

Do you remember the animals in your life? The family dog you had as a child? Or perhaps the aloof cat currently residing in your home? The average American has one or two cats or dogs in their home. We're betting for many, those animals are like family.

Now imagine that you or your loved one **needs** that animal for reasons beyond the straightforward companionship it provides. Imagine that you or your loved one relies on living with that animal because it helps you manage the extreme lows of chronic depression, it aids your child with autism in regulating impulsivity, or perhaps providing daily care for that animal helps your dad, a combat veteran, to cope with the effects of PTSD. In short, that animal makes it possible for you or your loved one to live a more functional, healthy life in your home. The mere fact that this animal lives with you is as vital a support as a medication or a cane; it provides you with equal opportunity to live in your home just as any person without a disability would.

For many years, the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, HUD, has enforced the rights of people with disabilities such as depression, autism, PTSD, and many other conditions to live with emotional support animals. Emotional support animals have been specifically protected in HUD's regulations and guidance related to the federal Fair Housing Act. This means that, for decades, our federal government has not treated emotional support animals as "pets," and that landlords, condominium associations, and property management companies have been required to exempt emotional support animals from no-pets policies and pet fees.

This changed late last month, when HUD issued a notice that it would no longer enforce the federal Fair Housing Act as it relates to emotional support animals. Instead, HUD will only protect the rights of people with disabilities to live with animals that are trained to provide "disability-related assistance," such as guide dogs for people with visual impairments. This is a fundamental misunderstanding of the essential purpose and function of emotional support animals. The cat that helps your sister manage her bipolar disorder, for example, isn't trained to do so; instead, its presence in her home and the responsibilities associated with caring for it help her manage her moods and structure her time.

Eliminating this civil rights protection for people with disabilities has three main consequences. First, people with disabilities will suffer. Denied the right to live with an emotional support animal, some adults will no longer be able to live independently.

Some children will struggle at school and in relationships with friends and family. Some people will experience the progression or worsening of a disability that impedes their ability to function in the community or at work, and that shortens their lives. This isn't hyperbole; we work with Wisconsin residents every day whose day-to-day lives are immeasurably improved – and sometimes saved - by living with an emotional support animal.

Second, HUD's backtracking on this issue lends credence to an all-too-common misperception: that most people who ask their housing provider to reside with an emotional support animal are "not really disabled." Like any legal issue, yes, some housing consumers may try to misuse the law. Rather than rescinding the rights of people who need emotional support animals, HUD should ensure landlords, condominium associations, and property management companies are clear on the law's protections and understand how the law is properly applied to avoid misuse.

Third, by protecting the use of animals that assist people with physical disabilities such as vision or mobility impairments, but not the use of animals that assist many people with chronic mental illnesses, HUD magnifies the stigma our culture still places on mental illness. It suggests that chronic mental illnesses aren't "real," or deserving of legal protections and societal recognition. This is the very opposite of what HUD should be doing: protecting the civil rights of all by enforcing the federal Fair Housing Act.

In Wisconsin, our state fair housing law still protects the rights of people with disabilities to live with emotional support animals, but without the power that a federal agency brings to bear, civil rights protections and meaningful enforcement will be diminished. Our federal government has greater resources available to enforce the law, and therefore it must not abdicate its responsibility to support Wisconsinites with disabilities and afford all people equal opportunities to thrive in their homes. Justice and community well-being demand nothing less than full civil rights for all.