

# Exploring Barriers And Facilitators To Accessing Emotional Support Animals (ESAs): A Scoping Review Protocol

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Emotional Support Animals (ESAs) provide therapeutic benefits, yet access is often limited by legal, financial, and logistical barriers. While research highlights the emotional benefits of ESAs, little is known about the societal and systemic obstacles individuals face in obtaining them. The scoping review aims to systematically explore and map the barriers and facilitators that influence access to Emotional Support Animals (ESAs).

## 1 Research Question

What evidence exists about the **barriers** and **facilitators** influencing **access** to Emotional Support Animals (ESAs) in the United States?

## 2 Methodology

Protocol follows the JBI methodology for scoping reviews and is registered in the Open Science Framework.

**Data sources:** PubMed, CABI: CAB Abstracts, Web of Science Core Collection, Scopus, PsycINFO, CINAHL, Academic Search Premier, HeinOnline, Google Scholar, Embase Cochrane Library, Policy Commons, Anthrozoös, Human Animal Interaction, and Frontiers of Veterinary Science

### Inclusion Criteria:

- Any animals providing emotional support as defined by O’Haire et al.
- Papers that mention *legal, financial, healthcare, or social factors* as barriers or facilitators to obtaining an ESA
- Papers that discuss the *roles of LMHPs or PCPs* in prescribing ESAs and individuals obtaining ESAs
- Studies and papers *based in the U.S.*
- All studies and papers, including legal documents, which examine ESAs and meet the inclusion criteria

### Exclusion Criteria:

- Animals *not* providing emotional support per O’Haire et al.
- Animals classified as *‘therapy animals’* and *‘assistance animals’*
- Papers that do *not* mention legal, financial, healthcare, or social factors as barriers or facilitators to obtaining an ESA
- Studies and papers based *outside of the U.S.*
- All review articles examining previously published studies

## 3 Screening Process

All identified citations were uploaded into Covidence, where duplicates were automatically removed. Titles and abstracts were screened by **two or more independent reviewers**, and full texts were assessed against the inclusion and exclusion criteria. Any disagreements were resolved through discussion or by involving an additional reviewer. The results will be reported in full in the final scoping review and presented in a PRISMA flow diagram.

## 5 Preliminary Findings

A total of **3,652 references** were collected from the data sources. After duplicates were removed, a total of **2,607 references** were collected for title and abstract screening, with **200 references** remaining in this screening stage. Of these so far, **20 references** have moved to full-text review.

The studies screened thus far reference topics such as the prescription process and frameworks for health providers, interpretations of regulations and laws, and restrictions related to requests for accommodation for ESAs.

## 4 Data Extraction & Analysis

Data will be organized in diagrammatic form to map the key barriers and facilitators impacting access to ESAs, categorized into **legal, financial, healthcare, and social** factors. A narrative summary will accompany the diagram to clarify the connections among these identified factors and their overall impact on obtaining ESAs.

The draft data extraction tool (**Figure 1**) will be modified and revised as needed throughout the data extraction process, with all modifications detailed in the final scoping review. Any disagreements will be resolved through discussion or with the involvement of an external reviewer.

Variable of Interest	Data Collection Method
Publication Details	Publication information
Study Design and Methodology	Study type, data collection methods, and sample size
Population Characteristics	Study population demographics
Legal Barriers	Any legal challenges impacting ESA access
Financial Barriers	Costs associated with obtaining an ESA
Healthcare-Related Barriers	Obstacles related to healthcare system access
Social and Logistical Barriers	Social challenges or logistical barriers affecting ESA access
Facilitators of ESA Access	Factors that enable access to ESAs
Outcomes Related to ESA Access	Reported outcomes tied to ESA access
Gaps and Recommendations	Research gaps or suggested interventions

Figure 1. Data Extraction Tool