

Testimony Before the House Committee on Veterans' Affairs, Subcommittee on Health:
Veterans Dog Training Therapy Act

Thank you Chairman Wenstrup and Ranking Member Brownley for holding this hearing today, and for giving me the opportunity to testify on behalf of my bill, the Veterans Dog Training Therapy Act. I also want to thank the co-sponsor of this bill, Congressman Tim Walz (D-MN), for his support.

We face a devastating mental health crisis in this country – one that has particularly affected our veterans' community. When veterans return home, many struggle with visible, physical wounds. However, the invisible wounds our veterans suffer with are often overlooked. This includes Posttraumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), depression, and other mental health related issues from their service. It is just as important that we find ways to help veterans address mental health related issues, as it is their physical wounds.

Today, I want to discuss a few of the ways that this bipartisan bill can help our nation's veterans in a unique way, and build on the already proven benefits therapy dogs can be to veterans.

Therapy Dogs Work

First and foremost, therapy dogs work. Anyone who has a dog as a pet knows how much of a calming presence they can be. For veterans struggling with service-connected mental health issues, having this presence can make all of the difference.

In fact, research by Kaiser Permanente has shown that veterans who have these companion dogs show fewer symptoms of PTSD, depression, anxiety, have better interpersonal relationships, a lowered risk of substance abuse, and better overall mental health. Therapy dogs can clearly make a difference, and as we are losing veterans every day to suicide, it is critical we pursue any strategy to help more veterans receive the help they need and deserve.

The Pilot Program

The Veterans Dog Therapy Training 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 seeking treatment to learn the art and science of dog training. Upon completion, the program will graduate the animal to go home with their veteran.

The Compassionate Innovation office at the Veterans Health Administration will be responsible for managing the program and ensuring that only the best organizations who are certified and specialize in companion animal training receive contracts. This bill also establishes a director of therapeutic service dog training who has a background in social services, experience in teaching others to train companion dogs, and at least one year of experience working with veterans or service members dealing with PTSD.

Additionally, this legislation will receive oversight from Congress. The Secretary of the VA will be required to collect data on the program to determine the effectiveness for those participating and their mental health outcomes and report back to Congress.

Veterans Helping Veterans

A unique part of this legislation is it will help facilitate veterans to help other veterans who are struggling. We know how valuable, veteran on veteran engagement is to assisting our service men and women and, my legislation adds a preference to the pilot program for contracting with veterans who have graduated from PTSD treatment programs and companion dog training certifications to conduct the training. Only other veterans truly understand the struggles of returning home, and the benefits a companion dog can provide. This is just one more way we can help veterans coping with PTSD make connections to other veterans who are in need.

I believe therapy dogs can make a real difference in the lives of veterans struggling with service-related mental health issues. The Veterans Dog Training Therapy Act is bipartisan, establishes a program to measure the real outcomes of connecting veterans to therapy dogs, and gives veterans the opportunity to help other veterans. This bill has the support of organizations such as the Paralyzed Veterans of America, Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans of America (IAVA), Veterans of Foreign Wars (VFW), and Disabled American Veterans (DAV). Moreover, this legislation is proven to have support – the Veterans Dog Training Therapy Act passed the House of Representatives during the 114th Congress.

I want to thank the Committee again for inviting me to testify today, and I encourage all of the Members of the Committee to consider this legislation.