

Revering Furry Valor



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National K9 Veterans Day celebrates the loyalty, bravery, and sacrifice of canine warriors. On March 13, 1942, canines officially became members of the Armed Services, with the Army's founding of its New War Dog Program, more popularly known as the K9 Corps. The dogs underwent basic training and then entered more specialized preparation just as human soldiers did.² There had been unofficial dogs of war who served courageously and selflessly in almost all of our armed conflicts.³ Indeed, the title of this column is taken from a wonderful article of the same name narrating the heroism of dogs in the 2 world wars.⁴

The dedication of canines to those who serve is not confined to combat or even active duty. Thousands of military and veteran men and women have benefited immensely from their relationship with service and emotional support dogs.

Before I continue, let me state 2 important limitations of this column. First, I am a dog person. Of course, veterans have formed healing and caring relationships with many types of companion animals. Equine therapy is increasingly recognized as a powerful means of helping veterans with anxiety, depression, and posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) to reduce distress and find purpose.⁵ Nevertheless, for this column, I will focus exclusively on dogs. Second, there are many worthy organizations, projects, and programs that pair veterans with therapeutic dogs inside and outside the VA. I am in no way an expert and will invariably neglect many of these positive initiatives in this brief review.

The long, proud history of canines in the military and the many moving stories of men and women in and out of uniform for whom dogs have been life changing, if not life-saving, have created 2 ethical dilemmas for the VA that I examine here. Both dilemmas pivot on the terms of official recognition of service dogs, the benefits, and who can qualify for them in the VA.

Under VA regulation and VHA policy, a service animal only can be a dog that is individ-

ually trained to do work or perform tasks to assist a person with a disability; dogs whose sole function is to provide emotional support, well-being, comfort, or companionship are not considered service animals.⁶

Prior to the widespread implementation of VHA Directive 1188, some VA medical centers had, pardon the pun, "gone to the dogs," in the sense that depending on the facility, emotional support animals were found in almost every area of hospitals and clinics. Their presence enabled many patients to feel comfortable enough to seek medical and mental health care, as the canine companion gave them a sense of security and calm. But some dogs had not received the extensive training that enables a service dog to follow commands and handle the stimulation of a large, busy hospital with all its sights, sounds, and smells. Infectious disease, police, and public health authorities raised legitimate public health and safety risks about the increasing number of dogs on VA grounds who were not formally certified as service dogs. In response to those concerns, in August 2015, VHA declared a uniform policy that restricted service dogs access to VA property.⁷ This was, as with most health policy, a necessary, albeit utilitarian decision, that the common good outweighed that of individual veterans. Unfortunately, some veterans experienced the decision as a form of psychological rejection, and others no longer felt able mentally or physically to master the stresses of seeking health care without a canine companion.

A valid question to ask is why couldn't the most vulnerable of these veterans, for instance those with severe mental health conditions, have service dogs that could accompany them into at least most areas of the medical center? Part of the reason is cost: Some training organizations estimate it may cost as much as \$27,000 to train service dogs.⁸ Though there are many wonderful volunteer and not-for-profit organizations that train mostly shelter animals and their veteran handlers—a double rescue—the

Ethics is nothing other than Reverence for Life.

Albert Schweitzer¹

lengthy process and expense means that many veterans wait years for a companion.

Congressional representatives, ethicists, veterans advocates, and canine therapy groups claim that this was unjust discrimination against those suffering with the equally, if not more disabling, mental health conditions like PTSD and depression.⁹ For many years, the VA has done a very good deed: For those who qualify for a service dog, VA pays for veterinary care and the equipment to handle the dog, but not boarding, grooming, food, and other miscellaneous expenses.¹⁰ But until 2016, those veterans approved for service dogs in the main had sensory or physical disabilities.

A partial breakthrough emerged when the Center for Compassionate Care Innovation launched the Mental Health Mobility Service Dogs Program that expanded veterinary health benefits to veterans with a “substantial mobility limitation.” For example, veterans whose hypervigilance and hyperarousal are so severe that they cannot attend medical appointments.¹¹

VA experts argue that at this time there is insufficient evidence to fund service dogs as even adjunctive PTSD therapy for the hundreds of veterans who might potentially qualify. It becomes an ethical question of prudent stewardship of public funds and trust. There is certainly plenty of compelling anecdotal testimony that companion canines are a high-benefit, relatively low-risk form of complementary and integrated therapy for the spectrum of trauma disorders that afflict many of the men and women who served in our conflicts. Demonstrating those positive effects scientifically may be more difficult than it seems, although early evidence is promising, and the VA is intensively researching the question.¹² For some veterans and their legislators, the VA has not gone far enough, fast enough in mainstreaming therapy dogs, they are calling for VA to expand veterans’ benefits to include mental health service dogs and to define what benefits would be covered.

National K9 Veterans Day is an important step toward giving dogs of war the homage they have earned, as are increasing efforts to ensure care for military canines throughout their life cycle. But as the seventeenth century poet John Milton wrote when he reflected on his



Dr. Geppert and her dog Ezri.

own worth despite his blindness, “Those also serve who only stand and wait.”¹³ The institutions charged to care for those the battle has most burdened are still trying to discover how to properly and proportionately revere that kind of furry valor.

Disclaimer

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