SERVICE DOGS

- The Government recognizes that there is great interest in using service dogs to assist Veterans with mental health conditions.

- Veterans Affairs Canada funded a small pilot study in 2015 to evaluate the safety and effectiveness of using service dogs to assist Veterans with Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), but results were limited.

- The United States Veterans Affairs recently released findings on the impact of service dogs for Veterans with PTSD. The study concluded that the overall health and wellbeing of Veterans with service dogs were no different than Veterans with emotional support dogs.

- Veterans Affairs Canada is constantly reviewing new studies and research to determine its approach with mental health service dogs, including any future change in policy direction by the United States Veterans Affairs.
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 Veteran with PTSD. The findings helped inform the Budget 2018 expansion of the Medical Expense Tax Credit in 2018 to recognize mental health service dogs. In 2015, Veterans Affairs Canada contracted the Canadian General Standards Board to establish a set of national standard, but this initiative was discontinued because there was no consensus. In 2019, through the Veteran Family and Well-being Fund, Wounded Warriors Canada received funding to expand its PTSD service dog program and ensure that their service dogs meet or exceed any published standards available in Canada.

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

Veterans Affairs Canada does not provide any coverage for service dogs used for issues such as mental health, hearing or mobility. However, the Department reimburses the costs associated with the care and maintenance of vision guide dogs up to an annual maximum of $1500, plus associated travel expenses, including those related to orientation and training with a guide dog.

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

Veterans Affairs Canada continues to review and monitor the approach it is taking with mental health service dogs. The Department is always looking at ways to improve its support for Veterans based on evidence, while ensuring the health and safety of Veterans.

Q4 – The US Department of Veterans Affairs has undertaken a Pilot program for training of service dogs by Veterans with PTSD. Is the Government willing to support a similar program for Veterans in Canada?

Veterans Affairs Canada is in regular communication with the United States Veterans Affairs about their research and policy direction, to information what may be done in Canada.
BACKGROUND — SERVICE DOGS

Canada Revenue Agency Expansion of the Medical Expense Tax Credit: 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 directly benefits Veterans and others in the disability community who rely on mental health service dogs.

Standards: In 2015, Veterans Affairs Canada contracted with the Canadian General Standards Board to establish a set of national standards for mental health service dogs. In 2018, the Board notified technical committee members that it had withdrawn its intent to produce a National Standard of Canada for Service Dogs, as there was no consensus among the committee members that the standard could be achieved. As a result, the initiative to develop a national standard was discontinued.

Veterans Affairs Canada: Veterans Affairs Canada 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.

In 2019, Wounded Warriors Canada received funding through Veterans Affairs Canada’s Veteran and Family Well-Being Fund to expand its PTSD service dog program and ensure that their service dogs meet or exceed any published standards available in Canada.

United States Veterans Affairs: A study of 153 Veterans diagnosed with PTSD found that Veterans with service dogs reported greater improvements in PTSD symptoms, suicidality, and anger reactions. Veterans Affairs Canada is interested in the United States PAWS pilot (Puppies Assisting Wounded Servicemembers) announced in August 2021 being conducted over a 5-year period. 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. Participation in the training is anticipated to improve the Veteran’s self-efficacy and increase their sense of purpose and self-worth.

Veterans Affairs Canada is currently reviewing the approach it is taking with mental health service dogs, and continues to monitor emerging Canadian and international research. Given the recent United States Veterans Affairs study, future change in policy direction by the United States Veterans Affairs will be closely examined.