



STATEMENT FOR THE RECORD

RICK A. YOUNT, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

WARRIOR CANINE CONNECTION

BEFORE THE

SUBCOMMITTEE ON HEALTH

COMMITTEE ON VETERANS' AFFAIRS

U.S. HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

JULY 14, 2015

Chairman Benishek, Ranking Member Brownley, and Members of the Subcommittee:

Thank you for inviting Warrior Canine Connection to provide our view on H.R. 359, the Veterans Dog Training Therapy Act, and to address the need for this legislation. I welcome this 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.

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 continued 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 professional 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 clinically based 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. After seven years of operation, there have been no hints of negative outcomes among the several thousand Warriors who have volunteered to participate in the program. In fact, based on the overwhelmingly 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.

Congress provided the funding to carry out these studies and DOD researchers have embraced this opportunity to get the science behind the positive patient outcomes that have been reported and observed. WCC is currently collaborating with the Uniform Services University of the Health Sciences (USUHS), NICOE, WRNMMC, and civilian academic experts, to conduct research on the therapeutic service dog training programs at WRNMMC and NICOE. There is a significant amount of published scientific evidence that supports the therapeutic use of dogs in addressing mental health issues. In particular, close positive interactions with animals have been shown to trigger the natural production of oxytocin, often referred to as the calming and connecting hormone. The first collaborative research study on the Service Dog Training Program at WRNMMC is underway and was designed to investigate the neurobiology of the human-animal bond and the treatment of PTSD, including oxytocin levels. A larger research protocol has been developed and is currently going through the Institutional Review Board (IRB) process. It will assess the sense of purpose, accomplishment, emotional regulation, sleep quality, pain reduction, reduced symptoms of depression and anxiety, improved parenting skills and couple relationship of Service Members who have participated in our Service Dog Training Program. We 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 the tragic loss of 22 Veterans to suicide each day, and almost daily news reports of Veterans who say that dog have helped them to deal with symptoms of combat stress, the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) still 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. I believe the current study design is also flawed. As a clinician, I was alarmed to learn of the tasks the VA has required the dogs in the study to perform. They included blocking (standing in front of the Veteran to keep people away), sweeping their homes for and barking at possible intruders, and standing behind the Veteran to watch

their back. 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.

Reportedly, results from the VA research study will not be available until 2019. 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. Enactment of this legislation will make therapeutic service dog training more widely available and will supplement, not duplicate, research being conducted by the DOD. In fact, this legislation will provide a valuable opportunity for a VA/DoD collaborative effort to study this program at multiple sites.

Service dog training therapy programs at VA and DOD medical facilities offer combat Veterans a continuing mission to help their disabled brothers and sisters while they are receiving treatment, 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. Our program's aim is to help Veterans gain their fullest function and independence. In many 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 seven 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 sponsored two convenings to focus on the use of service dogs and Animal Assisted Therapy in helping Veterans with the invisible wounds of war. Held in 2013 and 2014, the convenings included VA and DoD policy makers, mental health providers, researchers, service dog SME's, and service dog organizations. The convenings served to foster 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 was approved by the U.S. House of Representatives in the 111th and 112th Congresses. While VA officials have recognized the therapeutic value of the program at VA Menlo Park, the Department has consistently opposed legislation that would create additional sites and provide collaborative opportunities with the DOD to study the program's efficacy. The Department has indicated that the Secretary does not need Congressional authorization to create a VA pilot program on service dog training therapy, yet since 2008, program services to Veterans at VA Menlo Park have been supported exclusively by private donations.

The provisions of H.R. 359 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 outpatient as well as inpatient 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.

Based on my experience in providing this clinically based therapy, I believe it is best delivered at VA and DOD medical treatment facilities as an adjunctive treatment that complements other modalities. WCC service dog training instructors develop close working relationships with medical providers in these facilities in order to support each patient's clinical goals. The clinical underpinnings of the program have served as the foundation for its success to date. Therefore, it is important that any organization selected to conduct a service dog training therapy program pursuant to this legislation has the necessary clinical expertise to work with wounded Warriors with psychological injuries as well as experience in training industry standard mobility service dogs. It is equally important that these pilot sites are physically located to facilitate collaboration between VA and service dog organization clinical staff.

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 Service Dog 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 or the Office of Mental Health be considered to take the lead on this effort.

I appreciate this opportunity to provide my views on this legislation to create a VA pilot program on service dog training therapy. It is critically important that we look at alternative treatments that will support struggling Veterans. 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 the Director of the Service Dog Training Program at the National Intrepid Center of Excellence (NICoE) in Bethesda, MD . From January 2013 through July 2014, he was an individual contractor and funding for his services to NICoE and associated program expenses were provided through a NICoE (DoD) subcontract under which he received \$170,589. In 2014, Warrior Canine Connection (WCC) received \$77,696 in funding from a subcontract with NICoE (DoD) to provide the WCC program and service dog training instructors. That NICoE subcontract has provided WCC \$99,700 in 2015. WCC has received \$26,745 from the Henry M. Jackson Foundation in conjunction with its collaborative role in the first DoD research study associated with the WCC program at Walter Reed National Military Medical Center.

RICK A. YOUNT

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EDUCATION

2009 Master's degree in Assistance Dog Ed, Bergin Univ. of Canine Studies,

2001, Service Dog Training Seminar, Assistance Dog Institute

1995, B.A., West Virginia University

LICENSES & CERTIFICATIONS

Licensed Social Worker- WV Board of Social Work Examiners 1993

Certified Service Dog Trainer and Instructor- Assistance Dog Institute 2001

PRESENTATIONS

U.S. Dept. of Veterans Affairs 2009 National Mental Health Conference

International Association of Traumatic Stress Studies 2009 Conference

Army Surgeon General's 2009 Symposium on Animal Assisted Interventions

Johns Hopkins/U.S. Humane Society 2007 Animal Assisted Intervention Summit

PUBLICATIONS

Service Dog Training Program for Treatment of Posttraumatic Stress in Service Members, U.S. Army Medical Department Journal, April – June 2012

The Role of Service Dog Training in the Treatment of Combat-Related PTSD Psychiatric Annals, 43:6 | June 2013

EMPLOYMENT HISTORY

2011- Present

Executive Director-Warrior Canine Connection, and Director of the Service Dog Training Program at the National Intrepid Center of Excellence located in Bethesda, MD. Provide service dog training education to wounded Warriors through a DoD subcontract with Sage Consulting Group.

2007- 2011

Director-Paws for Purple Hearts, Bergin Univ. of Canine Studies
Designed, implemented and developed program involving service members and veterans with PTSD training service dogs for Veterans with mobility impairments.

2004-2007

High School Dog Program Manager, Assistance Dog Institute,
Staffed, managed and developed multiple program sites. Program involved teens-at-risk learning to train service dogs for people with mobility impairments

2001-2004

Founder and CEO, Golden Rule Assistance Dogs Inc.
Developed organization to train service dogs for community members with mobility impairments. Engaged teens in Alternative Learning Center in training of dogs. Created collaboration with West Virginia University Office of Service Learning.

1993-2001

Specialized Foster Care Case Manager, Burlington Family Services
Served as case manager to children placed in specialized foster care as a result of extreme abuse and neglect.

1989-1993

Interagency Case Manager, Valley Community Mental Health Center
Provided intensive case management services to youth identified as at high risk for placement out of their communities. Participated as member of interdisciplinary team along with other youth serving organizations.