



Assistance animal – Lessons from the AAT

A recent case before the AAT – Julia Dunstan and the NDIS – sheds light on the reasonable and necessary criteria as they apply to assistance animals.

You can [read the full description of the case](#) online; we have provided a summary below.

You may also be interested in a previous AAT summary which addressed psychosocial disability and assistance dogs – <https://tspforall.com.au/resources>

The case

Julia Dunstan is an NDIS participant who has been diagnosed with schizoaffective disorder. She also experiences high levels of anxiety and depression.

Ms Dunstan requested a review of her statement of participant supports and this eventually came before the AAT. Ms Dunstan requested a number of changes; this summary focuses on only one – support to train and register her dog, Spuddy, as a companion dog.

Ms Dunstan has a current assistance dog, Cane, who is aging. Ms Dunstan described having a support dog as the best support for maintaining her mental health. Her psychiatrist of 8 years also stated that Cane had greatly helped Ms Dunstan manage her high levels of anxiety and at times, her depression when she is acutely unwell.

In order for Spuddy to replace Cane, Spuddy needs to be legally recognised as an assistance animal, which entails Spuddy undergoing appropriate training and passing a public access test, which can cost in excess of \$5,000.

The AAT accepted evidence that without an assistance animal, Ms Dunstan would likely require the assistance of a support worker whenever she left the house, which would reduce her independence and be a backward step for her recovery.

The AAT was satisfied that training Spuddy to be an assistance dog meets the 'reasonable and necessary' criteria. It noted that having a registered assistance animal:

- is effective and beneficial to Ms Dunstan
- helps Ms Dunstan to undertake activities which facilitate social inclusion (i.e. to pursue the goals included in her plan)
- represents value for money relative to the benefits achieved and the cost of alternative supports.

However, the AAT did not consider providing Spuddy with veterinary and other support, as insufficient evidence as to the costs and benefits was offered. In general, these would be considered 'everyday costs' and would not meet the reasonable and necessary criteria.



What can we learn from this case?

This case provides another example of an assistance animal being funded for an NDIS participant with psychosocial disability.

As always, providing good evidence that the support meets the reasonable and necessary criteria is key. Check out our [Reasonable and necessary training module](#) for more information on this topic.

Disclaimer: The Transition Support Project believes that the information contained in this publication is correct at the time of publishing (August 2021); however, the Transition Support Project reserves the right to vary any of this publication without further notice. The information provided in this document should not be relied on instead of other legal, medical, financial, or professional advice.