

Sarah and Hugo's Fight for #HealthCareEquality**February 20, 2019**

Sarah* has a unique bond with her dog, Hugo. The two have been best friends for over two years and are inseparable. But Sarah's dog is more than just her best friend--he is her service dog. Many people with disabilities use service animals in order to fully participate in activities of daily life. Under the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), a service animal is defined as a dog or miniature horse that performs one or more tasks. **Service animals perform many tasks for individuals with physical and mental health disabilities.** Hugo performs the vital task of helping Sarah manage her PTSD and Dissociative Disorder. Hugo has been trained to recognize when Sarah begins to have a dissociative episode and nudges her to help lessen the symptoms of the episode. Hugo is vital to Sarah's mental health, stability, and independence.

A health care facility must allow a person with a disability to be accompanied by his or her service animal anywhere the person is allowed to go, with the exception of completely sterile environments, such as an ICU. Recently, Sarah decided to seek in-patient treatment to focus on her mental health and well-being. However, the treatment facility would not allow Hugo to accompany her, and Sarah had to kennel him. Without Hugo's support, Sarah was not able to fully participate in her treatment at the center.

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"Amidst all the chaos of seeking treatment and moving around and balancing life and mental health, Hugo has been the only anchor," says Sarah. "He senses when I'm upset before I realize for myself and knows how to prevent things from escalating and in that way, he provides me with a sense of safety and security that is very rare when you live with PTSD. Not having him at the treatment center meant that not only was I in an environment that was new and terrifying leaving me constantly hypervigilant, I felt like I



DRT Client Story: Sarah

had been stripped of the one thing in my life who could make me feel safe. That meant that I had intense and painful dissociative episodes that could otherwise have been prevented and it got in the way of me being able to benefit fully from treatment.”

Sarah contacted DRT for help advocating for her mental health needs, including Hugo’s participating during her treatment. DRT and Sarah educated the center about the important role Hugo plays in her health and well-being. As a result the center allowed Hugo to stay with Sarah. She was able to participate fully in her treatment at the center and made great strides in improving her mental health. Furthermore, the facility drafted a ‘service animal policy’ to ensure *future* patients are also accompanied by their service animals. Today, Sarah is happier, healthier, and attending college with Hugo by her side, and other Tennesseans with disabilities are able to access the same supports she received.

Summary: Sarah* has a service dog named Hugo. Hugo nudges Sarah to stop her mental health symptoms. Sarah went to the hospital to get help. The hospital would not let Hugo come with her. Sarah had a hard time getting treatment without Hugo. Sarah called DRT for help. DRT told the hospital the law. The law says that service animals must be allowed except in sterile places. The hospital now has new rules so other patients can bring their service animals.

Want to learn more about services animals?

[Unleashing the Fact About Service Animals](#)

[Frequently Asked Questions about Service Animals and the ADA](#)

*Pseudonym