

Unleashing a Win-Win Pet Paw-licy to Enhance Marketability

QUESTION

Dear Fair Housing Expert,

I've been a property manager for many years and our property doesn't allow pets. But, we may be missing out on some key business if we don't unleash a pet policy. Do you have any suggestions as to how we can develop a pet-friendly policy that protects our property from damages and liabilities but is also favorable for pet owners?

-Animal-Unaware

RESPONSE

Dear Animal-Unaware,

Like you, I've been in the housing industry for years and, yes, there's more to animals in apartments than you've likely ever considered. If you open your doors to pets, you could substantially increase your marketability as renters with pets makes up a large chunk of the market share. While I can relate to the challenges of accepting animals, I can tell you that designing a solid pet policy with clear guidelines will minimize concerns.

According to a American Pet Products Association (APPA) National Pet Owners survey, 68% of U.S. households own a pet – 89 million dogs and 94 million cats to be exact. Businesses are embracing pets at hotels, restaurants, coffee shops and some areas like Seattle have even banned pet rent altogether. No doubt about it, Americans love their pets and it behooves the apartment industry to consider accepting them rather than alienate a large portion of potential renters.

Federal fair housing law does not protect pet ownership, but it does require housing providers to consider and often accommodate service and assistance animals on a case-by-case basis. It's important to understand the difference and how to stay in compliance with the law.

When developing guidance around accepting run-of-the-mill pets (vs. those disability-related aid animals) into your community, you must recognize realistic expectations, communicate them clearly in your pet policy, and enforce them consistently. Document requirements like size, type, breed, weight of animal, number allowed per unit, plus deposits and fees and clearly note the types of animals that are prohibited as well. Also, be clear about requirements and documentation related to assistance animals.

Keeping too short a leash – that is, too many restrictions in your pet policy – may put off would-be renters. Create a welcoming environment and practice proper etiquette with your residents' critters to reinforce your customer service while distinguishing your property in the marketplace by showing you care.

Saying hello and being friendly to pets goes a long way as well as providing pet-friendly amenities like waste stations with disposable bags and even welcoming them with a branded pet product like a leash, chew toy, or plastic bowl.

Beyond greeting residents' animals, understanding the basics of critter communications can help your team maintain on-the-job safety. Taking in their stance, noting their level of eye contact coupled with a read of the rest of their body language can signal to you if now is a good time to approach or not and guide you in adjusting your own gestures to be the least threatening as possible.

Including animals in your community's disaster preparedness plan also strengthens your customer service efforts and builds rapport while minimizing logistical nightmares you may face post-incident. Plus, imagine how appreciative residents will be to know your helping look out for *all* your residents.

All in all, welcoming animals into your community has many advantages, enhances your marketability, and potentially increases occupancy rates. Any disadvantages can be offset with clear policies and expectations designed to mitigate damages or liability. If you need help adopting such policies, review your state regulations, and consult with your attorney.

Standby for Jo's [Tail Talk webinar](#) on August 31, 2017 at 10 am PT. ForRent readers, please use discount code: JB25 at registration for \$25 off.

Jo Becker, A Realtor®-turned-fair housing advocate, was licensed for eight years before joining a statewide fair housing nonprofit where she trained over 10,000 individuals in 10 years to consistently rave reviews. Her educational sessions focus on assistance animals under fair housing laws and related topics for the multifamily industry.

Jo has also studied emergency preparedness and disaster response with a focus on animals since 2005. She is an Oregon-based speaker and writer who takes an entertaining, personable approach to educating audiences and readers.

Regardless of topic or industry, Jo's aim is to inform, empower, and inspire with historical and relatable context, understandable concepts, and bottom line considerations. Visit Jo's web site <http://www.JoBecker.weebly.com>