

2016-18a: Andrew Sprague vs Edmonton Sun

*For immediate release*

A complaint that the Edmonton Sun incorrectly identified a dog used by a soldier with Post Traumatic Stress Disorder has been dismissed by the National NewsMedia Council.

Complainant Andrew Sprague argued that in the article “Soldier battling PTSD told his service dog can no longer accompany him to Edmonton Garrison”, which appeared January 26, 2016, the paper incorrectly identified the dog as a “certified service dog”, and stated that the correct term in this case is “emotional support dog”.

The complainant stated there is a legal difference and provided extensive information on certification and expectations of service dogs. Subsequently, the complainant said the paper inaccurately reported that the dog was received from a registered charity, and he provided information on the Wounded Warriors Weekend Foundation and Wounded Warriors.

The paper responded by saying it did not state the dog came from a registered Canadian charity, but from the Wounded Warriors Weekend Foundation, which is what the group calls itself on Facebook. Regarding the status of the dog, the paper argued there is no evidence reported to support or deny the dog’s certification status.

The paper noted that the military was quoted as saying the dog can’t have “the same access as a certified service dog because they are not certified service dogs” and that the military is trying to balance the needs of everyone. The military did not raise concerns about the article.

After reviewing the material provided by the complainant and the paper, the NNC noted that the story stated the dog was a gift from a Foundation, and that the story did not describe the dog as a certified service dog. Instead, the article referred to it as a service dog, a term that is generally understood by the public to mean a dog that assists or provides a service function, as distinct from a dog that has the role of a pet.

Information from the military spokesperson points to the distinction, perhaps not as well known in the public, between a dog that is certified as a service animal and one that acts in the role without such training and testing.

The complainant, who described himself as a service dog handler and has deep knowledge of the subject, is seeking careful wording regarding service and support dogs with reference to their training and assessment. He argues the distinction is important to the certified service dog community. A news story, while recognizing changing terminology and frames of reference, must use language and terms that is readily understandable to the general public.

In dismissing the complaint, the NNC found the allegation that the paper misstated the dog's certification status and origin is not supported on close reading of the article. The article meets journalistic standards of accuracy, fair comment and balance.