

# **Department of Veterans Affairs**

*Report on the Study of Costs and Benefits Associated with  
the Use of Service Dogs for the Treatment or  
Rehabilitation of Veterans with Physical or Mental Injuries  
or Disabilities*

**Department of Veterans Affairs (VA)**  
**Report on the Study of Costs and Benefits Associated with the**  
**Use of Service Dogs for the Treatment or Rehabilitation of Veterans**  
**with Physical or Mental Injuries or Disabilities**

**Fiscal Year (FY) 2021 Annual Report for FY 2020 Activities**

**Summary:** VA completed data collection for the post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and Service Dog study and prepared and submitted two monographs reporting the results to the National Academy of Sciences (NAS). NAS has reviewed the first monograph (Monograph 1), which addresses whether service dogs or emotional support dogs could reduce disability and improve the quality of life for Veterans with PTSD. The VA study team reports that although emotional support dogs and service dogs helped Veterans with PTSD in the study, Veterans paired with service dogs had significantly fewer symptoms of PTSD over time and had fewer suicidal ideations and behaviors, particularly at 18 months. Based upon the results reported in Monograph 1, VA has begun exploring the possibility of expanding eligibility for the service dog veterinary insurance benefit program to Veterans with PTSD and associated mental health diagnoses. The second monograph, which addresses whether the dogs resulted in healthcare savings, better employment or better job productivity, relies partially on data in health care records that VA collected after completion of the study, so VA could not submit it for NAS review with Monograph 1. NAS currently is reviewing Monograph 2 and VA expects release to Congress in September 2021.

**A. Citation**

The National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2010, P.L. 111-84 § 1077(a), required VA to commence a study to “assess the benefits, feasibility, and advisability of using service dogs for the treatment or rehabilitation of Veterans with physical or mental injuries or disabilities, including post-traumatic stress disorder.” The language directed VA to commence a 3-year study no later than 270 days after enactment of the Act. Several specific study requirements are present in section 1077. VA conducted the study and has met or intends to meet all requirements. The Institutional Review Board (IRB) responsible for protecting the rights of people in research and the Institutional Animal Care and Use Committee (IACUC) responsible for ensuring the ethical use of animals in research monitored the study to ensure the study did not pose an unacceptable risk to either Veterans or the study dogs. A discussion of the specific study requirements in P.L. 111-84 § 1077 follows.

P.L. 111-84 § 1077(b)(1)(B) required VA to partner with section 501(c)(3) organizations (“vendors”) and for those vendors to be “accredited by, or adhere to standards comparable to those of, an accrediting organization with demonstrated experience, national scope, and recognized leadership and expertise in the training of service dogs and education in the use of service dogs.” VA partnered only with section 501(c)(3) vendors who adhered to such standards.

Paragraph (b)(2) required VA to reimburse partners (“vendors”) “\$10,000 for each dog provided to a Veteran who enrolls in the study and successfully completes a training program offered by one of the partners.” Market research and extensive conversations with established vendors during site visits revealed that \$10,000 is much less than the actual cost of producing a high-quality service dog. As part of the dog procurement contracts put in place for the Phase 2 study, in addition to reimbursing vendors \$10,000 for each dog in accordance with paragraph (b)(2), VA reimbursed vendors for reasonable costs related to dog training, housing and veterinary medical care.

Paragraph (c)(1) required VA to “arrange for the provision of a service dog to the greater of the following: (A) 200 Veterans. (B) A sufficient number of such Veterans to produce scientifically valid results with respect to assessing the benefits and costs of the use of such dogs for the treatment or rehabilitation of such veterans.” A thorough analysis of the statistical power needed for the study indicated that about 220 Veterans were needed to provide appropriate statistical power to meet study objectives (including those required in paragraph (d)). Recruitment was completed July 13, 2017, with a final tally of 228 Veterans. Data collection for all Veterans completing the study ended on June 26, 2019.

Paragraph (c)(3) specified the criteria for Veterans to enroll and participate in the study, which included being diagnosed with physical disabilities (other than blindness or hearing impairment), mental injuries or disabilities. VA complied with this requirement.

Paragraph (c)(4) required that at least half the Veterans in the study have a primary mental health diagnosis. VA enrolled only Veterans with a primary diagnosis of PTSD, and thus all had a primary mental health diagnosis.

Paragraph (c)(5) required that VA provide a Veteran participating in this study the following items:

(A) Veterinary treatment to maintain the health of the dog and keep it functioning in its prescribed role.

(B) Hardware required by the dog to perform expected tasks, and repairs to such hardware.

(C) Payments and allowances for travel incurred in becoming adjusted to the service dogs, to be paid in the same manner that payments and allowances are authorized under 38 U.S.C. §1111, and its implementing regulations.

As required, all listed items in this section were provided at no cost to the Veteran, subject to applicable Federal Law, as noted in paragraph (c)(5)(C).

Paragraph (c)(6) required that VA provide a \$75 monthly stipend to each enrolled Veteran in the study. VA complied with this requirement.

Paragraph (c)(7) allowed the Veteran to assume ownership of the service dog at the completion of the study. If the Veteran chose not to take ownership of the dog, responsibility for the dog returned to the vendor. In all cases VA offered ownership of the dog to the Veteran when they completed the study; most Veterans chose to keep their dog.

Paragraph (d) required VA to conduct a study of the costs and benefits of service dogs for treatment and rehabilitation of Veterans with physical or mental injuries or disabilities. VA chose to focus the study only on Veterans with PTSD because scientific evidence of the benefits of service dogs for physical impairments was well established, whereas such evidence was lacking for very important diagnoses like PTSD for our Veterans. This paragraph required the study to address therapeutic benefits, including quality of life, economic benefits such as savings due to reduced medication use and hospitalization, and productivity and employment. The study addressed all these areas.

Phase One of the study consisted of only Veterans in Tampa, Florida. All 17 Veterans who completed Phase One elected to keep their dog. Phase Two of the study began in Atlanta, Georgia; Iowa City, Iowa; and Portland, Oregon in late 2014. Once completed, as in Phase One, Veterans could choose to keep their assigned dog, and VA transferred ownership when requested. If a Phase Two Veteran elected not to keep an assigned dog or was unable to meet the responsibilities of dog ownership during or at the completion of the Phase Two study, responsibility for the dog was returned to the vendor. Paragraph (d) lists required components of the study. Each of these components was integrated into the design of the study.

## **B. Data Analysis and Publication of Study Results**

Data analysis has been completed, and two monographs have been prepared reporting the results of the study. All results will have received NAS review, as required by section 1077(e)(2).

1. Monograph 1 has completed NAS review. It addresses whether service dogs or emotional support dogs could provide therapeutic benefits and improve the quality of life for Veterans with PTSD, fulfilling all the requirements of section 1077(d)(1):

“The matters studied shall include the following: (1) The therapeutic benefits to such veterans, including the quality of life benefits reported by the Veterans partaking in the study.”

2. Monograph 2 addresses whether there was any health economic or work productivity benefits for Veterans with PTSD in accordance with paragraph (d)(2). It was submitted for NAS review in December 2020, and will meet the remaining reporting requirements of section 1077(e):

“The matters studied shall include the following: (2) The economic benefits of using service dogs for the treatment or rehabilitation of such veterans,

including— (A) savings on health care costs, including savings related to reductions in hospitalization and reductions in the use of prescription drugs and (B) productivity and employment gains for the Veterans.”

### **C. Results of Monograph 1 and Planned Changes to Eligibility Criteria in 38 C.F.R. 17.148(b)(1)**

Based upon analysis of data in Monograph 1, the VA study team reported that although emotional support dogs and service dogs helped Veterans with PTSD in the study, Veterans paired with service dogs had significantly fewer symptoms of PTSD over time and also had fewer suicidal ideations and behaviors, particularly at 18 months after pairing with a service dog. VA has begun exploring the possibility of expanding eligibility for the service dog veterinary insurance benefit program to Veterans with PTSD and associated mental health diagnoses

### **D. Timeline to Public Release of Final Monographs**

1. Monograph 1 (whether service dogs or emotional support dogs could reduce disability and improve the quality of life for Veterans with PTSD). Monograph 1 completed NAS review in late December 2020 and was released to Congress and the public in January 2021.

2. Monograph 2, potential health economic or work productivity gains. This timeline is based upon a July 24, 2020, conference call with NAS personnel who are managing NAS review of the monographs. NAS managers have indicated that they anticipate additional committee members with a health economics background will have to be added to some existing members of the Monograph 1 review committee for review of Monograph 2.

Completed: Monograph 2 was submitted to NAS for review on December 3, 2020.

Remaining timeline. Important note regarding Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19) delays: NAS managers are concerned that commitments to highest priority COVID-19 studies at their home institutions by both prospective new volunteer committee members and current volunteer committee members with expertise in health economics will cause delays in the review of Monograph 2. Accordingly, the timeline after VA submission of Monograph 2 to NAS is approximate.

- April 2021: The NAS review committee will provide VA with its review comments and suggestions on Monograph 2 in a report.
- May 2021: VA will respond to all comments and suggestions in writing and provide a revised version of Monograph 2 incorporating the committee's comments and suggestions.

- June 2021: If the committee finds that the revised Monograph 2 adequately addresses its comments and suggestions, then it will be formatted for release. If the revised Monograph 2 does not adequately address all their comments and suggestions, the committee will provide additional comments and suggestions, and VA will provide a second revision back for the committee's final review.
- August 2021: VA internal review of final Monograph 2 version and concurrence.
- September 2021: The final revision of Monograph 2 will be released to Congress and the public.

**E. Commitment to Complete the Study and Report the Results.** VA's commitment to complete the study mandated by P.L. 111-84 § 1077 has been unwavering. Throughout this process, and considering the unusual challenges presented by the unique nature of the study, VA's primary focus has remained on the safety of Veterans, their families and the study dogs, as we completed the study and now prepare to report the results.

Despite those challenges, we have performed the study with integrity, respect for Veteran privacy and a dedication to conduct it based upon rigorous scientific principles.

Department of Veterans Affairs  
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