

Submission For the Record

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Hearing on H.R. 183, the Veterans Dog Training Therapy Act

U.S. House Committee on Veterans' Affairs Subcommittee on Health

March 27, 2014

Mr. Chairman and Members of the Subcommittee, as the Executive Director of Warrior Canine Connection, I would like to thank you for your invitation to submit a statement for the record in support of H.R. 183, the Veterans Dog Training Therapy Act. I am pleased to have the opportunity to bring Members of the Subcommittee up to date on this promising therapy for symptoms of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) and Traumatic Brain Injuries (TBI) in combat Veterans, and to address the need for this legislation.

Warrior Canine Connection (WCC) is a 501 (c) 3 nonprofit organization dedicated to empowering returning combat Veterans who have sustained physical and psychological wounds while in service to our country. Based on the concept of Warriors helping Warriors, WCC's therapeutic service dog training program is designed to mitigate symptoms of PTSD and TBI, while giving injured combat Veterans a sense of purpose, help in reintegrating back into their families and communities, and a potential career path as a service dog trainer. WCC currently provides its program to recovering Warriors at Walter Reed National Military Medical Center (WRNMMC), the National Intrepid Center of Excellence (NICoE), Palo Alto VA Medical Center (Menlo Park), Ft. Belvoir Warrior Transition Brigade, the NeuroRestorative Residential Treatment Center in Germantown, MD, and at WCC's "Healing Quarters" in Brookeville, MD.

Based on my experience as a licensed social worker and certified service dog instructor, I developed the concept of using the training of service dogs for fellow Warriors as a therapeutic intervention for the symptoms of combat trauma experienced by hundreds of thousands of returning Veterans. The program I designed specifically addresses the three symptom clusters associated with PTSD; re-experiencing, avoidance and numbing, and arousal. Working with Golden and Labrador Retrievers specially bred for health and temperament, Warrior Trainers must train the dogs to be comfortable and confident in all environments. In teaching the dogs that the world is a safe place, the Warrior Trainers challenge their symptoms of combat stress. By focusing on preparing the dogs for service as the partners of disabled Veterans, they are motivated and able to visit places they usually avoid, like stores, restaurants, and crowded public transportation stations. The program also emphasizes positive

reinforcement, emotional affect, consistency, and patience -- tools that make Warrior Trainers better parents and improve their family relationships.

Since launching the first therapeutic service dog training program as a privately funded pilot at the Palo Alto VA Trauma Recovery Program at Menlo Park in July 2008, I have seen significant improvement in symptoms of PTSD and TBI in participating Veterans. In some cases, this safe, non-pharmaceutical intervention has benefitted patients who were not responding to any other treatments being offered by their medical providers. Based on positive feedback from wounded Warriors and their clinical providers, the program has expanded to several new sites and is being sought by other treatment facilities caring for injured combat Veterans. In response to these encouraging patient outcomes, the House Armed Services Committee included the following language in its report accompanying the 2014 National Defense Authorization Act:

The committee is aware that recovering service members in treatment at the National Intrepid Center of Excellence (NICoE) and Walter Reed National Military Medical Center are reporting improvement in their symptoms of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) and Traumatic Brain Injury (TBI) when participating in the service dog training programs currently operating in those facilities. In addition, clinical observations support the benefits of this animal-assisted therapy modality to psychologically injured service members, including: decreased depressive symptoms, improved emotional regulation, improved sleep patterns, a greater sense of purpose, better reintegration into their communities, pain reduction, and improved parenting skills. The committee urges the Secretary of Defense to consider making this promising new therapeutic intervention more available to service members suffering from the invisible wounds of PTSD and TBI. Therefore, the committee directs the Secretary of Defense to conduct such studies as may be necessary to evaluate the efficacy of service dog training as an adjunctive treatment for PTSD and TBI and to maximize the therapeutic benefits to recovering members who participate in the programs. The committee further directs the Secretary to provide a report not later than March 1, 2015 to update the congressional defense committees.

WCC is currently collaborating with NICoE, WRNMMC, the Uniform Services University of the Health Sciences (USUHS), and civilian academic experts, to conduct research on the therapeutic service dog training programs at WRNMMC and NICoE. I look forward to obtaining the necessary scientific data to establish service dog training as an evidence-based treatment for the invisible wounds of war.

Despite anecdotal evidence of the benefits of service dog training therapy on the psychological injuries of wounded Warriors, and almost daily news reports of Veterans who say that dogs have helped them to deal with symptoms of combat stress, the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) presently does not support the provision of service dogs for psychological injuries. It is my understanding that the VA is waiting for the results of the VA research study mandated by the 2010 National Defense Authorization

Act before officials will consider revising VA policy with regard to service dogs for psychological disabilities. Unfortunately, as Subcommittee Members are aware, the VA research study has been significantly delayed and wrought with problems. Last month, the VA published a solicitation for service dogs to be used in the study. As a clinician and a member of the Assistance Dogs International (ADI) Subcommittee charged with recommending tasks to be carried out by service dogs for psychiatric disabilities, I was alarmed to read through the tasks the VA is requiring the dogs to perform for the study. They included blocking (standing in front of the Veteran to give them space), sweeping rooms for intruders, barking at intruders, and standing behind the Veteran to give them space. In my view, these tasks support symptoms of PTSD by reinforcing cognitive distortions, rather than mitigate them and will distract Veterans from addressing their challenges to fully reintegrate into their communities and families. Clearly there is a need for mental health experts, government policy makers, and service dog industry representatives to come together to develop standards and best practices for service dogs that will support our Nation's Veterans with psychiatric disabilities.

Results from the VA research study will not be available for several years. Meanwhile, hundreds of thousands of returning Service Members and Veterans with psychological injuries and their families are struggling to find treatments that will help heal the invisible wounds of war. Service dog training therapy programs at VA and DOD medical facilities offer combat Veterans a continuing mission to help their disabled brothers and sisters, as well as an innovative Animal Assisted Therapy for their invisible wounds. Each dog participating in the program touches the lives of approximately 60 wounded Warriors during training. The Warrior Trainers benefit from the close interactions with the dogs without the responsibilities of ownership. They also learn about the use, care, and training of service dogs. In some cases, Warriors may experience significant improvement in their symptoms, lessening their need for a service dog. When and if Warrior Trainers eventually decide to apply for a service dog to assist them with their disabilities, their experience working with service dogs in training sets them up for success with their new canine partners.

Veterans seeking industry standard service dogs often wait years on the waiting lists of the nonprofit organizations that provide them. The need for well-trained service dogs to support Veterans from the recent conflicts will remain for many decades to come. Creating additional program sites will enable more recovering Warriors to benefit from this Animal Assisted Therapy modality, while increasing the number of service dogs available to be placed with disabled Veterans. In my testimony to the Subcommittee on similar legislation in July, 2011, I stated that when it comes to training dogs for

Veterans, no one takes that task more seriously than those who served by their sides in conflict. After working alongside wounded Warriors these past six years, I am more convinced of that than ever.

Several Veterans who have participated in the training program have gone on to become professional service dog trainers and will continue to serve the needs of their fellow Warriors and other persons with disabilities.

Collaborative opportunities between VA and DoD

Warrior Canine Connection is currently operating the therapeutic service dog training program at both VA and DoD treatment centers. Both Departments are individually engaged in funding and carrying out research studies to fully understand the efficacy of using dogs to help Veterans and Service Members with PTSD. Collaboration between the VA and DoD would enhance their individual efforts as well as offer cost sharing opportunities. The Bob Woodruff Foundation recently sponsored a convening at the National Intrepid Center of Excellence to focus on the use of service dogs and Animal Assisted Therapy in helping Veterans with the invisible wounds of war. The convening included VA and DoD policy makers, mental health providers, researchers and service dog SME's. The convening was a great first step in fostering discussion and future collaboration related to using dogs to support the recovery of returning Veterans. The therapeutic service dog training concept resonated with almost all who attended the convening as an innovative Complementary Alternative Medicine (CAM) modality.

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As you are aware, legislation to create a VA pilot program on service dog training therapy has been approved by the U.S. House of Representatives in the past two Congresses. While VA officials have recognized the therapeutic value of the program at VA Menlo Park, and indicated that the Secretary does not need Congressional authorization to create a VA pilot program on service dog training therapy, the WCC program at VA Menlo Park continues to be supported exclusively by private donations.

The provisions of H.R. 183 are based on the original program launched in 2008 at VA Menlo Park through the Recreation Therapy Department. Since that time, service dog training therapy has been incorporated into additional programs at that facility. Consequently, it may be more appropriate at this point to provide the Secretary with more discretion to tailor the pilot program on this CAM modality to the needs of the Veterans at individual pilot sites.

In the past, all matters associated with service dogs have been delegated to the VA's Dept. of Prosthetics and Sensory Aid Services (PSAS). As reflected in the Congressionally mandated VA Inspector General's report on the VA Guide and ServiceDog Program, PSAS officials have been very slow to implement the VA's authority to provide service dogs to disabled Veterans and to provide related education and outreach to VA medical providers and Veterans. Since the pilot program established by the Veterans Dog Training Therapy Act is clearly first and foremost a mental health intervention and CAM modality, I would ask that the VA's Office of Patient Centered Care and Cultural Transformation be considered to take the lead on this effort, working closely with VA Mental Health consultants to maximize the therapeutic benefits to Veterans.

I appreciate this opportunity to provide my views on this legislation to create a VA pilot program on service dog training therapy. Based on my experience working with wounded Warriors, I know that making this CAM modality more widely available will contribute significantly to the psychological healing of returning Veterans.

Financial Disclosure Associated with the Statement for the Record of Rick A. Yount, Executive Director,

Warrior Canine Connection

Rick Yount serves as an individual contractor providing service dog training therapy and education to patients and their family members at the National Intrepid Center of Excellence (NICoE) in Bethesda, MD. Funding for his services at NICoE and associated expenses are being provided through a NICoE (DoD) subcontract under which he received \$121,240 annually in calendar years 2012 and 2013.