Police have a role in helping users of assistance animals stand up for their rights.

STORY AMY MOUAFI
OPERATIONAL PROGRAMS

Police can issue on-the-spot fines to organisations or individuals that unlawfully deny assistance animals entry to public places and public transport.

The Companion Animals Act 1998 clearly states that assistance animals and their users are legally allowed to access public spaces and places.

Sections 60 and 61 give police powers to impose infringement notices where an assistance animal has been denied entry or been unlawfully charged an entry fee respectively.

Guide Dogs NSW/ACT recently conducted a client survey which found that more than half of guide dog users had been discriminated against in the previous year. Such discrimination included being refused entry to restaurants, cafés or shopping centres or prevented from using public transport and taxis.

Corporate Sponsor for Vulnerable Communities, Assistant Commissioner Denis Clifford said police should respond to reports from assistance animal users of discrimination by issuing fines where appropriate.

“The NSW access laws relating to guide dogs have been in place for more than 30 years and, like all forms of discrimination, there’s no excuse for it,” Assistant Commissioner Clifford said.

In an effort to help users of assistance animals to stand up for their rights, the NSWPF has helped develop the Guide Dog Access Rights card. The card, which will be distributed to all guide dog users, clearly outlines the relevant laws about guide dog access. It also details the $165 on-the-spot fines that can be issued to businesses, individuals or organisations that deny entry or attempt to charge a fee for a guide dog’s entry.

Launching the card, North West Metropolitan Region Sponsor for Disability, Supt Dave Jones said he hoped the partnership forged between the NSWPF and Guide Dogs NSW/ACT and initiatives such as the Guide Dog Access Rights card would demonstrate to assistance animal users that police will take seriously any incidents that they report.

To further demonstrate the NSWPF’s commitment to the issue, all LACs will now display the ‘Guide dogs welcome here’ sticker.

While guide dogs are the most recognisable form of assistance animal, there are also assistance animals that help people with impaired hearing, diabetes, autism, dementia, post-traumatic stress disorder and other physical disabilities to live independently and remain mobile. These animals play a variety of roles including prompting hydration or regulation of blood sugar levels, increasing socialisation and improving health and mobility.

Assistance animals must be specially trained and meet specific hygiene requirements. They must also be registered as an assistance animal in accordance with the Companion Animals Act 1998 so that they’re not deemed to be a pet.

For more information, search the intranet for ‘assistance animals’ or email #VULNERABLE.

ABOVE The Guide Dogs Access Rights card outlines the rights of users of assistance animals.