

Rep Ron DeSantis (FL-06) Remarks
House Veterans Affairs Committee Member Day
May 16, 2018

Chairman Roe, Ranking Member Walz, thank you for the opportunity to speak today. I request that my statement be accepted for the record.

There is wide acknowledgment that the suicide rate among veterans is appallingly high, and we need to address this problem.

The Department of Veterans Affairs (VA)'s treatment for post-traumatic stress typically consists of counseling and prescribing drugs, which can be helpful, but does not answer the call for help of all veterans. Many suffering from significant post-traumatic stress go through the current VA process and remain symptomatic.

To address this problem, a number of organizations have turned to service dogs. These organizations train the dogs to understand the symptoms of post-traumatic stress to assist veterans in circumstances where stress is triggered, both at home and in public. This allows veterans suffering from post-traumatic stress to return to civilian life.

I am here today to highlight my bill, the Puppies Assisting Wounded Servicemembers Act. This bill would initiate a 5-year pilot program under which the VA would provide \$25,000 grants to eligible service dog organizations to pair a veteran suffering from severe post-traumatic stress with a service dog. In addition to initial pairing costs, the grants would cover a veterinary health insurance policy for the life of the dog, service dog hardware, and payment for travel expenses for the veteran to obtain the dog.

This is about saving lives, and the results are there. I have had a number of veterans come up to me to say that they would not be here today had it not been for their service dog.

Furthermore, a Purdue University study published this past February revealed that veterans suffering from post-traumatic stress exhibited better mental health and well-being on several measures if they had a service dog, including:

- Lower overall symptoms of post-traumatic stress;
- Lower levels of depression;
- Higher levels of life satisfaction;
- Higher overall psychological well-being; and
- Less absenteeism from work due to health among those who were employed.

Not only will the pairing of veterans with service dogs save lives, it will also save money as veterans stop relying on prescription drugs and become productive members of society.

Our bill currently has 219 bipartisan cosponsors – 118 Republicans and 101 Democrats, with endorsements from major veterans service organizations. This widespread support shows an urgent need to explore the option of pairing service dogs with veterans suffering from mental

health disorders.

Again, thank you for the opportunity to speak today. I look forward to continuing to work with the committee on this issue.