

VIRGINIA ACTS OF ASSEMBLY -- 2017 SESSION

CHAPTER 575

An Act to amend and reenact § 36-96.1:1 of the Code of Virginia and to amend the Code of Virginia by adding sections numbered 36-96.3:1 and 36-96.3:2, relating to the Virginia Fair Housing Law; rights and responsibilities with respect to the use of an assistance animal in a dwelling.

[S 1228]

Approved March 16, 2017

Be it enacted by the General Assembly of Virginia:

1. That § 36-96.1:1 of the Code of Virginia is amended and reenacted and that the Code of Virginia is amended by adding sections numbered 36-96.3:1 and 36-96.3:2 as follows:

§ 36-96.1:1. Definitions.

For the purposes of this chapter, unless the context clearly indicates otherwise:

"Aggrieved person" means any person who (i) claims to have been injured by a discriminatory housing practice or (ii) believes that such person will be injured by a discriminatory housing practice that is about to occur.

"Assistance animal" means an animal that works, provides assistance, or performs tasks for the benefit of a person with a disability, or provides emotional support that alleviates one or more identified symptoms or effects of a person's disability. Assistance animals perform many disability-related functions, including guiding individuals who are blind or have low vision, alerting individuals who are deaf or hard of hearing to sounds, providing protection or rescue assistance, pulling a wheelchair, fetching items, alerting persons to impending seizures, or providing emotional support to persons with disabilities who have a disability-related need for such support. An assistance animal is not required to be individually trained or certified. While dogs are the most common type of assistance animal, other animals can also be assistance animals. An assistance animal is not a pet.

"Complainant" means a person, including the Fair Housing Board, who files a complaint under § 36-96.9.

"Conciliation" means the attempted resolution of issues raised by a complainant, or by the investigation of such complaint, through informal negotiations involving the aggrieved person, the respondent, their respective authorized representatives and the Fair Housing Board.

"Conciliation agreement" means a written agreement setting forth the resolution of the issues in conciliation.

"Discriminatory housing practices" means an act that is unlawful under §§ § 36-96.3, 36-96.4, 36-96.5, or § 36-96.6.

"Dwelling" means any building, structure, or portion thereof, that is occupied as, or designated or intended for occupancy as, a residence by one or more families, and any vacant land that is offered for sale or lease for the construction or location thereon of any such building, structure, or portion thereof.

"Elderliness" means an individual who has attained his fifty-fifth birthday.

"Familial status" means one or more individuals who have not attained the age of 18 years being domiciled with (i) a parent or other person having legal custody of such individual or individuals or (ii) the designee of such parent or other person having custody with the written permission of such parent or other person. The term "familial status" also includes any person who is pregnant or is in the process of securing legal custody of any individual who has not attained the age of 18 years. For purposes of this section, "in the process of securing legal custody" means having filed an appropriate petition to obtain legal custody of such minor in a court of competent jurisdiction.

"Family" includes a single individual, whether male or female.

"Handicap" means, with respect to a person, (i) a physical or mental impairment that substantially limits one or more of such person's major life activities; (ii) a record of having such an impairment; or (iii) being regarded as having such an impairment. The term does not include current, illegal use of, or addiction to a controlled substance as defined in Virginia or federal law. ~~Neither the term "individual with a handicap" nor the term "handicap" shall apply to an individual solely because that individual is a transvestite~~ For the purposes of this chapter, the terms "handicap" and "disability" shall be interchangeable.

"Lending institution" includes any bank, savings institution, credit union, insurance company or mortgage lender.

"Major life activities" means, but shall not be limited to, any the following functions: caring for oneself, performing manual tasks, walking, seeing, hearing, speaking, breathing, learning, and working.

"Person" means one or more individuals, whether male or female, corporations, partnerships, associations, labor organizations, fair housing organizations, civil rights organizations, organizations, governmental entities, legal representatives, mutual companies, joint stock companies, trusts,

unincorporated organizations, trustees, trustees in bankruptcy, receivers and fiduciaries.

"Physical or mental impairment" means, but shall not be limited to, any of the following: (i) any physiological disorder or condition, cosmetic disfigurement, or anatomical loss affecting one or more of the following body systems: neurological; musculoskeletal; special sense organs; respiratory, including speech organs; cardiovascular; reproductive; digestive; genito-urinary; hemic and lymphatic; skin; or endocrine or (ii) any mental or psychological disorder, such as an intellectual or developmental disability, organic brain syndrome, emotional or mental illness, or specific learning disability. "Physical or mental impairment" includes such diseases and conditions as orthopedic, visual, speech, and hearing impairments; cerebral palsy; autism; epilepsy; muscular dystrophy; multiple sclerosis; cancer; heart disease; diabetes; human immunodeficiency virus infection; intellectual and developmental disabilities; emotional illness; drug addiction other than addiction caused by current, illegal use of a controlled substance; and alcoholism.

"Respondent" means any person or other entity alleged to have violated the provisions of this chapter, as stated in a complaint filed under the provisions of this chapter and any other person joined pursuant to the provisions of § 36-96.9.

"Restrictive covenant" means any specification in any instrument affecting title to real property that purports to limit the use, occupancy, transfer, rental, or lease of any dwelling because of race, color, religion, national origin, sex, elderliness, familial status, or handicap.

"To rent" means to lease, to sublease, to let, or otherwise to grant for consideration the right to occupy premises not owned by the occupant.

§ 36-96.3:1. Rights and responsibilities with respect to the use of an assistance animal in a dwelling.

A. A person with a disability, or a person associated with such person, who maintains an assistance animal in a dwelling shall comply with the rental agreement or any rules and regulations of the property owner applicable to all residents that do not interfere with an equal opportunity to use and enjoy the dwelling and any common areas of the premises. Such person shall not be required to pay a pet fee or deposit or any additional rent to maintain an assistance animal in a dwelling, but shall be responsible for any physical damages to the dwelling if residents who maintain pets are responsible for such damages in accordance with such documents or state law. Nothing herein shall be construed to affect any cause of action against any resident for other damages under the laws of the Commonwealth.

B. If a person's disability is obvious or otherwise known to the person receiving a request, or if the need for a requested accommodation is readily apparent or known to the person receiving a request, the person receiving a request for reasonable accommodation may not request any additional verification about the requester's disability. If a person's disability is readily apparent or known to the person receiving the request but the disability-related need is not readily apparent or known, the person receiving the request may ask for additional verification to evaluate the requester's disability-related need.

C. A person with a disability, or a person associated with such person, may submit a request for a reasonable accommodation to maintain an assistance animal in a dwelling. Subject to subsection B, the person receiving the request may ask the requester to provide reliable documentation of the disability and the disability-related need for an assistance animal, including documentation from any person with whom the person with a disability has or has had a therapeutic relationship.

D. Subject to subsection B, a person receiving a request for a reasonable accommodation to maintain an assistance animal in a dwelling shall evaluate the request and any reliable supporting documentation to verify the disability and the disability-related need for the reasonable accommodation regarding an assistance animal.

E. For purposes of this section, "therapeutic relationship" means the provision of medical care, program care, or personal care services, in good faith, to the person with a disability by (i) a mental health service provider as defined in § 54.1-2400.1; (ii) an individual or entity with a valid, unrestricted state license, certification, or registration to serve persons with disabilities; (iii) a person from a peer support or similar group that does not charge service recipients a fee or impose any actual or implied financial requirement and who has actual knowledge about the requester's disability; or (iv) a caregiver, reliable third party, or government entity with actual knowledge of the requester's disability.

§ 36-96.3:2. Reasonable accommodations; interactive process.

A. When a request for a reasonable accommodation establishes that such accommodation is necessary to afford a person with a disability, and who has a disability-related need, an equal opportunity to use and enjoy a dwelling and does not impose either (i) an undue financial and administrative burden or (ii) a fundamental alteration to the nature of the operations of the person receiving the request, the request for the accommodation is reasonable and shall be granted.

B. When a request for a reasonable accommodation may impose either (i) an undue financial and administrative burden or (ii) a fundamental alteration to the nature of the operations of the person receiving the request, the person receiving the request shall offer to engage in a good-faith interactive process to determine if there is an alternative accommodation that would effectively address the disability-related needs of the requester. An interactive process is not required when the requester does

not have a disability and a disability-related need for the requested accommodation. As part of the interactive process, unless the reasonableness and necessity for the accommodation has been established by the requester, a request may be made for additional supporting documentation to evaluate the reasonableness of either the requested accommodation or any identified alternative accommodations. If an alternative accommodation is identified that effectively meets the requester's disability-related needs and is reasonable, the person receiving the reasonable accommodation request shall make the effective alternative accommodation. However, the requester shall not be required to accept an alternative accommodation if the requested accommodation is also reasonable. The various factors to be considered for determining whether an accommodation imposes an undue financial and administrative burden include (a) the cost of the requested accommodation, including any substantial increase in the cost of the owner's insurance policy; (b) the financial resources of the person receiving the request; (c) the benefits that the accommodation would provide to the person with a disability; and (d) the availability of alternative accommodations that would effectively meet the requester's disability-related needs.

C. A request for a reasonable accommodation shall be determined on a case-by-case basis and may be denied if (i) the person on whose behalf the request for an accommodation was submitted is not disabled; (ii) there is no disability-related need for the accommodation; (iii) the accommodation imposes an undue financial and administrative burden on the person receiving the request; or (iv) the accommodation would fundamentally alter the nature of the operations of the person receiving the request. With respect to a request for reasonable accommodation to maintain an assistance animal in a dwelling, the requested assistance animal shall (a) work, provide assistance, or perform tasks or services for the benefit of the requester or (b) provide emotional support that alleviates one or more of the identified symptoms or effects of such requester's existing disability. In addition, as determined by the person receiving the request, the requested assistance animal shall not pose a clear and present threat of substantial harm to others or to the dwelling itself that is not solely based on breed, size, or type or cannot be reduced or eliminated by another reasonable accommodation.

2. That if any provision of this act is determined by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development to be not substantially equivalent or otherwise inconsistent with the federal Fair Housing Act of 1968, 42 U.S.C. § 3601 et seq., as amended, such provision shall not be enforceable.