Abstract - Howell

The lifecycle of an assistance animal and touch points impacting welfare

Assistance animals are highly trained to provide necessary disability support to their handler, and to a standard of hygiene and behaviour that enables them to legally access public places off limits to most animals. They are usually, but not exclusively, dogs. They are typically trained by experienced training providers, but there is a growing number of people who are training their own assistance dogs. The general public believes that assistance dogs experience good welfare due to being highly valued by their handler for the work they do. Nonetheless, there are aspects of their training, working life, and beyond, that have the potential to result in negative animal welfare outcomes.

This talk will provide an overview of the laws that provide protections to assistance animals, highlighting the fact that most existing legal statutes do not mention, let alone provide guidance on, their welfare. It will also describe the typical lifecycle of an assistance dog, from selection, through to training, working life, and retirement, and the ways in which their welfare could be impacted at each of these stages. Finally, it will discuss the pros and cons of owner-trained versus provider-trained, assistance dogs, regarding the dog-handler relationship and animal welfare.

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