

# **Member Day Testimony Before the House**

## **Committee on Veterans' Affairs**

### **Rep. Steve Stivers**

Thank you Chairman Takano and Ranking Member Roe for holding this Member Day today, and for giving me the opportunity to testify on behalf of veterans' issues in Ohio's 15<sup>th</sup> district.

We all know that returning service members suffer from invisible wounds. It must be Congress's top priority to pursue every avenue to disrupt the tragic links between separation from service and mental illness, such as PTS and TBI, and, worst of all, suicide.

Currently, Congress has authorized the Secretary to provide service dogs for veterans with hearing, vision, mobility, and mental health needs. However, VA regulations provide this benefit only if the veteran is diagnosed with a vision, hearing, or mobility impairment—specifically excluding veterans with mental health needs.

For this reason, I have introduced H.R. 3147 to clarify congressional intent by stating the Secretary may provide a service dog to a veteran, regardless of whether the veteran has a mobility impairment. This zero-cost legislation would close the loophole to allow veterans access to animal therapies as Congress originally intended.

To take these efforts further, I am introducing the PAWS for Veterans Therapy Act joined by Reps. Rutherford, Waltz, Cisneros, Sherrill, and Slotkin. This legislation combines two of the most popular and previously endorsed veteran dog therapy bills from last Congress: the Veteran Dog Training Therapy Act, which has passed the House in previous years, and the PAWS Act.

The new PAWS for Veterans Therapy Act would establish a pilot program at the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) in which the Secretary will contract with local therapeutic dog training organizations, and help veterans suffering with PTS to learn the art and science of dog training. This type of work-therapy training is widely recognized as beneficial therapy for our veterans suffering with this invisible disability.

Under this bill, the dog would be adopted by the veteran and provide continuing therapy beyond the training program, unless the veteran and his or her VA health care provider opt out of the program.

VA, and policymakers on this very Committee, have insisted on waiting for the VA to complete their study to evaluate the efficacy of these programs. At last update, I understand this VA-led study is expected to be complete by the end of next year.

However, this does not appear to be a sufficient reason to wait and deny this therapy to veterans who need it. There is research that has already been conducted by Kaiser Permanente and Purdue University that showed significant statistical benefits from this therapy in reducing substance abuse, enhancing and encouraging interpersonal relationships, and reducing depression-related metrics for veterans with service dogs. What's more, the Palo Alto VA already offers dog training through the Paws for Purple Hearts Program.

In 2017, VA Secretary David Shulkin stated that he “would not wait” for more studies to be completed before moving forward with dog therapies for veterans. Why, then, are we still waiting? Why are we putting veterans in need, in a holding pattern, while we sit to check an administrative box?

If there is such concern over the certainty of this pending VA study, I would point out that this legislation provides a pilot program only – leaving the opportunity for Congress, and the VA to revisit any program following whatever conclusion the VA may or may not make from the study. Our veterans deserve our best efforts to deliver any relief from the symptoms and effects their service may continue to have on them.

This Committee is aware and understands the mental health needs of our veterans will not be addressed with a single solution; rather, we must approach this problem thoughtfully and comprehensively, and no possible solution should be out of reach or placed in a holding pattern. Care that is delayed is care that is denied. This is one alternative therapy with incredible potential to make a difference in the lives of veterans now. I ask this committee to seriously consider if the wait is worth that risk.

I would like to thank the Chairman, Ranking Member, and Members of the Committee again for inviting me to testify today.