

ADA Laws and In-Laws

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By Guiding Eyes

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Another holiday season is upon us. I experience mixed emotions as I pack dog food and toys for my time on the road with Guiding Eyes Alberta.

On one hand, maneuvering around public spaces seems to get easier every year. The flight attendants on Delta Airlines know us by name and it's been some time since I've needed to explain to the taxi driver that he is legally required to allow my dog in his cab.

But, spending holidays with family and friends occasionally requires negotiation of private spaces and relationships for which no federal law applies. Here's the letter I wish I had the nerve to send to my family in advance of our visit.



Dear loving relative,

I look forward to being a guest in your home over the holidays and I'm grateful to participate in our extended family celebrations. But, here are some things that you should remember:

My guide dog, Alberta, will be with me. She will not bite your pet poodle, chase your cat or growl at your children. She will be tempted by appetizers put on the coffee table at nose height, but if you tell me when you put them out, I will tell her not to touch them. And, yes, she will leave dog hair in your house. I will take her outside every morning to brush her, just as I do at home, but Guiding Eyes has yet to solve the genetic puzzle of how to breed a Labrador who does not shed.

I let Alberta off-harness and off-duty, but only when I am comfortable that doing so will be safe for her, safe for me and will not interfere with anything that is going on around us.

No matter what you feed your pets, please do not feed Alberta ANYTHING. If you like, I can describe in detail what it is like traveling the day after Christmas with a dog who has diarrhea.

Please do not touch Alberta or take her anywhere without my permission. I know that you think that you are doing me a favor by taking her out in the morning or letting her out of the bedroom because your kids want to play with her. But, it is disconcerting for me to wake up in a strange place and find that my dog is not where I left her when I went to sleep.

Don't tell me that the nice restaurant where we're having Sunday brunch is not an appropriate place for my guide dog. I'm happy to call ahead and reserve a table in the corner so that I can keep Alberta out of the way of foot traffic. Thanks to my guide dog, we'll get the best seats in the house. And I am happy to assume that people stare because they are admiring my beautiful, well-bred and well-trained guide dog.

And most importantly, do not tell me that I can't take my guide dog to church. If your religious community would not celebrate Alberta and me attending Christmas Eve services, it is no place that I want to be. God knows that this dog is the biggest blessing of my life. Every prayer I breathe every day includes thanks for my wonderful dog, her puppy raisers and Guiding Eyes for the Blind.

Sincerely,
Deni Elliott

