

# Insight of Service Providers and Significant Others about the Role of Service Dogs in Veterans' Lives and Wellness

## Purpose, Background & Participants

**Purpose:** As part of A PAWSitive Support Project for Veterans with Posttraumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) and Substance Use Health Concerns, this fact sheet presents the findings of two sub-studies. Both studies offer insight on the role of service dogs in the wellness of Veterans from a perspective other than their own. The first study addressed service providers' awareness and perspectives on the incorporation of service dogs in the lives of their Veteran clients diagnosed with PTSD and who experience harms from substance use. The second sub-study captured the awareness and perspectives of significant others (i.e., spouse, close friend) on the role of service dogs in the lives of these same Veterans.

Five Veterans from a service dog organization participated in the larger patient-oriented study\*. 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). The perspectives of Veterans' close supports are important to document as they intimately witness the impact of a service dog on a Veteran's daily life, treatment plan, and wellness journey.

\* **See key original findings at:** 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; Williamson, L., Dell, C., Chalmers, D., Cruz, M., & De Groot, P. (2021). [Recognizing the Human-Animal Bond for Enhancing Zoeyvia among PTSD-Diagnosed Veterans who have a Service Dog and Problematically Use Substances.](#) *Human Animal Interaction Bulletin.* 10:2: 20-47; Gibson, M., Williamson, L., Henwood, G., Dell, C., & Chalmers, D. (2021). [Insight into Social Influences on Veterans' Use of Medical Cannabis to Manage their PTSD Symptoms.](#) *Journal of Veterans Studies.* 7(1): 59–70.

**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.

Two studies offer insight on the role of service dogs in the wellness of Veterans from others' perspectives.

A PAWSitive Support Project for Veterans with PTSD and Substance Use Health Concerns



## Purpose, Background & Participants *(continued)*

**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, 2012; Honouring Our Strengths, 2014). Considering PTSD and PSU simultaneously from within this framework is an innovative and inclusive approach to mental health and substance use recovery.\*\*

\*\* 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 et al., 2017).

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.

Interviews were conducted at baseline in May 2018, 1 month, 3, 6, 9, 12, and 18 months.

**Participants:** Veterans' primary mental health service provider (1 psychiatrist, 4 psychologists) participated in the first sub-study. They shared their awareness and perspectives of the Veterans' interactions with their service dogs and the role of the service dogs in the Veterans' wellness, with particular attention to PTSD symptoms and substance use. Interviews were conducted at 5 time-points for 3 of the service providers (i.e., at baseline in June 2018, 3 months, 6, 9, and 12 months), at 4 time points for one service provider (i.e., at baseline, 3 months, 6, and 9 months) and one time point for one service provider (at baseline).

Significant others (3 spouses, 2 close friends) of the five Veterans took part in the second sub-study. They shared their awareness and perspectives of the Veteran and service dogs' interactions in everyday life. Semi-structured interviews were conducted at 7 time-points with each (i.e., at baseline in May 2018, 1 month, 3, 6, 9, 12, and 18 months).

**Ethics:** The human and animal Research Ethics Boards at the University of Saskatchewan each approved the research project [17-317 and 20170114].

## Methods

**Method:** The two sub-studies presented in this Fact Sheet are part of a larger study which examined the experiences of 5 Veterans (M age = 43 years, range = 36-51 years) over a 18-month period as they acquired and were involved in the training of a service dog through the AUDE-AMUS, Inc. service dog program. Participant criteria included: formal PTSD diagnosis from a mental health professional and self-identified problematic substance use.

For each sub-study, themes were developed following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-step analysis guide. Two independent research associates coded the interview data using Saldaña's (2013) content analysis coding guide. Codes were then organized collaboratively, discussed, and finalized after review by researchers for this Fact Sheet.

Five overlapping and key themes among Veterans' significant others and service providers are presented below. Given the novelty of the two sub-studies, the themes are presented as a beginning point for consideration in future studies.



## Findings

The five key and common themes identified among service providers and significant others about service dogs contributing to Veteran lives and wellness are: development of a Veteran-service dog bond; service dogs increase Veterans' independence; service dogs initiate routine for Veterans; service dogs enhance Veterans' social engagement; and there is increased awareness of the potentially beneficial role of service dogs in Veterans' lives upon introduction of the service dog. Key challenges with service dogs in the Veterans' lives are also identified.

### 1 Development of the Veteran-Service Dog Bond –

The majority of the Veterans' supports recognized the importance and beneficial implications of the bond developed between a Veteran and their service dog.

**Service providers** recognized this bond as helping Veterans through feelings of isolation (often referring to the service dogs as the Veteran's 'friend'), facilitating openness during their counselling sessions, and assisting Veterans in adhering to their treatment plans. They specifically identified the service dog as a compliment to the Veterans' treatment. "[Veteran] came to the office with the dog a couple of times, a beautiful dog, so seems like a positive relationship...They do seem to be quite attached to each other. They also seem to both be learning a little bit about how to interact with each other" (Service Provider #5, Interview 1). The Veterans' **significant others** identified the Veteran and service dog bond as contributing to a stable home environment, improving spousal relationships, and reducing stress for themselves as significant others. They also noted the beneficial bond the service dog formed with other family members generally, and their subsequent role as an advocate for the dog. Significant others also noted how introducing the service dog changed their caretaking relationship with the Veteran as the service dog now shared part of that role (noting some tension accompanied this). "He doesn't have nightmares anymore because she is there cuddling him; oh, it is so nice" (Significant Other #4, Interview 2).

### 2 Service Dogs Increase Veterans' Independence –

**Service providers** identified that the Veterans' self-confidence and independence was enhanced with the introduction of a service dog. They also recognized increased public access by the Veterans. "[A]most an immediate

difference in [Veteran] after he got [Dog]. And the big thing was, the thing I noticed first, was that there were times that [Veteran] would come into the waiting room and he would kind of slump into a chair and his head was down. That sort of curled up position with a ball cap on. And I had to kind of really look to find him. But since he got [Dog] he's out there smiling, talking, and proud. Chest out, not head down" (Service Provider #4, Interview 1). **Significant others** in the Veterans' lives noted an overall increase in the Veterans' wellness with the introduction of a service dog, and specifically their interactions in public, which is a significant and ongoing concern (i.e., isolation). The service dog was also credited with enabling the Veterans to regulate their emotional and physical state when in stressful environments. "Oh it was to the point where he couldn't leave the house like he would go out to the backyard or the front yard but he wouldn't cross the street, literally, like he was just solitary and now [Dog] has got him going everywhere" (Significant Other #4, Interview 1).

3 **Service Dogs Initiate Routine –** The building of a routine with the service dog and its importance to Veterans' wellness was recognized by both service providers and significant others. **Service providers** discussed the development of new routines that benefited the Veterans' wellness, such as getting out of the house to walk the dog, which in turn offered them a form of purpose. "I think that bond with her has been really helpful for him. I think it gives him a bit of purpose, it gives him something to do, and gives him a reason to get up and do things" (Service Provider #3, Interview 2). They also identified the service dogs as a healthy distraction and a



Findings (continued)

means to get out of unhealthy routines; one service provider specifically referred to the service dog as a form of harm reduction from problematic substance use and the dog having a role in decreasing a Veteran's suicidal thoughts. "[Veteran's] focus is much more on [the dog], so he has to be less inclined to ruminate into a negative head space. So, he's much less inclined to need mood altering drugs" (Service Provider #4, Interview 4). Veterans' **significant others** found that new routines with the service dog generally helped Veterans live less sedentary and therefore healthier lifestyles. This included connecting with peers to access and offer support. Some did note, however, that a lack of public education about service dogs easily disrupted these routines. "He couldn't spiral into that black hole where he would get drunk and stay drunk. He had to stay sober and attend to [Dog]" (Significant Other #4, Interview 1).

**4 Service Dogs Enhance Social Engagement** - Both service providers and significant others identified the service dog as a gateway to social interaction for Veterans. **Service providers** noted that having the dog present at sessions allowed for more open conversations, starting with prompts about how the dog is doing and how it is supporting the Veteran. Having the dog present also increased the time the Veterans spent at their sessions and actively engaged with their service provider. "A lot of time over my experience with [Veteran] he would come for sessions and you know, by 20 to the hour he would be ready to leave... But he's been staying consistently since the beginning of the whole dog project" (Service Provider #1, Interview 1). **Significant others** reflected that having a service dog and engaging in training with others supported the Veteran to seek out, take part in, or offer peer support to other Veterans and service dog teams. "Well is it impossible to force a person to face that stigma without support....it is a matter of having them sitting together and they are reminiscing of their time together, and bad" (Significant Other #1, Interview 5).

**5 Increased Awareness of the Service Dog's Role** - As time progressed from the introduction of the service dogs, both **significant others** and family members recognized their own awareness of the role of service dogs in the lives and wellness of Veterans increased substantially. Both service providers and significant others shared that they were

initially hesitant about the helpfulness of a service dog for Veterans because they did not comprehend the full extent to which a service dog can assist with Veterans' mental health, substance use, wellness, relationships, and independence. "Yeah, I think he's very attached to [Dog] and she to him. They're very engaged with training and put a lot of time and effort into it. Certainly with [Dog's] help he's able to get out and engage with the world" (Service Provider #4, Interview 2). **Service providers** uniquely identified the helpful role of a service dog in their counselling sessions and significant others emphasized the benefits of the service dog integrating into their family. "I just think having a dog is a really good thing and I wasn't raised with animals, but I see the value in our kids being raised with an animal in the house" (Significant Other #6, Interview 1). Significant others also noted that increased awareness amongst the general public would be beneficial for the service dog and Veteran teams.



## Implications

The majority of themes identified in this Fact Sheet are present in the Veteran health and service dog literature (Krause-Parello, Sarni, Padden 2016; O’Haire & Rodriguez 2018; van Houtert et al. 2018; Vincent et al., 2017). The insights of these two sub-studies uniquely add to this general literature through the perspectives of significant others’ and service providers in the Veterans’ lives, including insight that has not been previously widely documented (e.g., service dog assuming some of a spouse’ caretaking duties). Key implications for both service providers and significant others are identified here, with the underlying focus being the need for their increased education. Significant others and service providers are a key support in Veterans’ lives and wellness, and as such it is critical that they are aware about the potential role of service dogs before they are introduced into Veterans’ lives.

### Implication for Service Providers

There is a need for increased awareness and education among service providers about the role and potential value of service dogs in their Veteran clients’ lives and wellness and how service dogs can effectively be integrated into counselling sessions generally and treatment plans specifically. This includes the need for a foundational understanding about the Veteran-service dog bond, and its important potential for increasing Veterans’ independence, initiating routine in their lives, and enhancing their social engagement.

### Implication for Significant Others

There is a need to educate significant others of Veterans paired with a service dog about the potential impact of the dog’s role within the family unit generally, and the caregiving role of most commonly the spouse. The greatest identified change in the Veterans’ lives was the introduction of independence, routine, and social engagement and the Veterans’ subsequent ability to leave the house. At the same time, the need for public education is necessary to combat the challenges Veterans face when in public with their service dogs.





## Summary and Resources

### References

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## Summary and Resources *(continued)*

### Resources (from our team)

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### Resources (from other teams)

- Ceatha, N. 2021. Learning with Dogs: Human-animal Bonds and Understandings of Relationships and Reflexivity in Practitioner-Research. *Aotearoa New Zealand Social Work*. 32(4), pp. 77-83.
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