

University of San Francisco

Emotional Support Animal (ESA) Policy

Policy Statement

Although USF generally prohibits animals of any type in University housing, the University will consider reasonable accommodation requests from students with disabilities for the presence of an Emotional Support Animal, (ESA) as required by the Fair Housing Act (FHA). USF will evaluate such requests to ensure students with disabilities have equal opportunity to use and benefit from University housing. The university defines “benefit” as the ability to participate in student housing requirements such as shared living (roommates), activities (floor and hall programs), etc.

No ESA may reside in University housing until the student has received written approval through Student Disability Services (SDS). Animals present prior to approval must be removed immediately and may result in disciplinary action.

Reason for Policy

This policy ensures compliance with federal and state fair housing laws while balancing the health, safety, and welfare of the broader residential community.

Definitions

Emotional Support Animal (ESA): An animal whose presence provides therapeutic benefit by ameliorating symptoms of a student’s mental health disability. Unlike service animals, ESAs are not trained to perform specific tasks. Their support derives from their presence and interaction. ESAs are not pets. This definition reflects guidance provided by both Federal and State sources. ESAs are only permitted in the owner’s dorm room, they are not permitted in shared areas of the dorm. ESAs are generally considered to be cats and dogs, although in rare cases, other domesticated animals may be approved.

Procedures

Requesting an ESA

Approval for an ESA is a two-step process:

1. **Establishing a disability-related need** for an ESA through the process administered by Student Disability Services (SDS). Documentation from a provider who has a working relationship with the owner will be required.
2. **Approval of a specific animal** to serve as the ESA.

Requests should be submitted as early as practicable, preferably at least 60 days prior to moving into University housing. Requests submitted fewer than 60 days in advance may delay implementation, and/or the request may not be approved until the following semester.

If the need arises after occupancy begins, students must contact SDS promptly. Approval is not guaranteed within the same semester.

ESA Documentation Guidelines

To evaluate your request for an Emotional Support Animal (ESA), Student Disability Services (SDS) recommends that you provide documentation from a qualified professional who:

- Is licensed and qualified to diagnose and assess disabilities (e.g., physician, psychiatrist, psychologist, licensed clinical social worker, or other appropriate healthcare provider), and
- Has personal knowledge of you and your condition.

Your provider should:

1. Identify the major life activity or activities in which you experience limitations.
2. Describe the connection (nexus) between your mental health disability and your need for an ESA in university housing.
3. Explain specifically how the presence of the ESA alleviates or mitigates your symptoms.

While documentation from the providers listed above is preferred, SDS will also consider reliable information from other appropriate sources.

Provider Relationship & Location

We generally prefer documentation from:

- A provider licensed in the State of California or in your home state, and
- A provider who has an established, ongoing therapeutic relationship with you and personal knowledge of your condition.

Reliable supporting documentation may be provided by a California-licensed professional who does not operate in this state solely for the purpose of providing ESA certifications.

Please note:

An emotional support animal registration, identification card, patch, certificate, or similar documentation (whether obtained online or in person) is **not sufficient on its own** to establish a disability-related need for an ESA.

Clinical Evaluation Expectations

Documentation should reflect direct personal knowledge based on a thorough clinical evaluation.

A clinical evaluation for a mental health condition typically includes:

- Clinical interviews
- Observation
- Review of history
- Consideration of medical and social factors
- Use of appropriate assessment tools (when relevant)

This process allows the provider to identify symptoms, assess their impact, and determine whether an ESA is an appropriate part of the treatment plan.

Specificity Matters

Documentation should clearly describe:

- The specific symptoms you experience
- How those symptoms substantially limit a major life activity
- How the presence of the ESA mitigates those particular symptoms

General statements are usually not sufficient. For example:

- “The animal alleviates anxiety” is too broad.
- Instead, the documentation should explain *how* the animal alleviates your anxiety (e.g., reducing panic episodes at night, interrupting dissociative episodes, grounding during acute distress, improving sleep stability, etc.).

Ongoing Approval

If your disability is not considered permanent, you may be asked to reapply each academic year to maintain approval for an ESA in university housing.

Criteria for Determining Eligibility

In evaluating ESA requests, USF requires the following:

Each resident may be approved for **no more than one ESA**. Housing may permit **more than one animal in a residential unit** when multiple residents have separately approved ESAs; however, approval is subject to review of the unit size, animal type, resident needs, safety, and potential impact on roommates or suitemates. ESAs must be at least 12 months old (for dogs) or at least 6 months old (for cats).

- The ESA must not be a disruption due to noise, odor, or behavior
- The ESA must be housebroken
- The animal must not present zoonotic disease risks
- The ESA must be in compliance with all local and state laws with regard to vaccinations

The ESA must be spayed or neutered prior to moving into University housing. Generally approved ESAs are dogs or cats; other commonly domesticated animals are reviewed on a case by case basis.

Emotional Support Animal Agreement

Approved students must sign an ESA Agreement outlining responsibilities, expectations, policy, and consent to information sharing as necessary.

Care and Control of ESA

The ESA must be under the owner's care and control at all times. ESAs may not run at large. Animals found unattended or loose may be removed immediately at the owner's expense. ESAs must be crated while the owner is away from their dorm room. Unsupervised ESAs will be considered unauthorized pets and will be excluded from university housing to be collected by the owner's emergency contact or relocated to a local shelter. Students must comply with all applicable city, county, and state animal laws, including licensing and vaccinations. Documentation may be required.

- Only one ESA is generally approved per student and per housing unit. This is dependent on availability, there are circumstances when you may be assigned with a roommate that has an approved ESA.
- Dogs must be at least 12 months old; cats at least 6 months
- Dogs and cats must be spayed or neutered
- ESAs may not be left overnight without the owner
- Animals must be crated when the Owner is absent
- ESAs must remain in the Owner's private bedroom except for relief purposes
- ESAs cannot be in lounges, hallways, classrooms, library, etc.
- ESAs that are abused or neglected will be removed and relocated at the owner's expense and the owner may face a student conduct violation.
- USF cannot guarantee the health and safety of the ESA

Animal Waste

Owners are responsible for proper disposal of animal waste in designated outdoor areas.

Damages

Owners are financially responsible and may be charged for any damage, beyond normal wear and tear, caused by the ESA, including pest treatment (e.g. fleas, ticks, lice) and furniture/structural repair.

Removal of ESA

USF may require removal of an ESA if:

1. The animal poses a direct threat to health and safety of others or causes substantial damage to university property or the property of other students (beyond wear and tear)
2. The presence of the ESA results in a fundamental alteration of housing operations
3. The owner violates ESA policy responsibilities
4. The animal causes ongoing disruption

Failure to remove the animal within 24 hours may result in removal of the ESA to a shelter or boarding facility at the owner's expense and referral to Student Conduct.

Non-Retaliation Provision

USF prohibits retaliation against any individual involved in requesting or facilitating accommodations under this policy.

ESA General Expectations

- No fees or surcharges for approved ESAs
 - Owners with unapproved animals living in the residence halls will incur a \$100 per-day charge
 - Knowingly submitting false documentation to SDS may result in disciplinary action
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Roommate Notification and Rights

Roommates will be notified of ESA requests and may decline shared placement within three business days. Roommates may request their own accommodations through SDS if impacted.

Hi, [ROOMMATE NAME],

We are notifying you that your roommate is seeking authorization to have an emotional support animal (ESA) reside in your shared on-campus residence. Please review the ESA Roommate Rights and Responsibilities listed below carefully.

If you accept placement of an ESA within your housing unit, no additional action is needed. **If you have concerns regarding placement of an ESA within your shared on-campus residence, you must respond to this email within 3 business days.** If we do not hear from you within 3 business days, we will move forward with ESA approval.

Roommate name:

ESA owner name:

Residence hall and room number:

Type of animal (species):

Emotional Support Animal (ESA)

Roommate Rights and Responsibilities

- You are being notified that your roommate is seeking authorization to have an emotional support animal (ESA) reside in your shared on-campus residence. If you have concerns, you must notify Student Housing within 3 business days of receiving this notice.
- The ESA is allowed only in the ESA owner's private bedroom and may not enter other bedrooms or common areas (e.g., kitchens, living rooms, bathrooms) without the consent of all roommate(s). The student understands that Housing

reserves the right to make roommate changes after the student and their ESA have been placed in a room

- *The ESA owner is solely responsible for the ESA's care, supervision, and control at all times.*
- *The ESA owner is responsible for any damage or injuries caused by their animal and must take appropriate precautions to prevent property damage or personal injury.*
- *The Office of Student Housing may inspect the residential unit on a regular basis as part of routine health and safety checks of all residential space. If fleas, ticks, or other pests are detected through inspection, the unit will be treated using fumigation methods by college approved pest control services. Those costs will be billed to the ESA owner.*
- *You may review the full scope of the ESA owner's rights and responsibilities by reviewing the University's [ESA Policy](#).*
- *You may email the Office of Student Housing studenthousing@usfca.edu if the animal exhibits behavior that is disruptive, threatening, unsanitary, or otherwise concerning.*
- *If you have a medical condition or disability that would be negatively impacted by the presence of this ESA, you have the right to request your own accommodation through the SDS office.*

Emergency Contact

Owners must designate an Emergency Contact who is able to remove the ESA within 3 hours if necessary.

Appeals

All SDS students have the right to appeal any accommodation decision made by SDS. Instructions for appealing an accommodation decision can be found [here](#) and under "Appeal Process Procedures" in the SDS Student Handbook.

Related Information

- [USF Service Animal Policy](#)
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History

Policy review dates to be recorded.
