

Guest Column: VA's Next Mental Health Program Should Have Four Legs

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Our military heroes recently got some much-welcomed news from the Veterans Administration: Emergency mental health care is now entirely free for veterans facing suicidal thoughts.

Now, veterans can seek emergency mental health treatment at any healthcare facility free of charge, even if they are not enrolled in the VA system.

This is undoubtedly good news. The veteran suicide rate — estimated to be as high as 24 deaths per day — is one of the most devastating issues facing our country. Any effort to address this heartbreaking problem is a step in the right direction.

But far more can be done to help veterans long before they face an emergency crisis. And the VA currently fails to fund one of the most effective mental health treatments on the market: Service dogs.

Several studies have confirmed what veterans have anecdotally said for years: Service dogs provide invaluable support and comfort to veterans struggling with their mental health.

One recent study published in *Frontiers in Psychiatry* found that veterans and first responders with post-traumatic stress demonstrated significantly fewer PTSD symptoms after working with service dogs. This included everything from better sleep to lower levels of anxiety.

There are many reasons service dogs improve the quality of life for veterans. Interactions between dogs cause a release of oxytocin — a hormone that decreases negative emotions — in the human brain. Service dogs can help facilitate social interactions, minimizing isolation. Working with service dogs instills a sense of responsibility and self-efficacy, two factors that help reduce depression. Having the dog present can help veterans suffering from flashbacks remain present and know that the danger is no longer there. Even taking the dogs for a walk is an exercise that can help release positive endorphins.

At American Humane, we've seen these benefits firsthand.

Through our Pups4Patriots program, we've trained service dogs to help meet all the needs of veterans struggling with post-traumatic stress and traumatic brain injuries. Each dog completes a program developed by a scientific advisory committee of scientists, veteran experts, mental health professionals, animal welfare specialists, veterinarians, dog trainers and other key advocates before being teamed up with their veteran partner.

The dogs are nothing short of remarkable. And the benefits they bring to their veterans are undeniable.

Studies analyzing the benefits of service dogs are abundant, but the VA continues to slow-walk the funding of veteran service dogs. The VA recently launched a five-year pilot program under the PAWS Act to test service dog eligibility for some veterans in select cities, but only some veterans can participate. And some veterans don't have five years to wait.

The invisible wounds many of our veterans face are not easily solved. And the tendency to rely on traditional medication is understandable. But for many veterans, it isn't enough on its own.

We've seen the military effectively fund and use trained dogs in combat. No one questions the heroic service these dogs provide overseas or doubts their benefit to active-duty military members.

But more veterans have died of suicide than in combat in the United States since September 11, 2001. If we trust that dogs help in physical combat, we can trust them to help overcome mental battles here at home, too.

The benefit of service dogs is clear. Veterans do not need to suffer alone. They can have a four-legged best friend at their side.

Fully funding emergency mental health care is an important step. But we don't need to wait for it to become an emergency. It is time for the VA to prioritize service dog access for veterans.

ABOUT THE WRITER

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