

**Evolution of ESAs**

Considering the legal definitions as clarified in the 2020 update (discussed later in this article) and the information required in ESA accommodation verification, ESAs may be considered an aspect of psychological or psychotherapy treatment with a required ongoing healing relationship between the client and the professional. Like a prescription or intervention needing clinician oversight, potential adjustments, and clinical intentionality, ESAs are considered an accommodation in order for clients to engage in an aspect of psychological or psychotherapy treatment in their living situation.

**The Human-Animal Bond**

The positive benefits of the human-animal bond provide the rationale and context for ESAs. While there have been many different definitions of the bond in the literature, themes identified by several researchers include: the bond is continuous or persistent, voluntary, bidirectional, of mutual benefit, and promotes well-being for both parties (Beck, 1999; Russow, 2002). The most widely used definition comes from The American Veterinary Medical Association (AVMA) and states that the human-animal bond is a “mutually beneficial and dynamic relationship between people and other animals that is influenced by behaviors that are essential to the health and well-being of both. This includes, but is not limited to emotional, psychological, and physical interactions with people, other animals, and the environment” (Journal of the American Veterinary

Animals evolved to become domesticated due to the mutual benefits between humans and the particular species. Animals may provide humans a sense of companionship and a source of attachment just as they provided other life-affirming aids such as protection, food procuring, or labor reduction. Dogs are especially well suited to provide emotional support. The ancestors of dogs, the wolf, live in complex social and communicative “packs” or family systems. Within these packs, wolves must recognize and interpret the intentions, attention, and desires of the other wolves around them in order to work effectively together (Virányi et al., 2004). As wolves evolved alongside humans, they were particularly predisposed to have a heightened sensitivity to human emotions and intentions that may allow them to integrate more easily within our human social systems and families (Horowitz, 2009).

There are three main theories that explain the importance of the human-animal bond: social support theory, attachment theory, and Biophilia hypothesis (Fine & Mackintosh, 2015). Most relevant to the emotional support of humans, the social support and attachment theories (Meehan, Massavelli, & Pachana, 2017) address the importance of being needed and cared about unconditionally. Given the focus on ESAs, we will not discuss the Biophilia hypothesis, though this theory certainly may include overlapping biological understandings.

Attachment theory emphasizes the importance of having a secure emotional and physical place of safety from which to explore the world and the naturally evolved need humans have to be connected to others and care for others (Bowlby, 1969). Bowlby
suggested that the drive to care for and nurture infants or helpless beings is evolutionarily advantageous and is based in our biology. The relationship between humans and animals often parallels the parent-child relationship because of animals’ dependency on humans for safety, necessities of life, and to make up for animals’ lack of clear abstract language (e.g., the need for a human to talk to a vet on an animal’s behalf; Finka et al., 2019). The human-animal relationship may stir feelings of attachment and elicit the powerful biological and emotional desire to care for a dependent being. Animals can also serve as “transitional objects” for children (and adults), creating a symbol of safety in the absence of other attachment figures (Barlow et al., 2012). Animals can also provide a secure, non-judgmental, and consistently available emotional base from which to explore other relationships or face life challenges, particularly in times of transition when life seems more uncertain or daunting (Fine & Eisen, 2008; Melson, 2003). Within a strong human-animal relationship, feeling needed and having purpose can provide powerful motivation and feelings of personal fulfillment (Kanat-Maymon et al., 2016). Animals may provide support through deep and meaningful attachment particularly for individuals with social anxiety, depression, generalized anxiety, and in the aftermath of trauma (Strand, 2004).

The Social Support Theory hypothesizes that human-animal relationships combat loneliness, spark conversation and human-human interaction, and knit communities together as social capital in the communities to which they belong (Arkow, 2019). Animals also provide some of the social interaction that humans need, moderating the negative physical and mental health outcomes linked to social exclusion and isolation (Lynch, 2000). Across the lifespan, pet-ownership has demonstrated positive social benefits such as more prosocial behaviors, social competence, increased social networks
and interaction, and decreased social isolation (Johnson & Bibbo, 2015; Purewal et al., 2017 Fine & Friedmann, 2018). Especially for individuals who have disabilities or illness (Duncan & Allen, 2006; Jenkins et al., 2012; O’Haire et al., 2015), or who may experience more isolation, a dog can act as a buffer against negative effects of social exclusion and facilitate neutral and positive interactions with others in their communities (Hall et al., 2017). Additionally, on a broader scale, community members can experience an increased sense of solidarity due to friendly neighborhood pets (Wood, 2009, 2011; Wood et al., 2015). Finally, dogs can act as a social lubricant facilitating human relationships (McNicholas & Collis, 2000).

In addition to empirical evidence supporting the social and emotional benefits to humans of companion animals (Brooks et al., 2018; Yamamoto & Hart, 2019), a substantial body of research has documented human physical health benefits associated with companion animals including lower rates of cardiovascular disease (Levine et al., 2013), more engagement in exercise (Mein & Grant, 2018), lower heart rate, blood pressure, and breathing rate (McGreevy et al., 2005, Shiloh et al., 2003), decreased cortisol levels (Beetz et al., 2012; Krause-Parello, 2008), and lower rates of diabetes (Friedmann, 2019). However, research addressing the link between general health or overall risk for illness and pet-ownership has been mixed (Herzog, 2018; Mein & Grant, 2018). At this time, there is no empirical research addressing the effectiveness of legally recognized ESAs in treating or ameliorating symptoms of emotional disabilities. There are, however, anecdotal accounts of ESAs providing such helpful support for day-to-day functioning (Bourland, 2009; Hernandez-Silk, 2017). Interestingly, there is limited research on the impact of becoming an ESA on the animal.
Regardless of the lack of ESA-specific investigations, research supports the profound impact companion animals can have on individuals’ emotional health, particularly for individuals who struggle with emotional or mental health concerns (Brooks et al., 2018). However, ESA decisions must nevertheless be made thoughtfully and in accordance with available best practices to avoid negative outcomes or potentially disastrous experiences for both the human and the animal. Irresponsible ESA letter-signing has the potential to cause danger to others, damage to property, poor quality of life for animals, and increase stigma and dangerous situations for other assistance animal partnerships (CNN, 2019; Foster, 2018; Witz, 2013). Considering the negative press and negative experiences, it is clear that a disability, good intentions, and a companion animal are not the only ingredients required for positive outcomes for animals, individuals with disabilities, and their communities (Fine et al., 2015, 2019).

**ESA Ethical Considerations**

Various situations and perspectives must be considered in order for health providers to make the best decision about ESAs for clients. Hoy-Gerlach et al. (2019) suggest that all ESA considerations fall under two categories: eligibility/indication and animal selection. Following their categories, the following sections outline legal, clinical, and welfare issues for clinicians to consider when deciding 1) whether an ESA would be appropriate for a client and 2) how an ESA is chosen. Thoughtfully done, clients and mental health professionals can take advantage of the probable efficacy and benefit of ESAs for easing the burden of persons with mental health challenges and disabilities. The ESA Decision Making Framework (also visually presented in Figure 1) can be used like a decision tree or an outline for conversations with clients. For each step in the process,
questions are suggested. A negative response to any of the questions should raise questions regarding the legality or clinical effectiveness of including an ESA into treatment with a client. As with many aspects of treatment, clinical decisions are complex, dynamic, and deeply rooted in individual context. The following presentation of the ESA Decision Making Framework is purposely left broad to honor the complexity and each clinician’s ability to navigate these ethical considerations within their own contexts and experience, while also attempting to provide clear guideposts from which to ground specific ESA decisions.

**Eligibility and Appropriateness**

*Legal Eligibility for an ESA*

Since ESA status implies need for a legal accommodation, it is necessary to first consider if an ESA status is necessary for an individual to access the potential therapeutic benefits of a meaningful relationship that comes from obtaining a pet. If there are no legal barriers to accessing a pet in the client’s residence, an animal with ESA status is not indicated. A pet without ESA status may provide similar therapeutic benefits to individuals if thoughtfully chosen and may still be included as an aspect of a client’s animal-assisted treatment.

In the Fair Housing Act (1968), ESAs are permitted for persons with disabilities who require an accommodation. The Fair Housing Act defines a disability as “a physical or mental impairment that substantially limits one of more major life activities.” The definition leaves considerable room for interpretation. However, a recent document by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (2020) adds clarity and specific guidelines regarding ESAs and states that “some types of impairments will, in virtually
all cases, be found to impose a substantial limitation on a major life activity resulting in a
determination of a disability” (p10). Among the examples listed are: major depressive
disorder, bipolar disorder, post-traumatic stress disorder, obsessive compulsive disorder.
Later in the document, the definition of “impairments” in the context of the Fair Housing
Act includes “any mental or psychological disorder” in the Diagnostic Statistical Manual

One of the challenges clinicians must consider in their decision to support a
client’s request for an ESA letter is the temporal nature of the client’s disability. Many
mental health conditions remit and (hopefully) improve with treatment. Should the
client’s condition improve, they may no longer meet the legal requirements for an ESA
putting the clinician, the client, and the animal in a challenging situation. No longer
having ESA status could require the client to move or remove the animal from their
home, negatively impacting the client and animal. The chronicity of the client’s disability
is critical for both the clinician and client to consider when adding an ESA as part of a
long-term treatment plan. An ESA decision should appropriately reflect the real needs
created by the disability of the client. An ESA, like a pet, is a long-term commitment and
relies on a meaningful bond between the animal and client that cannot be broken without
a significant negative impact on both.

Younggren, Boisvert, and Boness, (2016, 2020) consider the separate roles of
assessment and treatment of a disorder. They assert that having a treating mental health
professional making judgments about eligibility for disability status is a conflict of roles.
Instead, they suggest that a forensic psychologist be given the role of determining
whether the client meets the criteria of legal disability status. Others argue that an ESA is
part of the client’s treatment plan and therefore fits within the purview of the mental health care provider who is responsible for the continued treatment of the individual (Voda-Hamilton, 2019). In the 2020 HUD guidelines, it states that when providing disability related information for use in an ESA letter, “health care professionals should use personal knowledge of their patient/client – i.e., the knowledge used to diagnose, advise, counsel, treat, or provide health care or other disability-related services to their patient/client” (p. 16). Since a DSM 5 diagnosis is the primary criteria for “disability” according to the Fair Housing Act, psychotherapists are arguably in the best position to provide an accurate and contextually informed diagnosis. However, these differing positions raise two important points. First is that the term “disability” is used in multiple ways and has no single agreed upon definition (K. Lisa Yang and Hock E. Tan Institute on Employment and Disability, 2018). So, the context and purpose for which a determination of a disability is being made is critical to understanding what would constitute an appropriate evaluation and by whom such an evaluation could be conducted. Second, it is important to consider how the relationship with the client may impact the treating provider’s ESA decision. As always, remaining grounded in our professional mandate to do no harm and avoid problematic dual relationships, providers should consider if they can make an objective and effective decision regarding an ESA.

Clinical Appropriateness of an ESA

As an identified part of the client’s treatment plan, clinicians should intentionally integrate the ESA into the treatment provided and have ongoing oversight of the ESA in their treatment plan. Many professional and licensing organizations state the importance of delivering services only within the boundaries of the clinician's competence
In 2019, the Human-Animal Interactions in Counseling Interest Network (HAIC) created a position statement that emphasizes the cruciality of competence regarding ESAs and human-animal interactions in therapeutic settings: “The counselor must have … appropriate knowledge, skills and attitudes with the subject of therapeutic human-animal interactions before writing such a letter” (Stewart et al., p. 1). Clinicians who do not feel comfortable including an animal as part of their treatment may not want to consider the use of an ESA as a reasonable accommodation for a client’s disability.

Clinicians must also weigh the benefits and burdens of both documenting a disability for a client and adding substantial and on-going responsibilities of an animal into the client’s life. There may be long-term political consequences for documenting disabilities for individuals (e.g., military service, security clearance). Additionally, while interacting with an animal may be beneficial, clients must also have the financial resources to provide veterinary care, the ability to care for the animal consistently despite their challenges, and commitment to the animal for the future. In some situations, the burdens to a client with a disability may outweigh the benefits and the client’s intense desire for an animal. The wellbeing of the animal needs to be considered as well. Talking through the details of animal care and responsibilities with a client may be an important way to assess how an ESA may affect the day-to-day functioning of the client and the animal, for better or worse. Talking through potential difficult animal-related situations and the client’s ability or plans for dealing with them is especially important if the client is considering a new animal they have not cared for previously and may bring on as-yet-unknown challenges.
A “goal-first” approach is imperative when deciding whether an ESA would be a good fit for the individual. In essence, rather than deciding if an ESA can fit within the treatment plan, the treatment goal or disorder-related need should be identified and an ESA considered as one way to help meet that goal (MacNamara et al., 2015). For this reason, a client seeking services for the sole purpose of obtaining an ESA letter may not be consistent with best practices. Competence in animal-assisted interventions could aid in exploring ways to treat mental health concerns through animal-assisted interventions (AAIs) and when AAI may not be indicated.

The long-term commitment that an animal entails means that ESAs are likely only appropriate for clients with severe and/or chronic symptoms. However, individuals who may benefit from an appropriate ESA need not require “the presence of the animal to function and remain psychologically stable” (Younggren et al., 2020; p 159). A need of this caliber would likely not benefit from an ESA who cannot accompany their human partner in public spaces (e.g., grocery stores, work/school). Should an individual require an animal for daily functioning, a trained service animal is a more appropriate fit.

The partnership with animals in treatment is considered an adjunct and support to treatment, rather than a stand-alone treatment in itself (Fine, 2019; Horowitz, 2010). Therefore, for animals to remain a true adjunct to treatment for a mental disability, ongoing treatment with the health care professional is indicated and is a requirement that must be documented in an ESA letter (HUD, 2020). Especially considering the limited research regarding the efficacy of ESAs, clients and health care professionals should seek evidence-based treatment first and foremost, remaining open to adjunctive ways to support and enrich treatment of which ESAs are one.
ESA Selection

*Legal Implications in ESA Selection*

One legal consideration easily overlooked by clinicians is the responsibility incurred by giving an often-unknown animal access to public spaces (e.g., spaces shared by residents of multiple households). Clinicians often write ESA letters with no knowledge of the animal’s training, behavior, and temperament or the handler’s ability to manage the animal. The mental health professional who signs an ESA letter may be liable for any problems caused by the animals (e.g., bites, property damage) beyond the liability of the animal owner (Voda-Hamilton, 2019; Von Bergen, 2015). Consequently, it behooves the mental health professional to make sure that the animal can be reasonably expected to behave appropriately in the places the animal will be able to go (Younggren et al., 2020). In addition, ESAs are expected to avoid disrupting other working dogs across all environments (e.g., residence, public spaces; Taylor, 2016).

Equally important, the animal’s welfare must be considered to ensure that the animal is not put in overly stressful or unhealthy situations. Living spaces need to have the appropriate amount of space and have access to amenities appropriate to the animal’s needs. The client must be able to manage the animal and advocate for their health and wellbeing at home. Ideally, the animal would be assessed for behavioral aptitude, obedience training, and health before being given ESA status. For most mental health professionals such an assessment is beyond their expertise and consultation with a veterinarian and/or animal behaviorist is warranted.

As previously mentioned, there are no limits on breeds or species for ESAs. However, the updated HUD guidelines state that individuals requesting ESAs that are not
commonly kept in households (such as barnyard animals, monkeys, reptiles other than turtles, and other non-domesticated animals) have the “substantial burden of demonstrating a disability-related therapeutic need for the specific animal or the specific type of animal” (p. 12). This emphasizes the legal relevance of clinically intentional animal selection.

**Clinically Relevant Animal Selection**

Selecting an animal to serve as an ESA requires knowledge about animal behavior, health, animal-assisted interventions, as well as clinical understanding of clients’ unique needs and context and how those would interface with an animal. A goal-first approach necessitates the thoughtful consideration of the species, breed, and temperament chosen for the purpose of emotional support (MacNamara et al., 2015). Goals and expectations of the ESA in the treatment plan need to match the natural traits, abilities, and desires of the animal chosen. Importantly, the animal needs to be a voluntary participant in the treatment plan. The HAIC position statement highlights the importance of consultation regarding ESA selection (Stewart et al., 2019). An animal behaviorist may be an ideal resource to facilitate choosing an appropriate animal and ensure that the goals and expectations are realistic. Some animals are more tolerant and stable around intense human emotions and/or extensive physical contact than others who might be frightened, anxious, and stressed by these experiences. Enlisting the wrong animal for the job can be catastrophic and lead to safety and welfare issues for both human and animal.

There must be a “relationship or connection between the disability and the need for the assistance animal” (U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, 2020,
However, the relationship may take infinite forms. A couple examples provided in the HUD guidelines include: “assisting a person with mental illness to leave the isolation of home or to interact with others, enabling a person to deal with the symptoms or effects of major depression by providing a reason to live” (U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, 2020, p. 19). It is not necessary for an ESA to perform multiple disability-related functions. ESAs requirements are limited, but not restricted, to emotional support. The animal-assisted intervention literature and additional training for the clinician can provide further understanding of the potential for animals to help with emotional disability-related distress and symptoms.

A current pet of the client should not be immediately assumed to be well-suited to the goals established for an ESA. However, a pre-existing bond between a client and an animal does matter in considering the right animal for the right job (MacNamara et al., 2015). Poor attachment or inconsistency in the bond can preclude an animal from being an effective ESA. Sometimes the existing bond can be the most powerful effect of an ESA for an individual’s presenting concerns, so long as all other goals are realistically matched with the animal as well.

Problematic ESA selection has ramifications beyond the clinical or legal setting. ESAs can cause difficult situations for other assistance and working animals and handlers, and the public through contact with an animal that does not have the needed temperament, training, and support to successfully navigate their environment. The negative press and egregious behavior of ESAs who were not trustworthy or qualified for the work they claimed to do results in negative impacts for all working animals, making animal selection a social justice issue (Burns, 2017).
Routine ESA Assessment

After ESA selection, clinicians should continually assess the ESA’s role in treatment, their impact on the client’s targeted disability-related symptom(s) and troubleshoot ineffectiveness with clients. Younggren et al., (2020, p. 160) provide an excellent example of a question that may guide clinicians: “Does the presence of the ESA allow the individual to more effectively perform activities of daily living commonly done by others, reduce anxiety sufficiently to yield measurable improvements in concentration, or facilitate improved social interactions with other people?” Additional aspects to assess might involve the welfare and behavioral patterns of the individual or animal as they relate to the ESA. Frequent monitoring and assessment will position the client and provider to mitigate any issues, increase therapeutic collaboration, and increase awareness of the human-animal bond.

Animal Welfare Considerations

While welfare issues are intimately related to the clinical and legal aspects of ESAs, animal welfare is unfortunately most often left out of the conversation about ESAs with clinicians, clients, and policy makers. ESAs are living beings with rights commonly referred to as the Five Freedoms. Animals have the right to nutritious food and access to fresh water, adequate shelter and a place to rest comfortably, safety, healthcare, and the ability to engage in natural behaviors they enjoy (Farm Animal Welfare Committee, 2009). The successful human-animal bond should be voluntary and a relationship that increases the wellbeing of both the human and animal. Preserving and strengthening the bond between a client and their ESA through making animal welfare an explicit priority is central to the mandate of mental health providers to do no harm. We propose that
clinicians need to take the necessary care to avoid doing harm not only to their clients but to ESAs included as part of their treatment plan. Animals are a vulnerable population who do not have the power to consent to be part of treatment. Therefore, clinicians and clients must take on the responsibility of the ESAs wellbeing and protect them to the greatest degree possible from poor treatment, abuse, and neglect.

**Guidance for Mental Health Professionals**

As clinicians, it is important to develop the skills to educate and have compassionate conversations with clients about the relevant legal, clinical, and welfare issues when asked for ESA letters. When done with knowledge, critical thought, compassion, and reverence for the human animal bond, such conversations can strengthen the therapeutic alliance. Deciding not to support a request for an ESA as part of treatment is no different from deciding not to provide any adjunct to treatment that is not in the client’s best interests or the clinician’s competence. A transparent discussion may demonstrate to the client that the clinician is dedicated to the clients’ wellbeing, takes the client’s relationships with animals seriously, considers the welfare of their beloved animals, considers the client’s and animal’s impact in society, and is willing to let the client be an integral part of the decision-making process. The ESA Decision Making Framework provides an outline for these complex discussions with clients. Reaching a collaborative understanding may lead to less fraud, fewer misconceptions about the roles of ESAs, and ultimately more effective ESA-client-clinician relationships.

Clinicians can play an important role in providing alternatives to ESAs when working with clients who are seeking to benefit from the human-animal bond. The options are varied depending on the specific situation but could include clinicians helping
clients work toward finding pet-friendly housing. Though a pet is not an official adjunct to treatment, a pet may nevertheless open the door for positive benefits of the human-animal bond without need for clinical oversight, competencies regarding animal-assisted therapy, or consideration of disability status. Clients could also volunteer with animal-focused organizations, participate in animal assisted activities in their communities where available, or engage in animal-assisted therapy with a therapist trained to include their own animals in their therapeutic work.

Therapists can also help clients by becoming more knowledgeable about the human-animal bond, animal-assisted interactions and interventions, and ways to integrate animals and the human-animal bond into their own practice, even if only through the use of story and metaphor (Fine, 2019). On a broader level, therapists can get involved in research on the human animal bond, advocate for laws that reflect research and are responsive to concerns about fraud and access for responsible assistance animals, and support community animal welfare. Mental health professionals can also help promote awareness of the different types of assistance animals and support their separate and unique legal access rights.

**Conclusion**

Mental health professionals are in the ideal position to make decisions about ESAs with their clients. It is imperative that clinicians are familiar with and utilize legal, clinical, and welfare lenses in assessing client eligibility/indication for an ESA and in potential animal selection. Though ESA decisions and conversations may be difficult, a solid knowledge of ESA issues and compassion for the client’s bond with animals will
allow therapists to have meaningful conversations with clients and develop effective treatment plans, with or without an ESA, that honors clients’ relationships with animals.
References


https://doi.org/10.2752/175303712X13240472427159


https://doi.org/10.1016/B978-0-12-801292-5.00003-1


Foster, A. M. (2018). Don’t be distracted by the peacock trying to board an airplane: Why emotional support animals are service animals and should be regulated in the same manner. *Albany Law Review, 82*(1), 237–266.


https://doi.org/10.1080/08927936.2017.1311050


U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development. (2020). *Assessing a person’s request to have an animal as a reasonable accommodation under the Fair Housing Act*. Office of Fair Housing and Equal Opportunity.  


US Department of Transportation. (2020). *U.S. Department of Transportation Announces Final Rule on Traveling by Air with Service Animals*.  
https://www.transportation.gov/briefing-room/us-department-transportation-announces-final-rule-traveling-air-service-animals


Step 1: Eligibility and Indication - Consultation with animal behaviorists/trainers may assist in identifying reasonable expectations for animals.
- Are there legal barriers to accessing a pet in their residence?
- Does the individual have a severe or chronic mental disorder?
- Do you have an ongoing treatment-related relationship with the client?
- Identify target symptoms. Can a specific animal be reasonably expected to relieve one or more of these symptoms?
- Are the benefits of potential ESA-related symptom reduction greater than the burden of animal care on the individual?
- Is your level of competence in animal-assisted intervention adequate enough to feel comfortable including animals in your treatment provision? Do you have access to more competent animal-assisted professionals with whom you can consult?

Step 2: Animal Selection - Consider inclusion of veterinarians in selection and routine assessment to keep animal welfare a priority.
- Is the animal best suited to perform the specific identified ESA function(s) (behaviorally and in health)?
- Are the expectations on the animal reasonable and does the animal enjoy meeting them?
- Is there a strong, healthy mutually-beneficial bond between the individual and the ESA? Or is such a bond likely to develop relatively quickly?
- Is the individual reasonably knowledgeable and skilled in animal behavior and intervention in order to support and manage the animal appropriately?
- Is the individual and their living arrangements appropriate for the health and benefit of the animal (veterinary care, space, exercise needs, etc.)?

Step 3: Routine ESA Assessment - Using clinical judgement and relevant assessment tools. Consider appropriate consultation.
- Are the target disability-related symptoms still being aided by the individual’s interactions with the ESA?
- Are the behavior patterns of the individual or animal helpful and safe regarding the ESA context (no problematic behaviors of the individual or the animal)?
- Are the needs of the individual and animal being met in the current ESA context?
- Have you engaged in continued education regarding animal assisted interventions in psychotherapy?

You likely are engaging in the best practices for animal assisted interventions with respect to ESAs and support the potential for the human-animal bond to augment and enhance treatment for your client.

Figure 1

**ESA Decision Making Framework, Decision Tree, and Client Conversation Outline**
CHAPTER III

STUDY II

Ferrell, J., Crowley, S. L. (under review) Emotional support animal partnerships: Behavior, welfare, and clinical involvement. *Anthrozoos*

Emotional Support Animal Partnerships: Behavior, Welfare, and Clinical Involvement

Jillian Ferrell & Susan Crowley

Utah State University

The authors do not have any conflicts of interest to disclose.
Abstract

The present study gathered information about characteristics of individuals and dogs in Emotional Support Animal (ESA) partnerships, instances of service-animal misrepresentation, animal welfare and behavior, bond quality, and health professional involvement. Seventy-seven adults with a canine ESAs were surveyed via Qualtrics Panel Services. Many participants reported interacting with health care providers, though engagement was highly variable. The data also showed problematic instances including ESAs with a history of aggression, times when participants were unable to care for their dog, and misrepresenting ESAs as service animals in public. Welfare concerns were correlated with problematic animal behaviors and perceived costs to the humans in the partnership. These data provide a first picture of ESA partnerships and can be a springboard for future research toward protecting individuals with disabilities, their animals, and communities.

Keywords: Emotional support animal, animal welfare, animal-assisted therapy
Emotional Support Animal Partnerships: Behavior, Welfare, and Clinical Involvement

Introduction

Substantial research has investigated the impact of animals on humans. Data supports that humans can benefit physiologically (Curl et al., 2017; Friedmann, 2019; Mein & Grant, 2018), psychologically (Barba, 1995; Brooks et al., 2018; Kanat-Maymon et al., 2016), and socially (Arkow, 2019; Brown et al., 2016; Bueker, 2013; Thompson & Gullone, 2003; Wood et al., 2015) from positive relationships with animals. This body of research, however, has focused on companion animals or brief interactions with therapy animals. At the conceptual crossroads of companion animals and therapy animal are emotional support animals (ESAs).

ESAs are animals who provide emotional support or comfort to individuals with mental or emotional symptoms related to a physical disability or mental disorder (U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, 2020). Like companion animals, ESAs live with their human companions and interact with them on a daily basis and are not required to have any special training. Like therapy animals and service animals, the interactions are intended to provide a positive benefit to the individual related to their identified disorder or disability. ESAs are recognized by the Fair Housing Act (1968), permitting them to live in housing where pets are not allowed at no additional cost. ESA status does not require specialized training, certification, evaluation, or registry, and has no firm limitations on species or breeds. Obtaining ESA status for an animal requires documentation from a health professional stating that the client has a disability and that symptoms related to the disability is ameliorated or aided by the companionship of the
specifically identified animal, and therefore is entitled to reasonable accommodation through the Fair Housing Act (U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, 2020).

With increased popularity of ESAs has come confusion about ESA roles and law, and fraud. Negative press has highlighted problematic animals on airplanes (e.g., barking, bites), in no-pet housing (e.g., property destruction), and atypical species identified as ESAs (e.g., snakes, hamsters, ducks). As knowledge and popularity of ESAs has grown, an online “market” for ESA documentation developed where, for a fee, anyone can get a signed letter by a “mental health professional” supporting an ESA. In response, new guidelines state that letters with internet origins are not considered sufficient for housing accommodations (U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, 2020). Reports of misrepresenting ESAs as service animals in public spaces causes problems for other working dog teams when in contact with untrained ESAs. The increased fraud has also led to public questioning of legitimacy of service animals, and reluctance to grant access to legitimate service dog partnerships.

There is controversy about increasing requirements and monitoring for ESA animals, which could cut down on animal behavior issues for housing managers and clients but create hardship and barriers for individuals to participate in purported benefits of ESAs. Controversy within clinical circles is related to the lack of evidence for the efficacy of ESAs as a helpful adjunct to treatment of mental and emotional disorders. And yet, ESAs have also been reported anecdotally to be extremely helpful and even life-changing for many individuals with mental health disorders (Bourland, 2009; Hernandez-
Silk, 2017), likely reflecting a substantial body of research regarding the benefits of companion animals on individuals with mental health disorders (Brooks et al., 2018).

Guidelines and models for best practices have been proposed regarding ESA selection and treatment plans based on available research about using animals to assist in therapeutic contexts (Ferrell & Crowley, 2021; Hoy-Gerlach, Vincent, & Hector, 2019; Stewart et al., 2019). Predominantly, best practices emphasize the importance of the involvement of a health professional in the ESA selection and treatment process. Health professionals need to have an intimate understanding of a client’s chronic health challenges in order to assess a client’s legal eligibility for an ESA (U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, 2020). Furthermore, best practices guide the health professional to work closely with the client to develop a treatment plan or intention including the ESA (Hoy-Gerlach et al., 2019), and that the professional making an animal part of a treatment plan be competent in animal-assisted intervention practices, theories, and skills (Ferrell & Crowley, 2021).

Key to a successful ESA partnership is a relational interest and connection, the basis on which ESAs provide support to persons with chronic mental illness or physical disabilities (MacNamara et al., 2015; Fine & Beck, 2015; Hoy-Gerlach et al., 2019). A positive human-animal bond is based on a voluntary, mutually beneficial relationship, in which the welfare of both parties is prioritized (Davis & Balfour, 1992; Journal of the American Veterinary Medical Association, 1998). To date, the overwhelming majority of research has focused on the welfare of the human member of the bond with little focus on the welfare of the animal. Unquestionably, animal welfare is not only critically important in its own right, it is also essential to supporting the active ingredient in potentially
effective and long-lasting ESA partnerships (Fine & Ferrell, 2021; Peralta & Fine, 2021; Wensley, 2008).

Despite making headlines, limited research has investigated ESAs and those who benefit from them, and available data comes from small case studies and qualitative data (Bourland, 2009; Hoy-Gerlach et al., 2019). While literature on companion animals and animal-assisted interventions provides some guidance on the potential impact of and on ESAs, the unique status afforded to ESAs (i.e., legal accommodation, therapeutic intentionality) and the expectations placed on the animals (e.g., ability to tolerate distress) limit the extrapolation. Similarly, research on supports provided by service dogs cannot be generalized to ESAs due to the lower training requirements expected of ESAs and the fact that ESAs may not be with individuals as much due to no access rights beyond residences and pet-friendly public spaces. We have no broad or representative understanding of ESA characteristics or behaviors; the human component of ESA relationships, including individual’s characteristics, misrepresentation behaviors, diagnoses, or their ability to care for their animal partner; where individuals obtained their ESA documentation; how and if mental health professionals are involved; and the human-animal bond quality in ESA relationships. Addressing the gaps in our knowledge on ESAs could inform law, policy makers and other stakeholders, as well as provide understanding on how to facilitate responsible and effective ESA partnerships. Data can illuminate and prioritize problem areas to help avoid the pitfalls, misrepresentation, and destructive consequences.

The present study seeks to address the identified gaps in the knowledge base regarding ESAs. The objectives of the current study were to gather descriptive
information about the nature and context of current ESA dog partnerships, and to investigate the relationships among the contextual variables. Dogs were chosen exclusively because they are often identified as the most socially skilled animals suited for the ESA job (Horowitz, 2010; Mills et al., 2019). Additionally, dogs are the most common animals kept as pets in the U.S. and likely to be the largest group of ESA owners (Washton Brown Associates, 2019). Finally, dogs are able to go with their human handlers and so are more likely to be seen in public spaces. Specifically, the following research questions were addressed:

1. What are the characteristics and behaviors of the human partner including age, sex, disability; the types and frequencies of ESA misrepresentation behaviors; and the dogs’ age, sex, and canine obedience and problematic behavior such as damage or aggression?

2. Where and from whom do ESA partnerships obtain their ESA documentation, and what is the extent of mental health professional involvement in ESA processes and decisions?

3. What is the human partners’ report of bond quality with their dog, the extent to which animal welfare was explicitly discussed in the ESA documentation process, and reported welfare of the dog?

4. What are the relationships between professional involvement, misrepresentation, human-animal bond, welfare, and problematic animal behavior variables?

Based on previous literature on AAT, it is hypothesized that greater mental health professional involvement in the ESA documentation process would be positively
correlated with better animal welfare and bond quality, and negatively correlated with incidents of misrepresentation or problematic animal behavior (such as aggression or destruction of property). Better animal welfare is hypothesized to be correlated with more positive animal behavior, fewer problematic animal behaviors, and greater bond quality.

Methods

Participants

Participants included 77 individuals who identified as having an emotional support dog across the United States. To be included, participants must have been adults who have had their ESA dog for a minimum of 6 months. In addition, the ESA must not have functioned as a service animal and participants must not have had more than one ESA at the time of the study. Participants were recruited via a Qualtrics panel service. Data collection was anonymous and no identifying information was collected as part of the survey (e.g., name, location, contact information).

Measures

A survey addressing the topic areas of study was created through researcher-developed items and scales from several measures assessing the human-animal bond. For each topic area identified in the aims of the study, the assessment scales/items are listed below.

Demographics and Behaviors of Participant and ESA

Individual questions assessed participant and dog demographic information (e.g., age, gender, ESA-related diagnosis, breed, length of time ESA status). Two questions
asked about where participants took their ESA where pets are not allowed and if they have claimed their dog was a service dog. Dog behavioral history items were adapted from the Pet Partners Handler’s Questionnaire (Pet Partners, 2015). Specifically, questions assessed if the ESA dog had engaged in property damage, injured/killed another companion animal, exhibited aggression toward people/other animal, and other problematic behaviors (e.g., jumping, begging, chewing). Participants were also allowed to write in responses for most questions.

**Health Care Professional Involvement**

Four questions were used to assess from whom participants received ESA documentation online/internet, health care provider), if they were receiving treatment from the letter-writer, if the participant was receiving health treatment related to their disability from another provider, and whether the mental health professional was involved in animal selection and/or met the dog prior to signing the letter.

**Human-animal Bond Assessment**

The quality of the bond between the handler and ESA was evaluated through the use of subscales from two existing scales. The Monash Dog Owner Relationship Scale (MDORS; Dwyer et al., 2006) was used in its entirety, with 28 items that utilize a 5-point Likert Scale. There are three subscales within this measure: Dog-owner Interaction (9 items, range 9 – 45, Cronbach's alpha = .60), Perceived Costs (9 items, range 9 – 45, Cronbach's alpha = .90), and Perceived Emotional Closeness (10 items, range 10 – 50, Cronbach's alpha = .69). All items were recoded such that higher scores indicate greater dog-owner interaction, fewer perceived costs of dog-ownership, and higher levels of perceived emotional closeness. From The Pet Attachment and Life Impact Scale (PALS;
DeMarni & Barlow, 2013) two subscales (14 items, 5-point Likert scale) were used: Emotional Regulation (9 items, range 9 – 45, Cronbach’s alpha = .71) and Personal Growth (5 items, range 5 – 25, Cronbach’s alpha = .85). Items were recoded such that higher scores are associated with the perception that the dog provides emotional regulation for the participant and a greater perception of personal growth stemming from the relationship with the ESA dog.

**Animal Welfare**

Welfare-related information included researcher-created items about the current welfare of the dog regarding the “Five Freedoms” (Farm Animal Welfare Committee, 2009), including access to shelter, water, nutrition, health care, exercise, ability to have a break from ESA duties, respecting animal autonomy (i.e., forcing dog to cuddle), engaging in favorite activities, and overall health. Additionally, one question assessed the inclusion of welfare and/or consultation with a veterinarian in the ESA consideration process.

**Procedure**

The Utah State University Institutional Review Board reviewed and approved the study (protocol #11545). A survey was distributed to eligible individuals via Qualtrics’ panel services. The panel services work with third-party companies to find survey-takers who fit the inclusion criteria for the study and who have provided the third-party evidence of authenticity of identity. The survey took approximately 30 minutes to complete. Participants who completed the survey were paid for their participation by companies unaffiliated with the researchers. The integrity of the data was checked via Qualtrics staff and the researchers. Nonsense responses, patterned responses, and
participants who did not meet inclusion criteria were removed from the data pool prior to analysis.

Data Analysis Plan

Data collected via Qualtrics was analyzed using SPSS. The primary analyses were descriptive including means, standard deviations, and frequencies as dictated by the data. Bivariate relationships were investigated using Chi Square with Cramer’s Phi ($\phi_c$) effect size, and Kendall’s tau. For an interpretation of Cramer’s Phi, small, medium, and large effect sizes are generally considered to be .1, .3, and .5 respectively (Cohen, 1988). Data for letter writer and welfare variables was highly skewed and multiple response options were not endorsed by participants. To allow analyses, these variables were collapsed to nominal yes/no responses as follows (responses coding as yes are provided): treatment being provided by ESA letter writer; participant currently receiving treatment from any provider; dog receiving adequate exercise more than three days/week; dog engaging with favorite activities more than 3 days/week; dog access to adequate shelter always; dog access to water always; participant struggles to care for dog more than 1-2 days/week; forces dog to cuddle at least three days/week: dog is in good health rated agree or strongly agree. All participants reported that their ESA was able to have a break from duties, or reported “neither agree nor disagree.” Due to a lack of variance, this variable was not included in the analyses. For the following items that were recoded as yes/no, responses rated as “neither agree nor disagree” were excluded from analysis because it was unclear whether to include it in a yes or no response: A veterinarian was consulted prior to obtaining the ESA (12 excluded); participant can provide nutrition and healthcare rated agree or strongly agree (4 responses excluded); welfare was discussed during the
The results section is organized in line with the proposed research questions.

**Question 1: Characteristics of Human and Animal Partners**

Means, standard deviations, and frequencies for demographic data are presented in Table 1. Participant ages averaged 51.82 years (SD = 16.31) and the majority were White (84%). Participants were asked about their disabling conditions in an open-ended question and were allowed to type their own responses. The disabilities most commonly reported by participants included Post-traumatic Stress Disorder (28.6%), Major Depressive Disorder (24.7%), and Generalized Anxiety Disorder (24.7%). Some individuals listed multiple disabilities, some included physical disabilities as well, but were less common. 11.7 percent chose not to disclose an ESA-related disability, and 6.5% shared a physical disability or medical condition diagnosis.

The age of participants’ ESA dogs ranged from 1 – 15 years with a mean of 6.08 (SD = 3.71). Breeds included mixed breeds (29%), Labrador Retrievers (10.4%), and Golden Retrievers (7.8%). There were 48 male dogs (62.4%) and 29 females (37.6%). On average, participants had a relationship with their dog for 4.9 years (SD = 3.47) and their dogs had been given ESA status for 3.3 years (SD = 2.78).

Over half the participants (59.7%) reported having claimed their ESA dog as a service animal at least once, with 18.2% claiming service dog status frequently or almost
always. About one-quarter (24.7%) of participants reported never taking their ESA dog into stores, while 39% reported doing so frequently or almost always. Other places participants reported taking their ESA dog included restaurants, church, concerts, museums, non-pet-friendly parks, libraries, and other city buildings.

**Question 2: ESA Documentation and Professional Involvement**

Mental health professionals were the most common individuals from whom participants received letters (44.2%), and nearly a quarter of participants (22%) obtained their ESA letter from the internet. About three quarters of the participants reported that their letter provider was not involved in the ESA selection, but about half (48.1%) of the providers did meet the ESA before signing a letter. Half of the participants reported not currently receiving treatment for their identified disability from the individual who provided their ESA letter. Complete data are presented in Table 2.

**Question 3: Bond Quality and Welfare**

Descriptive data for participant scores on the 5 bond quality measures are provided in Table 3. Participants overwhelmingly report few costs, high emotional closeness, high interactions, high emotional regulation provided, and high personal growth provided.

When asked about ESA dogs’ access to basic needs, the majority of participants reported being able to provide fully for their dog (food, water, shelter, healthcare, exercise, favorite activities; 74.1% - 93.5%). However, 13% of ESA dogs did not have consistent adequate shelter and 14.3% of participants reported struggling to care for their ESA at least sometimes or 3 days/week. About half of the participants (49.4%) stated that a vet was consulted during the process of providing ESA status to the dog and 70.2%
agreed or strongly agreed that animal welfare was explicitly discussed in the ESA status obtaining process. Only the most notable findings are recounted here; A full list of frequencies of welfare variables are provided in Table A2 in Appendix A.

**Question 4: Relationships between professional involvement, misrepresentation, human-animal bond, welfare, and problematic animal behavior variables**

**Health Professional Involvement**

Correlations between the five health professional involvement variables (helping to select dog, met the dog prior to documentation, documentation from a health professional, participant currently receiving mental health treatment, participant in treatment with the ESA documenter) and 10 reported animal welfare variables (water, shelter, nutrition/healthcare, exercise, favorite activities, forcing to cuddle, consultation with veterinarian, overall health, if participant struggled to care for the animal, welfare discussed) were calculated. A table of this data is provided in Table A1 in Appendix A. As providers helped to select the ESA dog, adequate water was less often available to ESA dogs ($\chi^2 = 9.47, p < .002, \phi_c = -.35$), and the more participants reported with struggling to care for their dog ($\chi^2 = 5.45, p < .02, \phi_c = .27$), forcing the dog to cuddle ($\chi^2 = 5.45, p < .02, \phi_c = .27$), and consultation with a veterinarian as more likely to occur ($\chi^2 = 4.64, p < .03, \phi_c = .27$). Participants who reported that their provider met the ESA prior to documentation were less likely to have unlimited access to shelter ($\chi^2 = 4.70, p < .05, \phi_c = -.25$), but also associated with consulting a veterinarian ($\chi^2 = 17.43, p < .001, \phi_c = .52$). Receiving ESA documentation from a health professional was associated with the dog getting adequate exercise more often ($\chi^2 = 11.84, p < .001, \phi_c = .39$), unlimited
access to water ($\chi^2 = 9.47, p < .002, \varphi_c = .35$), and access to shelter ($\chi^2 = 6.92, p < .01, \varphi_c = .30$). Receiving current treatment by the letter writer was associated with adequate exercise ($\chi^2 = 4.34, p < .04, \varphi_c = .24$). Receiving current treatment by any professional did not yield any significant results.

Correlations between the five health professional involvement variables and 2 reported misrepresentation behavior variables (taking the ESA places pets are not invited, claiming service animal status) were calculated. The provider helping to select the dog and the provider meeting dog prior to writing a letter were both related to taking the dog to public places ($r = .30, p < .002$; $r = .28, p < .004$, respectively).

Looking at the relationship between health professional involvement variables and problematic behavior variables (history of aggression toward people/animals, seriously injuring/killing another companion animal, and causing damage to property), documentation from a professional was associated with fewer reports of ESA dogs with a history of aggression and injuring/killing another companion animal ($\chi^2 = 7.74, p > .005, \varphi_c = - .32, \chi^2 = 8.90, p < .005, \varphi_c = - .34$, respectively). Receiving treatment from the documenter was related to fewer reports of ESA dog history of aggression ($\chi^2 = 6.33, p > .02, \varphi_c = - .29$).

Correlations between the health professional involvement variables and human-animal bond measures (MDORS dog and owner interaction, perceived costs of having a dog, perceived emotional closeness; PALS dog providing emotional regulation, and dog providing personal growth) resulted in three statistically significant correlations. The provider helping to select the ESA was positively correlated with the dog providing emotional regulation ($r = .20, p < .04$) and with personal growth from their relationship.
with the dog ($r = .20$, $p < .04$). The provider meeting the dog prior to documentation was positively correlated with MDORS dog-owner interaction ($r = .38$, $p < .001$).

**Animal Welfare**

Multiple welfare variables (adequate exercise, adequate shelter, unlimited water, struggling to care for the dog, and forcing the dog to cuddle) were associated with a history of injuring/killing another companion animal and property damage with relationships ranging from $|.27| - |.52|$ in the expected directions. In addition, struggling to care for the ESA dog was associated with a reported history of aggression ($\chi^2 = 4.21$, $p > .05$, $\phi = .23$).

Correlations between animal welfare variables and human-animal bond measures are reported in Table 4. The majority of statistically significant correlations were between MDORS cost and welfare variables, although all correlations were relatively small.

**Discussion**

The present research was a first foray into understanding canine ESAs and their handlers, considering the welfare of both members of the relationship and the involvement of the ESA letter writer. The data reflect ongoing confusion surrounding the ESA purpose and laws for people who have them and those who write letters for ESAs. Some participants indicated their dog was “registered” as an ESA before obtaining the dog and that they obtained their ESA for the purpose of taking their dog with them in public places. One participant reported having no diagnosis or disability as the basis of obtaining their ESA. Nearly 60% of participants had claimed their dog as a service animal and 39% take their ESA into public places (e.g., stores, restaurants) on a regular
basis. This is alarming since one in six ESA dogs was reported to have a history of aggression and approximately one in four ESA dogs were reported as not being house-trained. Just shy of a quarter of the participants obtained their ESA documentation from the internet. Notably, the only three ESAs that were reported as having a history of seriously injuring or killing another companion animal were all documented as ESAs via an internet organization.

**Health Professional Involvement**

Only half of the documenters met the dog prior to signing a letter and even fewer were involved in the animal selection process making it unlikely that the majority of letter writers were able to be clinically intentional in selecting the most appropriate animal for their clients’ symptoms. Not seeing the animal and client together and how they relate to each other may limit the ability to assess the support that an animal is providing a client. Given that professional involvement was not significantly correlated with claiming to have a service animal, professionals may also be confused about ESA laws or are not discussing the law with their clients. Interestingly, more professional involvement in animal selection was positively related with participants taking the ESA to non-pet-friendly public places. Professional involvement that does not include a clear understanding and communication of ESA law may result in clients feeling justified taking their animal anywhere, irrespective of the law (e.g., Stewart et al., 2019).

We hypothesized that more professional involvement would be associated with better animal welfare, as professionals can act as gatekeepers for safe ESA partnerships. However, the data did not support our hypothesis. Provider involvement was associated with forcing the dog to cuddle and had non-significant relationships with welfare
variables. It appears that professional involvement is not actively focusing on the welfare of the ESA and/or the expectations of the human partner. And, if discussed by the professional, it is not being heard or acted on by the client. Professional involvement was also hypothesized to be associated with higher bond quality. This hypothesis was partially supported. Provider involvement in selection was related to more personal growth and emotional regulation effects of the ESA suggesting that professionals may be identifying when an animal might be helpful to client goals.

**Animal Welfare**

Better animal welfare was hypothesized to be associated with better bond quality and fewer problematic dog behaviors. Approximately one in seven ESA dogs may not be receiving consistent quality care and explicitly discussing animal welfare was not associated with actual welfare items except for adequate shelter. Clinical oversight of ESAs may need to include a more intentional assessment of caretaking behaviors and problem solve how to best meet the needs of the client and the ESA dog.

Notably, as participants reported more welfare problems (e.g., struggling to care for the dog), they also reported greater perceived costs of having a dog. Conversely, as the dogs’ basic needs were able to be met, the perceived costs to the participants were fewer. Further investigation of the relationship between animal welfare and bond quality is warranted to better understand how welfare, perceived costs, and bond quality are related and, more importantly, the causality or potentially cyclic nature of the relationships. The emphasis on mutuality in the human-animal bond suggests that bond assessment must include animal welfare (Johnson et al., 1992). Emotional closeness and
attachment are unquestionably important, but are not necessarily good indicators of greater animal welfare (Shore et al., 2005).

**Future Directions and Limitations**

The self-report nature of the survey leads data regarding animal welfare and behavior vulnerable to influences of social desirability. Participants were willing to report undesirable behaviors and limitations of welfare suggesting that the anonymous nature of the survey helped combat social desirability demands. Regarding professional involvement data, the self-report survey also only includes the perspective of ESA human partners; a survey of participants’ health professionals may yield very different results. Participants also self-selected eligibility to complete the survey with no external verification of their ESA, and their ESA letter. The confusion surrounding ESA may have impacted the participation of individuals who believe they have an ESA but would not technically or legally have one.

Research on most all aspects of ESAs is in its infancy. More research is needed on specific mechanisms of ESA success/benefits, the impact of competence in animal-assisted interventions, and the benefits of prioritizing animal welfare. The current study supports previous critiques of the lack of standardization in research involving assistance animals (Fine et al., 2019). As with therapy animals in animal-assisted therapy research, not all ESAs can be considered equal and cannot be treated as such in research, particularly when assessing if ESAs are effective in clinical trials. It would behoove researchers to consider the greatly varying contexts of ESA situations before attempting to draw conclusions about ESAs generally.
Investigation of professional support and involvement may be helpful to better understand how to best facilitate successful and safe ESA partnerships within and across ESA species. While we have little quantitative data to support the efficacy of ESAs and problematic ESA partnerships continue to be represented in the media, it is our conjecture that subjective health benefits will increase and problematic behaviors and fraud will decrease as education is promoted, animal welfare prioritized, animal behavioral management considered, and as animal-assisted-intervention-competent health professional involvement increases.

Very likely, professionals are trying to be helpful and do good with what they intuitively know – that clients’ relationships with animals can be transformative. Unfortunately, a subset of these ESA documentation decisions is problematic for communities, animals, and clients. Training for professionals to make ESA decisions would be a helpful first step. Including ESA issues in academic and practicum training for students entering the field may also be helpful. The Association of Animal-Assisted Intervention Professionals (AAIP), an affiliate of Pet Partners, has developed an accessible certification process and resources that may support professionals wanting to competently engage with animals in their professional practice (Pet Partners, 2022).

Conclusion

The results provide the first descriptive picture of canine ESAs and their human companions adding new data on the level of fraud in ESA documentation and misrepresentation, professional involvement, and the welfare of ESAs. These data are informative for multiple stakeholder groups, from clinicians to policymakers and researchers, and will fill a substantial gap in our knowledge of a controversial and
popular topic. There is strong reason to conclude from the data that an understanding of ESAs by clients and perhaps health professionals is sorely lacking and confused. Clinicians may consider common oversights in involvement and monitoring, such as animal welfare, access rights education, animal behavior, and capitalizing on bond quality through competent integration of the ESA into treatment plans. At a broader level, law makers may consider animal welfare security as highly relevant to prevention of problematic animal behavior, and education relevant to problems of misrepresentation of ESAs in public.
References


Human-Animal Interactions in Counseling Interest Network of the American Counseling Association.


Table 1

*Demographic summary of select Participant, Professional, and Dog Characteristics*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant Variables</th>
<th>Frequency (n)</th>
<th>Percent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Gender Identity</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>31.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>68.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Race/Ethnicity</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>65</td>
<td>84.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black or African American</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Latinx or Hispanic</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Middle Eastern</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Native American or Alaska Native</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Multiracial/multiethnic</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>6.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Treatment</td>
<td>In Current Treatment for Disability</td>
<td>54</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Canine Variables</th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sex</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>62.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>37.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dog Training</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attended a Dog Training Class</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>48.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Problematic Behavior</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Damaged Property</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>7.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Killed/Injured Another Animal</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aggression</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>15.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chewing Non-toys</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>14.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marking/Relieving Indoors</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>10.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Excessive Vocalization</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>35.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jumping on People</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>27.3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note.* n=77.
### Table 2

**Frequency of Professional Involvement Variables**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Frequency (n)</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Letter Source</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mental Health Professional</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Primary Care/Medical Provider</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Internet Source</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other Source</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Relationship to Letter Writer</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Short Term for Letter Purposes Only</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>27.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ongoing Treatment from Letter Writer</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>49.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Provider Involvement in Selection</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Provider Helped to Select the Dog</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Provider Met Dog Prior to Signing Letter</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>48.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Provider Discussed Animal Welfare</td>
<td>62</td>
<td>80.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Other Professional Involvement</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Veterinarian Was Consulted</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>49.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Treatment not from letter writer</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>20.1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note.* n=77.
Table 3

**Descriptive Statistics of Human-Animal Bond Quality**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Subscales</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>Range</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>MDORS Dog-Owner Interaction</td>
<td>36.57</td>
<td>4.01</td>
<td>23 – 45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MDORS Personal Costs of Ownership</td>
<td>39.03</td>
<td>7.62</td>
<td>15 – 45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MDORS Emotional Closeness</td>
<td>44.52</td>
<td>3.33</td>
<td>32 – 50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PALS Emotional Regulation</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>5.16</td>
<td>35 – 63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PALS Personal Growth</td>
<td>29.05</td>
<td>4.94</td>
<td>11 – 35</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note.* n=77. Higher scores correspond to more interaction, fewer costs of ownership, higher levels of emotional closeness, that the dog provides greater emotional regulation for the participant, and that the relationship with the dog provides greater personal growth.
### Table 4

**Relationship Between Welfare and Bond Quality**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>MDORS Interaction</th>
<th>MDORS Cost</th>
<th>MDORS Emotional Closeness</th>
<th>PALS Emotional Regulation</th>
<th>PALS Personal Growth</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Exercise</td>
<td>.25*</td>
<td>.24*</td>
<td>.23*</td>
<td>.24*</td>
<td>.08</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Favorite Activity</td>
<td>.09</td>
<td>.15</td>
<td>.13</td>
<td>.12</td>
<td>-.07</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shelter</td>
<td>-.19*</td>
<td>.34*</td>
<td>.16</td>
<td>.20*</td>
<td>.10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Water</td>
<td>-.18</td>
<td>.36**</td>
<td>.19*</td>
<td>.12</td>
<td>-.05</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Struggle to Care</td>
<td>.04</td>
<td>-.21*</td>
<td>-.09</td>
<td>-.02</td>
<td>.03</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Forced to Cuddle</td>
<td>.11</td>
<td>-.26**</td>
<td>-.17</td>
<td>-.14</td>
<td>.01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Provide Nutrition and Healthcare&lt;sup&gt;a&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>-.08</td>
<td>-.19*</td>
<td>*-.21</td>
<td>-.06</td>
<td>.13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vet Consult&lt;sup&gt;b&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>.15</td>
<td>.12</td>
<td>.15</td>
<td>.05</td>
<td>-.01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Welfare Discussed&lt;sup&gt;b&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>-.15</td>
<td>.02</td>
<td>-.13</td>
<td>-.10</td>
<td>-.09</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Good Health</td>
<td>.12</td>
<td>.08</td>
<td>.16</td>
<td>.16</td>
<td>.12</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* p < .05 level, ** p < .01 level

**Note:** n=77 unless otherwise specified. <sup>a</sup>n = 72, <sup>b</sup>n=65. df = 1 for all analyses. Positive correlations with MDORS Cost indicate that as welfare variables increase, there are fewer reported costs and higher bond quality, whereas negative correlations indicate that as welfare variables increase, there are lower bond quality and more reported costs. Note that higher scores on the perceived costs subscale is associated with fewer costs but greater bond quality.
CHAPTER IV

STUDY III


Emotional Support Animals On-Campus: A Narrative Inquiry

Jillian Ferrell

Jill Ferrell is a doctoral candidate in the Psychology Department at Utah State University

Susan L. Crowley

Susan Crowley is a professor of Psychology at Utah State University

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Jillian Ferrell,

jill.ferrell@usu.edu.
Emotional Support Animals On-Campus: A Narrative Inquiry

Abstract

An increasing number of college students are presenting documentation for Emotional support animals (ESA), allowing them to live with their ESA in university housing that does not otherwise allow pets. Research to date has focused primarily on university narratives about ESAs (e.g., avoiding risk) and little is known about the individuals who have ESAs. The current study sought to explore the meaning that ESAs have in the lives of individuals and the impacts of the unique university housing setting on ESA partnerships using a qualitative three-dimensional narrative approach. Focal parts of three participant narratives are shared along with eight shared themes: Getting out and active, being lighthearted, social lubricant, sense of community, partner relationship support, sense of family, sense of purpose, and soothing and calming presence. Four themes specific to the on-campus housing setting are highlighted: On-campus housing is desirable, sense of community on campus, requirement to prove legitimacy, and policy restrictions on ESAs. The narratives inform suggestions for university administrators to better support ESA partnerships individually, systemically, and within on-campus community with equality in addressing the needs of students with and without ESAs.

Keywords: emotional support animal, university housing, disability rights
Emotional Support Animals On-Campus: A Narrative Inquiry

Therapeutic relationships with animals can be powerful agents in leveling the playing field for individuals, allowing them more equal access to quality of life and learning. Emotional support animals (ESAs) are recognized by the Fair Housing Act (FHA; 1968) as animals who provide emotional support or comfort to individuals with disabilities. They are animals of any species or size that ameliorate mental or emotional symptoms of a mental disorder or physical disability. Documentation of an ESA requires a letter from a health professional who can confirm the presence of a mental diagnosis (e.g., Major Depressive Disorder, Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder) or other disability and a confirmation that living with the specified animal helps to ameliorate symptoms related to the disorder or disability for the individual.

Requests for ESAs on campus have increased in the past decade (Kogan et al., 2016; Lanning et al., 2022; Taylor, 2016). In 2012, a federal district court case, Velzen vs Grand Valley State University, determined that dormitories fit under the definition of “dwelling,” and therefore FHA applied to college housing (Hutchens, 2014). As with all access laws regarding assistance animals, access can be limited or modified under circumstances where the animal’s presence fundamentally alters the function of a setting or facility or interferes with the welfare or safety of other individuals (Air Carrier Access Act, 2003; The Americans with Disabilities Act, 1990; Fair Housing Act, 1968). In a dormitory setting, living in close proximity with an ESA may make allergies, phobias, and animal behavior become larger issues. Additionally, access boundaries are unclear in some housing situations. Dining halls or building lounges are in a gray area between housing and public spaces. Therefore, there is more flexibility and ambiguity for
universities to develop policies and additional restrictions to protect other residents. Policies such as handler responsibility agreements, enforced animal behavior rules, and restrictions on types or ages of animals may be imposed while still following the FHA (Salminen & Gregory, 2018). As yet, it is unclear what university policies may be helpful and what may be denying appropriate accommodation resulting in universities without clear ESA policies (Lanning et al., 2022).

Where they exist, university ESA policies are often ambiguous and constantly shifting as clarifications are made from relevant court rulings (Masinter, 2015). Education, awareness and support for ESA partnerships are generally lacking on campus (Kogan et al., 2016; Lanning et al., 2022). A driving force for university policy development is avoiding major incidents or complaints about ESAs while also seeking to avoid discordance with federal law (Hutchens, 2014; Lanning et al., 2022). The extent literature on ESAs in university settings has often centered on university perspectives, policy, and risk avoidance. We know little about the lived experiences of students with ESAs on campus. The aims of the current study are to illuminate real impacts of policy on real people and to provide the rich context that matters on an individual and systemic level but is often overlooked.

The current study aims to explore the following research questions through narratives of students in university housing with ESAs:

1. What does having an ESA mean for the individual?
2. What are the effects of on-campus housing on the experience of individuals with ESAs?
Methods

Theoretical and Methodological Orientation

Narrative Inquiry Methodology

Narrative methodology stems from an assumption that a story frames content in ways that provide context for interpreting the meaning of the story content (Schram, 2006). Along with themes in the content of stories, the focus is on the context communicated through the structure of story (e.g., tensions, dichotomies, turning points). Special focus is placed on how place, time and unique backgrounds influence meanings communicated in their stories (Creswell & Poth, 2016). As a qualitative orientation there is less interest in facts or “reality” and a focus on voice and contextually situated meanings people create about their lived experiences (Schram, 2006).

Narrative methodology and theory can open dialogue with universities highlighting the power they have to control the narratives of ESAs in their jurisdictions, and illuminating any experiences of oppression that may exist (Delgado, 1995). ESAs are often treated by the public with suspicion (e.g., taking advantage of lenient policies), especially as mental/emotional disabilities are stigmatized, often invisible, and easily hidden from others. Narrative Inquiry provides persons with disabilities an opportunity to use their own voice to share about the truth of their experience outside of paperwork which usually must be “approved” by entities with greater power before they are deemed legitimate.
Restorying is a process in which a participant’s narrative is analyzed for main elements of a story (e.g., characters, timeline, plots) and then rewritten in a chronological sequence (Ollerenshaw & Creswell, 2000). There is usually a protagonist, an expressed conflict, sequences of events that imply causality or other relationships among events, and a resolution. Restorying also involves using the telling of the story to emphasize the most essential aspects of participants’ experience through juxtaposition, metaphor, vivid imagery, or other literary devices that draw attention from the reader. The participant is a collaborator with the researcher to make sure that the story is true to the participant’s experiences and that the emphases in the story are an authentic portrayal to their experiences.

The narrative analysis process is intended to be transformative and illuminating to both researcher and participant (Creswell & Poth, 2016). The researcher may interweave their perceptions of their interactions with participant and reactions to the narrative. The researcher is encouraged to move away from the actual transcript at times and sort the social meaning and significance of each part and aspect of the story (Clandinin & Connelly, 2004). They may attend to inferences made about characters, emotionality, personality characteristics of the storyteller, and non-verbal communication. Thus, the researcher is considered essential to drawing out a more three-dimensional account of the participant’s actual lived experiences. The social context of the interview and storytelling is honored as data in its own right and is included in the restorying process. Participants are encouraged to engage fully in the analysis process, and researcher perspectives and
interpretations are checked and renegotiated throughout the collaboration with the participant.

Participants

Eligible participants were of any gender, race, or ability level, over the age of 18, who have resided in single student or family on-campus housing at a land-grant University in the intermountain west for at least one semester and who have had an ESA of any species. Participants must have been the identified person for whom the ESA is for and be a university student. Participants were excluded if their animal was a trained service animal.

Procedure

Participants were recruited via a flyer disseminated electronically to all residents of on-campus housing who were documented as having an ESA. Participants contacted the researcher with their interest and the first three individuals to make contact and met the inclusion criteria were selected to participate in the study. Each participant met with a researcher via Zoom for two recorded interviews. The first interview was approximately 45 minutes and focused on context relevant to understanding their experiences with and meaning of their ESA. All participants were asked about the following during first interview: 1) ESA characteristics, 2) environmental and internal context prior to obtaining their ESA and the impact of their disability on their life, 3) how the ESA was obtained and documented, 4) how their life changed since having the ESA, 5) particular moments that stand out as being particularly difficult and rewarding/positive regarding their ESA, 6) what their ESA has meant to them over time, 7) and anything else that is important to understanding their story of having an ESA in on-campus housing.
Interviews included follow up questions for clarification and greater detail. The researcher took notes during the interviews including personal reactions and points of emphasis by the participants.

Between interviews, the first interview was transcribed and coded with the use of MAXQDA (VERBI Software, 2021). The interview was coded for major indicators of time, setting, plot, and themes. Notes from the researcher’s experience also served as data integrated with non-verbal social cues and emotional content from video recordings. The interviews were then “restoried” by the researcher using a three-dimensional narrative analysis approach by organizing content onto a timeline of event with the integration of quotes and information that best represented each theme found in the analysis of the first interview. Pseudonyms were chosen by participants and used in the restory along with broadening or making vague any major details that might identify participants in their story. The restory was then provided to the participants prior to the second interview for them to read, analyze, and inspect for accuracy and to suggest alterations to create a restory that best captured their lived experience.

The second interview was approximately 30 minutes long and focused on triangulating the restoried data with the aid of an artifact, the participants’ experience of the first interview, and collaborative discussion about the accuracy of the restoried narrative. Participants were told that their artifact could be anything (e.g., object, writing, picture, sound) that best symbolized what having their ESA on campus housing meant to them. Together, the participant and researcher analyzed the meaning of their chosen artifact and its fit with the emphasized theme in the re-story. Artifacts were not considered narrative data, but a checking tool for the trustworthiness of the restory.
After the second interview, participants were sent their re-story with the edits from the co-analysis complete. Participants were asked to review the revised re-story and provide any feedback until the story felt accurate and complete to them. Participants were compensated with a $25 gift card for their participation. Three participants, their ESA, and their contexts are introduced in the following sections. For clarity, excerpts from the restoried data are presented in italics throughout the rest of the document.

**Chris and Gerald**

Chris is a married undergraduate student from out of state. In 2018 he was diagnosed with Complex Post Traumatic Stress Disorder. *He went to therapy for a year in his home state before coming to a different state to attend the university in 2019... Right about the time that the COVID-19 pandemic gained ground in the United States, he felt an unanticipated wave of difficulties and residue from his childhood trauma. Being a poor student, he couldn’t afford to go to therapy when he came to the university, and his anxiety and the effects of the pandemic were weighing on his mental health. Within the context of the pandemic, a recent move, and increasing anxieties related to his diagnosis, Chris and his wife were anticipating how lonely they were both going to be. Chris and his wife were living in on-campus housing when they decided to get a pet rabbit. For his wife’s birthday, “She just wanted something adorable in the house besides myself!” he joked. “So, we got a bunny.”* He is a gray-brown Rex mixed breed named Gerald.

Later, a resident assistant discovered the rabbit and informed Chris that he had to get appropriate documentation to allow the rabbit to stay on-campus and Chris started the paperwork immediately and Gerald was subsequently accepted as an ESA within about a week.
Ellie and Hermione

Ellie is a partnered international student coming to the university for graduate school. During the same time Hermione (ESA dog) was in a shelter and in foster care, Ellie was preparing for a big move of her own into the unknown for school with her partner. As an international student, Ellie could foresee all the anxieties that come with traveling to and living in another country. She anticipated feeling quite isolated. On top of that, COVID-19 was in full swing in the United States and social distancing practices made creating a sense of community or even casual friendships incredibly challenging. She also did not start school or her job until January; but they were moving in the Fall. Without being able to go to school or a workplace, it would be harder to make connections and Ellie was experiencing some stress about that. They thought that a dog might be a particularly effective emotional and social support for the stressful and isolating time ahead.

Ellie and her partner moved to on-campus housing and immediately began the ESA documentation process. After completing the required ESA documentation with the University, they adopted Hermione, a one-and-a-half-year-old brown herding breed, from a shelter “Hermione ended up in the shelter because she had nipped a maintenance worker who had come into her family’s backyard, and they consequently weren’t comfortable with keeping her” ... When they went to meet her, Ellie’s partner knew for sure that she was the right dog for them, but Ellie was more skeptical because of the history she learned about. At the meeting, Hermione was stranger shy and took her time to get to know them, but then warmed up rather quickly.
Rachel and Fish

Rachel is a graduate student at the university. Rachel and her husband were living off campus with family where they adopted a mixed breed puppy, Fish. Rachel had previously been diagnosed with depression and PTSD due to trauma that occurred during a mission trip to a foreign country, and she discovered how helpful Fish was for managing her PTSD and depression symptoms. “Unbeknownst to me, these animals were really important for me.”

Rachel and her partner had been benefitting from the emotional support that Fish offered for about six months before they got her documented as an ESA. They decided to move out of their extended family’s home to have their own space. They realized that in order to be close to campus, in an apartment or renting, it was likely that they’d need ESA documentation to have an accommodation to have a pet. They had not entirely decided where they would live, but they used the university documentation to prepare because it was the most comprehensive and straight-forward they had found and would be effective wherever they ended up. Ultimately, they decided to live on campus because it was so convenient, close to campus, affordable, and easiest to set up with plenty of time in advance.

Results

Participant restories are the primary data used to answer the research questions. Individual data from narratives will be shared regarding what their ESA means to Chris, Ellie, and Rachel. Next, common themes among participants will be shared regarding what an ESA means to their human partners. Lastly common themes will be identified
regarding the effect of the on-campus setting on the lived experiences of ESA partnerships.

**Meaning of the ESA**

For each participant, the most important or emphasized themes regarding what their ESA means to them will be shared completely through excerpts of their restoried narratives. The most important themes were triangulated from transcript and video analysis, interview collaboration, and the explanation of the participants’ chosen artifact shared in their second interview. The participants’ artifacts and their meanings are shared after their respected emphasized themes. Complete restories are provided in Appendix B.

**Chris and Gerald**

**Permission for Emotional Expression.** Chris held [Gerald] up to the camera during the interview, with both hands tenderly supporting him... An emotional connection was evident in the very way he moved: with gentleness and patience, taking care to move slowly and keep Gerald comfortable, sensitive to his needs and his experience as he was carried and held. It seemed to be a clear, visible contrast to how Chris described himself before Gerald entered his life.

“One of the things I struggled with in my mental illness is... ignoring my emotion... I didn’t realize how hard my heart was. I wasn’t belligerent or anything, just unaccepting of emotion, and unaccepting of my feelings... I didn’t want to acknowledge that I didn’t feel.”

A drive to nurture and an affinity for new life is not often praised in men in westernized Euro-American cultures but is more acceptable when an animal is involved. Chris reminisced about when Gerald was so small, maybe a third of the size he is now. He almost seemed embarrassed to share the feelings that came rushing in at the thought
of such a tiny bunny he had held against his chest. “There’s just this piece of your heart that if you’re holding a tiny animal, especially like a rabbit for me... It just softens your heart...”

**Honest Feedback about Lovability.** When Chris had first picked [Gerald] up and held him, the breeders were surprised “because apparently, he was really a spaz when people were holding him. But with me, he immediately was just really, really calm.” This first experience...had a profound effect on Chris. One of the deepest issues haunting him from his childhood trauma was that he was not lovable. And here a rabbit had chosen him to be comfortable with. This rabbit had chosen him. Beneath all that Gerald means to Chris, all the roles he plays, and all the benefits he provides, is a powerful experience that Gerald provides for Chris; through a relationship with Gerald, Chris experiences himself in a powerful, new, and therapeutic way...A rabbit is honest, incapable of an agenda, and defenseless and vulnerable. A rabbit has every reason to be choosey ... And yet, just like that first day they met, Gerald continues to choose Chris every day. “If he trusts me, I should trust me.” As tears came to his eyes, Chris expressed the hope and invitation Gerald’s love offered him. “If something this innocent, this pure, this adorable, can love me, why can’t I?” Gerald, an animal that can’t even speak his language, gave him permission. Chris reasons determinedly, “If this little creature can love me, then I can love myself.”

**Chris’ artifact.** Chris chose to bring a muscle stimulator machine often used in physical therapy. He explained that the tool both stimulates and relaxes the muscle so that it remembers how to be in use and helps it feel stimulation without the strain of actually working the muscle. Together we related this artifact to his sense that Gerald stimulated
his “heart” and allowed him to practice expressing and accepting care and love and especially to feel vulnerable emotions and express them in a safe way.

**Ellie and Hermione**

**Sense of Purpose: Giving a Being a Better Life.** Hermione, brown and of herding dog breed, was laying down on the couch in the background, relaxed as could be, while Ellie sat on the floor in front of her... Hermione came with her name, and Ellie and her partner kept it, as they respected and honored Hermione’s history and shy personality. ...Part of what has brought the most joy and meaning in their relationship stems from Hermione’s initially shy and hesitant nature...Ellie delights in providing Hermione with a home and experiences to encourage Hermione to grow more into herself and experience more of the joy in life, especially considering where she had come from. [Ellie] gently and consistently introduced her to new things. Hermione’s first swim was a big moment in their relationship. ...Having her just be so into the fetch that she would go swim for it, it was just like ‘Yes! I feel so accomplished!’ As if to demonstrate the better life she is living, in the background during the interview, Hermione flipped over onto her back, front paws in the air, back legs spread out across the length of the couch.... Yes, things are pretty good for her, now.

Over much time, exposure, and confidence-building, Hermione has not gotten more comfortable with or interested in strangers... Ellie advocates for Hermione when strangers want to pet her. ... Hermione had already been rejected by one family because of the expectations that she should be okay with strangers approaching her. Some of the power in the relationship for Ellie seems to stem from the opportunity to provide free,
chosen, and conscious acceptance for Hermione, which Hermione did not have before...

*Through wanting courage, joy, and connection for Hermione, Ellie found it for herself.*

**Ellie’s Artifact.** Ellie chose to bring Hermione’s frisbee. She shared that the frisbee is symbolic of Ellie’s intention to get to know Hermione as an individual and help her find a “job” she likes, can get excited about, and can help her grow, which, for Hermione, is frisbee.

**Rachel and Fish**

*Getting Out of Head and Into Here and Now.* Fish had just turned 3-years-old, and her puppy energy was still very present. “We joke. We call her monster.” She’s not really a monster; she’s very smart, obedient, and well-behaved, but “she could go, and go, and go, and just never give up until she gets really tired. And then she’ll breathe, get some water, and then she can go again.” She loves to be outside. During potty training, they trained Fish to ring bells on the door to let them know she needed to be let out. But now, she rings the bells anytime she wants to play outside as well. “She’s good at letting me know what she wants. She’s really needy, but at the same time, she’s so smart, you can’t be mad about it.” … during the interview Fish nosed her way between Rachel and the screen, pushing with a paw, staring, and grunting to communicate that she’d rather be doing something a bit more exciting than sitting on the bed paying attention to a screen. Rachel laughed.

Especially in the morning, Rachel could feel particularly down and have a hard time getting out of bed. Fish made her get out of bed because, first thing, she was ringing those bells on the door. Other times she’d nuzzle into her face and lick her ears until [Rachel] got up. Fish responded similarly when Rachel showed emotions like fear or
sadness, prompting her to get up, get out, and play. During the winter when Rachel struggled with depression more, Fish “lives for snow” and doesn’t want to be outside doing things any less... Her “neediness” and energy forced Rachel to experience the real, here-and-now, funny-squirrel-throwing-pine-cones-at-us world. “She helped me get outside of my own head, because I have to physically and emotionally engage with her in an outside setting... I have to be grounded in reality.” [Fish’s] boundless energy was contagious, and it helped Rachel have the energy to do things...

**Rachel’s artifact.** Rachel chose to bring Fish’s frisbee for her artifact. She shared that the most important meaning that Fish has meant to her as her ESA is her boundless energy and the ability she has to get Rachel outside and active in fun ways just by being her active Fish self. Fish loves her frisbee!

**Common Themes**

Several additional meanings and themes were presented in the restoried narratives that continue to answer the first research question of the study. The following are themes that were identified in the narratives across participants. These themes are listed in no particular order. This list is intended to give each theme represented the words to portray a lived experience related to each theme, and not to quantify, order, or achieve saturation.

**Getting Out and Active**

The needs, energy, and love of play that particularly accompany the canine species creates a reason and need for individuals to get out of the house, engage in regular exercise, be outdoors, and support a more here-and-now awareness. This theme was emphasized in Rachel’s and Ellie’s story. Ellie shared that **one thing that didn’t take very long to figure out was that Hermione was very energetic and liked to channel that**
energy... “We’ll get on more trails we would have taken more time to get to because I’m not going to go walk myself as often as I’m going to walk a dog. There’s just more things to do.”

**Being Light-Hearted**

All three participants shared that their ESA helps them be light-hearted and joyful and less concerned with ruminating on the past or worrying. Participants explained that their ESA provides this often through simplicity and bids for play. Ellie shared “You get to be more playful, which is something a lot of adults don’t get to do if you don’t have kids.” When Ellie comes home from a stressful day, there is a joyful dog ready to remind her that life is also fun! Chris noted that part of Gerald’s role is simply to exist as a rabbit..., who simply just is who he is... “[Gerald] gave us an opportunity to step out of ourselves... He gets us out of our own head.” Gerald’s rabbit-ness helped to simplify an increasingly complicated context surrounding the pandemic and Chris’ own “complex” traumatic history.

“...Bunnies are not complicated creatures at all. They like what they like, and they’re scared of what they are scared of, and then they move on... It’s just like there was no complication. There were no questions that needed to be answered. It was just ‘He loves me. I love him. He helps me. I help him.’ It’s that simple.”

**Social Lubricant**

Each participant described ways that their ESAs had sparked new friendships. They also mentioned that these friendships were even stronger when the other also had an animal that would enjoy “playdates” with their ESA. From Ellie’s story: Conversations with neighbors that would have only been a “hello” and “goodbye,” become longer conversations that start with talking about Hermione. Chris shared “It’s been more fun
for people to come over to our house because we’ll have a couple over and he’ll just be hopping around. And we’ll be talking for 20 – 30 minutes about Gerald… that’s helped us make some good friends.” …Petting and playing with him become ready-made, casual, joint activities. From Rachel’s story: Fish’s social nature also ended up rubbing off on Rachel… She helped Rachel engage with people in a time when she was out of the habit of being social because of social distancing during the Covid-19 pandemic. “She just loves people, and they love to see her because she's just so friendly-looking, and she is friendly.”

**Sense of Community**

Aside from being a catalyst for social interactions and relationships, participants described a sense of being part of a group. Ellie noted: “As someone not from this area, as a citizen of another country, and someone very much atheist, you don’t have those commonalities with people in this area… But you meet other people with dogs.”

**Partner Relationship Support**

All three participants happened to be partnered and each saw their ESA as being a couple's decision and experience. They described how their ESA provided an opportunity to work together, like Ellie shared, she and her partner are constantly “navigating teaching [Hermione] things or navigating [Hermione’s] challenges together” …Hermione gives them specific tangible goals to work on together and grow in their relationship and communication.

Additionally, Chris’ story highlights how Gerald helps in their marriage by facilitating communication about how they are each feeling and by diffusing some of the responsibility for meeting each of their emotional needs. When Chris was away at work
or school when his wife needed support, Gerald was there to soothe and comfort. “He did me a solid,” Chris said as he reflected on times Gerald filled in for him as a supportive spouse. Gerald acts as a buffer between Chris’ many responsibilities and the emotional demands of his marriage. Gerald also has often helped Chris when his wife didn’t know how to help him, reducing the pressure each experienced in the marriage. “He’s brought my wife and I closer together for sure.”

**Sense of Family**

Related to partner relationships, participants shared that their ESA made their partnership feel more like a “family.” Chris’ story mentions that: *Gerald seemed to curb his partner’s “baby hunger” for a time.* Rachel and Ellie also shared how their extended family also reaffirms that their ESA is part of their family. Ellie’s story states: *Hermione is also part of the extended family. When video calling and family, they always ask about Hermione as much as they ask for updates on Ellie and her partner’s lives.* Hermione is also spoiled by family members and friends on holidays. “So, it’s very much the sense of family for us three, and then also with my parents or the in-laws or the friends. She’s very much a part of that family as well.” And Rachel’s story asserts that Fish is “so integral to our family, both our little unit (my husband and I), as well as the greater family. My parents love her. The in-laws love her. She is the grand-puppy.”

**Sense of Purpose**

Having a sense of purpose, a motivating and meaningful role in life, was highlighted by participants. The sense of purpose described was related to a nurturing role and the fact that their ESA depended on them for care. Chris’ story shares: “*It’s been nice to feel like I’m needed to take care of this little thing... You want to take care of it.*
You want to give it the best life possible... It was nice to just have this little thing that I could call mine to teach and help it grow.” This theme was also a major part of Ellie’s story.

**Soothing and Calming Presence**

Each participant described a simple yet powerful experience of being soothed and calmed simply by the presence or touch of their ESA. From Rachel’s story: *There is something “peaceful and healing” about her presence. When Rachel had a panic attack or she got overwhelmed, “just being with [Fish] and having her there” was grounding.*

“I’ll just hold her paw while I’m napping and it’s just like all the worries go away and everything’s fine. ...It’s just that being able to hold on to something when you physically hurt, and something feels broken. You can hold on to them when you’re hurting. That is healing and wholesome to be able to do that.”

Chris’ story identified a few indirect benefits of emotional regulation and communication from his ESA that stem from this soothing and calming presence: “It’s hard to be anxious when you’re around a cute, fuzzy, calm rabbit... [It is] very soothing to just have this big ball of fluff cuddle you.” ... *It helps... Chris to get out of “survival mode” and recognize what he is feeling in the moment and then able to explain it to his wife so he can get help with it.*

**The Impact of On-campus Housing Context on the Meaning of ESAs**

While all the themes identified in the study occurred within the context of university on-campus housing, some themes were specific to the setting. These themes address the second research question of how the setting impacts the meaning that ESAs have for human partners.
On-Campus Housing is Desirable

Part of what having an ESA means to participants on campus is the desire to live on campus in the first place. In each story, on-campus housing was described as the most convenient, close to campus, and most affordable. University housing provided a way to be set up with housing far in advance with more security than might be possible off-campus. Additional benefits included that ESAs were known about and there was a protocol for handling ESA partnerships. Working with ESAs in the community does not always go as smoothly as was found in Rachel’s story: As Rachel and her husband looked for housing, they ran into several difficulties with housing accepting the ESA documentation. “It's actually technically not legal for housing complexes to do this, but we were denied, ‘absolutely no.’” To the university, Rachel said, “Thank you for actually believing me and having something set up where I can document this. And then not punishing me financially for having it.”

Sense of Community On-Campus

Although sense of community was listed earlier, it is worth noting that a major part of the community described by participants came from the university setting. Close proximity to neighbors and shared space allowed for ESAs to play a unique role in their community where pets were not allowed, and also created a sense of community with other neighbors who also had ESAs. These communities were both in person and virtual as was the case in Ellie’s story: There is even a Facebook group for residents with ESAs to connect with each other for fun or support. Rachel’s story states: [Fish] played a role in bringing her a deeper sense of community in a way [Rachel] didn’t have before living in on-campus housing. “All of our neighbors in our area just love her because she's just
so sweet and she's funny”... If anyone is on their back porch, Fish includes them in her play and now, “it's like our neighbors are some of our best friends.”

**The Requirement to Prove Legitimacy**

The need to “prove” their ESA’s legitimacy was described as frustrating to each participant, though certainly worth it. For Ellie who came from a different country, it had unique challenges: *She became animated and her voice increased in pitch as she described the frustration she experienced with this process... “it felt very weird to have a doctor breakdown of what’s going on with you, and then... really weird and bizarre to be like 'here's the notes from my doctor.' It's just like, ‘I don't know you...”* Overall, Ellie felt it was a very weird system and she didn’t like it. “Aren’t we all adults?” she asked, exasperated. For Chris, the need to prove Gerald’s legitimacy was anxiety provoking and even induced traumatic responses and shame: *He began to have anxiety attacks and began to wonder if he was good enough, if he was wrong. ...Being confronted about needing ESA paperwork without sensitivity to his condition and threats of losing Gerald “just nailed every single fear that I had... and it just exacerbated them through the roof... It was terrible... Chris felt that he was finally doing something to help himself in a powerful way, “and then everyone was just like, ‘you cannot help yourself.’... It felt like everything was falling in on me when I was trying to get [Gerald] approved.”*

Rachel’s story shares the sense that she needed to prove the legitimacy of her ESA with people in her community as a response to suspected ESA fraud on campus: *With a sense of community has also come some challenges, not with having an ESA, but with how it is perceived in the community... She feels like she must guard against people thinking she is one of those people who took advantage of the system to get a pet.*
“I almost feel like I have to explain myself to people when they see Fish because, especially here in this apartment complex, it's like, ‘You live in this place with an animal?’ ‘Yeah, it's because I have PTSD, because I was abused in multiple ways by different people throughout the course of five years. Will that shut you up? Will it make you believe me?’”

She doesn’t mean to be harsh; she just feels a little exasperated. Answering questions with perhaps too much uncomfortable and personal information makes it clear to questioners that it felt disrespectful to question her in the first place... living on campus with an ESA can also mean feeling the need to be a little defensive. “It can be a little bit taxing emotionally.”

**Policy Restrictions on ESAs**

According to one participant, the university policy on her campus had an age requirement for canine ESAs, presumably to cut down on puppy-related problems like potty-training and chewing behaviors. Ultimately, along with making ESAs potentially less available for some, older adopted dogs generally have unknown histories and potential behavior problems (e.g., aggression, destructive tendencies). In Ellie’s story, she... and her partner were looking at a few dogs, through classifieds and a shelter. However, by the time the process with the university was complete, those dogs were unavailable. “That was obviously annoying at the time. We didn’t want to get a dog when we were feeling so rushed… but when it felt right, and we weren’t able to get it, that was shitty.” At the time of the second interview, the University had changed its age-requirement policy for ESAs... Though she wouldn’t trade Hermione for another dog, Ellie reflects that her own stressful ESA searching process might have gone differently if she hadn’t had to look for an older dog with more of an unknown history.”
Discussion

The common themes identified in the participant narratives reflect roles that therapy animals and pets can play identified in the extent literature. “Getting out and active” theme is reflected in the literature on the physical health benefits of dogs (Hall et al., 2017; Headey, 1999) and several studies discuss the motivation that dogs provide for being physically active (Curl et al., 2017; Wohlfarth et al., 2013). The majority of the common themes in the data was social in nature. Animals, particularly dogs, have been considered “social capital,” or the glue that can hold communities together (Bueker, 2013). Animals create a sense of belonging and connection among neighbors, and spark conversations and interaction among people, and also work to help people increase their social skills (Chitic et al., 2012). The emotionally regulating effects that the participants described in “light-heartedness” and “soothing and calming presence” are also discussed in the literature (Allen et al., 2002; Beetz et al., 2012). Petting animals has been shown to decrease cortisol, a stress hormone, and to decrease subjective experiences of anxiety (Kertes et al., 2017; Shiloh et al., 2003). Looking into the eyes of a pet dog has the effect of increasing oxytocin, a stress-reducing hormone, in both humans and dogs (Nagasawa et al., 2015). The Biophilia hypothesis is often used to explain the powerful effect of being in the presence of animals (Fine & Ferrell, 2021). The connections made between the data and animal-assisted therapy research may suggest that ESAs can play a therapeutic role in the lives of students with disabilities even without a therapist present. Participants shared concrete ways that ESAs ameliorated their most distressing symptoms through the power of the human-animal bond.
The data supports that university housing is highly valued, particularly because of its awareness and acceptance of ESAs on the campus where the study took place. On-campus housing is also a very complex setting necessitating meeting the needs of many individuals at once and follow legal regulations, all of which may seem to be at odds with one another. Developing ESA policies are essential to meeting the needs of multiple student groups, however, policy content, communication and enforcement may have a differential impact across identities and situations. Listening to lived experiences of ESA partnerships is essential for considering the many impacts that policies may have. Court rulings, while informative and essential, are not sufficient to inform equitable university ESA policy development.

The content of university ESA policies are vulnerable to privileging some identities and situations over others. As universities seek to navigate the need of multiple students, it may be easy to view the needs of students in ESA partnerships are more optional or less serious that other concerns (e.g., allergies, phobias). Even when animal restrictions are intended to protect other students, according to the Department of Justice, allergies or phobias of other students are not valid reasons to deny or limit access for assistance animals (Phillips, 2016). Instead, universities must attempt to accommodate students with and without ESAs, concurrently avoiding privileging the needs of some students over others.

Within ESA documentation and approval policies, each participant shared examples of how their process was impacted by either privileged or marginalized identities. Rachel’s story acknowledged how privileges of having educated parents who worked on campus made her process accessible and smooth. Ellie shared that her
international student status and unfamiliarity with US health care system made her documentation process challenging.

Policies may also privilege students who are further along in their ESA process. Rachel, who had the smoothest experience, already had a dog with whom she had developed a meaningful relationship and established therapeutic roles. Ellie, on the other hand, shared how trying to choose an ESA that fit the age restriction imposed by the university was frustrating. Finding the right animal for the ESA job that fits the needs of the person and the context of the situation is vital (MacNamara et al., 2015). More stringent policies may make it even harder for individuals without this powerful therapeutic resource to obtain one, or they may preclude animals that actually have the best fit for the individual circumstance.

In ESA policy development, animal restrictions should not be imposed under the presumption that a certain animal (or age) will be destructive, disruptive, or “be too much” for a student to care for. It is essential for all stakeholders to remember that ESA status does not provide a free pass for destructive or dangerous behavior, or inadequate care. HUD guidelines (2020) state that an animal that causes excessive destruction of property, threat to others, or fundamentally changes the housing facility or purposes may be denied access if the problems “cannot be eliminated or reduced to an acceptable level through the actions that the individual takes to maintain control of the animal” (p 13).

It is not only content, but the communication and enforcement of ESA policies in university settings that can be inequitable and discriminatory. Chris’ traumatic interaction with the university stemmed from how the ESA policies were presented to him and enforced - as an urgent requirement with the threat of losing his ESA, which triggered his
disability-related symptoms. The guidelines (HUD, 2020) assert that ESA accommodation requests can be made after bringing the animal into the housing and encourage an “interactive process” that is approached “in good faith.” Educating residents and enforcing policies in a compassionate and openminded way can support individuals with disabilities in a process that can be intimidating, frustrating, and distressing.

Rachel’s concern about fraud and its impacts on “legitimate” ESA partnerships is relevant to the impact of policy communication on ESA partnerships. Unquestionably, there are some students who use ESA documentation in ways that intentionally dishonest. However, it is difficult to make that determination from the outside without contextual information. From a distance, Chris’ story looks like someone who just wanted to have a pet rabbit and did the documentation just to keep it. However, on closer inspection, legitimacy was present, and a powerful and therapeutic bond with his rabbit was ameliorating several symptoms related to his long-standing diagnosis. It is worth considering how much of the suspected fraud on campus stems from the often-invisible nature of and stigma surrounding mental health diagnoses, or confusion about ESA roles and purposes.

Chris also shared that he had heard stories of ESA documentation being denied and rejected “forcefully.” Policies that assume fraud until proven “legitimate” or project the image of being “choosy” about their acceptance have trickle down effects to residents including judgement, fear of judgement, and defensiveness. How residents are educated about policy and how it is enforced can be a potent source of prejudice and invalidation, or an opportunity for collaboration and respect. A positive stance and message can be a
powerful source of promoting an accepting attitude toward individuals with invisible disabilities. Educating, training, and supporting policy enforcers (e.g., resident assistants, hall managers) could make a positive difference in the experiences of on-campus ESA partnerships and the social climate in which they reside.

Limitations

The present study does not encompass all the meanings attached to ESAs in partnerships on university campuses. It did not, however, set out to do so. Saturation of themes was not achieved and, while is helpful for developing theory, saturation is not essential for exploring content areas from a narrative approach. Instead, the goal was to give a voice to three individuals, their experience, and the impact of the on-campus context on their ESA experiences. Unique individual stories have the advantage of highlighting those situations and identities who are often left out of the conversations and face barriers within systems of power that impact students with mental health challenges. Overlap between participant experiences and stories may begin to shape some themes that are possible for other ESA partnerships in a similar setting. Additionally, all participants were partnered and lived in family housing. These stories are specific to meanings of ESAs in a partnered situation, which may not reflect themes for those who are not partnered, have children, or contexts where students live alone or with roommates.

The stories presented are contextual in setting, disability, personalities, animal, and in time. The study was conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic. Participants’ stories may not reflect what ESAs mean to students on campus prior to the pandemic or
after the effects and restrictions tied to the pandemic recede, but reflect the meaning of
ESA during a time of increased stress, distress, and mental health challenges nationally.

**Future Directions**

Research on ESAs is needed across domains. Most research on animal-assisted
interventions, pet-therapy, and companion animals focus on the canine species due to
their highly social nature and affinity for human relationships. However, as was seen
from Chris’ story, the needs of the individual dictate which animal species are most
effective for the job of ESA (MacNamara et al., 2015). Many helpful animals may be left
out of animal-assisted intervention research.

Education, awareness, policy, and policy enforcement are all fruitful areas for
investigation. Special attention may focus on the perception and climate around ESAs on
campuses, including the knowledge that students have, their attitudes toward ESAs, and
relevant university policies, and interactions that students have had with ESAs on
campus. Continuing to attend to systemic and social factors (rather than only legal
factors) will help universities support individuals with disabilities on campus and provide
feedback about how to best develop and implement policies. With each step, we move
toward a better understanding of how best to support both ESA partnerships and the
university communities in which they reside.
References


https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2013.00796
CHAPTER V

Integrated Discussion and Conclusion

In seeking to better understand ESA partnerships, multiple perspectives must be considered simultaneously: individuals with disabilities, health and mental health professionals, policy makers and enforcers, and the animals. Further, it requires an understanding of how each perspective impacts the others in nuanced ways. Just as social support theory, attachment theory, and biophilia hypothesis work together and inform each other in understanding the human-animal bond (Fine & Ferrell, 2021) an understanding of ESAs partnerships and what they could be requires a complex and compassionate understanding of the relationships between all parties involved in an ESA partnership. In discussing the implications of the three papers, the discussion will focus on the various perspectives or stakeholders involved in the ESA context.

Legal perspectives and Implications

Legal aspects and perspectives continue to change, and more clarification occurs with each court case, especially concerning university or college housing (Masinter, 2015). A moving target, it is both challenging and important for all parties involved with ESAs to stay up to date. Since starting the projects, an important clarification was made in the HUD guidelines (U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, 2020) stating that ESA documentation from internet organizations were no longer acceptable. The clarification placed an emphasis on the importance of having health professionals who know clients well enough to make decisions about clients who qualify for disability status by meeting criteria for a diagnosis in the DSM-5 or other physical disability and
whether a particular animal ameliorates symptoms of their mental disorder or other disability. However, it is unclear how and if professionals would learn about this change, potentially leading to ESA documentation inconsistent with the law.

Another update since the beginning of the studies was that ESAs are no longer included in the definition of “service animal” in the ACAA (US Department of Transportation, 2020). Several participants in Study 2 reported that they originally got their ESA documented for the purpose of taking their ESA with them on airplanes when they travel and/or to aid them with severe flight anxiety. This change is already being enforced and likely has negatively impacted many individuals with ESAs, especially since alternatives for air transport of animals are generally unavailable or unsafe (Mejias, 2019).

However, the ACAA change has likely prevented some animal welfare and animal behavior problems that are more likely to occur stressful environments (Gammie & Lonstein, 2005). For example, the survey used in Study 2 originally contained an entire section dedicated to learning about how the animal responded to stimuli associated with airport and airplane settings such as large crowds of people, beeping machines, luggage, elevators, loud sounds, children, slick floors, automatic doors, cramped spaces, and etc. With ESAs no longer able to travel in the cabin of airplanes, this section of the survey became largely irrelevant to assessment of suitable ESA dog behavior and welfare.

Guided by the Ethical ESA Decision Making Framework from Study 1, animal selection standards could be considered greatly reduced. Unlike service animals, ESAs no longer need to behave or to be comfortable with the stimulating and unpredictable environments associated with air travel. Without the need for ESAs to be able tolerate
such a highly stressful situation, for an extended period of time, with no option to exit the environment should the animal become distressed, the pool of animals that could potentially have the natural skills and temperament to be ESAs increases markedly. Welfare concerns for ESAs can now be more focused on the stresses that come directly with their ESA duties and with their partner’s abilities to care for them and potential for intense emotional work.

A need for legal education was demonstrated across all three papers. A greater understanding of the law could assuage some of the worries of landlords and other enforcers and administrators when it comes to access rights for ESAs. Uneducated officials may fear that allowing access to ESAs means needing to tolerate poor behavior or threats that an animal might present to others. In response, policy makers, particularly on college campuses, might create more stringent policies to avoid significant negative situations. Guidelines (2020) state that an animal that causes excessive destruction of property, threat to others, or fundamentally alters the housing facility or its purposes may be denied access if the problems “cannot be eliminated or reduced to an acceptable level through the actions that the individual takes to maintain control of the animal” (p13). Understanding this can create more safety for housing officials to be more accepting and less wary of ESA accommodation requests as the law gives housing officials the right to intervene if major concerns do arise. Across all three papers and the author’s personal experience, it is astonishing how few individuals seem to be aware of the limitations that come with animals’ legal access to housing and public spaces.

In study 3, it was mentioned that an understanding of law can impact how persons with disabilities are treated during the process of getting an ESA recognized. It is
important to note that the HUD guidelines (2020) encourages persons with disabilities to request accommodation for an ESA prior to bringing them into the dwelling to promote good relations. However, for any reason, persons with disabilities may submit a request after the animal is already living with the person and should not be penalized because of the timing of their request.

Lastly, an understanding of the law can clarify the roles of each stakeholder during the ESA accommodation process. Persons with disabilities may not be required to share their specific diagnosis or its severity in order to obtain accommodation. Rather, the law places housing officials in the position of ascertaining whether the individual has a disability and need for an ESA (HUD, 2020). The role of determining diagnosis and whether an ESA would be appropriate is under the purview of the mental health professional who provides documentation communicating that a diagnosis and need are present. When housing officials attempt to take on the role of determining if an ESA is really needed, they cross boundaries into areas where they lack competence and may put persons with disabilities in a vulnerable position and/or pressure them to lose privacy of protected health information.

**Clinical Perspectives and Implications**

How important health professional involvement is in the clinical efficacy and benefits of ESAs is still largely unknown. Study II provides some preliminary data that could guide future research. Modest negative correlations between professional involvement and animal behavioral concerns suggests that clinicians may have an important role as gatekeepers for appropriate behavior of ESAs, at least in the case of extreme problematic behaviors that could result in injury and/or lawsuits. It was
interesting in Study II that professional involvement in animal selection was positively correlated with bond factors such as emotional regulation benefits and personal growth (Lisa DeMarni & Barlow, 2013), and yet these same aspects of the bond were not associated with receiving treatment for their mental disorder. Perhaps getting support for finding the right animal for the job is more impactful than including the ESA intentionally or explicitly in treatment as seemed to be supported in the participant stories from Study III (MacNamara et al., 2015; Mills et al., 2019).

These findings could also be an indication that health professionals are not currently utilizing ESAs intentionally in treatment in such a way that there is a meaningful difference between receiving treatment or not on the emotional impacts and bond of the ESA. Alternatively, research in animal-assisted therapy considers the health professional as having responsibility for facilitating therapeutic interactions between therapy animals and clients (Fine, 2019). Since the therapeutic benefits of an ESA are assumed to stem more from their bond, animal presence, and responsibility of pet care in residential setting rather than a therapeutic setting without third party facilitation, professional involvement may not play as large a role in the therapeutic benefits found for ESAs. However, it may largely depend on the severity and type of the disability the client experiences.

Study II results showed that current mental health professional involvement was associated with ESA being taken to places where pets are not invited and some welfare concerns such as forcing dogs to cuddle and clients struggling to care for them. While it may not be realistic to assume that professional involvement could always and accurately predict the welfare of a potential or current ESA or effectively prevent illegal behavior of
their clients, we must consider that the mental health professional is one step in the process that could influence these outcomes. Health professionals are in a position to have preventative and educative conversations with their clients and may know most intimately about the abilities of the client to care for themselves and a pet.

**Animal Perspective and Implications**

The voice that is most often left out of ESA conversations and decisions is the animal. Almost one third of participants in Study II reported that welfare was not discussed in the process of obtaining ESA status and less than half consulted a veterinarian during the process. It was alarming to see that 13%-14% reported struggling to care for their ESA at least 3 days a week and reported their ESA lacked access to adequate shelter. Without the ability to advocate for themselves, animals are vulnerable, and it is essential that the consideration of animal welfare and well-being become a central part any ESA discussions (Fine & Griffin, 2022). Providers writing ESA letters or discussing the potential integration of an ESA into treatment would serve their clients and the ESA partner by emphasizing the *mutual* bond as the main ingredient of the ESA role. Along with a discussion of how the ESA can benefit the human partner, but the human partner can help, support, and care for their ESA. It is worth noting that animal welfare is not mentioned in law regarding ESAs except to say that responsibilities of care rests on the individual who may be assisted by others (U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, 2020).

It would be helpful if the importance of considering animal welfare were reflected in law by including ESA welfare considerations as part of the requirements for ESA documentation. Further, health providers could include the provider’s understanding of
who will be responsible for the animal’s care, an assessment of the individual’s capacity to care for the animal, or even a statement asserting that animal welfare was discussed with the client in a treatment setting. In doing so, welfare prioritization supports the bond quality and the emotional support the bond provides – the basis of ESA’s purpose. It also still retains flexibility for clinicians to make thoughtful contextual decisions about writing a letter in support for an ESA.

Systemically, incorporating animal welfare into related policy in meaningful and flexible ways sets a precedent that welfare should be part of the complexity considered in the situation. The animal should not be left out of the constellation of groups whose perspective matters in ESA-related issues. An emphasis on welfare in legal communication also inherently supports the bond in legal documents, rather than the attitude of using animals in a one-way relationship. It could play a role increasing welfare, and therefore bond quality, and maybe even help ESAs be more effective through the avenues of welfare and, as Study 2 data supported, reduce problematic animal behaviors.

**Persons with Disabilities’ Perspectives and Implications**

From Study three, we learned that how policy is communicated and enforced can have a substantial impact on individuals’ experience. A defensive, “prove it” approach within policy and the communication of same is detrimental to persons with disabilities who may already experience microaggressions related to their disability on a daily basis (Lett et al., 2020). It also perpetuates stigma and suspicion in communities rather than promoting compassion, interaction, and dialogue that can be healing for persons with disabilities (Kattari et al., 2018). Compassionate and competent conversations can still be
effective at upholding law/policy and supporting animal and community welfare without contributing to the invalidation and disempowerment of persons with disabilities.

Accurate information is vital to facilitating such conversations, and that will likely necessitate education for most health providers who are asked to write ESA documentation. Pet Partners and other organizations provide training, online communities, and certifications and exams in animal assisted interventions and human-animal bond issues (Pet Partners, 2022). Competent professional involvement is not limited to having knowledge and skills related to animal-assisted interventions. It also involves developing skills related to facilitating collaborative, honest, and compassionate conversations with clients. It may be efficient to integrate information into training curriculum as part of ethical and applied training and provide opportunities to practice having collaborative and competent conversations with clients around ESAs, whether or not they ultimately providing ESA documentation to clients. Even if the answer is “no,” how the message is delivered is crucial to the lived experience of persons with disabilities and their experience of feeling respected and heard.

Study three highlighted inequities in the ESA process, most notably access to health providers, or at least ones who will collaborate with clients who are seeking ESA accommodations. Part of this is a much larger healthcare systemic problem that neglects minorities consistently (Greenaway et al., 2020). Additionally, pet-friendly housing options are difficult to come by in some areas especially among ethnic minorities, and where they do exist, they are often comparatively more expensive and not affordable to those who may benefit from a pet (Rose et al., 2020). One way to fight inequities around ESA status access is to promote healthy pet care behaviors in communities and endorse
pets as good for communities and housing areas, rather than having a reputation of risk. Affordable pet-friendly housing would negate the need for ESA status and the associated process of support from a health care professional.

**Future Directions**

All three studies emphasize the reality that there is confusion about what ESAs are, what they are supposed to do, where they can and cannot go, and who is eligible for one. Study 1 was predicated on the hope that education of clinicians could promote more safe and effective ESA partnerships. Study II data support that greater education may positively influence rates of misrepresentation and stressful situations or interactions between persons with disabilities and administrators, neighbors, or communities. In order to develop education campaigns that are targeted and efficient, more information on what the general public knows about ESA law would be helpful. Research about attitudes toward ESAs could also be beneficial in order to better understand the barriers to a more ESA partnership-friendly climate in the United States. Study III demonstrates that clearly not all ESAs are as those represented in most media and news outlets, and that the ESAs in an individual life can have a noteworthy impact on overall quality of life.

There is a need for research to continue to investigate the risks and benefits of ESA partnerships, and understand when, how, and under what circumstances ESAs are supported, safe and effective vs. risky, dangerous, or inappropriate. Answers to these queries could have far-reaching applications for each stakeholder group. Understanding the roles of ESA partnership contexts could help clinicians make more informed decisions in their role as ESA gatekeepers, increase confidence in ESAs for landlords and
other policy-enforcing officials, protect animals, and support persons with disabilities either directly or through reducing stigma that they may face in their communities.

Among clinical professionals, many suggest that clinical research should guide policy on ESAs. While such a perspective is understandable given the values, philosophy, and contexts surrounding health care professionals, it behooves researchers to consider the needs and purposes of research from the perspectives of each stakeholder and including multiple ways of knowing when designing their studies. Along with considering multiple perspectives when designing a study, the generalizability and application of the results across stakeholder groups may be different between clinical, disability, animal, political, or community perspectives.

There are numerous examples that highlight the challenges and impacts of applying research across distinct stakeholder perspectives, knowledge, and jurisdictions of power. From the framework of health care professionals, better understanding the empirical efficacy of ESAs to reduce psychopathology for people with disabilities may enhance clinical treatment options available, promote healthy human-animal bonds in treatment decisions, and have greater outcomes from their clinical decisions. From a legal and human rights standpoint, the very same research question is less important because all that is needed for a reasonable accommodation is that the person experiences an increase in functioning of daily tasks. Whether ESAs are shown to be “effective”, “somewhat effective”, or “not effective” are unlikely to inform other stakeholders (e.g., policy-makers), and an understanding of current disability law. Going a step further, applying research findings from a specific perspective (e.g., health care) without regard
to the broader context (e.g., disability law) could lead to discriminatory policies and practices.

Other research areas could focus on making animal relationships more accessible, responding to stigma in communities, changing policies that may impact animal welfare, or preventing misrepresentation of ESAs and SAs. A more holistic perspective may lead to more community-based research and activism and collaboration with relevant stakeholders. Perhaps, from a more wholistically considered perspective, research may be most broadly applicable, inclusive, and protective of all stakeholders if focused on reducing risk and avoiding harm (misrepresentation, animal welfare problems, injuries, etc.). A do-no-harm approach to ESA research enhances flexibility for all stakeholders to apply ESAs in ways that make the most sense given their situations, rather than a one-size-fits-all approach. This is particularly important with disability policy due to the idiographic needs and contexts in which persons with disabilities may find themselves and the various ways that animals can impact people’s experiences. A do-no harm approach facilitates consideration of power and privilege allowing multiple perspectives to be equally valued and facilitates the dismantling of hierarchal frameworks by which ESA partnerships and processes have been judged.

situation above the standard of do-no-harm may be considered acceptable, rather than a “best practices” structure that has greater potential to lift some situations above others in acceptability in the public eye, and leads to greater stigma and suspicion.
Recommendations

Based on the results of the three study and the extant literature, a number of recommendations and points for consideration are offered below. Although enumerated, the suggestions are all equally worthy of thoughtful attention.

1. It would be helpful for facilities to have clear policies that are understandable and accessible to the public and relevant stakeholders. Review policy statements carefully and thoughtfully to avoid raising unnecessary barriers for individuals with disabilities.

2. A pamphlet or other user-friendly document about ESAs and how your facility may respond to ESA requests and why would be more helpful than only saying “we don’t do that here.” Such a document is also much easier to navigate than many formal policies.

3. Education is critical at all levels and for all stakeholder groups. There is tremendous confusion regarding the role of service animals, therapy animals, and emotional support animals.

4. Policy enforcers would benefit from training in how to engage with ESA partnerships in a compassionate, collaborative way rather than taking an authoritarian stance.

5. When concerns are raised, it is useful to remember that a) ESAs (and service animals) can be denied access if their behavior is inappropriate and/or aggressive; b) it is not acceptable by law to elevate the concerns of one party (e.g., someone who is allergic to dogs) over the needs of the individual with an ESA dog; and c)
it is helpful to approach those with ESAs and making requests for ESAs by assuming good intentions, rather than fraud.

6. Health professionals are charged with assessing the disability or need for an ESA. It is important for others (e.g., policy developers and enforcers, other community members) to remember that assessing the “validity” of an ESA is not their role.

7. Federal lawmakers and local policy makers could consider adding more explicit animal welfare considerations to ESA documentation requirements. Increased emphasis on the wellbeing of the animal in ESA partnerships is needed and overdue.

8. Health Professionals should use a clear framework when making decisions about providing ESA documentation. Collaborative dialogue with clients requesting ESA documentation is important for good clinical decision making as well as respect for persons with disabilities.

9. Include ESA-related ethics in academic programs for pre-professionals to learn knowledge of ESA-related (and service animal) issues and law and provide opportunities to practice ESA collaborative discussions with clients in clinical training experiences.

10. If interested in further training and competence in animal-assisted interventions, consider becoming a part of an organization that provides webinars, research articles, online communities for discussion and consultation, and training opportunities online and in person (Division 17, Section 13 of the American Psychological Association, 2022; HABRI, 2022; International Association of Human-Animal Interaction Organizations, 2022)
Conclusion

The knowledge, priorities, and behaviors of several different groups help to shape the context in which ESAs partnerships exist and how we understand them. One of the most broad and impactful conclusions of the current inquiry into ESAs is the important consideration of systems interacting with the individual. ESA decisions involve political and legal processes, clinical and health professionals and ethics, housing administrators, persons with disabilities, and animals. While each ESA situation is unique, not a one of them is isolated from the situations of others in the complex system described. In order to effect change in individuals, animals, health fields, or policies, we must keep their interconnectedness in the forefront. Policies change culture, but people change policies. Each stakeholder needs a place at the table for making decisions about ESAs in any arena. Rachel’s restory data from Study three sums up the sentiments that arise when stakeholder groups can see each other’s perspectives and work together to support a healthy ESA partnership:

… there is a very specific role that an ESA fills beyond that of a pet… Rachel said, “Thank you for actually believing me and having something set up where I can document this. And then not punishing me financially for having it.”
References


Aneson, C. L. (2021). Effectiveness of Emotional Support Animals as a Treatment Method for Adults Diagnosed with Generalized Anxiety Disorder [M.S., Florida Gulf Coast University].

http://www.proquest.com/docview/2572603811/abstract/51F719CC1CFA45F8PQ


https://www.animallaw.info/case/whittier-terrace-associates-v-hampshire


https://doi.org/10.2752/175303712X13240472427159


Bryan, J. L., Quist, M. C., Young, C. M., Steers, M.-L. N., Foster, D. W., & Lu, Q. (2014). Canine comfort: Pet affinity buffers the negative impact of ambivalence


Foster, A. M. (2018). Don’t be distracted by the peacock trying to board an airplane: Why emotional support animals are service animals and should be regulated in the same manner. *Albany Law Review, 82*(1), 237–266.


http://www.proquest.com/docview/2597743201/abstract/95BEB311FEE84BF9PQ/1


https://doi.org/10.1080/08927936.2017.1311050


https://doi.org/10.1177/1206331220956539


http://www.proquest.com/docview/2490097402/abstract/79365D5B08694DBAPQ/1


Appendices
### Table A1

**Relationship Between Welfare and Professional Involvement Variables**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Documentation by Professional</th>
<th>Professional Met Dog</th>
<th>Professional Helped Select</th>
<th>Treatment by Letter Writer&lt;sup&gt;a&lt;/sup&gt;</th>
<th>Treatment by Any Professional&lt;sup&gt;a&lt;/sup&gt;</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Exercise</td>
<td>$\chi^2$ = 11.84**, $\phi_c$ = .39</td>
<td>$\chi^2$ = 1.85, $\phi_c$ = -.16</td>
<td>$\chi^2$ = .50, $\phi_c$ = -.08</td>
<td>$\chi^2$ = 4.34*, $\phi_c$ = .25</td>
<td>$\chi^2$ = 3.4, $\phi_c$ = 2.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Favorite Activity</td>
<td>2.04, $\phi_c$ = .16</td>
<td>.79, $\phi_c$ = -.10</td>
<td>.66, $\phi_c$ = .09</td>
<td>.00, $\phi_c$ = .00</td>
<td>1.13, $\phi_c$ = .12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shelter</td>
<td>6.92**, $\phi_c$ = .30</td>
<td>4.70*, $\phi_c$ = .25</td>
<td>3.45, $\phi_c$ = .21</td>
<td>1.84, $\phi_c$ = .16</td>
<td>.68, $\phi_c$ = .10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Water</td>
<td>9.47**, $\phi_c$ = .35</td>
<td>3.13, $\phi_c$ = .20</td>
<td>9.47**, $\phi_c$ = .35</td>
<td>2.66, $\phi_c$ = .19</td>
<td>1.70, $\phi_c$ = .15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Struggle to Care</td>
<td>2.53, $\phi_c$ = -.18</td>
<td>.22, $\phi_c$ = -.05</td>
<td>5.45*, $\phi_c$ = -.27</td>
<td>.11, $\phi_c$ = .04</td>
<td>.02, $\phi_c$ = .02</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Forced to Cuddle</td>
<td>.72, $\phi_c$ = -.10</td>
<td>1.25, $\phi_c$ = -.13</td>
<td>5.45*, $\phi_c$ = -.27</td>
<td>.11, $\phi_c$ = .04</td>
<td>.34, $\phi_c$ = -.07</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nutrition and Healthcare&lt;sup&gt;b&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>.67, $\phi_c$ = -.10</td>
<td>.00, $\phi_c$ = .00</td>
<td>.71, $\phi_c$ = .10</td>
<td>2.18, $\phi_c$ = .17</td>
<td>.59, $\phi_c$ = .09</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vet Consult&lt;sup&gt;c&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>.00, $\phi_c$ = .00</td>
<td>17.43**, $\phi_c$ = -.52</td>
<td>4.64*, $\phi_c$ = -.27</td>
<td>.02, $\phi_c$ = -.02</td>
<td>.73, $\phi_c$ = .11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Welfare Discussed&lt;sup&gt;e&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>.17, $\phi_c$ = -.05</td>
<td>2.92, $\phi_c$ = -.21</td>
<td>2.37, $\phi_c$ = -.19</td>
<td>.01, $\phi_c$ = .01</td>
<td>2.11, $\phi_c$ = .18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Good Health</td>
<td>.36, $\phi_c$ = -.07</td>
<td>.94, $\phi_c$ = -.11</td>
<td>.36, $\phi_c$ = -.07</td>
<td>1.01, $\phi_c$ = -.12</td>
<td>.41, $\phi_c$ = -.07</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* $p < .05$ level, ** $p < .01$ level

*Note: df = 1 for all analyses. n = 77 unless otherwise specified. <sup>a</sup>n=76, <sup>b</sup>n = 72, <sup>c</sup>n=65.*
Table A2

**Frequency of Welfare Variables**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Response</th>
<th>Frequency (n)</th>
<th>Percent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Exercise</td>
<td>At Least 3 Days/Week</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>74</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Less Than 3 Days/Week</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Activities</td>
<td>At Least 3 Days/Week</td>
<td>59</td>
<td>76</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Less Than 3 Days/Week</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>23.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adequate Shelter</td>
<td>Almost always</td>
<td>67</td>
<td>87</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Less than 7-6 Days/Week</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unlimited Water Access</td>
<td>Always</td>
<td>66</td>
<td>85.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Less Than 6-7 Days/Week</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>14.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Struggle to Care for ESA</td>
<td>At Least 3 Days/Week</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>14.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Less Than 3 Days/Week</td>
<td>66</td>
<td>85.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Forces ESA to Cuddle</td>
<td>At Least 3 Days/Week</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>14.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Never or Rarely</td>
<td>66</td>
<td>85.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Veterinarian Consulted</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>49.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>No</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>35.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Unsure</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>15.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Can Afford Quality Healthcare and Nutrition</td>
<td>Agree</td>
<td>71</td>
<td>92.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Disagree</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Neither Agree Nor Disagree</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ESA is in Overall Good Health</td>
<td>Agree</td>
<td>76</td>
<td>98.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Disagree</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ESA Can Be Undisturbed</td>
<td>Agree</td>
<td>70</td>
<td>90.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Disagree</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Neither Agree Nor Disagree</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>9.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Welfare Explicitly Discussed</td>
<td>Agree</td>
<td>62</td>
<td>80.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Disagree</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>7.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Neither Agree Nor Disagree</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>11.7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note.* \(n=77\).
Chris and Gerald

Chris had never had a rabbit before. He grew up with guinea pigs, gerbils, an African Grey parrot, an Indian Green Ringneck Parrot, and turtles. Now, he will tell you that out of all the pets he ever had, rabbits are the best. Chris may have an affinity for rabbits in general now, but perhaps a certain rabbit is at the heart of it.

In 2018 he was diagnosed with Complex Post Traumatic Stress Disorder. He went to therapy for a year in his home state before coming to a different state to attend the university in 2019. At this point he started experiencing “the second round of anxieties and things I hadn’t resolved yet.” Right about the time that the COVID-19 pandemic gained ground in the United States, he felt an unanticipated wave of difficulties and residue from his childhood trauma. “I thought that I was, not cured, but in the place where I had the tools to manage… like I shouldn’t have to ask for more help.” Looking back, he can see that he is always going to need some help, like we all do – a compassionate truth that his wife and a special rabbit started him on a journey to discover.

Being a poor student, he couldn’t afford to go to therapy when he came to the university, and his anxiety and the effects of the pandemic were weighing on his mental health. “My wife, she didn't know how to handle it, and I don't blame her. It's a super complicated disorder… she would feel really guilty and down that she couldn't help me.” Within the context of the pandemic, a recent move, and increasing anxieties related to his
diagnosis, Chris and his wife were anticipating how lonely they were both going to be. 

“We wanted to have something fluffy to cuddle…”

For his wife’s birthday, “She just wanted something adorable in the house besides myself!” he joked. “So, we got a bunny.” They went to a nearby city get her a rabbit from a breeder. At the breeder’s house, she held a Holland Lop while Chris held a baby Mini Rex. He saw her eyeballing the rabbit he was holding, and he thought to himself, “Please choose this one! Please choose this one!” Though the rabbit was for her birthday, he had clearly, immediately felt something special with this baby gray/brown Mini Rex. When Chris had first picked him up and held him, the breeders were surprised “because apparently, he was really a spaz when people were holding him. But with me, he immediately was just really, really calm.” His wife held him, and he seemed to get a little anxious. But then Chris held him again, and he calmed down again. This first experience with this choosy baby rabbit had a profound effect on Chris. One of the deepest issues haunting him from his childhood trauma was that he was not lovable. And here a rabbit had chosen him to be comfortable with. This rabbit had chosen him.

The bond was apparent, and the couple ended up taking the little gray/brown rabbit home with them. They were told was a Mini Rex. He ended up growing into a rather large rabbit, so Chris is not entirely sure that he is a Mini Rex. His name is Gerald. Chris held him up to the camera during the interview, with both hands tenderly supporting him. Gerald remained still and looked comfortable in his arms. After brief introductions, Chris explained that Gerald had been napping and he thoughtfully returned him to his hutch in the background of his screen so he could continue his rest.
As he put him back, there seemed to be a sense of both pride and humility in his posture. He seemed proud of this little creature that meant so much to him, happy to show him off. And yet, there was also almost a reverence for Gerald. An emotional connection that was evident in the very way he moved: with gentleness and patience, taking care to move slowly and keep Gerald comfortable, sensitive to his needs and his experience as he was carried and held. It seemed to be a clear, visible contrast to how Chris described himself before Gerald entered his life. “One of the things I struggled with in my mental illness is being too logical, too reason-minded, and less emotion-based, and ignoring my emotion… I didn’t realize how hard my heart was. I wasn’t belligerent or anything, just unaccepting of emotion, and unaccepting of my feelings, and of being sympathetic towards myself. I experienced a ridiculous amount of trauma as a kid, and I was still paying for it… I didn’t want to acknowledge that I didn’t feel.” During the interview, though, Chris was emotionally present in a way that is rarely comfortable for men in popular U.S. culture. It took great intentionality for him to be so emotionally vulnerable, but it seemed effortless and genuine.

While Chris and his wife had intended for Gerald to provide emotional support to them both, they had not intended to get official Emotional Support Animal documentation through the university. There were many animals in their housing area, and he felt that no one really cared whether you had a pet or not, unless you had a certain kind of resident assistant (RA) that is a stickler to the rules. And there were many, many rules. One day as Chris was letting Gerald run around outside, his RA came and told him he had to have paperwork to have a rabbit. Chris had heard it was incredibly difficult to get an ESA allowed in university housing. He heard stories of people who seemed to
have legitimate needs get denied an ESA accommodation “quickly and forcefully.” He began to have anxiety attacks and began to wonder if he was good enough, if he was wrong. Though the paperwork and process itself was not that bad, being confronted about needing ESA paperwork without sensitivity to his condition and threats of losing Gerald “just nailed every single fear that I had… and it just exacerbated them through the roof… It was terrible… it was not a pleasant experience at all.” Chris felt that he was finally doing something to help himself in a powerful way, “and then everyone was just like, ‘you cannot help yourself.’… It felt like everything was falling in on me when I was trying to get [Gerald] approved.”

After about 4 days of feeling like he was living in a “fight or flight” state, Gerald was approved. From that point on, the most distress related to living with Gerald has only been related to the “expected difficulties” of having an animal, such as teaching Gerald not to chew cables. He even was potty trained very quickly and easily. Chris felt that all discomfort or responsibilities were swallowed up in his relationship with him and were dismissed as almost irrelevant to his experience with Gerald.

On a regular basis, Gerald is soothing to Chris. He just somehow seems to know when he is stressed or having an anxiety attack and seeks to be pet. Gerald seems to be particularly calm for a rabbit. Several times Gerald has fallen asleep on Chris’ chest, sending safe and relaxing signals to Chris’ own body. “It’s hard to be anxious when you’re around a cute fuzzy calm rabbit… [It is] very soothing to just have this big ball of fluff cuddle you.” Rather than helping with the really big instances, Gerald helps with bringing his baseline, day-to-day levels of anxiety down. Recently Chris has been able to get more help through therapy which brings down his anxiety levels even more, “But
during the really, really hard times,” Gerald was there when Chris had no other options available to him. Gerald also seemed to set the stage for Chris’ progress in treatment, helping him get to an emotional and mental state that is more receptive to help from other sources. For example, when the anxiety goes down a little bit, Chris finds it is much easier to “think a little better” particularly allowing Chris to get out of “survival mode” and recognize what he is feeling in the moment and then able to explain it to his wife so he can get help with it.

Besides a soothing, fuzzy presence, part of Gerald’s role is simply to exist as a rabbit who doesn’t think too deeply about things, doesn’t hang onto experiences in his mind, and who simply just is who he is. A relationship of such simplicity seemed to disrupt rumination and intense pressures that sometimes sneak into Chris’ life during a time of crisis in the world. “[Gerald] gave us an opportunity to step out of ourselves… He gets us out of our own head.” Gerald’s rabbit-ness helped to simplify an increasingly complicated context surrounding the pandemic and Chris’ own “complex” traumatic history. “With the context of COVID and all the lies and all the misinformation and confusion that was occurring, there was a lot of distrust and a lot of disbelief. But then with something as simple and just loving as a bunny... Bunnies are not complicated creatures at all. They like what they like, and they’re scared of what they are scared of, and then they move on… It’s just like there was no complication. There were no questions that needed to be answered. It was just ‘He loves me. I love him. He helps me. I help him.’ It’s that simple.” The simplicity that Gerald offered by his very nature made it safe for Chris to face complexities of life, emotions, and his own identity because Gerald demonstrated a way of living in which he didn’t have to fight any of it. A relationship of
love with a simple bunny helped him practice how he could just be himself; and this was enough for the moment.

In addition to simplifying his experience of life, Chris found that Gerald also added to it a sense of purpose. “It’s been nice to feel like I’m needed to take care of this little thing.” A drive to nurture and an affinity for new life is not often praised in men in westernized Euro-American cultures but is more acceptable when an animal is involved. Chris reminisced about when Gerald was so small, maybe a third of the size he is now. He almost seemed embarrassed to share the feelings that came rushing in at the thought of such a tiny bunny he had held against his chest. “There’s just this piece of your heart that if you’re holding a tiny animal, especially like a rabbit for me… It just softens your heart… You just want to love it. You want to take care of it. You want to give it the best life possible… It was nice to just have this little thing that I could call mine to teach and help it grow.”

Chris’ drive to help Gerald grow up safe and interested in the world created a sense of family with his wife. He even mentioned that it seemed to curb his partner’s “baby hunger” for a time. As a constantly available member of the family, Gerald helps in their marriage by facilitating communication about how they are each feeling and by diffusing some of the felt sense of responsibility for helping each other with emotional needs for comfort. When Chris was away at work or school when his wife needed support, Gerald was there to soothe and comfort. “He did me a solid,” Chris said as he reflected on times Gerald filled in for him as a supportive spouse. Gerald acts as a buffer between Chris’ many responsibilities and the emotional demands of his marriage. Gerald also has often helped Chris when his wife didn’t know how to help him, reducing the
pressure each experienced in the marriage. “He’s brought my wife and I closer together for sure.”

Outside their family unit, Gerald is a social lubricant of sorts. “It’s been more fun for people to come over to our house because we’ll have a couple over and he’ll just be hopping around. And we’ll be talking for 20 – 30 minutes about Gerald… that’s helped us make some good friends.” Particularly considering increased social divisions in the nation and social distancing practices and effects of the pandemic, Gerald has become a central part of making connections with others: a neutral, interesting, and heartwarming topic for discussion. Petting and playing with him become ready-made, casual, joint activities.

Beneath all that Gerald means to Chris, all the roles he plays, and all the benefits he provides, is a powerful experience that Gerald provides for Chris; through a relationship with Gerald, Chris experiences himself in a powerful, new, and therapeutic way. His painful past has always taught him that he was unlovable, not to be trusted, and incapable of doing things right. Though people have played a role in helping him challenge these beliefs, there always seems to be a way to rationalize their love or trust away. But a rabbit? A rabbit is honest, incapable of an agenda, and defenseless and vulnerable. A rabbit has every reason to be choosy about its relationships and trust. They can be temperamental. And yet, just like that first day they met, Gerald continues to choose Chris every day.

One day, after Chris had made difficult but significant progress in his therapy, Gerald was in Chris’ arms, held like a baby, belly showing, with his feet in the air – a position that is quite vulnerable and scary for a prey animal. Gerald used to hate this
position at the beginning of their relationship. But on this day, Gerald was so calm. His eyes were half-closed, and he let Chris cradle his head. After an experience where Chris questioned if he was doing the right thing and if his emotions were valid, Gerald showed a significant level of trust in him that had been earned through Chris’ consistent trustworthiness. Chris’ worries quieted, “Wow. Okay. If he trusts me, I should trust me.” As tears came to his eyes, Chris expressed the hope and invitation Gerald’s love offered him. “If something this innocent, this pure, this adorable, can love me, why can’t I?”

Gerald, an animal that can’t even speak his language, gave him permission. Chris reasons determinedly, “If this little creature can love me, then I can love myself.”

Ellie and Hermione Re-story

Hermione was a year and a half when Ellie got her fall of 2020. Her “adoptiversary” was two weeks from the date of our interview. Hermione, brown and of herding dog breed, was laying down on the couch in the background, relaxed as could be, while Ellie sat on the floor in front of her. Few would guess that about a year before, Hermione was in a cramped kennel, maybe even on death row.

During the same time Hermione was in a shelter and in foster care, Ellie was preparing for a big move of her own into the unknown for school with her partner. As an international student, Ellie could foresee all the anxieties that come with traveling to and living in another country. She anticipated feeling quite isolated. On top of that, COVID-19 was in full swing in the United States and social distancing practices made creating a sense of community or even casual friendships incredibly challenging. She also did not start school or her job until January; but they were moving in the Fall. Without being able to go to school or a workplace, it would be harder to make connections and Ellie was
experiencing some stress about that. They thought that a dog might be a particularly effective emotional and social support for the stressful and isolating time ahead.

Ellie and her partner prioritized affordability, proximity to campus, and the ability to get set up ahead of time when looking for housing near the university. Especially being from another country, on-campus housing provided the most affordability, best location in relation to campus, and could be secured months in advance, compared to private rentals that may only give 1 month in advance or less. They also considered if the housing allowed for pets, even if there were hoops they’d have to jump through.

Once Ellie arrived on campus, as an atheist, she did not feel she belonged in the local faith communities that seemed to knit the majority of her other neighbors together. “We were not necessarily for sure on getting [an ESA], but then once we got here, we decided that that would be a good support.” They started the process.

First, she needed to get a medical note, “which was a bit of a navigation obviously as somebody from outside the country. It’s a lot different being in The States… like trying to understand, like, ‘provider’…? I still don’t fully understand how the health stuff works or what all the options are.” Ellie managed to meet with a nurse practitioner via zoom. They used the form that the university provided to assess Ellie’s concerns so the form could be returned to the university to confirm a diagnosis and need for an emotional support animal. She became animated and her voice increased in pitch as she described the frustration she experienced with this process. While Ellie wasn't a student during that process, “it felt very weird to have a doctor breakdown of what’s going on with you, and then… really weird and bizarre to be like ‘here's the notes from my doctor.’ It's just like, ‘I don't know you… Like, ‘you’re a social worker,’ but what does that even mean?!” The
ESA approval process seemed to be a reflection of the many other rules in the on-campus housing that annoyed her. Overall, Ellie felt it was a very weird system and she didn’t like it. “Aren’t we all adults?” she asked, exasperated. “Ultimately,” Ellie said, “the payoff of having her” was worth going through the process, “but would I rather not? Of course!”

Another part of the process included meeting the university’s criteria for the animal chosen as an ESA, which included that a dog needed to be over a certain age, “eight months, or something like that.” Ellie and her partner were looking at a few dogs, one through classifieds and another couple in a shelter. However, by the time the process with the university was complete, those dogs were unavailable. “That was obviously annoying at the time. We didn’t want to get a dog when we were feeling so rushed… but when it felt right, and we weren’t able to get it, that was shitty.” Ellie even considered getting one dog before the approval process was complete, she told her partner, “We should just get it and if they’re a quiet dog, nobody will know, and then it will be approved!” But her partner felt strongly that they should have all the paperwork sorted out before getting the dog, and that’s what they did.

At the time of the second interview, the University had changed its age-requirement policy for ESAs. Ellie noticed immediately when a policy change at the university allowed for younger puppies to be documented as ESAs because there seemed to be a “puppy explosion” in her housing area. Reflecting on her own process, Ellie saw any step in the direction of making it easier to get documentation for legitimate ESAs is a step in a good direction. Though she wouldn’t trade Hermione for another dog, Ellie
reflects that her own stressful ESA searching process might have gone differently if she hadn’t had to look for an older dog with more of an unknown history.

Eventually Ellie and her partner decided on a local shelter. Hermione ended up in the shelter because she had nipped a maintenance worker who had come into her family’s backyard, and they consequently weren’t comfortable with keeping her. When they saw her picture online, both Ellie and her partner thought, “Oh, this is the one!” They had been wanting a brown herding dog and she was exactly that. When they went to meet her, Ellie’s partner knew for sure that she was the right dog for them, but Ellie was more skeptical because of the history she learned about. At the meeting, Hermione was stranger shy and took her time to get to know them, but then warmed up rather quickly. “So, we had that all in mind when getting her… as might be expected with a shelter rescue situation, there is some history there. You’re not getting her as a puppy. There’s just a different set of challenges versus a puppy... you know, there’s just stuff we’ve got to figure out.” One thing that didn’t take very long to figure out was that Hermione was very energetic and liked to channel that energy, as herding dogs tend to. It was a good fit for Ellie and her partner because they like to be active, and having a dog be able to join them outdoors was more fun. “We’ll get on more trails we would have taken more time to get to because I’m not going to go walk myself as often as I’m going to walk a dog. There’s just more things to do.” They also like teaching Hermione new tricks and seeing what different things they can get her to sit on or jump through or find. Mostly, Ellie is grateful for the playfulness and fun that Hermione provides her. “You get to be more playful, which is something a lot of adults don’t get to do if you don’t have kids… You get to come home and have a little pet to play with. It’s fun and we all need more fun.”
Especially with so many serious stressors that come with grad school, when Ellie comes home, there is a joyful dog ready to remind her that life is also fun!

Outside of the home, Hermione has been a catalyst for new friendships. Right from the start, Hermione’s foster parents became friends. Ellie and her partner have kept in contact with them and they meet up to let their dogs play with each other. These relationships expanded to neighbors and strangers, especially if they also have dogs, or particularly like them. Ellie messages neighbors to set up playdates for their dogs. “So that's nice to do that for them and for us so being more socially connected with the other people living here.” Conversations with neighbors that would have only been a “hello” and “goodbye,” become longer conversations that start with talking about Hermione. There is even a Facebook group for residents with ESAs to connect with each other for fun or support. Hermione and other dogs create a network of friends, a community, not just individual relationships. “As someone not from this area, as a citizen of another country, and someone very much atheist, you don't have those commonalities with people in this area… so you kind of feel like that outsider piece. But you meet other people with dogs.” Ellie’s general anxiety levels are decreased not just directly because of a relationship with Hermione, but indirectly through social interactions and the sense of belonging Ellie feels with people when she’s out and about with Hermione, in person and virtually.

Throughout the interview, Ellie referred to her experience as “we” and seemed to include her partner in most of her experiences. Not surprisingly, Hermione has spurred growth in her marital relationship. Ellie shared that her and her partner are constantly “navigating teaching [Hermione] things or navigating [Hermione’s] challenges.”
Together. “… and then us being able to communicate more, and just figure out what to do for things that come up unexpectedly. So, I guess all that to say the growth there in our relationship based on navigating stuff to do with her.” Hermione gives them specific tangible goals to work on together and grow in their relationship and communication. She also changed the words they use to describe their relationship. “I joke anyways that we've been together about 10 years, but I never referred to us as like a family before. And now once we have her, I'm like, ‘I have a family.’” Hermione isn’t just a member of their family, she *made* it a family for them. Hermione is also part of the extended family. When video calling and family, they always ask about Hermione as much as they ask for updates on Ellie and her partner’s lives. Hermione is also spoiled by family members and friends on holidays. “So, it’s very much the sense of family for us three, and then also with my parents or the in-laws or the friends. She’s very much a part of that family as well.”

Hermione came with her name, and Ellie and her partner kept it, as they also respected and honored Hermione’s history and shy personality. As it turns out, part of what has brought the most joy and meaning in their relationship stems from Hermione’s initially shy and hesitant nature, and being part of helping her explore the world with more confidence and interest, while also exploring and respecting Hermione’s preferences. Ellie delights in providing Hermione with a home and experiences to encourage Hermione to grow more into herself and experience more of the joy in life, especially considering where she had come from. She didn't seem to know fetch when they got her, a strange thing for a herding dog, they thought. Since they don’t know her history very well, they can only hypothesize that playing fetch and other activities must
be firsts for Hermione. Ellie spoke as if speaking directly to Hermione, trying hard to understand her, “maybe the people you had before didn't expose you to a whole lot if you're so wary of new people.” She gently and consistently introduced her to new things.

Hermione had been wary of the water before and disinterested in jumping in it. So, Hermione’s first swim was a big moment in their relationship. “The day when we just like threw a stick and she went swimming, I was just like ‘Oh my gosh! I’m gonna cry!’ …It was just cool to see that we could teach her … It just seemed like a harder one to teach and for her to take on since she's not necessarily like the outgoing-just-go-out-and-do-new-things [kind of dog]… So, having her just be so into the fetch that she would go swim for it, it was just like ‘Yes! I feel so accomplished!’”

Now Hermione’s life is expanded, having adventures locally and adventures in Ellie’s home country when they travel to visit. One of Hermione’s roles is a travel partner. Ellie and her partner consider Hermione as they travel to places more locally and do more outdoor activities than they usually would – adventurous activities that Hermione can be part of and would enjoy. “So, [Hermione] adds to that aspect of my identity, some of my values of traveling and doing new things.” As if to demonstrate the better life she is living, in the background during the interview, Hermione flipped over onto her back, front paws in the air, back legs spread out across the length of the couch. Yes, things are pretty good for her, now.

Over much time, exposure, and confidence-building, Hermione has not gotten more comfortable with or interested in strangers; it seems to be part of who she is, not merely a lack of positive experiences. Ellie advocates for Hermione when strangers want to pet her. Sometimes Ellie feels the weight of expectations to have a stranger-friendly
dog neighbor kids can pet. However, there seems to be deeper relational meaning in accepting Hermione for who she is and who she is not - and not needing to apologize to anyone for it. For one, it makes Hermione’s love for the people who are in her circle are all the more meaningful since the relationship is not created easily. Secondly, Hermione had already been rejected by one family because of the expectations that she should be okay with strangers approaching her. Some of the power in the relationship for Ellie seems to stem from the opportunity to provide free, chosen, and conscious acceptance for Hermione, which Hermione did not have before. “That’s a big theme and work-in-progress in my own life: just accepting and being okay with ‘it is what it is.’ You can’t change certain things.”

In many ways, Hermione offers Ellie a similar gift that Ellie offers to Hermione. In helping Hermione navigate new, somewhat-scary experiences and helping her to find joy in them, Ellie experiences a sense of purpose, community, mastery, and joy in a world that might otherwise be experienced as isolating, unknown, somewhat-scary and stressful. Both of their worlds are expanded with less fear and more connections. Ellie said, “I’d be her if I could be a dog!” She’s proud of the life she could offer to a dog who was once misunderstood, isolated, and a bit afraid of the world around her. Hermione might be thinking something similar about Ellie.

Ellie shared that from her relationship with Hermione, she’s become stronger in advocacy for adoption of dogs. The patience, acceptance, exploration, and new “leash” on life that a rescue dog needed elicited the confidence, belonging, acceptance, and connection that Ellie needed and could not so easily attain outside of assuming that nurturing and rescuing role. Through wanting courage, joy, and connection for Hermione,
Ellie found it for herself. The sense of purpose, fun, and connection Hermione brings crosses political, religious, species, and social distance boundaries in a time when so many of these things have caused great divides and isolated those who are most different. Hermione, a dog once displaced from home, anxious, closed off, and now rescued, is living hope for Ellie who anticipated also feeling isolated, anxious, and far, far away from home.

**Rachel and Fish Re-story**

Looking back, Rachel can see that dogs have always served an important role in her emotional and social wellbeing, but it was never really made explicit before recently. Rachel was bullied a lot in elementary school. She was a year older than most everyone in her grade and her body matured faster which made her stand out from her peers of any gender. She didn’t have a lot of friends, so her Scotty dog was her friend. After that, a Schnauzer was her companion through high school and after she graduated. After high school, Rachel left home to serve for her church in a far-away country where she couldn’t talk to family, lost a support system, and was trying to navigate a culture and a language completely foreign to her. On top of that already difficult situation, she experienced abuse from multiple people during this trip. She returned home before the anticipated time was up and was diagnosed with mild depression and PTSD. At home, her parents both worked and her only sibling lived away from home in another city, so it was just her and her dog much of the time as she tried to sort through her traumatic experiences. “Unbeknownst to me, these animals were really important for me.”

Next, Rachel planned to get married, but her anxious Schnauzer did not like her fiancée and even bit him at one point a week before their wedding. They were both in
agreement, “the schnauzer cannot get in the middle of us.” They moved in with her husband’s parents without her dog, who stayed with her parents. “I had never lived without a dog my whole life.” Rachel seemed to not know what to do with herself. “I was like, ‘I need a dog. I need a dog.’ And my husband was like ‘Are you sure you need a dog?’ And I was like, ‘I need a dog!’” So, they looked around, specifically for a herding-type dog, and they found rescued puppies for sale online. One night Rachel was sobbing after having just looked at the pictures. When her husband asked her what was wrong, she replied, “I just really want them! They’re really cute!” A couple of days later, her husband conceded, “Okay, we’re just going to go and get this dog for you. It’s only $75.” Rachel laughs at the irony that the food and supplies costed more than the actual puppy that means so much to her. She and her husband both say now that it was the greatest $75 they’ve ever spent!

They drove up to the house and an 11-week-old puppy came running out in the dark to their car. She didn’t whine once the whole ride home. “She just fell asleep in our arms.” Little did they know the ball of energy she would be. Rachel and her husband had always had dogs, but it had been seven years since Rachel had a puppy, and her husband had never had one. It became an adventure for them both, just a little over a month after getting married. The pup was easy to train, but there were certainly times they thought, “One of us is going to end her!” But more than anything, they were surprised and in awe about how very unique her personality was, and the sheer magnitude of her personality. Her name is Fish. She’s a mutt, part Golden Retriever, part Poodle, and part Border Collie with dew claws intact, but a docked nub of a wagging tail.
And “she’s so stinking cute! Huh, Fish?!” Rachel used her puppy voice and switched the camera around to show a dog sprawled across her bed during the interview. In response to being talked to, Fish tried to claw her way up to Rachel on the bed while still remaining on her side. She made a “snarf” sound as she shimmied herself to make contact with Rachel’s body. Between Fish and Rachel, there was a lot of enthusiasm and personality there for one piece of furniture.

At the time of the interview, Fish had just turned 3-years-old and her puppy energy was still very present. “We joke. We call her monster.” She’s not really a monster; she’s very smart, obedient, and well-behaved, but “she could go, and go, and go, and just never give up until she gets really tired. And then she’ll breathe, get some water, and then she can go again.” Fish loves chasing balls, but more than anything, she can’t go anywhere without her most beloved toy. As Rachel talked about Fish’s favorite toy, she began laughing. Fish had sat up and was staring at her because she had said the word: “Frisbee.” Rachel said that she picks up on words really easily. All she has to say is “go for” and whether it’s a walk or a ride, Fish’s ears will be perked, and she’ll be excited to “go for” whatever it is. She loves to be outside. During potty training, they trained fish to ring bells on the door to let them know she needed to be let out. But now, she rings the bells anytime she wants to play outside as well. “She’s good at letting me know what she wants. She’s really needy, but at the same time, she’s so smart, you can’t be mad about it.” In case that wasn’t clear, during the interview Fish nosed her way between Rachel and the screen, pushing with a paw, staring, and grunting to communicate that she’d rather be doing something a bit more exciting than sitting on the bed paying attention to a screen. Rachel laughed.
While Fish has that border collie energy, she also seems to channel that energy in more of the way that a Golden Retriever would: socially. Fish loves other living things. Even on the TV, Fish will sit and watch animals on the screen with interest. Emotionally attuned, Fish even seems to pay attention to what is going on during a movie. She sometimes even growls at the villains. Overall, though, Fish thinks “people are [her] people” more than other dogs, which was really atypical of any animal Rachel has had before. In fact, the most difficult thing about having Fish, is that she often wants to say hello to everyone, but not everyone is comfortable with being greeted by her. Fish doesn’t understand this. Since Fish is so well-behaved, Rachel reasons that all her socially-oriented intense energy is just her personality, her identity, and not really a matter of training behavior. “It’s just who she is.”

Initially Rachel and her spouse just wanted a dog, but they did not realize just how much they needed who Fish is. “We saw how she started interacting with people and we were like, ‘Wow! This is so cool! She’s such a unique animal.’” And without planning it, Fish began to play some very important roles in their family, and for Rachel especially.

Especially in the morning, Rachel could feel particularly down and have a hard time getting out of bed. Fish made her get out of bed because, first thing, she was ringing those bells on the door. Other times she’d nuzzle into her face and lick her ears until she got up. Fish responded similarly when Rachel showed emotions like fear or sadness, prompting her to get up, get out, and play. During the winter, when Rachel struggled with depression more, Fish “lives for snow” and doesn’t want to be outside doing things any less, so it was especially helpful for seasonal-affective symptoms. Her “neediness” and energy forced Rachel to experience the real, here-and-now, funny-squirrel-throwing-pine-
cones-at-us world. “She helped me get outside of my own head, because I have to physically and emotionally engage with her in an outside setting... I have to be grounded in reality.” Her boundless energy was contagious, and it helped Rachel have the energy to do things, whether with Fish or the world around her.

Aside from Fish’s prompts, knowing and anticipating her needs provided Rachel with motivation to maintain an organized and realistic schedule, stay on top of schoolwork, and to regularly exercise. She even trained for a half marathon which Fish ran with her. Fish also helped Rachel take breaks from schoolwork for self-care before refocusing on assignments which made it harder to get burned out.

“For her, it’s very selfish,” Rachel points out. It’s not out of concern for Rachel necessarily that Fish intervenes in emotion or lethargy associated with depression; It’s because Fish wants to play with her. What stands out as most meaningful for Rachel is that just Fish being herself, enjoying what she enjoys, is the very thing that also benefits Rachel almost as a side-effect. Fish doesn’t have to give anything up to provide something very important to Rachel’s daily life. The relationship is very mutual.

Rachel enjoyed that when she came home after a class when her husband is still at work, the house was not empty. In fact, it was full of energy; Fish is there! “Honestly, that is the most simple but also the most rewarding things about her, is that she's always, always happy to see you. Even if she's tired and grumpy, she is just always happy to see you, always has to be around you, always wanting to play with you.” Rachel recognizes that not everyone would want this, that some people don’t love that high energy from dogs when you first walk into the house, but for her specifically, “that’s just awesome… I love that.” And, even without the energy, when Fish is more calm, There is something
“peaceful and healing” about her presence. When Rachel had a panic attack or she got overwhelmed, “just being with [Fish] and having her there” was grounding. Rachel paused to say, “I’ll show you right now.” She flipped the camera over and the dog that had been growling at a squirrel through the window earlier in the interview was now laying calmly on the bed beside Rachel, head nestled into the folds of a blanket. “I’ll just hold her paw while I’m napping and it’s just like all the worries go away and everything’s fine. Sometimes she helps me come back to reality and helps me realize that, ‘Oh, things are going to be okay.’” So, not only is her energy contagious, but so is her peace.

Fish’s social nature also ended up rubbing off on Rachel. Rachel says Fish is “an ESA for the world! And she loves it!” She helped Rachel engage with people in a time when she was out of the habit of being social because of social distancing during the Covid-19 pandemic. “She just loves people, and they love to see her because she's just so friendly-looking, and she is friendly.” People on the street or at the restaurant drive-thru commented on how cute she is and asked if they could pet her or give her a treat. “They always ask about her, and so then I engage with them… She just helps us engage with people more than we typically would.”

“But it's kind of interesting because, I don't think that I had ever really realized how important an animal was for me to have until, just because of her. I never really noticed it with my other animals… It wasn't until really a year after we were married, we were like, ‘Wow, she's really important for both of us in that regard, just getting up and doing things and stuff like that.’” Rachel and her partner had been benefitting from the emotional support that Fish offered for about six months before they got her officially
documented as an ESA. They decided to move out of Rachel’s in-law’s house to have their own space. They realized that in order to be close to campus, in an apartment or renting, it was likely that they’d need ESA documentation to have an accommodation to have a pet. They had not entirely decided where they would live, but they used the USU documentation to prepare because it was the most comprehensive and straight-forward they had found and would be effective wherever they ended up, including on campus if nothing else worked out.

Rachel did not particularly find the process stressful at all. She was completing the forms plenty of time in advance of needing them (about 8 months before they ended up moving). She also had grown up in the area around the university campus her whole life, had parents who knew the right people to talk to for the forms, and she already had a working relationship with both a physician and psychiatrist. Unlike others in the housing area, Rachel acknowledged, she had most of her pathway already set up for her to get ESA documentation. Both her health care providers consulted together and agreed that Fish’s temperament made her very qualified for fulfilling the ESA role and filled out the paperwork.

As Rachel and her husband looked for housing they ran into several difficulties with housing accepting the ESA documentation. “It's actually technically not legal for housing complexes to do this, but we were denied, ‘absolutely no.’ And it's like, ‘Actually I could come after you for saying that, but I don't want to live here if that's your attitude anyway.’” Ultimately, they decided to live on campus because it was so convenient, close to campus, affordable, and easiest to set up with plenty of time in advance. The move was smooth with the ESA documentation completed months in
advance. Given her previous experience, she was also impressed with the on-campus housing respecting that she had a legitimate need and not barring her from having a furry companion. To the university, Rachel said, “Thank you for actually believing me and having something set up where I can document this. And then not punishing me financially for having it.” Their resident assistant also was happy to see that everything was in place regarding Fish’s ESA status prior to move-in.

After about 2 years of living on campus at the time of the interview, it became clear that in addition to the prior roles Fish fulfilled for Rachel, Fish provides even more and different impact than before. At the time of the interview, Rachel was pregnant and also struggling with a painful orthopedic medical condition that made it difficult to be as physically active as she used to be. This experience drastically changed how she normally manages her depression and PTSD and adds hormone fluctuations as well. She needs different things from Fish now than to go out running, because she can’t do that as much anymore. “Just to be able to hold her and to have her. It's like a stuffed animal, but this one can actually breathe and lick you. It's just that being able to hold on to something when you physically hurt, and something feels broken. You can hold on to them when you're hurting. That is healing and wholesome to be able to do that.”

While Fish continued to provide emotional support and structure to her days, she also played a role in bringing her a deeper sense of community in a way she didn’t have before living in on-campus housing. “All of our neighbors in our area just love her because she's just so sweet and she's funny… [Her energy is] not psychotic energy… It's a playful energy that's full of life and full of excitement. And it's rewarding for people to be around her because she brings that energy to you as well.” If anyone is on their back
porch, Fish includes them in her play and now, “it's like our neighbors are some of our best friends. And we met them because, you know, she also has an ESA. It's a little dog, and he loves fish. And that's actually how we met each other.”

With a sense of community has also come some challenges, not with having an ESA, but with how it is perceived in the community, because sometimes it seems that some people are dishonest. “How can I say this without sounding like a brat?... We just see so many animals here in this apartment complex where it’s like. ‘that's not really... you just filled that out to get them here, right?’ Because if you go through the right channels and you pay enough money, it can be very easy to get documentation to prove that.” And while perhaps everyone can benefit from an animal (“unless you’re allergic or one of those weirdos who just don't like animals”), there is a very specific role that and ESA fills beyond that of a pet. “Obviously, [Fish is] a pet, and she's part of our family, but she really does have that role to fill. We just didn't realize it until after we'd already had her.”

While Rachel doesn’t care about what people think of her for a lot of things, it’s very important to her that others see her as honest and as having integrity – a core part of how she sees herself and wants others to see her. In order to preserve the perception of her integrity and honesty, she feels like she must guard against people thinking she is one of those people who took advantage of the system to get a pet. “I almost feel like I have to explain myself to people when they see Fish because, especially here in this apartment complex, it's like, ‘You live in this place with an animal?’ ‘Yeah it's because I have PTSD, because I was abused in multiple ways by different people throughout the course of five years. Will that shut you up? Will it make you believe me?’” She doesn’t mean to
be harsh, she just feels a little exasperated. Answering questions with perhaps too much uncomfortable and personal information makes it clear to questioners that it felt disrespectful to question her in the first place. It is frustrating because Rachel wonders why people don’t take her at her word, why we can’t we trust people to be honest. “Well obviously it's because you can't, which I understand. But it's frustrating coming from somebody for whom this is a legitimate thing… And I don't think that it helps that the stigma around mental illnesses or things like that, despite all that's being done to help destigmatize, there is still a stigma around it.” While it is totally worth it, living on campus with an ESA can also mean feeling the need to be a little defensive. “It can be a little bit taxing emotionally.”

Fish is not just a pet – in multiple ways. Fish fills a very special role in regards to helping with Rachel’s PTSD and Major Depressive Disorder, “but at the same time, she's so integral to our family, both our little unit (my husband and I), as well as the greater family. My parents love her. The in-laws love her. She is the grand-puppy.” Sometimes extended family members will call to have Fish visit. “She really is not just a pet. Which I know is like cliche or sappy… But she really is! She has an integral place and an integral role in our daily lives. Both of us. Not just me.”

Speaking of extending family, as Rachel and her husband expected to welcome another new little being into their family, Rachel thought Fish already knew while she was pregnant. Fish protected her stomach when Rachel and her husband were wrestling, even though she usually sees Rachel’s husband as the “Alpha.” “We're not afraid or worried for her to be around my child because she is just so sweet and so gentle.” After the child was born, Fish continued to be a major source of support for Rachel as she
struggled with post-partum concerns. In particularly difficult moments, Rachel found herself thinking, “I need Fish,” solidifying for her the importance of the role Fish plays in her emotional life. Fish also took on a similar role for the baby. Just as she interrupts Rachel’s negative emotions and thought patterns with a sweet and demanding invitation to play, Fish will lick Rachel’s baby’s ear when he’s crying. The infant, in response, stops crying to look at Fish in interest and curiosity. Another thing is for sure, with her tenacity, Fish will have that kid up and running and playing with her in no time. They just hope that Fish will continue to be gentle when she pokes the baby with her nose. She does like to do that…
CURRICULUM VITAE
JILLIAN FERRELL (SHE/HER)
Department of Psychology, Utah State University, Logan, UT.
Cell Phone: (801) 669-0848
Email: jill.ferrell@usu.edu

EDUCATION

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Degree</th>
<th>Program</th>
<th>Institution</th>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Details</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
  Chair: Susan L. Crowley, PhD |
| MS     | Counseling Psychology Program               | Utah State University, Logan, UT.       | 2019   | Thesis: Narrative Identities of Early-Return Missionaries from The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints  
  Chair: Susan L. Crowley, PhD |
| BS     |                                             | Brigham Young University, Provo, UT.    | 2014   | Psychology Major GPA: 3.91                                             |

GRANTS AND AWARDS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Grant Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2018</td>
<td>Utah State University Student Association Graduate Enhancement Award ($4000)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| 2014 | ORCA Grant Recipient from Brigham Young Office of Research and Creative Activities.  
  For Assessing the Impact of Spiritual and Relational Teaching on Student Learning. ($1500) |

CLINICAL EXPERIENCE

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Organization</th>
<th>Responsibilities</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| 9/21 – 5/22  | Counseling and Psychological Services (CAPS), Utah State University, Logan, UT | Responsibilities: professional development training, participate in group and individual supervision, conduct intakes, individual and group counseling (process and psychoeducational), outreach, supervision of undergraduate REACH Peer skills training students, and workshops for USU students  
  Supervisors: Eri Bentley, PhD, LuAnn Helms, PhD, Charles Bentley, PhD, Amy Kleiner, PhD, Chris Chapman, PhD, Mark Nafziger, PhD, Zhen Li, PhD, Justin Barker, PhD  
  Direct hours: 570 |
| 9/17 – 4/20  | Psychology Community Clinic, Sorenson Center for Clinical Excellence, Utah State University, Logan, Utah | Responsibilities: Develop and co-lead body image group therapy for adult women, co-facilitate telehealth DBT skills group for adolescents, attend supervision, attend Grand Rounds didactic training, conduct intakes for adults and adolescents, provide individual therapy for adults and adolescents, conduct ADHD and LD assessments and develop integrated reports for adult and child community members.  
  Supervisor: Sara Boghosian, PhD, Marietta Veeder, PhD |
Direct hours = 233

7/19 – 9/19  Student Health and Wellness Center, Utah State University, Logan, UT
Responsibilities: Triage/intakes referred from physicians, attend weekly supervision, provide weekly 30-minute individual brief therapy for PTSD, GAD, and MDD in integrative behavioral health model, development of skills group, provided consultation and training in the integrative behavioral health setting.
Supervisor: Scott Deberard, PhD
Direct hours: 11

9/16 – 6/17  Utah State University Psychology Community Clinic, Logan, UT
Responsibilities: intakes, assessment, report writing, and individual counseling to adults, parents, children, and adolescents.
Supervisors: Susan Crowley, PhD, Sara Boghosian, PhD, Marietta Veeder, PhD,
Direct hours: 102.5

TEACHING EXPERIENCE

Graduate Student Instructor, Utah State University, Logan, UT.

6/20 – 5/22  PSY 4230 Psychology of Gender (Online and Hybrid modalities)
Responsibilities: Develop course outcomes, assignments, policies, gather course learning materials, set up online course platform, facilitate class discussions, grading, communication with students, and work within a teaching team of multiple sections.

5/18 – 9/18, 5/19 -9/19  PSY 5200 Introduction to Counseling and Interviewing (Online)
Responsibilities: teaching basic counseling and interviewing skills in a hands-on learning experience, supervise mock sessions via video tape, grading, recorded lectures, and communication. Course evaluations in above average range.

9/17 – 5/18  USU 1730 Strategies for Academic Success
Responsibilities: course and syllabus development, grading, office hours, lecturing, group and individual academic consultations, designing and leading workshops, contributing to faculty meetings, and contribution project with Academic Success Center Canvas Course Outcomes gradebook. Overall course evaluations in above average to high range.

9/16 – 1/17  PSY 3210 Abnormal Psychology
Responsibilities: course and syllabus development, lecturing, developing and proctoring exams, hold office hours, grading, communication with 150 students. Course evaluations in above average range.

Teaching Assistant, Utah State University, Logan UT.

1/21 – 5/21  ADVS 5910 Animal Assisted Interventions and Special Populations
Responsibilities: Grading assignments, Course technical support and course redevelopment, student communication, student program development consultation, guest lecturing, weekly meetings with instructor.
Supervisor: Aubrey Fine, PhD

9/19 – 5/20  PSY 6310 Intellectual Assessment
Responsibilities: Facilitating 1.5-hour lab, teach introduction to intellectual assessment protocols, guide administration practice, grading and scoring of WISC
and WAIS student administration and protocols, and support assessment analysis and report writing process for students.

Supervisor: Marietta Veeder, PhD

1/17 – 5/17  **PSY 2010 Orientation to the Psychology Major**
Supervisor: Carrie Madden, PhD
Responsibilities: grading on campus and online classes, lecturing, office hours.

1/16 – 5/16  **PSY 3200 Introduction to Counseling and Interviewing Skills**
Supervisor: Carolyn Barcus, EdD
Responsibilities: grading, office hours, online course administrative tasks, and lecturing.

9/15 - 1/16,  **PSY 1010 Introductory Psychology**
9/17 – 1/18  Supervisors: Jennifer Grewe, PhD and Rebecca Blais, PhD
Responsibilities: grading, facilitate discussion group labs, office hours, lecturing, and online communication and scheduling.

**Guest Lecturer**, Utah State University, Logan, UT

9/15 – 5/19  **PSY 1010, Introductory Psychology**
*Primary Instructor:* Kathryn Sperry, PhD
*Lecture topics:* Misunderstood Freud, Animal-Assisted Interactions (Each lecture provided twice per semester)

4/18  **PSY 2010, Orientation to the Psychology Major**
*Primary Instructor:* Carrie Madden, PhD
*Lecture topic:* Preparing for Graduate School and Application Process

3/20  **ADVS 5910, Animal Assisted Interventions and Special Populations**
*Primary Instructor:* Aubrey Fine, PhD
*Lecture topics:* Emotional Support Animals, Animal-Assisted Therapy with College Students, Animal-Assisted Activities on College Campus

**Learning Specialist**, Academic Success Center, Utah State University, Logan, UT

9/17-5/18  Responsibilities: (non-practicum experience) teach academic skills course, meet with individual students for consultations, stress/anxiety management and academic/interpersonal skill development sessions, and community resource connections.
Supervisors: Melanie Chambers, MEd & Dennis Kohler, MS

**RESEARCH ENDEAVORS**

**Manuscripts In Progress**

**Publications**


**Book Chapters**


**Presentations**


**DEPARTMENTAL AND COMMUNITY SERVICE**

**Leadership Experiences**

2018 - 2022  USU Safe Passages for You, Project Lead

Redevelop and provide compassion-focused diversity knowledge, awareness, and skills trainings on campus, train SP4U student teams, coordinate scheduling for trainings to staff/students/departments across campus/community, lead team meetings, workshop at USU Inclusive Excellence Symposium.

2017 – 2018  Combined Psychology Program Student Representative, Utah State University, Logan UT

Acted as student representative to the program and departmental faculty. Attended faculty meetings and shared student perspectives and concerns; Developed student mentoring program, lead monthly student meetings
including providing information on practicum training sites, assisted with organization of student applicant interviews.

**Workshops Provided**

2022  Co-led Workshop with REACH Peer: *Coping with Test Anxiety* for USU Counseling and Psychological Services

2020  Recorded *Resilience in COVID-19 Video Series* for USU Counseling and Psychological Services

*Introduction to Resilience in COVID-19 Series, Finding Joy in Uncertainty, Increasing Motivation, Finding Connection, Compassion in the Face of Fear, Be the Change You Wish to See.* Videos were available on USU CAPS website.

2019  Led Workshop for Utah State University Counseling and Psychological Services *Stress and Anxiety Management.* Provided to students, staff, faculty, and community members.

2018 – 2021  Co-led Training Workshop with Safe Passages for You Team

*Safe Passages for You (SPA4) (4 hours), SPA4 Abbreviated (2 hours).* Cultural competence self-awareness, knowledge, and skills training provided to USU graduate and undergraduate students and Library department faculty.

2018  Co-led Workshop for Utah State University Counseling and Psychological Services

*Animal-assisted Mindfulness* with Mark Nafziger, PhD Provided to USU undergraduate and graduate students with assistance from registered therapy dog, Sugar

2017 – 2018  Led Workshops for Utah State University Academic Success Center

*Turning Anxiety into Energy, Resilient Students* (provided to USU undergraduate students), and *Academic Anxiety* (provided in multiple Logan Middle School classrooms).

**Community Service**

2012  Crisis Line Volunteer, Utah County Crisis Line, Provo, UT

Answer phones for the Utah County Crisis Line (day and night shifts) provide supportive listening, connection to community resources, perform risk assessment, and communicate with emergency personnel when necessary.

2020  Puppy Raiser for Guide Dogs for the Blind, Orem and Layton, UT.

2010 – 2015, 2004 – 2007  Train and behaviorally prepare 3 dogs for final training with persons who are blind or visually impaired and/or use wheelchairs, educate public of disability awareness and service dog law/etiquette, aid in weekly training classes and puppy-sitting and exchanges within the Guide Dogs for the Blind Orem, Utah Puppy Raising Club and Layton, Utah Puppy Raising Club.

**ANIMAL-ASSISTED INTERVENTION EXPERIENCE**

Pet Partner Therapy Dog Handler, Delta Society/Pet Partners Association,

2016 – Present  *Graduate Animal-assisted Therapist,*

Counseling and Psychological Services, Utah State University
Sorenson Center for Clinical Excellence, Utah State University

**Animal-assisted Activities Therapy Animal Handler**, Utah State University

Student Stress Bust events (2-3 per semester)

Bi-weekly stress-relief hour at Utah State University Merril-Cazier Library

2013 – 2015  **Animal-assisted Activities Therapy Animal Handler**, Provo, UT

Utah State Hospital Adolescent Unit (Bi-weekly)

Brigham Young University Stress Bust events

2008 – 2010  **Animal-assisted Activities Therapy Animal Handler**, Fairview, TN

Visit hospitals, assisted living centers, weekly reading program for identified at-risk elementary school students

**Animal-Assisted Intervention Training Courses**

9/19 – 12/19  **Understanding the Human Animal Bond**

An interdisciplinary examination of the human-animal relationship and various animal-assisted interventions and research.

Instructor: Aubrey Fine, PhD

**Animal-Assisted Intervention Webinars and Workshops**

April 2020  **Human-Animal Intervention - With Exotics** (Webinar)

Speakers: Joan Hall, MS, Lori Kogan, PhD

Nov. 2019  **Childfree Pet Parents: Therapeutic and Counseling Considerations** (Webinar)

Speakers: Shelly Volsche, PhD, Lori Kogan, PhD

Aug. 2019  **How to Legally and Ethically Navigate Client Requests For an Emotional Support Animal or Service Animal** (Webinar)

Speakers: Vey Voda-Hamilton, Esq., Lori Kogan, PhD


Speaker: Aubrey Fine, PhD

Utah State University, Logan, UT.

March 2017  **More Than Puppy Love: The Roles of Animals in Our Lives and in Therapy** (6 hr Workshop)

Speaker: Aubrey Fine, PhD

Utah State University, Logan, UT.

Nov. 2015  **Equine Facilitated Psychotherapy and Learning** (6 hr. Workshop)

Speakers: Sheryl Harrison, Ph.D., Reg Saybrook

Utah State University, Logan, UT.

**PROFESSIONAL AFFILIATIONS**

2021-Current  Student Member, Society of Indian Psychologists

2019-Current  Student Member, Division 17 - Human Animal Interactions section American Psychological Association.

2020-Current  Student Member of Utah Psychological Association

2014-2019  Student Member, Association of Mormon Counselors and Psychologists

2013-2015  Member, Psi Chi, BYU Chapter