Canines for Combat Veterans: The National Education for Assistance Dog Services

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National Education for Assistance Dog Services (NEADS)/Dogs for Deaf and Disabled Americans* has a long history of meeting the needs of the disabled. Established in 1976 as an agency to train and place dogs with the hearing impaired, NEADS evolved into one of the major canine assistance agencies catering to the needs of individuals with a variety of physical disabilities.

Training our dogs is at the heart of our work. Puppies enter our program at 8 to 10 weeks of age, living and learning in our Laura J. Niles Early Learning Center (Princeton, MA) for 8 weeks. We take full advantage of early learning capacity with a specialized curriculum that provides an enriched environment of stimulating experiences, vigorous socialization, and service dog “prep” work, as well as lots of playtime with their housemates. The program builds a solid, socialized, and eager-to-learn foundation, and readies puppies for the next stage of training; placement in our Prison PUP Program or in foster homes. At this point, puppies must spend up to a year “growing up” and learning the basics before receiving their advanced task-work training on the NEADS campus as service dogs.

Our Prison PUP Program† has operated in minimum/medium security correctional facilities across New England for the past 12 years. Our program utilizes 2 inmates, a primary and a back up, to raise each puppy. Inmates raise and train puppies right in their rooms, taking responsibility for crate training, house breaking, care, and grooming. A NEADS trainer visits each prison program once a week to conduct a 2-hour class for the inmates in the program. Here, the inmates learn how to teach their puppy basic obedience and service dog tasks. In addition, they learn how to groom and properly care for their puppy, basic first aid, and canine health. The trainer assesses each puppy weekly, making training recommendations and assigning homework for the handler for the upcoming week.

The dogs trained by inmates are some of our best-trained dogs. Inmates have little else to do and training our dogs provides them with a task that not only helps them pass the time but allows them to use their prison time to give something back. The dogs also help the inmates, providing a calming presence and unconditional love.

After completing the Prison PUP Program, the dogs return to our campus for final task training and proofing in order to be matched with a client.

Based upon a well-recognized reputation of training service dogs, NEADS was the first program to be invited to the Walter Reed Army Medical Center to discuss the possibility of training dogs for Veterans who had sustained combat injuries. From these discussions, the Canines for Combat Veterans program was born.

In May of 2006, we worked with the Walter Reed staff to determine how we could best meet the needs of these Veterans, many of whom were dependent upon manual wheelchairs or were learning to use prostheses. As we talked with Veterans themselves, one of the most requested tasks for a potential service dog was to aid the Veteran who, often in public, fell and required assistance to get up. Veterans admitted to embarrassment and feelings of helplessness when they felt dependent upon others to help them. On the other hand, having well-trained dogs that could partner with them in this task would give these Veterans an increased sense of self-mastery.

In addition to assistance after falling, Veterans felt the need for support when using their prosthetics. With this in mind, we developed a specially fitted harness that allowed the Veterans to use the dog to aid them while walking. Interestingly, of the Veterans who were provided with dogs trained to a harness in those early years of the program (2006 and 2007), most, if not all have, recovered to the point in their rehabilitation that they no longer need the harness on the dog to help with balance.

Perhaps the most popular overall task performed by service dogs for Veterans is retrieval. A service dog can pick up an article as small as a coin or credit card and as large as a cane or crutch. Since the Veteran is often unable to reach to the floor for a dropped object because

*http://www.neads.org
such action might put him or her at risk for a fall, having a dog that will retrieve is a valuable asset.

An interesting response from Veterans applying for service dogs was the request to give the dog to a fellow Veteran whom they perceived needed a dog’s help more than the applicant. We did not often get this request from the private sector. Veterans seemed to be concerned: “What if I do not use the dog on a daily basis? Perhaps I don’t need one as badly as the next guy.”

Our response was that the dog became a form of insurance and empowerment. An example we often used was that an applicant may not drop his keys every day, but when the keys are dropped and perhaps falls into an inaccessible place, the dog can quickly retrieve, hold, and give the keys back. Because of the dog’s ability to perform this task, the Veteran will not be forced to wait until someone came along to pick up the keys. The Veteran could maintain (or in some cases, regain) his or her independence and protect his or her feelings of worth.

A particular strength of the NEADS program is that we take great care in matching dogs with their human partners. Applicants complete a detailed application and participate in several in-depth interviews, the purpose of which is to get to know the applicant and find the right dog match to meet his or her needs. These individual interviews became especially important as we sought to address the individual requirements of the Veterans who applied to our program.

As we continued to place dogs with Veterans who had been physically injured in combat, we recognized that many of them were also suffering from posttraumatic stress (PTS). Our observations and other anecdotal evidence indicated that a natural byproduct of having a service dog was often the alleviation of symptoms of PTS. This led us to wonder if we could develop a program to help Veterans, who may or may not have a physical impairment, to cope with their posttraumatic stress.

In July 2009, NEADS undertook a 2-year study to more definitively evaluate whether specially selected and trained service dogs could lessen the symptoms of PTS in Veterans. This study, the Trauma Alert Dog program, was designed to assess the experiences of 10 to 15 Veteran-dog teams and to determine how the dog was assisting the Veteran with his trauma symptoms. Veterans who applied were telling us that they feared going into public places and had to sit with their backs to walls in order to feel safe. They found that they had difficulty with sleep and complained of frequent nightmares. Could a dog really help them with these issues?

For the PTS pilot study, we placed trained service dogs, with 15 combat Veterans (in groups of 3 or 4) diagnosed with PTS, who had served in Iraq or Afghanistan. The Veterans in the study were all from the New England area. It was our hope that the dog would provide a bridge for these Veterans that would help them to reintegrate into their environments with less anxiety. Veterans who also needed the tasks of a service dog as well as PTS support were given dogs that had dual functions. Following placement, the Veterans were closely followed for the first year and their progress evaluated.

To date we feel that this study has been quite successful. The results are being tabulated and we will publish our results in the near future.

Whether placing dogs with Veterans to aid them with their physical disabilities or with those who can benefit from the support of a dog to help them cope with their combat-related PTS, we, at NEADS, are strongly committed to meeting the needs of our Veteran clients.

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