



Assistance Dogs transforming lives.

April 13, 2021

Statement for the Record

To: Committee on Veterans' Affairs Subcommittee on Health

Re: H.R. 1448, PAWS for Veterans Therapy Act

On behalf of: paws4people®, 501(c)(3), EIN 54-1948479

Background:

paws4people® was founded by me in 1999, alongside my father, Terry Henry. Terry is a Veteran (USN 1972-77, USAF 1979-87) who, since his discharge, has battled the symptoms of Chronic/Complex Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (CC/PTSD), Major Depressive Disorder (MDD), and Generalized Anxiety Disorder (GAD).

paws4people is a fully-accredited member of Assistance Dogs International (ADI) as well as Animal Assisted Intervention International (AAIL). I proudly serve on ADI's Standards Committee, and am the chairperson of the Subcommittee for Psychiatric Service Dogs.

Throughout its history, paws4people has placed more than 400 Psychiatric Service Dogs. We have developed cutting-edge methods to teach these clients how to utilize their Psychiatric Service Dogs to **Control, Regulate, and Mitigate**® their symptoms to achieve **K9-centric Post-Traumatic Growth**®.

As a premiere VSO providing Psychiatric Service Dogs, we are extremely encouraged by H.R. 1448. We are especially impressed to see that participating entities will be required to be accredited and will be required to *employ* at least one person with clinical experience related to mental health. Furthermore, we are extremely supportive of the explicit prohibition of the use of shock or prong collars as training tools. We recognize that this explicit requirement may be received with controversy, but it is certainly the right statement to make in setting the gold standard for Service Dogs.

We respectfully submit two recommendations.

Recommendation 1:

There is one important requirement that is missing from the requirements for participating entities. There is no mention of a liability insurance requirement. paws4people provides liability insurance to each Service Dog Team for the entirety of their career. This is very important so that the Veteran is not left to try (usually unsuccessfully) to secure coverage independently, or – even worse – take their dog into public settings with no coverage at all. This leaves the Veteran vulnerable and helpless if there is any incident or accusation about the behavior or training of their dog, or if their dog becomes the victim of any sort of accident.

We respectfully recommend that the H.R. 1448 Pilot Program require participating entities to provide liability insurance for the Service Dogs they place, to avoid undue financial and emotional stress for the Veteran.

Recommendation 2:

There is one section of the Bill which causes great concern. Section (C)(10)(A) States: "the veteran who received the training will keep the dog unless the veteran and the veteran's health provider decide it is not in the best interest of the veteran." *This statement does not account for the professional responsibility of the Service Dog provider to monitor and ensure the Dog's welfare at all times.* There have been instances, although rare, that the Veteran does not comply with policies and procedures that are essential in providing for the dog's health and welfare; or, due to circumstances surrounding the Veteran's mental health, they are no longer able to provide a safe, secure, and healthy environment for the Service Dog. In these instances, it's very likely not to be the Veteran nor the Veteran's health provider who is willing, able, or capable to make the decision that it is no longer safe for the Service Dog to remain in the care of the Veteran.

It is important to note that Assistance Dogs International has a Standard of Conduct for programs in these scenarios. It reads: "The program has a written policy to ensure that, if a dog must be removed from its partnership, someone who is part of the veteran's support system is notified and preferably present at the time of the dog's surrender to the program. The veteran's last known mental health provider is also notified."

We respectfully submit that in order to reasonably expect accredited, professional Service Dog Programs to participate in the pilot program, their professional responsibility to prioritize the welfare of their Service Dogs must be added to Section (C)(10)(A). We suggest an edit such as: “The veteran who received the training will keep the dog unless the veteran and the veteran’s health provider, OR the Service Dog Program who provided the dog, decide it is not in the best interest of the veteran and/or the dog.”

Without being given the ability to protect the welfare of our dogs, we would not be able to agree to participate, nor would – we suspect – any other credible organization.

In conclusion, we feel that H.R. 1448 is, without a doubt, the most comprehensive and well-researched Service Dog bill to date. With your consideration of our recommendations, most importantly Recommendation 2, we would be the first in line to apply for participation in the pilot program. We are so grateful for your recognition of this essential, life-saving modality for our nation’s veterans, and are hopeful to have the opportunity work together with the Department of Veterans Affairs on this initiative.

Very Respectfully,

Kyria Henry Whisenhunt

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