

## **SERVICE DOGS**

- The Government recognizes that there is great interest in using service dogs to assist Veterans with physical and mental health conditions.
- In June 2022 the Standing Committee on Veterans Affairs released its report “Incorporating Service Dogs into the Rehabilitation Program of Veterans Affairs Canada”. Among the Committee’s recommendations, Veteran’s Affairs Canada was asked to take into consideration the work currently underway in a five-year pilot program, by the United States Veterans Administration, once a national standard is in place.
- The Department continues to review and monitor emerging research and evidence with respect to the use of service dogs including any future change in policy direction by the United States Department of Veterans Affairs.
- Our goal is to make sure that Veterans are covered for the mental and physical health support they need.
- Efforts to develop a nationally recognized Canadian standard for service dogs were not successful as a national consensus could not be reached.-

- This government did expand the Medical Expense Tax Credit in 2018 through which expenses for specially trained service animals may be claimed.
- This tax credit is available for eligible Canadians, including Veterans.
- VAC will continue to monitor the ongoing research and work in this field across Canada.

## **WHEN PRESSED:**

### **Q1 – What has the Government done to support mental health service dogs for Veterans?**

In 2015, the Department funded a pilot study to evaluate the safety and effectiveness of using service dogs to assist Veterans with PTSD. In 2019, the Department provided funding through the Veteran Family and Well-being Fund to Wounded Warriors Canada to support the development of a PTSD service dog certification program. Through Budget 2018, the Government expanded the Medical Expense Tax Credit to recognize mental health service dogs.

In 2015, Veterans Affairs Canada contracted the Canadian General Standards Board to establish a set of national standards; this initiative was later discontinued as consensus amongst the group was not possible.

### **Q2 – What support does the Department provide today for Veterans with service dogs?**

Veterans Affairs Canada provides support for a variety of mental health treatments. Our treatment benefits do not consider service dogs to be a recognized mental health treatment.

### **Q3 – Will Veterans Affairs Canada support the use of service dogs for PTSD and mental health?**

The Department is aware of the interest in mental health service dogs and the potential they may have to assist those suffering from mental health conditions. Our goal is to provide Veterans access to evidence-based, safe and effective health benefits. Currently, there is insufficient evidence to support the efficacy of service dogs as a mental health treatment or aid.

Veterans Affairs Canada continues to review and monitor its approach regarding mental health service dogs. The Department is always looking at ways to improve its support for Veterans based on available evidence.

### **Q4 – Does Veterans Affairs provide support to Veterans with emotional support dogs?**

While emotional support animals, including emotional support dogs, may provide beneficial companionship to owners, VAC does not fund expenses for these animals.

### **Q5 – The US Department of Veterans Affairs has undertaken a pilot program for training service dogs by Veterans with PTSD. Is the Government willing to support a similar program for Veterans in Canada?**

Service Dogs

Source: Strategic Policy, Planning and Performance Date: 2024/11/25

Veterans Affairs Canada has consulted with the United States Veterans Affairs about their research and policy direction, to inform what may be done in Canada and within the Canadian context. VAC is continually reviewing emerging research to determine its approach with mental health service dogs, including any change in policy direction by the United States Department of Veterans Affairs. The US study – a pilot program – began in late 2022 and is to run for five years. VAC will review findings and best practices from the study and will determine if there is application for VAC in the Canadian context.

## **BACKGROUND — SERVICE DOGS**

The Government of Canada expanded the Medical Expense Tax Credit to recognize specially trained service animals to assist individuals in coping with their mental health condition. Effective January 2018, this measure can directly benefit Veterans and others in the disability community who rely on service dogs including mental health service dogs.

### **Veterans Affairs Canada:**

Veterans Affairs Canada previously funded a pilot study to evaluate the effectiveness of service dogs for Veterans with PTSD. While 31 Veterans were recruited, only 18 Veteran participants completed the pilot study over the course of an 18-month period. In 2018 the study was released with limited findings.

### **United States Veterans Affairs:**

Veterans Affairs Canada is interested in the United States PAWS pilot (Puppies Assisting Wounded Servicemembers) announced in August 2021 and approved and funded by Congress. The pilot program began in late Summer 2022 and is being conducted over a 5-year period in five VA medical centre sites. USVA has put together a service dog training model, which will have Veterans engage in both basic obedience and other training of a dog, so that the dog may become a service dog for another individual.

### **Australia's Rehabilitation Appliances Program:**

While Australia's Department of Veterans Affairs began a 4-year study of service dogs and Veterans with PTSD in 2019, it decided not to wait for the results. In 2022, DVA Australia began providing service dogs to carefully screened Veterans with PTSD under its Psychiatric Assistance Dog Program to help meet their clinical recovery goals. VAC will monitor with interest the outcomes of Australia's newly adopted practice to provide psychiatric service dogs to eligible Veterans with PTSD.

### **Standing Committee on Veterans Affairs:**

In June 2022, the Standing Committee on Veterans Affairs (ACVA) tabled its report "[Incorporating Service Dogs Into the Rehabilitation Program of Veterans Affairs Canada \(publications.gc.ca\)](https://publications.gc.ca/collections/collection_025/ACVA/ACVA68-1-20220601-eng.pdf)". Six recommendations request the involvement of VAC or the Government of Canada.