

Spot the difference: more leeway for assistance animals

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Eran Picker with his dog, Spot, an autism assistance dog, is one of many public transport users who now have easier access to the assistance animal pass. *Photo: Angela Wylie*

DOGS, cats, guinea pigs and even ferrets could become a more common sight on Melbourne's trams, trains and buses.

Under changes to the Department of Transport's "assistance animal pass", it will become far easier for people with conditions such as autism, Alzheimer's, epilepsy and psychiatric illnesses such as social anxiety to travel on public transport with their pets.

The assistance animal pass was introduced more than two years ago for people who wanted to travel with assistance animals that alleviate the effects of their disability. However, since then, just 15 people have been issued with the pass, which has been criticised for being too restrictive and even discriminatory.

The conditions of the previous pass stipulated that it could only be issued if the animal had been trained from an approved shortlist of accredited animal training organisations. Under the new pass, those strict requirements have been lifted, opening the way for hundreds of people who have had their assistance animals privately trained.

"This is great news for the growing number of people who are using assistance animals for all sorts of conditions," says Dr Linda Marston, who is a member of the Australian Network for the Development of Animal Assisted Therapies (ANDAAT), which has been lobbying for the change.

"In the past the application process was just so prohibitive that for people who needed an assistance dog other than a guide dog or a hearing dog, they really did not have ready access to public transport. This will change all that."

The changes have been welcomed by the family of Eran Picker, who was the 15th person to receive the pass, albeit under "special circumstances", several weeks ago. Under the changes, 21-year-old Eran would have received the pass as a matter of course for his dog, Spot, who was trained as an autism assistance dog, in Israel.

Eran's parents, Eli and Kevin Picker, say the changes they have seen in their son since the smooth collie arrived two years ago have been "unbelievable".

They say much of his self-harming behaviour stopped immediately and not only does he no longer run away from home, he can now leave the house on his own. They say the fact that he can now travel on public transport with Spot will increase his independence even further. Next year, for example, he will catch the tram to TAFE.

"He couldn't travel alone before because he can't communicate and was very vulnerable," says Mrs Picker. "Spot gives him confidence and protects him.

"Also, his behaviour is much better when he is with Spot, which means he can catch a tram without attracting as much attention or annoying people who don't understand his disability. It is much safer."

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