

Statement of
Representative Steve Stivers
Veterans Affairs Subcommittee on Health Hearing
July 14, 2015

I want to thank Chairman Benishek for including my bipartisan bill, the Veterans Dog Training Therapy Act, in today's legislative hearing.

As the Committee Members are well aware, it is estimated that 22 current and former service members commit suicide each day. This is a tragedy that requires immediate action and I want to commend the Committee Members for their commitment to addressing this matter.

It is known that post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) contributes to suicide among the veteran population and Congress has taken steps to improve treatments of the condition. However, every individual is unique and responds differently to available therapies and treatments.

That is why I introduced the Veterans Dog Training Therapy Act with my colleague and good friend, Tim Walz. Our bill seeks to expand access to an alternative therapy that has been proven effective for many veterans who suffer from the invisible scars of war.

Specifically, our legislation would establish a service dog training pilot program at 3-5 VA facilities as selected by the VA Secretary. Results of the pilot would be studied for consideration of expanding the program. Under the pilot program, veterans suffering from PTSD would be connected to service dog training organizations. These veterans would learn useful occupational skills while training service dogs. Upon completion of their training, each dog would be provided to a disabled veteran — enabling veterans to help other veterans.

This program is not made from scratch; it is an almost identical model to the successful service dog training program conducted by the non-profit organization *Warrior Canine Connection* at several Department of Defense medical facilities and one VA Hospital location. Veterans enrolled in this program witnessed significant improvements in PTSD and TBI-related symptoms. It is also important to note that some of the wounded warriors who benefited from the service dog training therapy program had not been responding successfully to other treatment options.

The effectiveness of service dogs in treating PTSD and TBI-related symptoms is supported by preliminary research from Kaiser Permanente, which has shown that veterans who own service dogs have fewer symptoms of PTSD and depression, better interpersonal relationships, a lowered risk of substance abuse and better overall mental health.

It should also be noted that Congress directed the VA to conduct a research study on the efficacy of service dogs in treating these injuries in the 2010 NDAA, which was signed into law in September of 2009. Since then, the agency has blundered so badly in the design and implementation of its own study that research results are not expected until 2019 — 10 years after the study was ordered by Congress. These veterans cannot wait any longer.

I do not claim that my bill will completely solve PTSD. But it is clear that many veterans have been helped by service dog training therapy programs and that it has promising potential to significantly aid in the treatment of many individuals who are struggling with invisible wounds in the VA system —brave men and women who are not responding to other treatment methods.

Lastly, psychological conditions like PTSD are not new. These conditions have confronted American soldiers returning from all wars. We must address this issue now so that we can end the current suicide epidemic and to ensure that the best treatments are available for soldiers returning from future conflicts.

Again, I appreciate the Chairman for allowing me to testify today and holding this hearing.