

# No day in court for lawyer's dog

BY EDEN LAIKIN

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Jeanie Waters, a quadriplegic attorney, has been around the world with her service dog, Elli. But the pair couldn't get into a courtroom in Hempstead this week.

Employees at the Nassau County Traffic Violations Agency on Tuesday night refused to let the 9-year-old golden retriever into the courtroom where her owner was to argue a case, said Waters, of Rockville Centre.

After Waters insisted that she could not be without the dog, agency staff allowed Waters to arrange a plea deal for her client in the hallway.

Officials at the traffic agency, however, deny that they refused Waters courtroom access. "We strongly recommended that the dog stay in an area where there were less people," said David Rich, the agency's chief deputy director. "There was a full waiting room, and we thought the dog might feel confined or people might be afraid of it."

The agency's executive director has since told security guards, who are supplied by a private company, that the next time someone comes in with a service dog to find a supervisor immediately.

Meanwhile, Waters, 48, is considering legal action and has retained a Hempstead attorney, Fred Brewington, who said the agency is offering excuses. "When government officials make a mistake, they have to learn that it's all right to admit we made a mistake and we'll do better, rather than engage in a shell game that is bound to lead to costing the taxpayers' money," he said.

It's against state civil rights law to deny anyone with a disability and their service dogs access to public areas.

Waters, who suffered a spinal cord injury while fixing a car in 1984, said a police liaison at the courthouse said no dogs were allowed in the courtroom. The liaison said she would hold Elli while Waters went into the courtroom.

"I said, 'No, that's why I



NEWSDAY PHOTO / JIM PEPPLER

Attorney Jeanie Waters and Elli sit outside the Hempstead traffic courtroom where the service dog was barred.

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have a service dog," said Waters, who added the arrangement was unacceptable. "She didn't even know what a service dog was."

Elli helps Waters, who also has muscular dystrophy, by pull-

ing her wheelchair, holding her briefcase and picking up things she drops, Waters said. If she falls, the dog will either help her up or get someone to help.

"Elli has been to other court-houses and jails," Waters said. "She goes to church just about every week." And they have been together to the traffic violations agency two or three times before, said Waters.

Waters got Elli seven years ago and they were trained to work together — Elli even turns lights on and helps do the laundry, Waters said. "People joke that Elli does the plea bargaining for me," she said. "We go everywhere. It would be like saying: 'Leave your wheelchair home and crawl in.'"

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