



Summer 2026

Prince William County Human Rights Office Newsletter

FOCUS

ON HUMAN RIGHTS

HUD Pauses Federal ESA Enforcement, But Virginia Protections Remain Firm

Recent federal policy shifts are creating a complex legal landscape for housing providers and tenants navigating rules around assistance animals. In May 2026, the HUD Office of Fair Housing and Equal Opportunity (FHEO) issued an internal memorandum narrowing its administrative intake criteria. Under this new guidance, federal investigators will only issue "probable cause" findings for fair housing complaints involving trained service animals that perform specific tasks—effectively pausing federal administrative enforcement for untrained Emotional Support Animals (ESAs).

However, legal experts emphasize that this internal federal shift does not change the core statutory text of the Fair Housing Act, nor does it override state laws. In Virginia, the Virginia Fair Housing Law (Va. Code § 36-96.3:1) explicitly includes ESAs within its statutory definition of assistance animals. As a result, individuals with disabilities retain the right to maintain both trained service animals and untrained ESAs in residential dwellings without paying additional pet fees or deposits. The Virginia Fair Housing Board and the Real Estate Board continue to enforce administrative protections and actively accept state-level complaints, leaving state-level protections firmly intact.

To maintain fairness and reduce policy abuse, Virginia enforces strict verification and anti-fraud boundaries:

- **Therapeutic Relationship Required:** If a resident's disability or need for an animal is non-obvious, housing providers have the legal right to request reliable verification. Virginia law explicitly standardizes this documentation, requiring it to come from a licensed healthcare or care professional with whom the resident shares an authentic, established therapeutic relationship.
- **Strict Anti-Fraud Protection:** Providing fraudulent documentation regarding a disability or disability-related need to secure housing accommodations for an assistance animal is an explicit violation of the Virginia Consumer Protection Act.

Know Your Rights

If you live in Prince William County and believe your housing provider has unlawfully denied your request for an assistance animal, or if you feel you have experienced any form of housing discrimination, help is available locally. You can contact the [Prince William County Human Rights Office](#) to discuss your situation or file a discrimination complaint by visiting the Prince William County Human Rights Page.

In the News

Federal Government-

- [End of Birthright Citizenship-](#) Aims to end "birth tourism" by restricting pregnant foreign nationals from traveling to the United States primarily to secure automatic U.S. citizenship for their children.
- [American Citizenship-](#) Seeks to limit automatic birthright citizenship for children born in the United States to certain foreign government employees and foreign lobbyists.
- [Alien Registration Requirement-](#) Implements new registration procedures that allow children born in the United States to foreign government employees to register as lawful permanent residents, while declaring that they do not automatically acquire U.S. citizenship at birth

State Government-

- [Ten new laws took effect on July 1st-](#) New rules on guns, schools, housing, wages and criminal justice begin rolling out across the commonwealth
- [SB637-](#) VA Human Rights Act Expansion has been expanded to a full two years to file.
- [Sickle Cell Care-](#) Virginia signed the Queen Candis Act to expand sickle cell healthcare.

Webinar: Fair Housing & Assistance Animals: Understanding Your Rights

On September 3rd, the Office of Human Rights hosted a session on fair housing and assistance animals. Community members gathered to understand their rights, explore the legal definitions of service and support animals, and learn practical strategies for addressing discrimination in housing settings.

Registration Open: Student Leadership Council CoHort 11

Registration is open for the Prince William County Human Rights Commission Student Leadership Council (SLC) Cohort 11. This dynamic program empowers local high school students to explore civics, develop leadership skills, and advocate for human rights within their community. Applications are being accepted for the upcoming term. Interested students can learn more about eligibility and secure their spot by visiting the [PWC Human Rights Student Leadership Council page](#).

Virginia Assistance Animal Rules

Avoid blanket ESA denials to prevent severe legal liability. Landlords must waive pet fees and evaluate requests individually. Reject generic online certificates; verification requires an established, professional healthcare relationship.

For more information on Anti-Discrimination laws and ordinances you may visit the [Prince William Human Rights](#) office at: [Human Rights - PWC Gov](#)

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