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**TITLE: EMOTIONAL SUPPORT ANIMAL POLICY**

**CATEGORY: BEHAVIORAL HEALTH AND COMPLIANCE**

**EFFECTIVE DATE: DECEMBER 15, 2025**

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**POLICY:** allowing Emotional Support Animals (ESAs) within Carolina Health Centers (CHC) facilities to support patients' mental health needs while maintaining safety, hygiene, and compliance with applicable laws and clinical standards.

**SCOPE:** Applies to all clinic locations, patients, visitors, and staff requesting ESA accommodations

**DEFINITIONS:**

- **Emotional Support Animal (ESA):** A domesticated animal that provides comfort or emotional support to an individual with a mental health condition. ESAs are not service animals under the ADA and are not trained to perform specific tasks.
- **Service Animal:** A dog (or miniature horse) trained to perform tasks for a person with a disability; protected under the ADA.
- **Psychiatric Service Animal:** A service animal trained to assist individuals with psychiatric disabilities by performing specific tasks.
- **Therapy Animal:** An animal that provides therapeutic benefit in clinical settings but is not covered by the ADA/FHA for public access.
- **Pet:** An animal kept for companionship; no special public access rights.

**PROCEDURE:**

1. **Access Areas and Restrictions:** ESAs may be permitted in non-sterile areas of the clinic upon prior approval. ESAs are not allowed in operating rooms, intensive care units, isolation rooms, or any sterile/restricted zones.
2. **ESA approval process:**
  - Patients are required to:
    - **Current CHC Behavioral Health Patients:** When a CHC clinician provides a written letter confirming the need for an ESA, document an Alert in the patient's chart.
    - **Non-CHC Behavioral Health Patients:** Submit a written request to clinic administration/patient services with a letter from a licensed mental health professional, dated within the last 12 months, confirming the need for an ESA.
    - **Case-by-Case:** Approval may be revoked if the animal poses a health or safety risk.

### 3. **ESA Handler Responsibilities:**

- Keep the ESA **under control** (leash, harness, or carrier) at all times.
- Owner/handler is responsible for **hygiene, waste cleanup**, preventing disruption, and any **damage/injury** caused

### 4. **Infection Control:**

- Hand hygiene required after contact.
- Immediate cleanup of waste using gloves and leak-proof bags.
- Staff may request removal if infection control or safety is compromised

### 5. **Staff Guidance & Permissible Questions:**

- Staff may ask: Is the animal required because of a disability?
- For service animals only, staff may ask: “What work or task has it been trained to perform?”

*Note: Staff may not ask for details about the patient’s condition.*

### 6. **Emergency Protocols:**

- Medical Emergency: Prioritize patient care; relocate animal safely.
- Aggressive Behavior: Remove animal immediately; document incident.
- Infection Control Breach: Follow isolation and sanitation procedures.
- Evacuation: Handler secures/evacuates animal; staff assist if safe

### 7. **Compliance:** This policy aligns with ADA (for service animals), Fair Housing Act (for housing accommodations), and state/local health regulations.

### 8. **Enforcement:** Failure to comply may result in denial of ESA access or removal from the premises.

### 9. **Staff Accommodation for ESA Related Fear or Discomfort:**

CHC is committed to maintaining a safe and supportive environment for all staff. If a staff member experiences fear, anxiety, or discomfort related to the presence of an Emotional Support Animal (ESA), the following protocol applies:

- The staff member should promptly notify their supervisor or team lead of their concern.
- Supervisors will make reasonable efforts to reassign duties or facilitate a switch with another qualified staff member so that patient care and clinic operations are not disrupted.
- Staff are encouraged to communicate openly and respectfully about their needs. No staff member will be required to interact with an ESA if they feel unsafe or uncomfortable.
- Supervisors should document the accommodation and ensure that all staff are aware of the process for requesting a switch.

- If needed, staff may seek support through the Employee Assistance Program (EAP) for additional guidance or stress management resources.

**REFERENCES:**

- APA — *Resource Document on Emotional Support Animals (2022)*. Download
- HUD FHEO-2020-01 — *Assessing Requests for Assistance Animals under FHA (Jan 28, 2020)*. Download
- South Carolina Code of Laws — Title 47; § 47-3-980 (Service Animal Misrepresentation)