

U.S. Senate Special Committee on Aging: Field Hearing: Tampa, FL

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GL: I represent K9 Partners for Patriots, a nonprofit organization based in Brooksville, FL. I'm the Communications Director and I've been with K9P4P for the past 7 years. We exist to prevent veteran suicide. For veterans with a service-related diagnosis of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD); Traumatic Brain Injury (TBI); or Military Sexual Trauma (MST); we provide a six-month training program in which we teach the veteran how to train a K9 that becomes his or her working service dog.

We provide the training; a dog if needed; all of the necessary equipment and even some veterinary care. We provide professional counseling from a Licensed Clinical Social Worker (LCSW) who is also a veteran working full-time on our staff. All of this is available at no charge to the veteran.

K9P4P was founded by Mary Peter, a Certified Master Dog Trainer (CMDT), and Executive Director of Training Operations. She is a nationally recognized K9 behavior expert, who also chairs the Board of Directors of the Association of Service Dog Providers for Military Veterans (ASDPMV).

Accessibility for Veterans with Disabilities at VA Facilities

Conservatively speaking, our trainers and staff say that approximately 75% of our veterans complain regularly about the inconsistency they experience from one VA facility to another when it comes to easy access for their service dog. Our veterans tell us: *'They let dogs in that are not service dogs...'* and on occasion, their service dogs have been attacked by dogs that are unruly and untrained.

We're told that access at Haley VA Center is selective and arbitrary. The Gainesville Dental Clinic permits veterans to enter with their service dog, while other locations do not. Some refuse access to service dogs-in-training.

One of our veterans had an appointment with a dermatologist at Haley. She tried to get in with her service dog and was told it was a 'sterile environment' and she had to put her K9 back in her car. This made her distraught and the experience induced a panic attack for that veteran.

Other veterans have noted the irony of having their VA doctor recommend a service dog to help them with their PTSD; only to be refused entrance to the office of the same doctor when accompanied by their service dog. That's truly Orwellian and the absurdity is undeniable.

Scheduling Delays at the VA & in Community Care

As you might expect, many of our veterans have experienced scheduling delays and/or appointment cancellations often with little notice. Especially for veterans traveling a considerable distance to their VA appointments, arriving on time only to learn that their doctor is unavailable or has canceled, can be frustrating at best and infuriating at worst. Again, our veterans all struggle with PTSD, TBI, and/or MST.

In many instances, we've heard from veterans who need to see a specialist, such as a cardiologist for instance, and there are often delays of 2 to 3 months. The authorizations that veterans are required to gather add to the delays. If and when they seek care outside of the VA network from another provider, as you know, more authorizations are needed. That means more delay.

Overall Transitioning from Active Duty to Civilian Life:

This is our wheelhouse.

The challenge of assisting veterans struggling to fill the void of purpose; pride and camaraderie is profound. And it's compounded by the fact that those who are most in need of help are often the least capable of asking for it. How do we help these veterans regain their purpose in a civilian world they barely recognize? How do we help them regain the confidence of their spouse and family who may not recognize the 'triggers' and now tread on egg shells?

This is why K9 Partners For Patriots exists. This is what we do. And it's why we've grown from a handful of veterans in 2014 to 725 veterans now active in our program. They represent 41 of Florida's 67 counties and we have some from out-of-state as well.

While we humbly believe our growth reflects the success of our methodology; we know it also reflects the relentless need for help.

How does it work?

If a veteran has an honorary discharge; a doctor's diagnosis of service-related PTSD, TBI, or MST, and, no felonies... he or she qualifies for our program. They apply online and submit their paperwork. Our veteran liaison reviews the application and arranges a face-to-face interview at our facility in Brooksville. This is a critical step because it lets us hear from the veteran whether he or she is ready and truly understands the commitment they're making; or, whether they're being pushed through the door prematurely by a well-intended spouse or family member.

The face-to-face interview at our facility also gives us a thorough assessment of the veteran's physical & mental health needs. And that enables us to find the K9 that our trainers believe is the best match for that particular veteran.

For a dog to qualify, it must pass the basic criteria one would apply to any potential pet. We test for fear, aggression, sociability, etc. But it must also be able to alert positively to the scent of cortisol/adrenaline. We test for that because that's how a service dog knows when its veteran is experiencing stress & anxiety. And the dog then takes action to mitigate those experiences. Often the dog senses a problem before the veteran. It then draws the veteran's attention to itself; to the present.

Once a veteran is approved and welcomed into the K9P4P family, there is no wait time.

We want them to begin by making their 'commitment'. That requires coming to watch a class once a week for three consecutive weeks. Our classes are held Monday thru Thursday generally from 10 AM to 11:30 AM. They are welcome to bring a spouse, family members or a friend with them.

When veterans are making their commitment, they sit in chairs on one side of our training floor and the veterans & K9s in class are on the opposite side. They can see how the classes are conducted; they see and hear the trainers talk about what they'll work on, and they'll also hear questions from veterans in the class... Right away they realize that every veteran and dog fits in here. And they all progress at their own pace.

By seeing a class led by our founder, Mary Peter, Certified Master Dog Trainer (CMDT), and the training team, it helps remove much of the apprehension they may have about the class of their own that they'll soon begin. Classes are small; 10 veterans & K9s at most. And again, family is welcome.

Veterans are expected to conduct 2 hours of training each day at home until they return the next week. That can be managed in 5- or 10- minute increments and it keeps them both engaged.

Within a few weeks the veterans start to recognize the progress their K9s are making and that's the result of their work. In turn, that builds their self-confidence and improves their disposition. Over time, the progress they make with their service dog in our program helps reconnection with family. Research at UCF confirmed this in November 2020:

<https://www.prnewswire.com/news-releases/veterans-reconnect-with-family-according-to-ucf-study-of-spouses-of-veterans-in-k9-partners-for-patriots-service-dog-program-301169311.html>

If a K9 has difficulty learning a task, or, the veteran struggles to teach it properly, we offer one-on-one training whenever needed. We have their back. Each veteran sees that every day.

When they complete their training and graduate, many do not want it to end! And we remind them they are always part of this family and they can return to brush up on training or just have a cup of coffee any time they want.

We are determined to stay connected. To continue to keep in touch with each class, we require that each veteran recertify his K9 once a year for five years. We want to ensure that veterans are keeping up with the care of their dog and with the training. We want to know about the well-being of both.

Additionally, we conduct 'Aftercare' events on a quarterly basis in which we invite all K9P4P alumni and those currently in class; along with spouse and family to a catered, buffet gathering at our facility. These include live music; games and face-painting for kids; etc. It's a great social event and it gives us a chance to see how our veterans and K9s are doing in a gathering of 100 to 150; much larger than the classes they attended!

At K9 Partners for Patriots, veterans know they're not a number. We respect their individuality and their dog's! That's essential for this work because each one brings unique experiences and triggers with frequency & severity that we can only mitigate. There is no cure.

Many of the dogs we provide are rescued from shelters. They bring their own history and baggage that we have no way of fully knowing. But together, they build a bond and share a purpose, to rescue each other.

For our veterans and their families, the bond with their service dog represents a positive path forward that is transformative.