

SUAP PAWSitive Support Project

Final Report

Prepared by:



September 2022

A. Introduction

The goal of this three-year project was “to have service dog organizations working with veterans diagnosed with PTSD to address recovery from problematic substance use, by using evidence-informed practice, with specific attention to substance use and distance peer support in their training programs.”

The evaluation of the project was undertaken by an independent company, Proactive Information Services Inc.¹ The evaluation monitored outputs and assessed the immediate and intermediate outcomes through a combination of methods, including annual interviews with representatives from participating service dog organizations.

B. Overview of the Methodology

In order to address the outputs and outcomes, data sources included project records, website data, online post-learning evaluation surveys, and annual interviews with representatives from service dog organizations.

The SUAP PAWSitive Support Project recruited organizations with the goal of having 10 service dog organizations participate. Instead, 17 organizations signed on, nine of which served veterans and/or first responders. Representatives from 17 organizations and one individual (who was in the process of becoming a trainer) were interviewed in 2020. In 2021, 11 organizations and the same individual were interviewed.

Representatives from nine of the service dog organizations participated in the final interviews in 2022. In 2022, these semi-structured interviews were conducted in May and early June. Interview instruments were developed by the external evaluator in consultation with project representatives. All interviews were conducted by telephone by the external evaluator. Interviews ranged from 15 minutes to one hour, with the majority between 30 and 45 minutes.

¹ Proactive Information Services Inc. was established in 1984 specifically to provide research and evaluation services to clients in the public and non-profit sectors. Proactive’s clients include government departments, school districts, post-secondary institutions, health authorities, community organizations, foundations, and other NGOs in Canada and internationally. www.proactive.mb.ca.

Theory of Change

If service dog organizations working with veterans diagnosed with PTSD, see the value of evidence-informed information on problematic substance use and peer support, they will use this information to change policies, programs and practices which are designed to help veterans take positive actions with respect to substance use.

In 2022, participants represented organizations from the east coast to the west coast of Canada. Of the nine organizations, four identified as being non-profit/charitable organizations. Seven indicated that they supported clients with PTSD, while five had clients who were veterans and/or first responders.

C. Discussion of Findings

1. Key Interview Results

While the interviews were one method of ascertaining information on outcomes, they also provided insights into the types of learning opportunities and resources of interest to participants. Throughout the project, there was high interest in accessing learning opportunities and resources. Areas of interest were animal welfare and the human animal bond, as well as mental health, peer support and, to a somewhat lesser extent, problematic substance use.

Almost all those interviewed, indicated that they were interested in sharing sessions with other service dog organizations, although one respondent wanted to stay anonymous in the process. Suggestions for sharing sessions included sharing stories (particularly success stories), sharing training approaches and guidelines, learnings from the project, as well as the importance of legislation and advocacy for legislation. Across all years, the need to advocate for standardization and federal legislation regarding the service dog industry was expressed by many of those interviewed.

Interest in learning opportunities and resources was also evidenced by the number of people interviewed who indicated they had visited the project website and/or read the newsletter (Table 1).

Resource	2021			2022		
	Yes	No	Total	Yes	No	Total
Visited Website	9	3	12	8	1	9
Read Newsletter	10	2	12	7	2	9

By the end of the project, 343 individuals were receiving the newsletter.

When asked about whether they had increased their learning in key areas, four indicated their knowledge about how to take positive action to help someone experiencing substance use harm had increased.² Regarding knowledge about peer support, seven individuals indicated that their knowledge of peer support had increased as a result of their participation in the project. One person noted that *“peer support makes more sense, brought it all together,”* while another reported that *“I’d never done peer support before and I learned so much. Yes, I am absolutely more confident and it validated the things I personally believed.”*

Two individuals indicated that their organization had adjusted program content and/or practices as a result of what they had learned by participating in the project. Another organization was considering adjusting their content and practices (*“we are now more evidence-based”*), while two others noted how the project had reinforced what they were already doing.

² Four individuals indicated that this topic was not applicable to their organization.

When asked what was the most important thing the project had accomplished several themes emerged from the interviews over the past two years (Table 2).

Most Important Things Project Has Done	2021	2022
	n=11	n=9
Awareness raising/public awareness of service dogs	5	2
Education/training/information on evidence-based practice	2	4
Connections/bringing people together/collaboration	3	2
Supporting veterans/veterans supporting each other	2	2
Raising awareness of mental health issues/PTSD	1	3
Working towards standardization/government starting to listen	3	1
Project as a whole	2	0
Use of online technology	0	1

Note: Respondents were able to give more than one response.

Some of the specific responses in 2022 were:

- *“I just like the collaborative efforts that have been ongoing. I am hopeful that the information will help educate the public at large, as well as others with PTSD who need service dogs. We need more education out there. It needs to be science based.”*
- *“I think the work with veterans is great. Mental health issues are foremost. Biggest demand for service dogs, first responders, PTSD, incredible the work that has been done. Enjoyed seeing this work.”*
- *“[It] definitely created a network and a safe space for veterans and people experiencing the same type of situations or scenarios. Helpful to that group to have that connection.”*
- *“The impact has been in the broad-based education of programs offering services and opening eyes to peer support and what connection does and how important that is. What does support look like and this is how you do it.”*

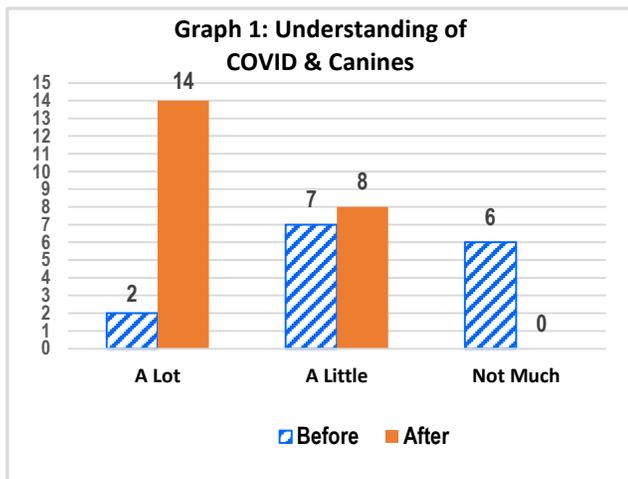
“Crucial in developing and providing support for our veterans, because then everyone has had access and everyone has grown.... The timing was perfect in the Pandemic. Although veterans are used to being isolated, the pandemic was an unseen enemy. Much the same as being in Afghanistan.... I really want to get across how grateful we are; we appreciated the effort, the communication. Just want to make sure they hear how thankful we are for what they’ve done. I hope they pursue it in a different manner because it’s so important [and we] hope to be a part of it.”

2. Learning Opportunities

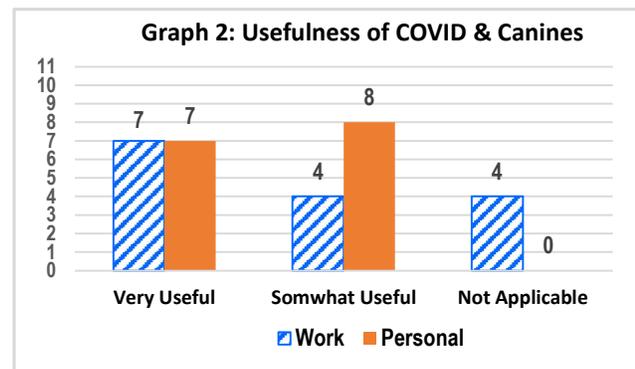
a) Webinars

Webinars were offered on 13 different topics, while most were one-hour sessions, some had multiple sessions. Evaluations were conducted for a number of these webinars³.

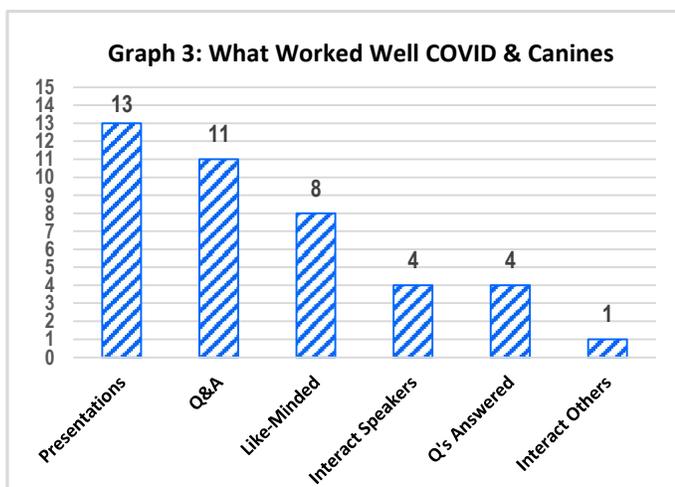
For the **COVID and Canines** webinar, 15 people responded to the evaluation survey, seven of whom were from service dog organizations and four of whom were veterans. Of the 15, 10 indicated the webinar had met their expectations, while the other five indicated it had exceeded their expectations. In addition, almost all attendees believed their understanding of COVID-19 and dogs had increased (Graph 1).



When asked how useful it would be to them in their work and personal lives, no one said it would not be useful (Graph 2).



What people most often thought worked well were the speakers' presentations (n=13) and the question-and-answer session (n=11). However, over half (n=8) also identified the feeling of being part of a like-minded community (Graph 3).

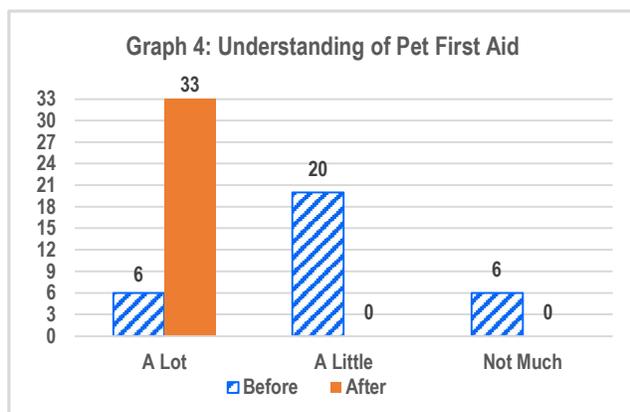


All those responding to the survey indicated that they would be 'definitely' interested in taking part in other learning opportunities like this one.

Pet First Aid was conducted over three sessions. Of the 33 people who responded to the survey, 21 were associated with a service dog organization and 12 were veterans.⁴ Of the 33, 20 indicated it had met their expectations, 11 indicated it had exceeded expectations, and two felt their expectations were not met.

³ A number of the questions dealt with technical aspects of the webinars which are not reported here.

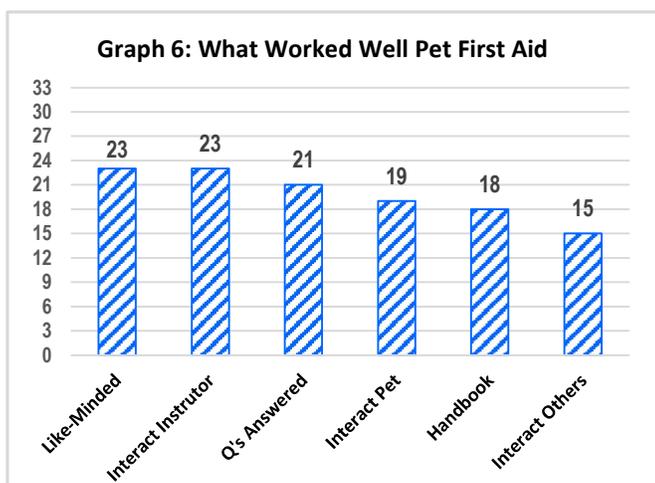
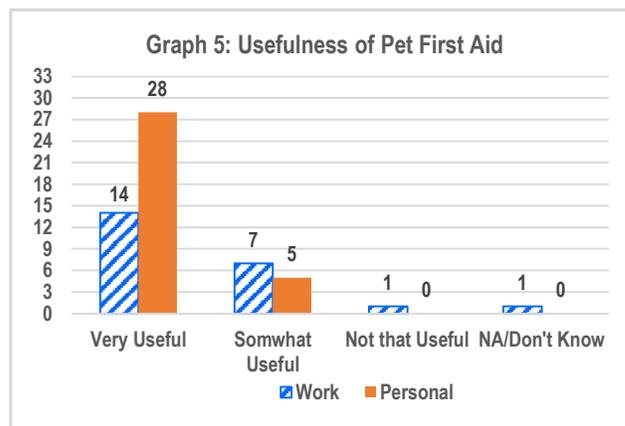
⁴ Other participants included students connected to the SUAP project, research assistants, and partners.



In addition, all respondents believed their understanding of pet first aid was ‘a lot’ after participating in the course (Graph 4).

When asked how useful it would be to them in their work and personal lives, only one person indicated ‘not that useful’ (Graph 5).

Of the 33 respondents, 23 liked interacting with other like-minded participants and with the instructor. (Graph 6). Twenty-one people also identified having their questions answered as something that worked well.



Twenty-seven respondents would ‘definitely’ be interested in participating in similar learning opportunities, while five responded ‘probably,’ and one ‘maybe.’⁵

b) Online Peer Support

Crisis and Trauma Resource Institute (CTRI) Equipping the Natural Helper Peer Course

In June 2021, this course was delivered to 30 participants from six service dog organizations, of

whom 17 were veterans. Twelve people responded to the evaluation survey.

The workshop was highly rated on all aspects. On a five-point scale with five being the most positive, all means were 4.5 or higher. For example:

- The information presented was current and relevant. Mean = 4.92
- Workshop met expectations. Mean = 4.75
- Overall rating of the workshop. Mean = 4.75

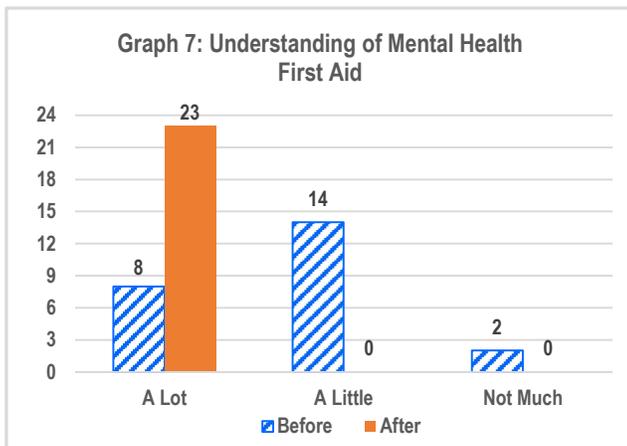
A number of strengths were identified, including positive comments about the facilitator and the content. One person explained the strength was “*giving the Peer Support person the tools to be as supportive and useful as possible in a safe way.*” In addition, a participant noted “*some of the participants had really great information and experiences to share which was educational and enlightening.*”

⁵ It should be noted that Pet First Aid was three sessions.

One suggestion for improvement also referenced sharing among participants; *“More discussion groups would be good. I felt I could offer more and learn more from others in those small groups.”*

Mental Health First Aid

This course was provided by the Mental Health Commission of Canada. Two trainers led two separate groups of 15 participants through this online course in the spring of 2021. The 30 participants were from seven service dog organizations with 14 being veterans.

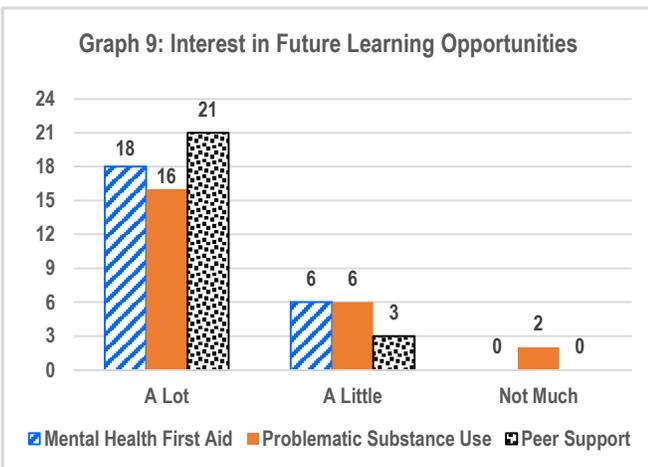
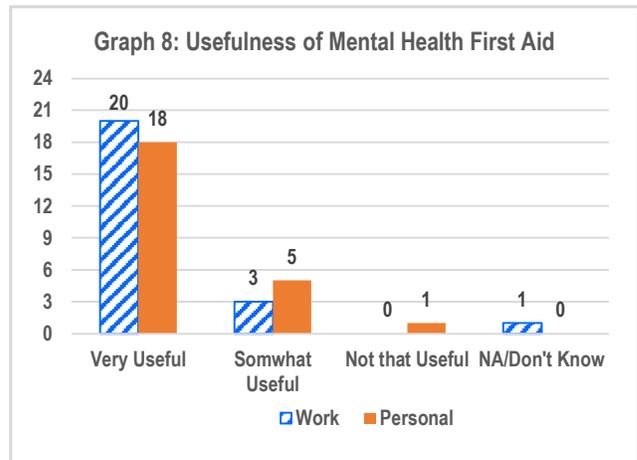


Of the 24 people responding to the questions, 23 thought the break-out rooms were great and 19 thought the debriefing exercises were great, primarily because of the exchange among participants, hearing others’ ideas and opinions. In addition, 23 of 24 respondents ‘liked’ their experience training with other people: *“I learned good ideas from others living in similar situations dealing with mental health issues.”*

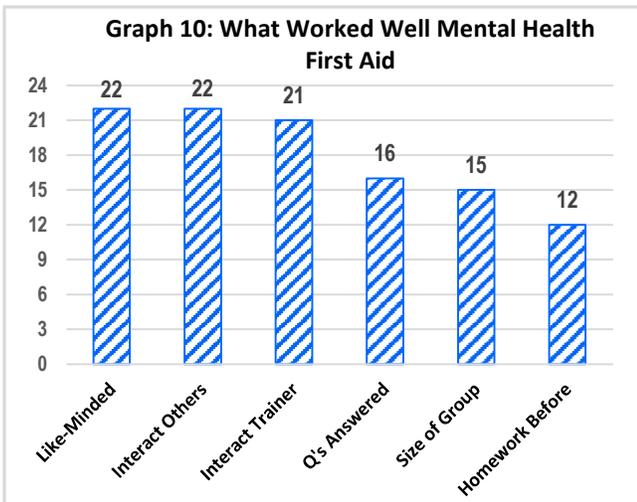
Seventeen people reported the training met their expectations and for seven it exceeded expectations. In addition, almost all indicated that their understanding of mental health first aid had increased (Graph 7).

Regarding the usefulness of the training, most participants felt it would be ‘very useful’ in both their paid or volunteer work and their personal lives (Graph 8).

Twenty respondents felt it was ‘very important’ for a service dog organization to offer mental health first aid as part of its program service, while the other four thought it was ‘somewhat important.’



Respondents were asked about their interest in future learning experiences in the areas of mental health first aid, problematic substance use and peer support. While all were of interest, peer support was of highest interest (Graph 9).

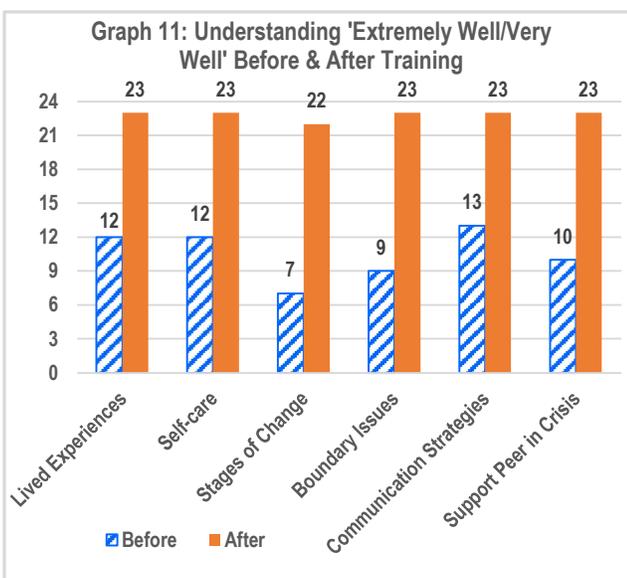


Respondents identified multiple aspects of the training that ‘worked well’ (Graph 10). The features of being part of a like-minded community and interacting with other participants were most often cited, followed by interaction with the trainer; *“A like-minded community made it easier to ask questions.”*

Mental Health Innovations (MHI) Peer Support Training

This online peer support training (18 hours, 2 days a week for a six-week period) was delivered to 30 veterans and staff from three service dog organizations in the spring of 2021.

Of the 24 people responding to the questionnaire, 23 thought it was ‘very important’ for service dog organizations to offer peer support as part of its program/services, while one person thought it was ‘somewhat important.’

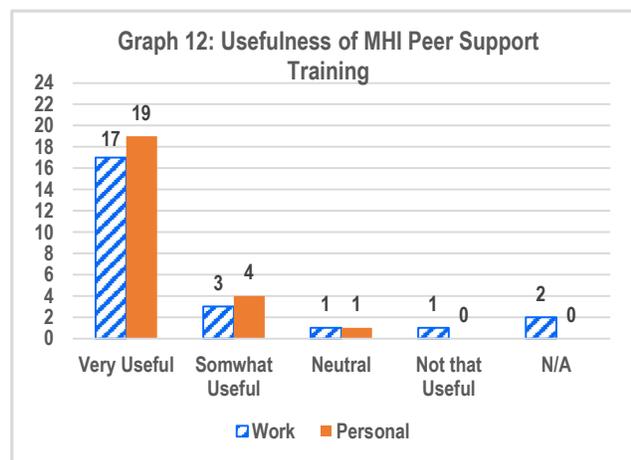


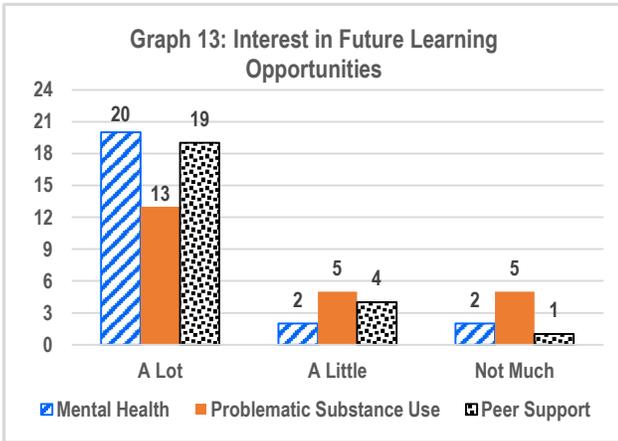
Participants were asked a series of questions regarding how well they understood certain aspects of how to support peers before and after training. In all cases, understanding within the participant group increased, most frequently in the understanding of the stages of change in recovery (Graph 11).

When asked about the time allotted to group interaction, 17 people felt the time for large group discussion was ‘just right.’ For small group discussion 10 people felt it was ‘just right,’ while 14 felt it was ‘not enough.’ In addition, 16 people reported they liked the experience training with other participants, while the other eight chose ‘neutral’ as their response.

Regarding the usefulness of the training, most participants felt it would be ‘very useful’ in both their paid or volunteer work and their personal lives (Graph 12).

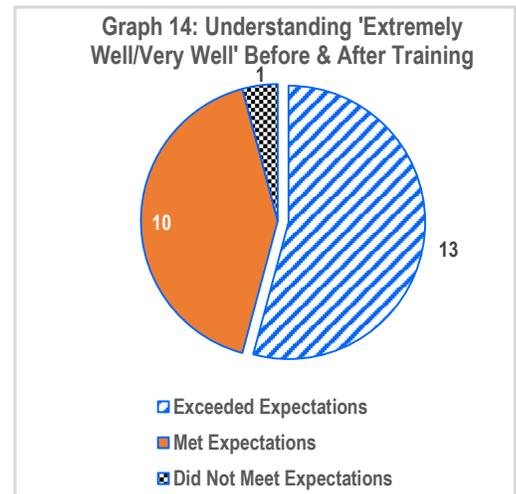
Respondents were asked about their interest in future learning experiences in the areas of mental health first aid, problematic substance use and peer support.





Mental Health and Peer Support were of higher interest than the area of problematic substance use (Graph 13).

Other suggestions were volunteered by participants, with a number focusing on service dogs. Suicide prevention, particularly for youth, was also proposed as a topic.



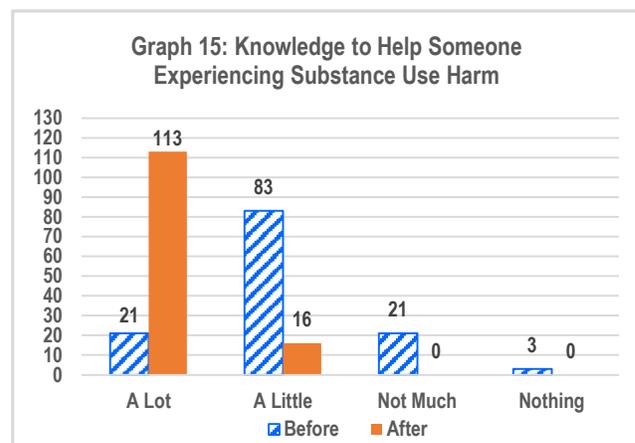
Overall, the training met or exceeded participants' expectations (Graph 14).

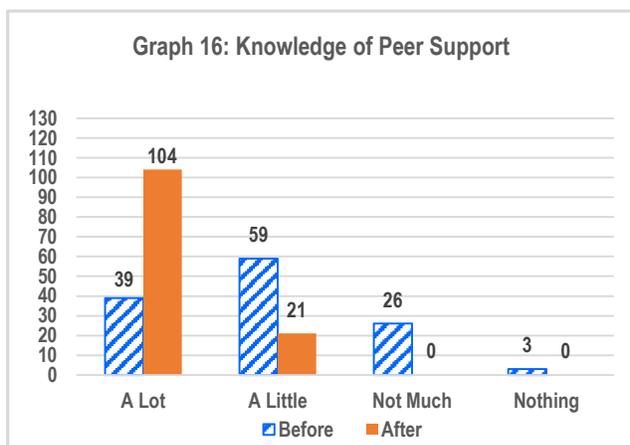
c) Online Connecting for Veteran Wellness Toolkit

The *Connecting for Veteran Wellness Toolkit* informs service dog trainers about recovery from substance use health problems and the important role of peer support and connection for the wellness of their Veteran dog handlers diagnosed with posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD). The toolkit includes an online certificate course made up of nine modules and access to substance use recovery and peer support resources. It takes approximately two to four hours to complete and participants can request a completion certificate.

As of July 2022, 330 people had registered for the course and 130 had completed the online post-course survey. Of these, 56 represented a service dog organization or were a service dog trainer, 10 were a non-service dog training organization, seven were with a veteran support organization (non-dog related), and 18 were veterans. Others were interested individuals or represented a variety of organizations (e.g., foster dog organization, veterinary student, mental health service worker, breeder). Of the 130, 119 were in Canada – the majority in Saskatchewan (n=64) – with 10 people from the United States and one from Australia.

When asked about their knowledge about how to take positive action to help someone experiencing substance use harm, there was an increase in knowledge (Graph 15). Also, after taking the course, 16 or the 18 veterans rated their knowledge as 'a lot.'





Regarding knowledge of peer support, there was also an increase in participant knowledge after they had taken the online course (Graph 16). For veterans, 13 of the 18 rated their knowledge of peer support as ‘a lot’ after taking the course.

Of those for whom the questions were applicable, almost half indicated they were considering adjusting their program’s content and practices, while approximately one-third were considering adjusting their policies as a result of their participation in the project (Table 3). It should also

be noted that more than 40% were unsure whether they would consider these adjustments. Very similar results were seen in the responses from service dog organizations only. Policy changes were least likely to be considered.

Table 3: Considering Adjusting Content, Practices & Policies

Resource	Overall			Service Dog Organizations		
	Yes	Unsure	No	Yes	Unsure	No
Considering adjusting content (Overall n=55) (SDO n= 41)	47%	44%	9%	46%	44%	9%
Considering adjusting practices (Overall n=56) (SDO n= 41)	48%	41%	11%	49%	42%	9%
Considering adjusting policies (Overall n=51) (SDO n=39)	35%	47%	18%	31%	54%	15%

Survey results indicate that taking the online course *Connecting for Veteran Wellness Toolkit* increased knowledge regarding how to take positive action to reduce substance use harm, as well as knowledge regarding peer support. While not the majority, many organizations were considering adjusting their content and practices as a result of their participation in the online course.

D. Outputs and Outcomes

When considering the outputs and outcomes, it should be recognized that the COVID-19 pandemic affected project implementation. When the first shutdown occurred in March 2020, the therapy dog program was moved to an online format which helped to inform other aspects of the project over the course of the pandemic. Additional partnerships were also forged which resulted in outputs, such as the fact sheet with CCSA and MHCC, the online therapy dog article, as well as media and other presentations.

1. Outputs

a. Knowledge Products

The targets for the creation of knowledge products were; three infographics, three peer reviewed articles, four conference presentations, a resource tool kit, and a modified Audeamus curriculum.

- Five infographics were created, sharing knowledge on topics from COVID-19 experiences to PTSD and substance use. Four fact sheets were also produced, highlighting project findings.
- Four peer reviewed articles were published.

Williamson, L., Dell, C., Osgood, N., Chalmers, D., Lohnes, C., Carleton, R., Asmundson, G. 2021. "Examining changes in posttraumatic stress disorder symptoms and substance use among a sample of Canadian veterans working with service dogs: An exploratory longitudinal study." *Journal of Veterans Studies*. 7(1), pp. 1–13.

Gibson, M, Williamson, L., Dell, C., Chalmers, D., DeGroot, P. 2021. "Insight into Social Influences on Veterans' Use of Medical Cannabis to Manage their PTSD Symptoms." *Journal of Veterans Studies*. 7(1), 59–70.

Williamson, L., Dell, C., Chalmers, D., Cruz, M., De Groot, P. "Recognizing the Human-Animal Bond for Enhancing Zooeyia among PTSD-Diagnosed Veterans who have a Service Dog and Problematically Use Substances." *Human Animal Interaction Bulletin*. 2021. 10:2, 20-47.

Dell, C., Kosteniuk, B., Bentley, E. 2022. "Benefits and Challenges of Having a Service Dog Among Veterans in Recovery from Substance Use Harms." *Anthrozoös*. 1-15. DOI:10.1080/08927936.2022.2074190.

- Over 25 conference presentations were given by members of the project team. Conferences included CCSA Issues of Substance, SCPOR Research Showcase, and the NIDA International Forum.
- An interactive, online toolkit was created with resources and an online course; 330 people signed up for the course.
- In addition, six videos were created, including acknowledging our veterans and project updates. Two witness statements were made to the House of Commons on Service Dogs in Canada. Twelve blog posts and upgrading of social media channels highlighted the experiences of staff, students and participants with Service Dogs and the human-animal bond.
- The curriculum was modified due to COVID and now includes the use of the online toolkit. Audeamus trainers also participated in all online training and peer support training opportunities.

It can be concluded that the project exceeded its targets on the number and type of knowledge products.

b. Learning Opportunities

The targets related to learning opportunities included having service dog organizations participate in the Community of Practice, the delivery of four webinars, and four One Health Day community and media events.

- At the beginning of the project, no service dog organizations were participating in a Community of Practice. By 2021, 21 organizations had participated to some degree; 17 were directly involved in the project and four were not. However, involvement in the Community of Practice may be better reflected in the newsletter uptake which, by project completion, included 343 individuals.

- Results from the interviews and the evaluation surveys, pointed to a willingness to participate in learning opportunities with representatives from other service dog organizations and a recognition that much can be learned from each other. Many appreciated being part of a 'like-minded' community.
- Thirteen webinars and learning opportunities were provided by the project, including online peer support trainings, CTRI Equipping the Natural Helper Peer Course, Mental Health First Aid, MHI Peer Support Training, and Online PAWS Your Stress (PYS) Therapy Dog Program. <https://servicedogresearch.ca/webinars>
- Over 40 media engagements occurred, including radio interviews, newspaper articles and news broadcasts. <https://servicedogresearch.ca/in-the-news-1>

It can be concluded that the project exceeded its targets on the number, type, and participation in learning opportunities.

2. Immediate Outcomes

a. Ten service dog organizations access the various evidence-informed knowledge products.

- Of those interviewed in 2021, 10 read the newsletter (many regularly). Nine had visited the website, meeting the target number of 10 service dog organizations accessing knowledge products. While fewer people were available for interview in 2022, eight of nine had visited the website and seven of nine read the newsletters. In addition, 330 individuals registered for the *Connecting for Veteran Wellness Toolkit*.
- In the past 12 months, there were 101 fact sheet downloads and 153 fact sheet page views.⁶

b. Ten service dog organizations access evidence-informed information through participation in learning opportunities.

- As of October 2021, more than 10 organizations participated in learning opportunities with at least 30 veterans engaging in learning opportunities. Fifty-six people who completed post-course surveys from the *Connecting for Veteran Wellness Toolkit* were representatives of service dog organizations and 18 were veterans.
- In addition, project participants, as evidenced both from the interview findings and the post-course online surveys, believed what they were learning was useful and had increased their understanding in areas of the project's focus.

It can be concluded that the immediate outcomes were achieved and, in fact, exceeded expectations.

3. Intermediate Outcomes

This data on the intermediate outcomes is drawn from the survey completed by participants after completing the online course *Connecting for Veteran Wellness Toolkit*.

⁶ The numbers are likely under-represented, as Google Analytics only tracks users who enable cookies when visiting the site.

Responses were received from 130 participants; 56 identified as service dog training organization or a service dog trainer, 18 were veterans, 10 were other dog training organizations, and seven were veteran support organizations (non-dog related).

Targeted stakeholders use evidence-informed information on substance use to change policies, programs, and practice.⁷

- When service dog organizations were asked, based on what they had learned in the online course, would they consider adjusting their policies, 31% responded ‘yes,’ while another 54% were ‘unsure.’
- When service dog organizations were asked, based on what they had learned in the online course, would they consider adjusting their program’s content, 46% replied ‘yes,’ while another 44% were ‘unsure.’
- When service dog organizations were asked, based on what they had learned in the online course, would they consider adjusting their program’s practices, 49% replied ‘yes,’ while another 42% were ‘unsure.’

Targeted Canadians take positive actions with respect to substance use.

- Of the 18 veterans, prior to taking the course, one person (6%) indicated that her/his knowledge of how to take positive action to help someone experiencing substance use harm was ‘a lot.’ After taking the course, 16 veterans (89%) rated their knowledge as ‘a lot.’
- 13 of the 18 veterans (72%) also reported they were felt ‘a lot’ of confidence they could take positive action to help someone experiencing substance use harm.

While percentages have not quite reached the target percentage of 50%, it appears that service dog organizations are open to making change. In addition, veterans involved in the project through the online toolkit course increased their knowledge and their confidence about taking positive action with respect to substance use.

In summary, it is concluded that the project exceeded its target and achieved its immediate outcomes. One intermediate outcome approached the desired achievement level and veterans increased their ability to take positive action with respect to substance use. These findings are more impressive, given that the project had to adjust as it operated through the pandemic.

⁷ Percentages omit the respondents who indicated the questions were ‘not applicable’ to their organization.