



Second Chance: Rescued Dogs Help Vets Heal

By Nell Graham Sale, CELA

During World War I, it was termed “shell shock.” But while the psychological toll of war isn’t new, veterans with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) or traumatic brain injury (TBI) continue to battle the common misperception that mental health and “war injury” are mutually exclusive. They face the same stereotypes foisted upon others with mental illness—that their disability is somehow less real because invisible and perhaps an indication of personal weakness. [Paws and Stripes](#), a Rio Rancho, New Mexico, nonprofit, focuses on these vets, who are often underserved by Veterans Affairs, by matching them with service dogs and mental health professionals.

The organization’s concept grew from the personal experience of co-founders Lindsey and Jim Stanek. A retired Army sergeant, Jim was being treated for PTSD and TBI when time spent with a therapy dog began to noticeably reduce his stress level. Lindsey, a former veterinary assistant, connected that observation to her work with abandoned animals, and the idea of rescuing shelter dogs in order to help veterans was launched.

The Paws and Stripes process is unique. Veterans with TBI and/or PTSD select their own service dogs from nearby shelters, and the dogs go home with them on day one. Dog and owner together undergo a training regimen customized to the vet’s needs. The dog might learn to provide medical alerts, pick up items or help with balance. Service dogs are working animals, taught to give medical assistance to a specific person for his or her particular needs. There are no charges to veterans for either the dogs or training, in contrast to other programs which may charge from \$10,000 to \$60,000. In addition, the organization partners with Integrative Counseling of New Mexico (ICNM) to provide low-cost mental health services to both vets and their families.

Program graduates are enthusiastic about the difference these dogs have made to their lives. But while Paws and Stripes was recently recognized by the Association of Fundraising Professionals as the best up-and-coming nonprofit in the area, it faces many challenges. While 50 vets have completed the program to date, the agency maintains a waiting list of 600 vets from all over the country, who must currently provide their own housing throughout the training period.

A federally funded study is underway to determine if the benefits provided by service dogs should qualify them for classification as “medical devices,” making them eligible for

coverage by Veterans Affairs. Such a finding could set a precedent for insurance companies and other government programs to pay similar expenses for non-vets who need a service dog but can't afford one.

A&E Network will feature Paws and Stripes in a reality series, "Dogs of War," which will premier in fall 2014, following four veterans as they bond and train with their rescue dogs. For more information on Paws and Stripes, visit www.pawsandstripes.org.

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