

## **Government Response to the Standing Committee on Veterans Affairs Sixth Report Incorporating Service Dogs into the Rehabilitation Program of Veterans Affairs Canada**

The Government of Canada (Government) welcomes the opportunity to respond to recommendations made in the sixth report of the Standing Committee on Veterans Affairs (ACVA). The Government would like to thank both ACVA for this report, as well as the witnesses who appeared before the Committee.

The Government is pleased to provide individual responses to the Committee's recommendations, which are aligned with the significant efforts that have already been made, and that continue to be made, by the Government to ensure CAF members and Veterans have access to adequate mental health resources, services, and training programs tailored to their specific needs.

### **Committee Recommendation 1**

That Veterans Affairs Canada increase funding for Canadian research on psychiatric service dogs, and partner with international counterparts to coordinate and build on the growing body of research becoming available worldwide.

### **Government Response**

VAC partially agrees with this recommendation and is committed to exploring options to increase funding for Canadian research on how psychiatric service dogs may benefit Veteran well-being, as well as partnering with international counterparts to share and leverage existing knowledge on this topic.

VAC conducts and supports research projects, monitors and interprets international research, provides methodological expertise to help guide strategic decisions, and engages in knowledge transfer and exchange both within VAC and with other partners and stakeholders. VAC has worked with Veterans and stakeholder groups, research teams at Laval University, McMaster University and McGill University, and counterparts within the United States and Australian Veterans' administrations to discuss new and ongoing studies about the safety and efficacy of all types of service dogs for Veterans, as well as to understand the potential benefits of psychiatric service dogs in particular on Veteran well-being.

In 2015, VAC provided funding for a service dog research project with the Canadian Institute for Military and Veteran Health Research (CIMVHR). The purpose of this study was to explore the effects of acquiring a service dog on psychiatric symptoms, daily/social functioning, and quality of life in Veterans with PTSD. Results were limited due to only 18 of the 31 original participants completing the study, but did indicate that within this small group of participants, service dogs provided a reduction of PTSD symptoms, a moderate long-lasting reduction of depressive symptoms, and a significant increase in the subjective feeling of well-being related to overall quality of life. The study could not confirm that service dogs had an impact on the use of medication or reliance on a family member or caregiver in Veterans with mental health problems. The findings from this research were shared online<sup>1</sup>. Building on this work, subsequent research funding from Health Canada, the University of Saskatchewan, and the AUDEAMUS charity, supported a pilot study to create a toolkit for using service dogs to treat addiction problems in Veterans with PTSD (<https://servicedogresearch.ca/>).

Various methodological issues (e.g., difficulty recruiting and retaining an adequate number of participants) as well as a lack of consistency in service dog standards across Canada, has challenged research in this area. For example, it is still unclear whether the benefits of psychiatric service dogs outweigh those of emotional support dogs with respect to improving the quality of life of Veterans with PTSD. VAC is committed to exploring opportunities to further examine these research questions with government and academic partners.

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<sup>1</sup> Frequently Asked Questions: <https://www.veterans.gc.ca/eng/help/faq/service-dog-pilot-study>; Results Infographic: <https://www.veterans.gc.ca/eng/about-vac/research/research-directorate/info-briefs/service-dogs>

VAC will also liaise with international research partners to ensure departmental awareness of current scientific knowledge on this topic. Presently, VAC is working closely with the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (USVA) during their ongoing five-year pilot program to provide canine training to eligible Veterans, and with the Australian Department of Veterans Affairs during their four-year study to examine the impact of service dogs for Veterans with PTSD. VAC will also propose an international exchange of knowledge on the topic of service dogs through the Five Eyes Veteran Research Committee, which collaborates on priority research topics of mutual interest across Canada, Australia, New Zealand, the United Kingdom, and the United States.

### **Committee Recommendation 2**

That, after national standards have been established, Veterans Affairs Canada consult the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs on their five-year pilot program to provide canine training to eligible Veterans through the Puppies Assisting Wounded Service members for Veterans Therapy Act or the PAWS for Veterans Therapy Act, and plan to implement a similar pilot in Canada based on the early results and best practices from the U.S. model.

### **Government Response**

VAC partially agrees with this recommendation.

VAC is currently reviewing its approach to mental health service dogs, and will continue to monitor emerging Canadian and international research, including results of the USVA five-year pilot project. VAC will review any lessons learned from the results of the USVA pilot and apply those as appropriate to the Canadian context. Should a pilot be deemed an appropriate approach for the Canadian context, VAC would need to confirm legal authorities as well as seek the appropriate funding authorities.

VAC is interested in the evidence of whether psychiatric service dogs are effective at addressing the needs of an individual with a mental health condition. The USVA pilot is not examining the effect that the service dog has for the individual receiving the dog. The USVA pilot allows eligible veterans diagnosed with PTSD to participate in the training of a dog as part of a complementary and integrative health program for Veterans. Veterans participating in the pilot engage in both basic obedience and other training of a dog, so that the dog may eventually become, in most cases, a service dog for another individual. The adjunct therapy is the act of training the dog not in the provision of that dog to the Veteran upon completion of the training. As such, the pilot is designed to determine whether a Veteran's participation in the canine training will improve their self-efficacy and increase their sense of purpose and self-worth.

The USVA pilot program received approval and funding in 2021. In May 2022 five (5) sites were chosen for this work. As of August 2022, that work has not yet begun. Projecting that final results will be published in five years at the conclusion of the pilot program, there are no policy changes reportable at this time.

VAC will continue its consultation with the USVA (and other stakeholders) on this matter.

### **Committee Recommendation 3**

That Veterans Affairs Canada cover the costs of psychiatric service dogs for Veterans under the following conditions:

- If a set of overarching standards for service dogs is established;
- If psychiatric service dogs are likely to significantly reduce the intensity of clinical interventions; and
- If Veterans can periodically demonstrate their ability to take care of an animal in a manner that ensures its well-being.

### **Government Response**

VAC partially agrees with this recommendation as the Department continues to support the funding of efficient, safe, evidence-based treatments that provide measurable results for Veterans.

In 2019 VAC provided \$245,000 through the Veteran Well-Being Fund to Wounded Warriors Canada (WWC) to assist with expanding WWC's service dog program to include Veterans with PTSD.

For all of VAC's Treatment Benefits, the Department's Benefit Review Committee (BRC) analyzes proposed treatments based on evidence-based information, and ensures the inclusion of these benefits are safe, equitable and cost-effective to meet Veterans' health and functional needs. Currently, the coverage of psychiatric service dogs has not been supported by the evidence-based information required to support such a benefit.

VAC will continue to monitor and assess its position as supporting evidence becomes available. Should the proposed conditions of the recommendation be achieved, VAC would investigate whether it would be possible to expand the current benefit approach to support psychiatric service dogs in the same manner as service dogs for vision impairment are currently supported.

### **Committee Recommendation 4**

That Veterans Affairs Canada support and promote the creation of national standards for service dogs in Canada by encouraging all service dog providers in Canada to submit their documentation on their standards and training materials to the Human Research Standards Organization, as it has partnered with the Canadian Foundation for Animal-Assisted Support Services in a national initiative to develop national standards of Canada for all types of animal-assisted services.

### **Government Response**

VAC partially agrees with this recommendation and work is already underway in this field.

VAC will support organizations working to develop national standards by sharing their messaging with Veteran Stakeholder groups and as suitable, with service dog providers in an effort to increase awareness and encourage participation in the initiative to develop a national standard.

### **Committee Recommendation 5**

That, until national standards have been set for service dogs in Canada, Veterans Affairs Canada (VAC) work with stakeholders to create and regularly revise an extensive list of all current service dog providers and trainers in Canada to ensure that they are regularly informed of the process of developing national standards, and that VAC provide notice of intent to the technical group of the Human Research Standards Organization and the Canadian Foundation for Animal-Assisted Support Services to develop national standards specifically for Veterans' service dogs.

### **Government Response**

VAC agrees with this recommendation and continues its interest and support for the development of national standards for service dogs in Canada.

VAC supports the development of standards well-informed by organizations within the service dog industry. Standards for service dogs are already being pursued by the HRSO and the CFAASS. These organizations have created and are maintaining a comprehensive list of service dog providers in Canada. VAC sees this as the logical and practical repository for such information. VAC will continue to collaborate with the HRSO and CFAASS to share information on their process with Veteran stakeholders.

VAC took steps to establish a standard in 2015 through a contract with the Canadian General Standards Board. CGSB was unsuccessful in reaching consensus among the committee members that the standard could be achieved for the intended positive impact.

One of the crucial lessons learned from the 2015 CIMVHR research project is that the development of national standards specifically for Veterans' service dogs must come from industry itself and must employ the knowledge and expertise of such organizations as CGSB in properly advancing this work on national standards.

#### **Committee Recommendation 6**

That the Government of Canada encourage the provinces and territories to harmonize current regulations or to develop new regulations to grant tenancy rights, and access rights to transportation and public places by service dogs who demonstrate the ability to perform service dog tasks, not only obedience tasks.

#### **Government Response**

VAC agrees with this recommendation.

VAC supports the leadership of the Government of Canada to encourage provinces and territories to harmonize regulatory (legislative or other) frameworks to facilitate accessible tenancy rights as well as transportation and access to public places for those with service dogs.