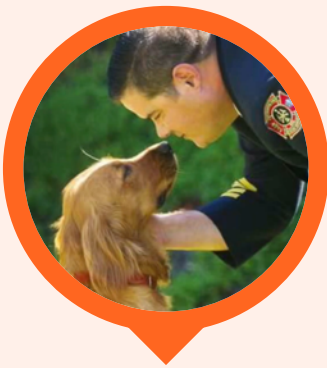


ONLINE SERVICE DOG TRAINING EVALUATION

Purpose, Background & Participants



What are Veterans' experiences training in an online format with a Service Dog program?

Purpose: As part of a project titled *A PAWSitive Support Project for Veterans with Post-traumatic Stress Disorder and Substance Use Health Concerns*, this fact sheet presents the findings of an evaluation of the delivery of a service dog training program that transitioned from an in-person to an online format due to COVID-19 pandemic safety restrictions. The research question is: What are Veterans' experiences training in an online* format with the AUDEAMUS Inc. service dog program? The focus is on the Veterans' experiences of the online offering of the program and not the service dog program or content.

Background: Service dogs are trained to assist their handler with symptoms and limitations from trauma, injuries and disabilities. There are federal and varying provincial access rights for service dog teams in Canada (e.g., provincial legislation and regulations, Human Rights Codes and case law legislation). Generally, service dogs are visibly identified with a vest and have full access to public spaces because they are trained to perform tasks to support their handler. Service dogs can be trained by organizations, independent dog trainers, or in some cases by their handler or another individual, with or without the assistance of a dog trainer. Most service dog trainers and service dog organizations assess the suitability of a dog for service dog work prior to and/or during the training process.

Connection: Our multidisciplinary team identifies that posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and problematic substance use (PSU) can contribute to Veterans' disconnection from other humans, as well as animals and the environment. A One Health framework recognizes that the convergence of people, animals, and the environment has created a new dynamic in which the health of each group is interconnected (CDC, 2021). The interdependence of the wellness of humans, animals and the environment has been traditionally recognized from within an Indigenous worldview (Papequash 2011; Honouring Our Strengths 2014). Considering PTSD and PSU simultaneously within this framework is an innovative and inclusive approach to mental health and substance use recovery.**

To learn more about the role of service dogs in the lives of Veterans diagnosed with PTSD who problematically use substances, please refer to the resource list at the end of this Fact Sheet.





Purpose, Background & Participants *(continued)*

Participants: A group of five Veterans were recruited to participate in a 6-month pilot evaluation. According to Veteran Affairs Canada (VAC), a Veteran is “[a]ny former member of the Canadian Armed Forces who successfully underwent basic training and is honourably discharged” (Veteran Affairs Canada, 2021). Four identified as male and one as female. The Veterans were all diagnosed with chronic PTSD, and all self-described their condition as severe, alongside varying medical issues and substance use. The average age was 57-years, ranging from 51 to 67. Four of the Veterans were retired, and one currently serving as a member of the Canadian Armed Forces. Four of the five Veterans (80%, all male) completed the six-month online training period for this pilot evaluation.

The level of previous service dog program experience varied amongst the Veterans. One Veteran was matched with a dog that had some previous service dog training experience, but the Veteran did not. A second Veteran was paired with a puppy. The three other Veterans had some experience with the AUDEAMUS service dog program, but it was very limited.

Four additional individuals who were involved in the delivery of the online program also participated in the pilot evaluation. Two identified as male and two as female. One was the lead AUDEAMUS trainer. The three others were Assistant Trainers/Peer Support Facilitators with the AUDEAMUS program. All had trained a service dog through the AUDEAMUS program.

Service Dog Demographics: The five service dogs paired with the Veterans ranged in age from 3-months to 7-years at the start of the program. Only one service dog was a young dog of 3-months, and the other four were between 2- and 7-years. Two of the dogs had previous experience training as service dogs with other service dog organizations.

* Online in this context refers to remote service dog training sessions using zoom and a virtual classroom (i.e., Google classroom).

** The term recovery is variously referred to, including: being in recovery, seeking recovery, wellness, health, healing journey, to name a few. Common elements amongst definitions of recovery are seeking a life worth living, optimism that recovery is possible, recognition that it is a process, and acknowledgement that there is always hope (McQuaid, 2017).

Methods & Program

Method: Between January 19 and July 13, 2021, a total of 22 semi-structured interviews were conducted by three researchers, one who was both bilingual and a social worker. Thirteen interviews were with the Veterans, including at three time points with four Veterans and one interview with the fifth Veteran who did not continue in the program. In addition interviews at two time points were conducted with each of the three AUDEAMUS Assistant Trainers/Peer Support Facilitators. The lead Trainer for the AUDEAMUS program was interviewed three times. The average length of the interviews was 74 minutes, ranging from 48 to 103 minutes.

The research team conducted a thematic analysis of the interview data, the aim of which was to systematically identify recurrent patterns, or themes, in the knowledge shared in the interviews. After transcription, interviews were independently analyzed and coded by two members of the research team to strengthen reliability. Three cycles of analyses were conducted, using Saldaña’s (2016) descriptive method of coding followed by pattern coding, discussions, and synthesis.

Ethics: The human and animal Research Ethics Boards (REB) at the University of Saskatchewan each approved the larger research project [17-317 and 20170114]. As this was a pilot evaluation, specific REB approval was not required.



Methods & Program *(continued)*

Service Dog Program: AUDEAMUS provides service dogs to Veterans, Police Officers and First Responders. Many of the Veterans have returned home from deployment in combat zones. The Veterans typically train with the service dogs for 52 weeks, applying AUDEAMUS's holistic training curriculum (www.audeamus.ca/program). Peer support is a foundational component of the AUDEAMUS program.

Online Service Dog Program: Service dog training was initially piloted by the AUDEAMUS lead trainer with a group of five researchers and their companion dogs over a 12 week period in 2020 to assess if and how the training could be offered on a virtual connectivity platform, Zoom. It was deemed viable and lessons learned were incorporated into AUDEAMUS's online training offered through Zoom with 5 Veterans and their service dogs for this pilot evaluation.

The online program was offered with the intent to parallel the first 6-months of the AUDEAMUS in-person program; the online program was delivered with remote service dog training sessions and a virtual classroom component (which is also available with the in-person training program). The Veterans met weekly via Zoom for service dog training with the AUDEAMUS lead trainer, and participated in peer support meetings 1-3 times a week. The amount of time Veterans met individually with Assistant Trainers/Peer Support Facilitators varied as some requested more attention than others on particular weeks. The Veterans also interacted with the virtual classroom on a weekly basis as they worked through homework assignments (e.g., video of Veteran practicing) and they used the classroom stream to post pictures of their dogs and reflections they wanted to share during the week (e.g., a successful training experience).

Impact of the Pandemic: Several of the Veterans reported no concerns about the social implications of the pandemic because they were already isolating to help cope with their severe PTSD symptoms. Some Veterans did identify job/career restrictions due to COVID-19, and noted that this contributed further to their isolation and substance use health concerns. In a couple of cases, participants reported it was actually easier for them to venture out in public with social distancing restrictions in place.



Online training was initially piloted with a group of 5 researchers and their companion dogs over 12 weeks.

The online program was offered to Veterans with the intent to parallel the first 6-months of the in-person program.





Findings

QUESTION: What are Veterans' experiences of training in an online format with the AUDEAMUS service dog program? The Veterans' responses to this question were categorized into five key areas: (1) general experiences with the 6-month online program, (2) benefits of online program delivery, (3) challenges with online program delivery, (4) fundamentals enabling a positive experience for Veterans with online service dog programming, and (5) receiving and offering peer support online.

1 General Experiences with a 6-Month Online Program. Online service dog program participants experienced change over time similar to in-person programming. Highlights at the three interview time points are:

Baseline: Optimistic about online program; confident with the technology; establishing a relationship with the service dog; expressing love for the service dog; some PTSD self-management with the service dog.

3 months: Some progress connecting with the service dog and for PTSD management; some program drop-off and interruption with personal issues; some feelings of frustration and being overwhelmed; some technology challenges and consequently additional support required.

6 months: Further progress connecting with the service dog and some work with the service dog in public spaces; components of the online classroom program becoming clearer; on average, a quarter way through the 52 week program; some disillusionment with unmet needs.

2 Benefits of Online Program Delivery. Online program delivery benefits include:

- Establishment of an 'easy to access' space for introductory communication and orientation during the initial phase of the program (e.g., comfort level).
- Leisurely access to service dog training videos, which can be replayed by participants as required, because they are already familiar with the online space.

- Simplified (e.g., less organizing) transition from an online training session to doing online follow-up peer support and one-on-one training with AUDEAMUS Assistant Trainers/Peer Support Facilitators.
- Near immediate access to peer support and additional training when online (e.g., do not have to travel).
- 24/7 access to resources and digital stories about positive connections between Veterans and their service dogs (e.g., replay training videos).
- Ability to train within the context of a Veteran's home environment.

3 Online Program Delivery Challenges. Key challenges include:

- Isolation and trust issues with PTSD may make it easier for Veterans to avoid regular online sessions, in comparison to in-person training.
- The military culture of Veterans can make it difficult for them to be vulnerable with others and share their mistakes (e.g., imprecision) in service dog training activities. This is reinforced when online sessions are recorded and viewed by the Veterans themselves and their peers.
- A 'drop-off' in participation because the time commitment for service dog training and practice requirements can be overwhelming at various stages of a lengthy program. The reasons for this in an online environment may be more prevalent and unique compared to in-person training (e.g., online training is longer in duration than in-person training).

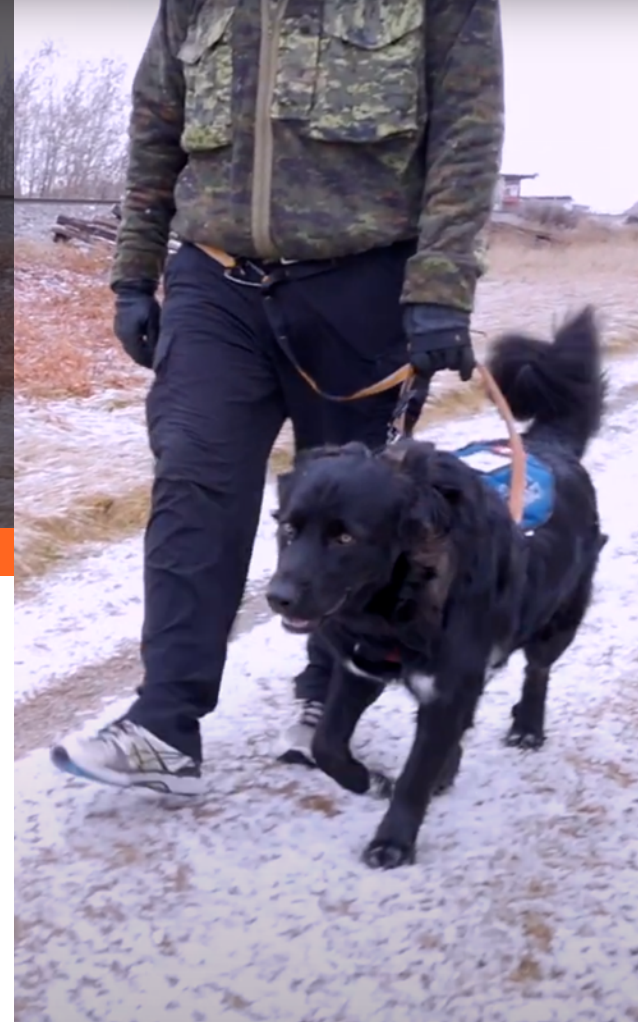
After a successful follow-up session, one Veteran had the courage to make an appointment they had delayed for over a year.

Findings (continued)

- The pace of training sessions can be challenging for Veterans with a Traumatic Brain Injury (e.g., speed of verbal uptake), Veterans with a mood disorder (e.g., affect their ability to be 'in-the-moment'), and Veterans for whom English is not their primary language (given that the program is only offered in English). Attention to the pace of a training session was more a concern to gauge with online compared to in-person programming.
- Veterans who had service dog training experience with in-person group sessions as well as the online group format would often make comparisons between the two. It was frequently mentioned that what takes a month to accomplish successfully in the online delivery would take a week with in-person training.

4 Fundamentals for a Positive Online Service Dog Program Experience. Key fundamentals, according to Veterans and service dog Trainers/Peer Support Facilitators, for Veterans to have a positive online service dog experience, include:

- Veteran has the ability to extend trust to others and feel trusted by others.
- Veteran experiences positive support from immediate family.
- Veteran is not feeling pressure, but instead gentle nudges, to get out of their comfort zone.
- Trainer and program flexibility and adaptation to accommodate Veterans' complex personal needs.
- Veteran develops a connection with others and their service dogs in the program.
- Veteran ability to witness and experience some immediate results/success.
- Trainers know and understand each individual participant and their service dog.



5 Receiving and Offering Peer Support Online. Considerations for experiencing and offering peer support online include:

- Weekly one-on-one follow-up sessions by the AUDEAMUS Assistant Trainers/Peer Support Facilitators were valuable to keep the Veterans engaged and challenged in the program. For example, after a successful follow-up session, one Veteran had the courage to make an appointment they had delayed for over a year.
- Despite encouraging Veterans to connect with one another through small group break-out sessions at the end of each main weekly service dog training session, only one Veteran attempted this. To assist with peer connection and to practice training activities outside the main weekly session, Assistant Trainers/Peer Support Facilitators could follow-up with each Veteran.



Recommendation: A Hybrid Model

The findings from this project suggest that online service dog programming has many potential benefits, especially for the start of a training program, and that the challenges experienced by the Veterans could be mitigated by some in-person elements. Thus the exploration of a hybrid in-person and online model of service dog training is recommended to AUDEAMUS and other interested service dog organizations to explore. To ensure this hybrid model had input from the Veterans' voices and experiences, and adhering to our team's adoption of a patient-oriented research approach (SCPOR, 2021), this Fact Sheet was reviewed by the pilot evaluation participants plus several Veteran advisors to the larger project.

It is important to share that our internet search found many online service dog training programs, but no accompanying evaluation literature was identified. Any implementation of a hybrid model for service dog programming should draw upon the latest emerging evidence and be evaluated upon implementation.

The hybrid model proposed here consists of four components. The model begins with:

Step 1: an online orientation to the service dog program and an introduction of the Veteran group/cohort, followed by a series of online service dog training sessions. Note: if the participant is using substances with harmful outcomes, assess whether they are ready for a service dog program.

Step 2: an in-person group training session for up to a week in duration (e.g., at a retreat).

Step 3: undertake further online group training sessions and importantly, one-on-one in-person and online peer support and mentoring.

Step 4: integrate an online classroom platform when feasible for the group to maintain the Veterans' service dog training activities and to access the service dog training videos as well as other resources.

To put the hybrid model successfully into practice, the Veterans, Trainer and Assistant Trainers/Peer Support Facilitators identified necessary areas for attention. These include online lesson delivery suggestions from the Veterans as well as expectations for Veteran success identified by the Trainers and Assistant Trainers/Peer Support Facilitators.

Online Lesson Delivery. Key suggestions from Veterans include:

Ensure service dog training activities are communicated in advance of scheduled remote sessions.

Do a visual demonstration of the service dog training activities before a verbal explanation.

Record the remote training sessions so the Veterans can review them if not in attendance and can also view them at their own pace to practice.

Provide immediate feedback from the Trainer and Assistant Trainers/Peer Support Facilitators to the Veterans and ensure they comprehend the feedback and its intention.

Do frequent 'follow-ups' and 'check-ins' with Veterans to determine their individual needs, recognizing the complexity of this population of participants.

Trainer/Peer Supporter Expectations for Veteran Success. Important suggestions from Trainers/Peer Supports to support Veteran success is to assist them to:

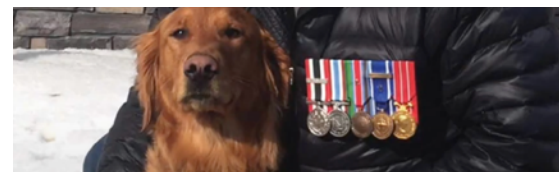
Engage with the program content.

Develop a routine for personal program engagement.

Build open communication skills with Peer Support Facilitators, Trainers, and other members of their group.

Prioritize connection with the service dog, so the dog is able to increase responsiveness to the Veterans' triggers. It is important for them to be reminded that service dog training is not obedience training.

Stay engaged with mental health professionals (e.g., psychologist, occupational therapist) to monitor health symptoms and medications while in the program.





Summary and Resources

Summary of Findings

This pilot evaluation aimed to answer: What are Veterans' experiences training in an online format with the AUDEAMUS service dog program?

This evaluation found that:

- Veterans were able to engage with their Trainer, other participants, and their service dog in an online environment, indicating that an online service dog program is feasible;
- Veterans felt that an exclusive online service dog program is slower to achieve progress in comparison to an exclusive in-person program, which may cause disillusionment or frustration;
- Veterans reported unique benefits to training online such as being able to train their service dog in their home environment;
- Conversely, Veterans faced unique challenges training online, including heightened self-criticism when training on video; and
- Veterans individually had unique needs and this should be considered in any online program offering, including the impacts of a Traumatic Brain Injury and the need for flexibility and regular program trainer and peer support follow-up.

Based upon the experiences of Veterans taking part in the online AUDEAMUS service dog training program, a hybrid online and in-person model of service dog programming is suggested. The Veterans experienced both positive aspects and challenges associated with accessing service dog training online. These experiences suggest that elements of the online program should be explored for future training offering by AUDEAMUS and other service dog organizations, while in-person training can mitigate some of the challenges. Key components include clear communication to participants using visual demonstrations and advance notice of session plans as much as possible.

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Summary and Resources (continued)

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