

## ABSTRACT

**DISSERTATION PROJECT:** A Companion for the Journey: An Ethnography of the Assisted-Animal Therapy Community

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Assisted-animal therapy (AAT) is used by individuals with disabilities as a form of assistive technology. As a living form of support, a service animal can provide people in need with help to face the daily challenges of life. Many people who use AAT find that their service animal provides companionship that can replace the need for reliance on human support. People can become attached to their animal creating a bond promoting mental well-being, improved physical health, and increased social interaction opportunities. This bond can form a relationship leading to an improved quality of life.

The purpose of this ethnographic, qualitative study was to investigate the daily, life experiences of members of the assisted-animal therapy community. A major focus was to study the effects of AAT on the development of independence for individuals with disabilities. Challenges to serving as a community member were also investigated. Current literature is limited in the study of those who use assisted-animal therapy. In an effort to help bridge the gap

in available literature, this investigation included five adults with a variety of disabilities including visual, PTSD, anxiety, and narcolepsy. Members participated in face-to-face interviews and in both voice recordings and photo elicitation interviews. The research questions of investigation included: *What are the experiences of postsecondary members of the academy and other professional workers with disabilities as members of the assisted-animal therapy community? How does a service animal affect independent living abilities? What are the challenges of service animal ownership?*

Results of this study indicate that the use of a service animal helps individuals with disabilities to become more independent in living on their own, accessing public entities, interacting within large groups of people, and successfully maintaining employment. Participants discussed being able to lessen the amount of medications taken and interact socially with others that had not previously been possible. Members of the AAT community also face challenges in service animal ownership. They frequently encounter other animals in public that are not properly trained service dogs that can cause a disruption or become a threat to their trained animal. They also face opposition from business owners and others in public who do not fully understand their need and legal right to access with a trained service dog. There is a need for advocacy and awareness that will help people in public to understand that not all disabilities are visible and that the need for a service animal varies among the population in need. Detailed findings, limitations, implications and recommendations for further research are included. Research students in health and education, university policy makers, professors, and community business leaders may find the information in this dissertation informative and useful.