



# st. john's lutheran church of sweet air

## **Guidelines on Caring Paws Outreach and Service Animals inside building**

Approved by Council June, 2026

### **Introduction**

God calls us to be good stewards of God's whole creation, including creatures. We, God's people of St. John's Evangelical Lutheran Church Sweet Air, MD, believe that God created the heavens and the earth and all that is in them. *"For every beast of the forest is mine, the cattle on a thousand hills. I know all the birds of the hills, and all that moves in the field is mine."* We have hosted *Caring Paws Outreach* ministry since 2020--a ministry with licensed, documented therapy dogs for the purpose of visitation on and off campus.

### **Goal**

While we understand that St. John's is a religious institution and is exempt from this ADA requirement and does not have to allow individuals to bring their Service Animals into the facility, we believe it is our obligation to continue to show the love of Christ to those with such recognized disabilities and to ensure that ALL people are welcomed to receive God's grace and mercy here at St. John's. We also have a responsibility to our church membership, guests, and visitors to provide a safe environment. Therefore, we have enacted this policy to provide guidance to those who attend our services or indoor activities with an official **Caring Paws Outreach Animal** or **Service Animal** and to set forth the expectations we have regarding animals and their handlers.

### **Definitions**

With the help of the American Disabilities Act ("ADA" -Revised Requirements: Service Animals), and we at St. John's, recognize and define **Service Animals** as *"dogs that are individually trained to do work or perform tasks for an individual with a disability. The task(s) performed by the dog must be directly related to the person's disability."* Examples of such work or tasks include, but are not limited to, assisting people who are blind, alerting people who are deaf, pulling a wheelchair, alerting and protecting a person who is having a seizure, reminding a person with mental illness to take prescribed medications, calming a person with Post Traumatic Stress Disorder ("PTSD") during an anxiety attack, or performing other duties. St. John's also understand that service animals are working animals, not pets.

**Caring Paws Outreach** is a visitation ministry here at St. John's Lutheran Sweet Air, though membership at SJLC is not required to be a part of this group. Visitations are for those who are home-bound and to group homes like nursing homes. To join this group, your dog must:

1. Be trained in the "Canine Good Citizen (CGC)" program through the American Kennel Club (AKC) ([more info on that here](#)). CGC Classes and training are offered in many locations. You can find your [closest location and/or trainer here](#).
2. Be working towards the AKC's "Therapy Dog" title. To learn more about that program and its requirements, [click here](#).

To join the Caring Paws Outreach Team you and your dog need to complete the following four courses:

1. Basic Obedience course
2. Intermediate Obedience course
3. Canine Good Citizen course
4. Therapy Dog Course

After getting the four certificates, human handlers also get training and a background check before getting our durable St. John's vest. Our Caring Paws Outreach team not only visit members upon request, but also hospitals, nursing homes, schools and libraries with the permission of the facility. At this time, we welcome Caring Paws Outreach in the building for approved meetings and worship the *first* Sunday of the month.

**We will not permit Emotional Support Animals** inside our building. St. John's defines **Emotional Support Animal** as an animal (cat, dog, etc.) that provides a therapeutic benefit to its owner through companionship and is not specifically trained or certified to perform tasks for a person who suffers from emotional, psychiatric or mental health-related disabilities. An Emotional Support Animal DOES NOT QUALIFY as a Service Animal as defined above and, thus, is not granted access to St. John's building.

## Registration and Approval

**If a person plans to regularly attend SJLC events and/or worship services with a *service animal* or Caring Paws Outreach animal, they must complete the attached form and show proof of vaccination to a staff member and register the paperwork with the church office.**

## Liability and Safety Policies

- **Owner Responsibility:** The handler is legally responsible for any damage or injury to people or property caused by their animal.
- Upon request St John's reserves, the right to be shown proof of a service dog's training and certification
- Caring Paws and Service Animals must be harnessed, leashed, or tethered, unless these devices interfere with the service animal's work or the individual's disability prevents using these devices. (In that case, the individual must maintain control of the support animal through voice, signal, or other effective controls.)
- Caring Paws and Service Animals must wear their vest identifying themselves at all times while they are on the property.
- Caring Paws and Service Animals must not sit on church furniture.
- Caring Paws and Service Animals must not obstruct an area used for emergency evacuation.
- We ask that Caring Paws and Service Animals not be in food prep areas (such as our kitchen or in Fellowship Hall when meals are being served). *Emotional support animals, therapy animals, or support animals that do not meet the Health General, §7-701 definition of a service animal are not allowed in food service facilities under COMAR 10.15.03 (except in outdoor dining spaces under the Outdoor Dining and Patron's Dog law).*
- Caring Paws and Service Animals must be in good health, meet all animal to human contact health requirements and must be current on all vaccinations including, without any limitation, Rabies vaccinations.
- Handler must pick up and clean up all waste from their Caring Paws and Service Animals inside and out.
- **Removal of Animal:** Our church has the right to remove a service animal or any animal that is aggressive, growling, biting, or creates a significant disruption (e.g., barking continuously). If an animal becomes disruptive or exhibits threatening behavior, the handler will be asked to correct the issue or remove the animal.

We encourage all those wishing to bring their service animal to St. John's to make an appointment well in advance of any plan to attend our worship service or regularly sponsored events. St. John's may revoke approval of any non-compliant handler or Service or Emotional Support Animal.

**St. John's may make exceptions to this policy to accommodate unique events and situations.**

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## ANIMAL REGISTRATION FORM

Date \_\_\_\_\_

Animal name: \_\_\_\_\_

- Service Animal
- Animal's breed \_\_\_\_\_
- Animal weight \_\_\_\_\_
- Animal's date of birth or age \_\_\_\_\_

Please print:

Owner/Guardian Full Name \_\_\_\_\_

Address \_\_\_\_\_

Email \_\_\_\_\_

Phone \_\_\_\_\_

Emergency contact \_\_\_\_\_ Phone \_\_\_\_\_

- Health documentation attached.

*Provide and attach required certification as well as a copy of the overall health certificate issued and signed by a licensed veterinarian within the last year that includes proof of rabies/vaccinations or other applicable animal to human contact requirements and is dated with veterinarian's name and phone number.*

- I have read the safety guidelines and understand I am responsible for this animal and any damage the animal may cause to people, property or other animals.

Signature \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

Staff signature \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

Print name \_\_\_\_\_ Position \_\_\_\_\_