SERVICE DOGS

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

• In June 2022 the Standing Committee on Veterans Affairs (ACVA) released its report “Incorporating Service Dogs into the Rehabilitation Program of Veterans Affairs Canada”. Amongst ACVA’s 6 recommendations, VAC is asked to take into consideration the work underway in a five-year pilot program by the United States Veterans Administration (USVA).

• VAC 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 Department of Veterans Affairs.

• Our goal is to make sure that Veterans are covered for the mental and physical health support they need.
WHEN PRESSED:

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

A - In 2015, the Department funded a pilot study to evaluate the safety and effectiveness of using service dogs to assist Veterans 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 standards; this initiative was discontinued because there was no consensus possible. 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?

A - 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 towards the costs of food, grooming and veterinary care.

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

A – 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 service dogs by Veterans with PTSD. Is the Government willing to support a similar program for Veterans in Canada?

- A – Veterans Affairs Canada is in regular communication 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 constantly reviewing emerging studies and research to determine its approach with mental health service dogs, including any future change in policy direction by the United States Department of Veterans Affairs.
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 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 $500,000 over 5 years through Veterans Affairs Canada’s Veteran and Family Well-Being Fund to expand its PTSD Service Dog Program. The Program matches Veterans who have PTSD with trained service dogs, and consists of three pillars:

1. The establishment of consistent, defined, transparent and measurable National Standards for all PTSD Service Dog Providers (irrespective of province).

2. Formal recognition of Wounded Warriors Canada Service Dog Providers across the country that meet or exceed the Wounded Warriors Canada published standards and are willing to work in a cooperative manner with other Wounded Warrior Canada Service Dog Providers.

3. Implementing a clinically-informed set of Prescribed Guidelines applicable to all applicants for a PTSD service dog.

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 and approved and funded by Congress, being conducted over a 5-year period in five 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. Participation in the training is anticipated to improve the Veteran’s self-efficacy and increase their sense of purpose and self-worth. The pilot program will be offered at five VA medical centers: Anchorage, Alaska; Asheville, North Carolina; Palo Alto, California; San Antonio, Texas and West Palm Beach, Florida.

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 pilot program, future change in policy direction by the United States Veterans Affairs will be closely examined.

**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. Psychiatric service dogs have recently been added to Australia’s Rehabilitation Appliance Program. Amendments to key legislation allowed the Repatriation Commission and the Military Rehabilitation and Compensation Commission to accept financial responsibility for the supply and reasonable upkeep of psychiatric assistance dogs i.e., to add psychiatric assistance dogs to the Treatment Principles.

VAC will monitor with interest the results of the Australia study and DVA Australia’s newly adopted practice to provide psychiatric service dogs to eligible Veterans with PTSD and will take into consideration the study results and information related to this Psychiatric Assistance Dog Program as it considers its position on supporting psychiatric service dogs for Veterans and in which manner.

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