



PAWS Research Project

Preliminary Results

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Community Benefit Initiatives*

Project Team

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Community Partners

- Joys of Living Assistance Dogs (Oregon)
- Paws Assisting Veterans (Oregon)
- Bergin University of Canine Studies (California)
- paws4people (paws4vets) (Georgia)
- Canine Assistants (Georgia)

Background

- As many as 42% of reserve soldiers have diagnosable mental health conditions, as do 20% of active soldiers and 25% of veterans
- 56% of veterans returning with mental health conditions have two or more psychiatric diagnoses
- Community reintegration problems are common, particularly for those with psychiatric disabilities
- Younger veterans are at significantly greater risk than older veterans for developing psychiatric disorders
- Stigma associated with mental health problems in the military creates barriers to seeking care

Background (continued)

- Anecdotal reports suggest service dogs can help veterans with PTSD, but no systematic research is available
 - VA provides funding for service dogs for veterans with physical disabilities but not psychiatric disabilities
- Service dogs may be an acceptable form of mental health treatment for veterans who are not comfortable with other forms of treatment
- Anecdotal reports suggest that service dogs may help veterans reduce or eliminate psychiatric or other medications
 - Many psychiatric medications have serious side effects and can lead to discontinuation of treatment with corresponding poor outcomes
 - Many psychiatric medications are expensive

About the project

- Study goals:
 - To understand and document the ways that service dogs aid veterans with PTSD
- Study design
 - Surveys & Interviews with:
 - Veterans with PTSD on waiting lists for service dogs
 - Veterans with PTSD who already have service dogs
 - Veterans with PTSD before and after receiving a service dog provided through the study
 - Interviews with caregivers/loved ones of veterans who receive a dog as part of the study
 - Observations of training camps
 - Observations of veterans with their new dogs

Progress to date:

- 75 veterans have participated
 - 31% women
 - Average age = 43 years
- 51 surveys completed with vets waiting for dogs
 - 44 interviews completed
- 24 surveys completed with vets who have dogs
 - 17 interviews completed
- 3 interviews completed with caregivers/loved ones of vets who have received dogs as part of the study

Qualitative Data: Examples from the interviews

Before being matched with a dog, hopes for how the dog will help...

“And just having a companion—someone that you can count on to be with you—would take down that wall of constantly being aware and afraid. So quality of life. We’re talking about being able to do the simple tasks of life again. Just being able to live again. Right now, you know, sitting at home waiting for my husband to [come] home so I could feel okay to go somewhere is not really living.”

Examples from interviews continued...

Expectations for service dogs

“And no matter how bad you’re feeling, or how ugly you feel, or how angry that you feel, a service animal is going to be there no matter what...It is not judging me...I can sit here and I can ...blame myself, why did you let all of these bad things happen? But the animal doesn’t care about that. They care about how you are, here and now. And having the ability to make you feel secure in who you are and what you’re doing. And what you’re doing out in the world is one of the most important things of life, you know. My own vision of who I am is so skewed, by the past, [but] the animal doesn’t see that.”

The need...

*“I don’t leave my house anymore. And if I do go somewhere you won’t find my wife but maybe four or five steps away from me. I go nowhere without my wife... I don’t do nothing by myself....
...A dog will] give me my independence back. But it’ll also give my wife her independence back.”*

Needs (continued)

“I've heard from other veterans is they'll wake you up during a nightmare. My nightmares will get so bad that she'll [wife] have to leave...[I need the dog] to wake me up before that dream gets to that point where I wake up and I think I'm being shot at, that's going to help.”

“There's a thing I do...perimeter checks...I have to know the house is secured. So fifteen times a day, either him and I doing it together, or him doing it alone would be a huge...relief on my brain...that he can know if somebody's at that door, or near a window because of their dog sense.”

How dogs can help...

He picks up on negative emotion and pulls me back out of that, back into the present...if I'm even in a down mood, he acts silly...I feel better going out in public now with him. I never went out for probably three, four years before my dog. I didn't go anywhere...it's not just emotional or in my mind, it's had a physiological affect on me...they finally took me off blood pressure medication, because my blood pressure is down far enough"

How dogs help...

“I have a meaningful relationship with somebody now. But I hadn’t for such a long time that I couldn’t remember what it meant...And then there was this dog with me twenty-four/seven, who never...judged me based on how I felt. And he always knew what to do when I was feeling down.”

How dogs help—relationships with others...

“My wife says she got her husband back... She said that we will never, ever be without a service dog ever again.”

Examples from those who have service dogs...

- *“I have not been in a full fledged nightmare for more than fifteen minutes because of him, because he puts his wet nose on my neck. And then if I start to thrash, he literally gets on the bed with me and wakes me up.*
- *I got off two of the [psychiatric] medications...”*
- *“He does the patrol at night, watches the kids. So I’m not checking the windows and doors fifty times a night, maybe five. And at four o’clock in the morning I don’t wake up instantly thinking, oh, the door is unlocked.”*
- *“I think people are more acceptable of my behavior because of him.”*

Preliminary Quantitative Data

- Comparisons of veterans with and without dogs
 - Cannot determine causality, but results are suggestive of positive effects
- Statistically significant between those with and without dogs on:
 - PTSD symptoms (lower symptoms among those with service dogs)
 - Depression-related functioning (lower symptoms among those with dogs)
 - Interpersonal relationships (better relationships)
 - Substance abuse (less substance abuse)
 - Overall mental health (fewer psychiatric symptoms)
- No differences for:
 - Combat exposure (suggests similar history of traumatic experiences)
 - Self-reported physical health (suggests dogs are primarily addressing mental health)

Thank you!

Questions?